

475 BUCKNER, JOHN

Publisher

Gloucester County

Proprietor of the first press in Virginia (1682-83), employing William Nuthead (316).

Buckner was a well-connected Gloucester County merchant-planter who brought the first printing press in the Virginia colony in 1682; yet, his office's life is measured only in weeks, not months or years, as Buckner breached contemporaneous English law by printing official documents without governmental sanction, both colonial and imperial.

Referred to as "the head of the family in America" in a 1907 family history, Buckner appears to have landed in Virginia in about 1666. He was the third of five sons of Thomas Buckner of Oxfordshire, England; excluded by primogeniture from a paternal inheritance, he evidently sought his fortune in London, likely as a lawyer, where he married in 1661. By February of 1667, Buckner had removed to Virginia and had acquired a small plantation in Gloucester County; surviving court records indicate that he was both a factor and attorney for London merchant houses there. That month, he received the first of at least eight land grants in the county from the colonial government, including one in 1669 for which he used a headright for bringing younger brother Philip to Virginia. By November of 1686, Buckner had received at least 7500 acres in Gloucester County, along with 5600 acres in adjacent Rappahannock (or Essex after 1692), often in partnerships with Henry Whiting and Thomas Royston, both later marriage relations. He was also one in a group of five Gloucester County grandes who were granted 10,000 acres in New Kent County in early 1674 by redeeming headrights. His quickly-growing land-holdings made him a prominent figure in Gloucester County, bringing him a seat on the vestry of Petsworth Parish by 1671.

Buckner became the Clerk of the Gloucester County Court at about that same time, and held both posts until his death in 1695. In that public role, he became aware of the tardy distribution of the laws enacted by the General Assembly, then "published" only in widely-varying manuscript form carried home by the individual Burgesses. The sitting governor, Sir William Berkeley, opposed and actively suppressed any efforts to bring printing to Virginia, seeing the technology as a destabilizing influence – as evinced by the printing press's role in fomenting the English Civil War, which took the life of his patron, Charles I, as well as the social order of his youth. But his departure in 1677, recalled over his handling of Bacon's Rebellion, brought changes to Virginia, with the county courts and their clerks pressing for a more timely promulgation of those laws by their publication in print. Berkeley's successor, Thomas Culpeper, Lord Thoresway, was essentially an absentee governor, residing in the colony just ten months in the seven years he held the post, an absence that left open the question of whether printing was allowed in Virginia.

The uncertainty led Buckner to take matters into his own hands. He had been elected to the 1682 General Assembly, serving in the two sessions that year (April and November). Being now both one of the burgesses responsible for distributing the acts of the Assembly and a county-court clerk who needed those new laws, Buckner understood the problem at hand better than most of his peers in the Assembly. It appears that between the two sessions, he invited an English printer, William Nuthead, to bring his press to Virginia to produce printed

copies of that Assembly's laws. At the end of the November 1682 meeting, Nuthead printed proof copies of the laws enacted by that Assembly for Buckner at his Gloucester Point store. (As the colonial government was then seated at Jamestown, some historians have assumed that the Buckner-Nuthead press was conducted there, but the journals of the Governor's Council clearly show that it was situated in Gloucester, not in the capital.) However, neither Buckner nor Nuthead had asked permission to do so from the Council or the Assembly, nor had they sought a license under the Printing Act promulgated with the Stuart Restoration: the Licensing of the Press Act 1662. While their actions were consistent with the practices followed by colonial American printers to the north, this oversight in Virginia resulted in a call to appear before the Governor (who had returned, reluctantly, in December 1682) and his Council to explain their presumptive behavior. In February 1683, they were ordered to immediately cease and desist in their endeavor until the King's pleasure on the matter could be ascertained, and to post a £100 bond guaranteeing their compliance with the order.

Culpeper and the Council expected that the issue would be resolved when the governor returned to England in May 1683. But what no one could know then was that Culpeper's return home would infuriate Charles II and instigate proceedings that eventually voided his commission from his negligence. Council president Nicholas Spencer would be the acting governor until Culpeper's successor arrived, leaving the issue unresolved. But when Francis Howard, Baron Howard of Effingham, arrived in February 1684 – more than a year after the Council's cease-and-desist order – he carried explicit instructions on the matter:

"And whereas, We have taken notice of the Inconvenience that may arise by the Liberty of Printing in that Our Colony, you are to provide by all necessary orders and Directions that no person be permitted to use any press for printing upon any occasion whatsoever."

Effingham was expected to guarantee that Virginia's printing void would not be filled by entrepreneurs like Buckner and Nuthead. As a result their new printing office was now out of business permanently. Nuthead removed his press to St. Mary's City in Maryland, where he then became that colony's first printer as well.

This singular event did not have as deleterious effect on Buckner's life as one may think; indeed, one of the largest land grants he received personally was issued in December 1682, just before his censure by the Council. Moreover, he was elected to the subsequent 1693 Assembly, during which then Governor Edmund Andros initiated a compilation and revisal of Virginia laws, in response to the continuing complaints from the county courts and their clerks concerning the distribution of the Acts of the Assembly. But little else is known about Buckner after the printing-press controversy, given a dearth of extant public records for this period. It appears that he died in January 1695; he is recorded as attending a vestry meeting in early December 1694, with an inventory of his estate then being entered in the will books of Essex County in mid-February 1695, making it most likely that his life ended in January.

Even though Buckner is generally known only as a footnote in Virginia's printing history, he had a sizeable influence on the colony's ensuing social and economic development through his numerous descendants, particularly in son Richard, who was (like his father) a merchant-planter and a member of the House of Burgesses in the early eighteenth century.

NB: So as to avoid confusion, dates noted here are "new style" (Gregorian calendar), rather than the hyphenated "old style" dates (Julian calendar) in use during Buckner's lifetime.

Personal Data

Born: ca. Feb. 1630 St Mary's Parish, Oxford, England.
Married: July 10 1661 Deborah Ferrers @ London, England.
Died: ca. Jan. 1695 Marlfield, Gloucester County, Virginia.
Children: Richard, Thomas, William, John Jr., and Elizabeth, all apparently born in Virginia.

Sources: Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 2; Colonial Land Office Records, Library of Virginia; *Buckners of Virginia*.