

452 WILSON, THOMAS

Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher of the *Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk & Portsmouth General Advertiser* (1792-94) at Norfolk with Daniel Baxter (027).

Wilson was a young printer who conducted his first newspaper in Norfolk in conjunction with one of the most experienced tradesmen then in the state. Once that partner left their concern, he was induced to move that office to Washington, where he died far too young before the second newspaper that he published there ever found its footing.

His first paper was originally known as the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* when it was founded in August 1789. It was the immediate successor to the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* of John McLean (297), a Scottish printer with a New York office who made his paper the first started in post-Revolutionary Norfolk; in May 1789, he died unexpectedly resulting in the sale of his press and subscriber list within weeks. William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter – two Virginia journeymen trained in Williamsburg before the war – moved quickly to acquire both; Baxter left his job in Richmond as foreman in the office of John Dixon Sr. (140) to become the resident proprietor of the new firm of Prentis & Baxter; his partner was then conducting the *Petersburg Intelligencer* in that Appomattox River port, his first paper; acquiring the McLean office was a way for Prentis to expand his business with the help of a trusted friend. Their partnership continued for three profitable years, as their *Chronicle* continued its dominance as the principal mercantile advertiser for the port.

By early 1792, however, competition had emerged in Petersburg for Prentis, compelling him to sell his Norfolk interests and refocus his efforts on his initial newspaper. Baxter could not continue alone, burdened by the promissory notes he gave Prentis, and so sought out a new partner in that solidly established journal. He found Thomas Wilson, then twenty-two and evidently looking for his first independent situation as a journalist. The new firm of Baxter & Wilson took control of the old McLean office in May 1792, at the end of the *Chronicle's* third volume, and began issuing the newly retitled *Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk & Portsmouth General Advertiser*.

Yet the new partners soon faced the same challenge that Prentis faced in Petersburg: the advent of a competitor in what had been a single-paper market. Over the next two years, *The American Gazette and Norfolk & Portsmouth Public Advertiser* of Charles Willett (445) and William Davis (127) ate into the patronage for Baxter & Wilson's older *Chronicle*. So by mid-1794, its financial state was precarious, its survival questionable, and the heavily-indebted Baxter wanting out. Remarkably, the Willett & Davis partnership was also under pressure at that point, a result of Davis's politicization of the paper as a Federalist organ and his attempt to expand his business interests into Petersburg to challenge there Prentis in 1793. So both Baxter and Willett chose to end their existing partnerships and join together to publish a third journal in Norfolk. Willett ended his agreement with Davis in late July 1794 and began the twice-weekly *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* in mid-August – a paper that became the long-lived *Norfolk Herald*; Baxter extricated himself from his agreement with Wilson in late October and moved over to Willett's office; yet the state

of his finances did not then allow him to buy into the business immediately, as he had hoped, resulting in Baxter being supplanted as Willett's partner in July 1795 by James O'Connor (317), an adolescent friend of Willett's during their London apprenticeships.

With the *Chronicle* now in his hands alone, Wilson was initially determined to continue as before, promising readers "that nothing shall be omitted on his part to merit a continuance of their favors." But it soon became apparent that Willett & O'Connor had tied up the larger advertisers in the area, and that Davis had locked up its partisan patronage. So just before the end of the year – late December 1794 – Wilson closed the *Chronicle* forever.

By April 1795, Wilson had moved the entire office to Washington in the newly established District of Columbia; and once settled, he circulated a prospectus for a weekly paper that he would call *The Impartial Observer and Washington Advertiser*. At that moment, the planned capital was essentially a construction site, with the relocation of the federal government still some five years away; but Wilson was intent to build a journalistic base there among the merchants and artisans then building the city, one that would provide some priority among advertisers and subscribers alike when the government did arrive. Unlike Norfolk, his only competition in the District was a small twice-weekly in Georgetown: *The Columbian Chronicle* of Samuel Hanson (200); he had brought that paper from Alexandria, where it was known as *The Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser*, after his partnership with Thomas Bond (039) ended in November 1793. Yet Wilson had three advantages over Hanson. First, Hanson was a dry-goods merchant dependent on hired hands to produce his paper for him, while Wilson was his own labor force. Next, he was in the center of the new capital city itself, rather than in quarters in the old Maryland port nearby, and so privy to the goings-on among the builders and planners there. But last and most important, his weekly was less expensive to produce than was Hanson's twice-weekly, and so required fewer patrons, whether advertisers or subscribers, to be a viable venture.

Wilson's prospectus also demonstrated a unique perspective on the practice of journalism then. He had a sense that his paper would soon become an important historical record, as the *Observer* would be printed in "the heartiest form, and will, at the end of the year, afford a handsome volume" when bound. He also eschewed "the long and troublesome address, relative to his professional knowledge" that was then *de rigueur* in such proposals; his paper would stand as its own example of trade competence. But the paper's key feature was in its title: impartiality; his Norfolk experience had told him that offering a mercantile advertiser was a more profitable course to follow than was partisan journalism – all he needed was primacy among a distinct set of advertisers and consumers, as Willett & O'Connor had.

Still, starting the *Impartial Observer* was problematic; Wilson failed to meet the proposed target date for its first number by three weeks, for reasons he left unsaid. That first issue appeared on May 22, 1795, and apparently found sufficient support to make the venture more than a short-lived one of a month or two. Wilson used his pages to assist the building of the capital city; he became, in very short order, the journal-of-record for the series of lotteries staged in 1795 and 1796 to raise funds for the construction of public buildings such as the Capitol itself. Those pages also carried the laborers' wry observations about the "self-made" men who appropriated the monies that should have come to those workers for their

own aggrandizement.

It appears that Wilson employed a successful formula, as seen in reaction to his unexpected and premature death in February 1796, just nine months on. There was a scramble among several merchants who wanted to buy the paper and press from his estate, meaning that the now twice-weekly journal reappeared under new owners just fifteen days after he died, with the simplified title of *The Washington Advertiser*. The office and paper was sold again just three months later to Benjamin More, whose retitled *Washington Gazette* continued until larger, better financed presses began arriving in the capital region in 1798.

Where Wilson came from and trained is unknown, but numerous reprintings of his death notice in Boston and New York newspapers suggests he had at least worked in those cities before early 1792 and so probably was from one or the other; an early twentieth-century account reports that Wilson came to Washington from Philadelphia, not Norfolk, hinting that he may also have had a link to that key printing center. Notices concerning his estate published in Alexandria papers show that he was married when he died, but any further information regarding Alice Wilson, her origins, or any children have yet to be found.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1770 Unknown.

Died: Feb. 22 1796 Washington, District of Columbia.

A wife named Alice administered estate; no children reported.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*, Wertebaker, *Norfolk*; Hudson, *Journalism*; prospectus in [Alexandria] *Columbian Mirror* (Apr. 30, 1795); worker's commentary in *Greenleaf's New York Journal* (June 20, 1795); lottery notices in Philadelphia papers (1795-96); death notice in [New York City] *Argus* (Mar. 6, 1796), among many others.