

## 462 WORSLEY, WILLIAM W.

**Printer, Publisher**

**Richmond, Norfolk**

Publisher of the *Commercial Register* (1802-03) at Norfolk with Meriwether Jones (242); of the *Examiner* (1804) at Richmond with Skelton Jones (243); and of the *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-05) with Thomas Ritchie (360).

Worsley was a practical printer who began his life as a journalist and bookseller in Virginia. But the majority of his print trade career came in Kentucky, where he was key figure among tradesmen and politicians alike, ending his life as a respected and admired patrician.

Where Worsley originated is unknown. Some nineteenth-century sources report that he was from Virginia; yet, the Worsley surname does not appear in the federal censuses for Virginia in either 1790 or 1800, when he was in his adolescence; rather, the majority of the occurrences of that surname in both of those enumerations are in central North Carolina, suggesting that Worsley was born there. His first appearance in the Virginia print trade was in 1800, working as a journeyman in the Richmond office of Meriwether Jones, then the printer to the Commonwealth. As it was widely-reported in his lifetime that he had been trained in Richmond, Worsley's placement in such an openly partisan printing office infers two possible settings: that he trained in either the office of John Dixon Jr. (141), who had been Jones's original partner when he was appointed as public printer in 1798, or in that of Samuel Pleasants (331), who conducted the *Virginia Argus*, the primary Republican journal in the state, and who provided printers for Jones's office then.

### **Virginia Printer**

The printing office managed by the non-tradesman Jones in 1800 was one focused on the election of Republican candidates to both the state and federal legislatures, even as it served the state government's needs; starting in 1799, that office issued a flood of partisan imprints designed to facilitate such electoral victories, particularly that of Thomas Jefferson as president. So Worsley worked alongside John L. Cook (105) and Seaton Grantland (186), both future Republican journalists, and in conjunction with the partisan writers James Lyon (274) and James Thomson Callender (075) whose work issued frequently from the *Examiner* office. His service there brought his elevation to foreman of that busy press by 1801.

In April 1802, the *Epitome of the Times* of Augustus C. Jordan (244) in Norfolk was forced to close in consequence of his declining health and eroding finances. His prominent Republican paper served as the party's principal voice in the lower tidewater after the *Norfolk Herald* of Charles Willett (445) and James O'Connor (317) had bested the Federalist *American Gazette* of William Davis (127) in 1797; but as the sole mercantile advertiser there, the Willett & O'Connor paper yielded its place in the partisan newspaper wars to Jordan in March 1798, so as to remain profitable. With Jordan's retirement, the town was again without an activist voice that supported the Republican administrations in Richmond and Washington. Local party leaders approached Jones about publishing a replacement for them; after arranging financing through Jones, Worsley accepted the challenge in early summer, and moved to Norfolk to begin publishing the *Commercial Register* as a full partner to Jones. He issued the

first number of the thrice-weekly on August 16th.

Worsley soon discovered, though, that Jones was unable to live up to the promises he had made for providing editorial matter for their new journal. The printer was conducting the press alone, and so did not have time to write the *Register* as well as print it. Jones acted as a real-estate agent and land speculator throughout his tenure as public printer, as well as organizing the horse races staged by the Richmond Jockey Club, while leaving the technical side of his office to hired hands such as Worsley, Cook, and Grantland. These distractions reached a new peak when Jones was named to a committee to divide Richmond into three wards and conduct elections for the reorganized government in January 1803. The trickle of material sent from Richmond ended; exasperated, Worsley quit the venture, dissolving their five-month-long partnership, despite the fact that Republican merchants and readers in the area provided sufficient revenue for the *Register* to continue. In the *Register's* final number on January 11th, Worsley made his anger clear for all to see:

"I conceive (and every person endowed with rationality will doubtless accord with me in sentiment) that it is the height of folly, the very summit of madness, to remain longer in an ungrateful employment, by which I daily become deeper and deeper immersed in the vortex of ruin."

He offered to reimburse subscribers for the balance of their year-long subscriptions, even offering to do job-printing as an in-kind payment of those refunds. Evidently, this approach was just the first of many such deeds that brought him a reputation for "strict integrity and remarkable amiability." Worsley remained in Norfolk for at least another month, fulfilling his promises, before returning to Richmond to work again as a journeyman printer.

In July 1803, Meriwether Jones yielded control of his *Examiner* and its press to his lawyer-brother Skelton and began lobbying the Jefferson administration for an appointment to a less-stressful federal post, a change induced by his now-failing health. With the transfer, Skelton Jones offered Worsley an interest in the *Examiner* office if he would return there to conduct the press for him, as the journeyman had for his delinquent brother. Remarkably, Worsley accepted the offer, perhaps as a way for him to settle outstanding accounts with his former partner. However, the restructuring did not alter the deteriorating financial state of the *Examiner*. In taking on the paper, Skelton Jones had also assumed its debts and soon found the entire proposition untenable. At the end of 1803, he sold the press to Worsley, who he then contracted to print the *Examiner* for him. But when that approach did not solve his problems, Jones closed the *Examiner* in January 1804 and retired from journalism.

Behind the scenes, a new paper was planned to replace the *Examiner* as the voice of the Republican party in Virginia. Meriwether Jones was about to resign as public printer to take the federal post he had lobbied for, leaving Samuel Pleasants to take his place as the public printer; Pleasants's *Virginia Argus* had always been the more moderate Republican paper, and that perspective was not about to change when the *Argus* became the state's journal-of-record in March 1804. So Jones sold his subscriber list to Thomas Ritchie, a Richmond bookseller and teacher with aspirations to fame as political journalist. As Ritchie was not a trained printer, Worsley figured into his plans as the owner of the old *Examiner* press. Once relieved of his contract with Jones for the public work in March, the printer signed a one-

year contract with Ritchie to both finance and publish a new partisan journal for him: the *Enquirer*. Worsley promptly set out for Philadelphia and New York to acquire new type and paper for his press, as well as build a network of correspondents with Republican editors in the north. His travels delayed publication of the *Enquirer's* first number by two months, but when the paper finally appeared on May 9th, it would continue uninterrupted for nearly sixty years – issued initially twice-weekly, except during Assembly sessions, when it was issued thrice-weekly, a schedule Ritchie maintained until 1844, when it became a daily.

Ritchie evidently understood Worsley well. He had already experienced disappointment in his Norfolk paper with Jones and so did not want to repeat that experience with Ritchie. It was also evident that Worsley wanted to be free eventually of the demands of a partisan press in Richmond. Ritchie may also have known that Worsley was considering a move to Kentucky. So he accepted the limitations of a one-year alliance and brought Thomas Burling (1766), another Richmond-trained printer, back to Virginia from Baltimore to act as their foreman, relieving Worsley of responsibility for the press work itself. Ritchie then arranged for financing that would allow him to buy both Worsley's interest in the *Enquirer* and the printer's press when their pact ended in May 1805.

### **Lexington Journalist**

Over the course of his year with Ritchie, Worsley developed his planned move to Kentucky. It appears that a key figure in that planning was Henry Clay (1777-1852), a native Virginian then a practicing lawyer in Lexington, and later the celebrated Whig political leader. During Worsley's early days in Richmond, Clay was employed by George Wythe (1726-1806), the Virginia Chancery Court justice who occasionally wrote for the *Virginia Argus*; Clay served as Wythe's secretary while reading for the law with him; Clay relocated to Lexington in 1797 when he was licensed to practice law, but frequently returned to Richmond over the next two decades as he conducted personal and professional business there; he was also a friend of Ritchie's when the *Enquirer* first issued. By 1805, Clay was established as an influential political figure in Kentucky, so drawing other Virginians of his generation to the west. In the summer of 1805, Worsley followed suit, setting up a job-printing shop and bookstore on Main Street in Lexington, close by Clay's law office.

At that time, Lexington had a single newspaper, the *Kentucky Gazette* of Daniel Bradford; in 1806, the *Gazette* was challenged for primacy as the chief Federalist voice in Kentucky by the *Western World*, a weekly started in the state capital of Frankfort by John Wood (1756), late of Richmond; as that contest intensified, the *Gazette* became ever more critical of the Republican Clay, especially over the lawyer's earlier association with Aaron Burr. So in late 1807, Clay and his supporters convinced Worsley to return to the partisan newspaper fray with a new Republican voice: the *Kentucky Reporter*. It took Worsley three or four months to organize for the venture, finally issuing his first number on March 12, 1808; therein, he deferred making promises, offering instead a simple statement of principles to readers:

"Highly approving of the principles of the revolution, as contained in the Federal Constitution, and duly appreciating the enlightened policy pursued by the present administration; it shall be the undeviating object of the Editors, as far as it may come

within the sphere of their influence. to contribute to the promotion and preservation of the Former, and embrace every opportunity of testifying the virtue and faithfulness of the Latter."

His partner in the effort was another Virginia transplant, Samuel R. Overton (1768-1832) of Louisa County; Overton was the financier in this project and so withdrew from the concern on July 1, 1809 once the *Reporter's* survival seemed assured. Indeed, Worsley's press was successful enough to start publishing a quarterly agricultural magazine in December 1810: *The Rural Visitor*.

Worsley would conduct his *Reporter* for the next decade. And in that time, his weekly became Clay's primary outlet for news and opinions that he wanted published in Kentucky. After spring 1809, he also began providing material for the *Kentucky Gazette*, which was now edited by Worsley's protégé, Thomas Smith (1787-1866), formerly of Hanover County, Virginia; it appears that Smith came to Lexington with Worsley in 1805 and may have been part of the *Enquirer* office in Richmond before that; his sister was married to Worsley as well. Now Smith was building networks within the state, as was Worsley, which resulted in his marriage to a niece of Clay's wife Lucretia in 1819. In the run up to the War of 1812, Clay used both papers simultaneously, sending one letter to either Worsley or Smith and expecting each publisher to provide the other with his missive. But when it came to personal business, as in the 1813 settlement of his father-in-law's estate, Clay employed Worsley's newspaper exclusively and held the proprietor in his confidence. By early 1816, Clay was telling Secretary of State James Monroe that Worsley's *Reporter* was "decidedly the best paper in the State, and has the extent of circulation" required for the license to publish the laws of Congress in its pages; Monroe took Clay at his word, granting Worsley that lucrative subsidy for the laws of 1815-16 session.

After the War of 1812, however, Worsley recognized that Lexington was fading as a center of commerce – and so of advertising – in comparison to the towns along the Ohio River. So he developed another careful plan to relocate, this time to Louisville. In 1816, he acquired a large building on Lexington's public square from Henry Clay and moved his business there; a year later, he made Smith his partner in the *Reporter* and relegated himself to the printing side of their business alone. Then in early 1819, Worsley sold his interest to Smith, retiring to the bookstore he now conducted in partnership with James W. Palmer, "an Englishman" with "a beautiful disposition and engaging manners," who became Smith's partner in 1828. Still, it took until 1825 for Worsley to settle his accounts in Lexington and move Louisville; but when he did, his coffers were full, a result of his careful management of his affairs during the economic downturn in late 1819.

### **Louisville Publisher**

Worsley would eventually conduct a new paper in Louisville, though not an avowedly political one, even as he continued to support Clay and his "American System." But initially, Worsley was more interested in job-printing, particularly in publishing school books; such imprints produced in the east incurred steep transportation charges in reaching the Ohio River valley, and he had regularly printed such in Lexington after 1811. Now he set out to

produce large numbers of popular titles in Louisville that proved to be cheaper alternatives. Worsley brought with him from Lexington his bookstore clerk, John P. Morton (1807-89), another of the numerous tradesmen he trained in Kentucky. The textbook business grew quickly, inducing Worsley to put Morton at the head of a publishing company (Morton & Co.) that he financed in 1827; in 1832, he also financed the purchase of an interest in that business by William Smith, another young protégé, creating the succeeding firm of Morton & Smith. Worsley finally sold out of Morton's publishing firm in 1838 and retired from the print trade for good, well compensated for his labors.

But before that, Worsley conducted one last journal. In November 1826, he started a new weekly there, called *The Focus of Politics, Commerce, and Literature*, in conjunction with Dr. Joseph Buchanan (1785 - 1829), the early-Republic-era psychologist who had helped edit Worsley's *Reporter* in Lexington. The *Focus* was essentially a literary and scientific journal, but was rabidly anti-Jackson in the 1828 presidential campaign in which the Tennessean besmirched the reputation of Worsley's friend and associate Henry Clay. While profitable, Worsley continued the *Focus* only as long as Buchanan was involved; following the doctor's death in 1829, Worsley sold their paper to Ignatius T. Cavins and George S. Robinson, who merged it with their *Daily Journal* to create the Whig-oriented *Journal and Focus*.

Thereafter, Worsley went into semi-retirement, eschewing active business pursuits for less strenuous service as a director of a bank and a manufacturing company in Louisville. He remained a Clay stalwart, feeding political intelligence to the politician when the situation warranted. His last political contribution came with the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849-50; he was a member of the "Friends of Emancipation," formed in Louisville to oppose the repeal of a long-standing constitutional provision forbidding importations of slaves into the state; his group led a state-wide effort to introduce clauses into the new constitution for a liberal emancipation process that would result in the gradual abolition of slavery in Kentucky; when a constitution lacking such clauses was adopted, anti-slavery Whigs like Worsley found themselves outside political discussions on the state's future. So it is perhaps fortunate that Worsley died before the sectional crisis reached its peak after the 1852 election. He was a victim of the Louisville cholera epidemic of October 1852, passing from the public scene just six months after his friend and patron, Henry Clay.

### **Legal Legacy**

Worsley's death brought litigation between the executor of his estate, apparently Morton, and his widow Rebecca; in November 1846, Worsley gave his wife title to their residence and domestic servants (slaves) to guarantee she had a suitable home to live in should he die intestate, as well as to remove its value from his potential estate; in June 1847, he drafted a will that gave most of his remaining wealth to members of his wife's family, while giving her the income of his entire estate for the rest of her life. However, after his death, Rebecca renounced her legacy in that will, seeking her "widow's right" to half the value of Worsley's estate. The executor construed the 1846 deed and the 1847 will to be Worsley's entire will, and argued that she could not keep the house and then demand more – either accept the deed or refuse the will. The Louisville Chancery Court found – and was upheld by the state's Court of Appeals in December 1855 – that the deed and will were separate and that the will

could not legally alter or rescind an executed deed, despite the lawyer's assertion that Rebecca could not accept the deed until Worsley was dead, under the rules of coverture (*femme covert*). The case reaffirmed that *coverture law* did not supersede *dower law* in Kentucky. It also meant that Worsley's executor had to pay all of the debts that he owed the estate before he could take the commission he was legally allowed as executor.

***Personal Data***

Born:           In 1780   North Carolina?  
Married:       By 1816   Rebecca Smith @ Lexington, Kentucky.  
Died:       Oct. 11 1852   Louisville, Kentucky.  
Children:   He died without issue.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians;" Perrin, *Pioneer Press of Kentucky*; Ranck, *History of Lexington*; Casseday, *History of Louisville*; Papers of Henry Clay; Remini, *Henry Clay*; Tallant, *Evil Necessity*; Ramage, *Kentucky Rising*; "Worsley's Executor v. Worsley," *Kentucky Reports*, vol. 55 (1855).