

489 FITZ-RANDOLPH, DAVID

Apprentice Printer

Alexandria

Apprentice in the Alexandria office of Samuel Snowden (393), his uncle.

David Fitz-Randolph is best remembered as the proprietor of a long-lived newspaper in New Jersey. But that career was built on a foundation crafted in the press office of a maternal uncle in Alexandria, Virginia.

The Fitz-Randolph family of New Jersey descended from an English progenitor who was an early settler of Barnstable, Massachusetts. Their branch relocated to the neighborhood of Piscataway and New Brunswick in the early 1700s, emerging as one of the leading families in Middlesex County, New Jersey during the Revolutionary War. Lewis Fitz-Randolph (1757-1822), David's father, was one of at least a dozen family members who served in, and often led, units in the state militia during that formative era. As an ensign in the county militia, Lewis gained fame for leading three daring raids on British-held Staten Island in August and September 1780 that captured more than a dozen Loyalist residents there to be traded in later prisoner exchanges with the British. In 1782, Lewis married Rachel Snowden (1758-1822), who was apparently the eldest sister of printer Samuel Snowden, then just seven years of age. The couple had at least ten children in their forty-year-long union, with David being their third child and second son.

In late 1799, Samuel Snowden, now a journeyman printer in Baltimore, joined with editor Matthew Brown (057) to acquire the assets of the failing *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* and started publishing a Federalist paper that came to be known as the *Alexandria Gazette*. It was in his press office that David apprenticed to the printing trade, alongside his younger brother James (490). As it is now understood that the brothers left their uncle's service in the winter of 1810-11, establishing the date when they began their training with him can only be approximated; but it must have been about 1803, when James reached age twelve, generally the youngest appropriate age for apprentices. That date corresponds with the conversion of Snowden's office from a partnership to a proprietary one, which strained his finances substantially, so making familial assistance a viable and desirable option.

Still, this kin relationship apparently proved awkward in the longer term. The Fitz-Randolph brothers were both keen Republicans employed in printing one of Virginia's most zealous Federalist journals. Moreover, Snowden's *Gazette* had effectively undermined the financial support for the city's only Republican newspaper, forcing its removal to Washington in early 1809. Lacking the funding needed to start their own journal there, and seemingly averse to contending with their uncle, the two young printers were compelled to find another locale where they could establish their independence in the print trade. So they chose to return to Middlesex County and establish a Republican sheet in New Brunswick, the county seat.

By February 1811, the brothers had acquired the tools needed to publish a weekly paper there and began soliciting subscriptions for a journal they called *The Fredonian*.

"The importance of this establishment, every Republican in the State must no doubt perceive, from the almost equally balanced returns of the elections in Middlesex and

some of the adjacent Counties. A little diffusion of correct information in that quarter, we are persuaded, would soon remove those doubts, which have for several years past, hung upon all of the important elections of New-Jersey."

Finding sufficient support, the *Fredonian* issued on April 17, 1811, and continued in David's hands until April 1854. In their initial arrangement, David served as the paper's printer, with James acting as its editor. That division of labor allowed James to emerge as an influential political figure in New Jersey; he was named as the Federal collector of internal revenue in Middlesex County in 1815, which forced an end to his regular involvement in the newspaper in 1816, although some sources report that he continued to edit the weekly until 1842; but given his subsequent roles as the clerk of the court of common pleas, state assemblyman, Congressman, and bank president – all before 1842 – such an involvement is improbable; it is more likely that he simply contributed irregularly to his brother's paper after he withdrew from their partnership in 1816.

David, however, did not follow such a diverse career. His life was one tied to the *Fredonian* until his retirement in 1854. He endured as the sole proprietor for all but two of those forty-three years, but even then the business remained well within family circles; in 1829, David briefly took an a partner in one Melancthon F. Carman (1807-84), the youngest brother of James's wife Sara, probably as a way to provide that untried sibling the means to establish himself in the community. Still, Fitz-Randolph did benefit from his political connections, as seen in his appointment as the town's postmaster in 1819, which aided his editorial efforts via the *gratis* exchange of his weekly with those of other newspaper publishers. The only other public position that he held was in a two-year term as New Brunswick's mayor (1849-51). Otherwise, the paper was the focus of his labors.

In that time, Fitz-Randolph followed the path of many business-oriented Republicans by opposing the Jacksonians and supporting the emerging Whig Party. But as that party waned after the ill-fated Compromise of 1850, the publisher decided to retire from journalism. In April 1854, he sold the *Fredonian* to John F. Babcock (1825-1903), then the foreman of his press office, and sometimes described as his editor. The native of nearby Monmouth joined him in late 1852, when his then foreman, A[lanson]. A. Vance (1826-1916), removed to Morristown to become proprietor of *The Jerseyman* there. Babcock changed "the character of the paper materially," according to a contemporaneous local history, turning its focus away from Fitz-Randolph's long-held interest in state and national politics toward one on local affairs; but such was probably a necessity, considering the decline of the Whigs then; consequently, Babcock was able to continue publishing the paper until 1887, when sold it to a stock company.

In retirement, Fitz-Randolph was considered a widely respected gentleman. He exhibited a continuing commitment to the city of New Brunswick by investing a large portion of the proceeds from the sale of the *Fredonian* in the town's Bank of New Jersey, the reorganized successor to the bank that his brother had headed up in the 1830s. But after his beloved wife died in January 1863, his energy and reliability waned visibly. So it was no surprise when he followed her to the grave just seven months later.

NB: In the 1820s, many in the Fitz-Randolph family adopted a form of their surname that made the prefix "Fitz" into a middle name, so discarding any obvious connection to English royalty, as in the original meaning of that style, in an era that celebrated the common man. The best example of this is found in the name of Theodore F. Randolph, the son of James who served as New Jersey's governor after the Civil War.

Personal Data

Born: Aug. 11 1789 Piscataway, Middlesex, New Jersey.
Married: Apr. 8 1813 Elizabeth Stansbury @ New York, New York.
Died: Aug. 28 1863 New Brunswick, New Jersey.
Children: Stephen (b. 1814); Emily (b. 1817); Clarissa (b. 1820); Lewis (b. 1824);
Almira (b. 1832).

Sources: Imprints; Queznel, *Samuel Snowden*; Clayton, *History of Union and Middlesex Counties*; and notices in the *Fredonian* (1811-63). Genealogical information from family-tree charts seen on *Ancestry.com* (March 2016); exact dates of birth & death taken from grave stone (photo @ *findagrave.com*).