

514 ROLLS, JOHN

Apprentice Printer

Dumfries

Apprentice Printer bound out to Charles Fierer (163) in 1792.

John Rolls apparently had a brief and unhappy association with the Virginia print trade from having been bound out to the service of Charles Fierer in Dumfries in October 1792.

Fierer has been broadly described as a Hessian soldier who stayed in America. But the fuller story has him captured at the Battle of Trenton, held prisoner in Dumfries, paroled in March 1778, then deserting to the American side that August, where he joined the Virginia Line. After the war he returned to his hometown in the Electorate of Hanover, only to find that he had been tried, *in absentia*, for desertion and so was shunned there; he returned to the United States in 1788 and set up a job-press office in Georgetown, Maryland. Using that press, Fierer began publishing a weekly paper there, but soon found he was in need of both trained assistance and operating capital; the former Baltimore publisher, William Goddard, dispatched Thomas Updike Fosdick (167), a kinsman trained as a printer in Rhode Island, to fill both of those needs. But within a year, the firm of Fierer & Fosdick was in deep financial trouble, inducing the partners to remove their business to Dumfries, Virginia, to escape the probable seizure of their assets by Maryland authorities. The pair restarted their newspaper there in September 1791, under the title of the *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository*, embracing the interest in scientific farming of their neighbor George Washington. But their finances were not improved by the change in venue and focus, which persuaded Fosdick to terminate his association with Fierer the ensuing winter and return to Rhode Island.

Consequently, Fierer was in need of inexpensive help in his struggling office when John Rolls was entrusted to his care in October 1792. But Fierer's problems were compounded when his health began to fail soon after that assignment. With a poorly-trained Rolls now printing the *Repository* for him, his weekly was a typographical embarrassment, resembling a sheet from two-hundred years before, rather than the slick productions then issued in the larger American cities, such as nearby Alexandria. It was clear that talents and resources were not now available to Fierer, and the whole enterprise collapsed in late 1793.

With that closing, Rolls disappears from sight. His name is not seen in surviving newspapers, nor is he seen in the imprint record anywhere in the country. He may have been a part of the succeeding Dumfries printing office that opened in May 1795, one which used the same press Fierer employed. However, as Rolls has left no trace of his subsequent activities, that possibility is purely speculative. All that can be said is that a young Prince William resident was bound out to a failing press office in 1792 and that his fate after the demise of that office is unknown, as he cannot be found again in print-trade records or elsewhere.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Lercher, "Printer Soldier of Fortune" (1936).