

## 526 TEBBS, WILLOUGHBY

### Press Owner

### Dumfries

Press owner in Dumfries in 1795.

Willoughby Tebbs was lawyer and county official in Prince William County who became a part of the Virginia print trade by acquiring the press office of Charles Fierer (163) from the printer's estate early in 1795. That purchase furthered his life-long goal of building a major Potomac River port on the Quantico estuary, one complete with a mercantile advertiser.

Known by the honorific "Colonel" for most of his adult life, Tebbs earned that title from his lengthy service in the Prince William County militia. He was a son of Foushee Tebbs II (1723-92), a French & Indian War veteran, justice of the county court, and burgess in the colonial-era Assembly, and his wife, Mary Innis Baxter (b. 1735). In March 1777, after the combat death of older brother Thomas that January, he enlisted in the Virginia Line as an ensign and was promoted to lieutenant in June 1778; by war's end, he had attained the rank of captain, and was advanced to lieutenant-colonel in the Prince William militia by the county court in 1783 – when he was also named that court's deputy clerk. Tebbs shared a grandfather, James Pierre Fouche (1669-1729), with Dr. William Foushee of Richmond (1749-1824), the father of Republican publisher John H. Foushee (170), which accounts for the recurring use of that surname as a given name in his branch of the Tebbs family.

After the war, Tebbs joined with other county notables in attempting to revive the fading fortunes of the town of Dumfries. The aging tobacco-port's harbor, a tidal tributary of the Potomac called Quantico Creek, was becoming clogged with silt, limiting its usability; at the same time, the nearby port of Alexandria was drawing away the merchant trade that the town depended on, as a result of its overland and river connections to the Valley of Virginia and the Ohio country. In view of that, Tebbs was among a group of like-minded men who sought and received appointments from the October 1786 Assembly to act as the town's trustees, effectively a board of supervisors that would regulate activities there and thereby revitalize the port. But it became apparent within a year that renovating the existing town would be insufficient to secure its future. In November 1787, the ensuing Assembly granted a group of investors, including Tebbs's brother William, permission to establish another town just southeast of Dumfries at the mouth of Quantico Creek. The next year, that northern-bank settlement, aptly called Newtown, was complemented by a grant made to another group, this including Tebbs, for a second town on the creek's southern bank, so exploiting the waterfront on both sides of the inlet. Called Carrborough, after investor William Carr, who was also Tebbs's father-in-law, that settlement was slightly larger than Newtown, as well as situated on a sizable tract of land that Tebbs owned.

By the summer of 1791, however, these development efforts had failed to gain traction. At that time, Charles Fierer and Thomas Updike Fosdick (167), publishers of *The Times and the Patowmack Packet* in Georgetown, Maryland (soon to be part of the District of Columbia), were seeking a new home for their financially struggling business. They found amenable patrons among Prince William's merchant community, which convinced the printers to

move their office to Dumfries; there they resumed publishing their weekly as the *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* in September 1791. The timing of the relocation argues for it being an attribute of the Newtown/Carrborough effort. And given subsequent events, Tebbs was most likely one of the partners' persuasive patrons.

Unfortunately, the ill-trained Fierer was also a poor businessman, and their relocated office never recovered from the financial stresses that attended its removal. Fosdick separated himself from the venture at the end of his two-year contract with Fierer in November 1791 and left Virginia. Fierer carried on the business alone, but his problems were compounded when his health began to fail as well. Consequently, the newspaper collapsed at the end of 1793, with the printer then expiring in December 1794. What little property Fierer owned was sold at auction by his estate's administrators in early 1795 to satisfy his debts, as his will directed. His press and office supplies were acquired by Willoughby Tebbs.

The purchase was clearly part of a local effort to make certain that a Dumfries-based weekly would continue to promote local economic interests, such as the Newtown/Carrborough project. But the fact that an untrained individual such as Tebbs now owned Fierer's tools suggests that plans were already in place for replacing the closed paper when the printer died. Sometime in the winter of 1794-95, an Irish émigré named James Kempe (247) arrived in Prince William County; he was practical printer who had fled the persecution of dissident printers and journalists in Great Britain in the early 1790s. Hence, Tebbs had a competent tradesman close at hand when he bought the press, and possibly had induced Kempe to remove to Dumfries in anticipation of that purchase. So it should be no surprise that Kempe published the first number of his new *Republican Journal and Dumfries Weekly Advertiser* with a few weeks of that sale under the banner of James Kempe & Co. – with Tebbs among his unnamed partners. The published list of Kempe's agents shows that it was intended to serve residents in the Virginia counties of Prince William, Fauquier, and Stafford, as well as those in Charles County, Maryland, across the Potomac from Dumfries. The agents reported for Prince William include nearly all of those involved in the Newtown/Carrborough project.

Yet in acquiring the Fierer press, Tebbs effected only a short-term solution to a longer-lived problem. He gave Kempe an opportunity to build a successful business, but evidently put a fixed deadline on his participation in that process. Sometime between October 2, 1795 and February 11, 1796 – most likely in November, when an initial six-month contract between the men would have expired – Tebbs conveyed his interest in Kempe's paper to Dr. Thomas Thornton (414), creating the new firm of Kempe & Thornton. A young physician with deep familial roots in Prince William, just as had Tebbs, Thornton brought with him not only the infusion of capital Kempe needed to sustain a still marginal enterprise, but a more insistent Republican tone to the journal as well – one opposing the election of Federalist John Adams as president that fall. However, it seems that Kempe's ties to the *Republican Journal* were limited to a one-year contract, for in March 1796 he transferred his interest in the paper to Thornton as well. He likely remained in the office operating the press, as Thornton was not a trained printer, particularly as Kempe is not noted in county records as being independent of that business until 1798. But after March 1796, Kempe's name no longer appeared on the paper's masthead. The *Journal* was now the doctor's alone to conduct. By November 1796, the work had overwhelmed him; as a result, he closed the weekly just eighteen months

after it began. Dumfries would not again host a newspaper until after World War II.

Still, in ending his ties to this first Dumfries press, Tebbs did not cease his efforts at local economic development. He continued to promote the sale of town lots in Carrborough – a site that today is within the bounds of Marine Corps Base Quantico – until the fall of 1802. But after 1795, his resources were increasingly focused on trading and exercising military land warrants – the vouchers issued to Revolutionary War soldiers in lieu of pay – acquiring land tracts in both northern Virginia and the Ohio River Valley. In notices published in 1802 and 1803, Tebbs stated he had patented upwards of 2500 acres along two creeks just west of Chillicothe, Ohio, then the capital of the Northwest Territory, and 25,000 acres along the Ohio River in Kentucky. He held claim to perhaps another 5000 acres in Virginia.

Yet for someone so deeply involved in legal and commercial affairs, Tebbs died intestate in 1803. His unexpected, early death meant the sale of his assets in January 1804, a sale that disrupted the lives of his wife and children. In her 1841 application for a federal pension as the widow of a Revolutionary-era soldier, Betsey Tebbs reported that she was compelled to move to a farm owned by her father in Loudoun County after her husband's death and so became dependent on her youngest son for sustenance and support after her father died. That son, Samuel J. Tebbs, benefitted by his grandfather's death as sole heir to those lands, running a profitable farm there until the ravages of the Civil War visited northern Virginia.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Late 1759 Prince William County, Virginia.  
Married: Sept. 1786 Elizabeth Carr @ Prince William County, Virginia.  
Died: Oct. 22 1803 Dumfries, Prince William County, Virginia.  
Children: Mary F. (1787-1867); Margaret C. (1789-1845); Ann F. (1791-1868);  
Thomas F. (1794-1828); Foushee III (1797-1835); Willoughby W.  
(1799-1832); and Samuel J. (1802-68).

Sources: WPA Survey Report on Tebbsdale Site, Prince William County (1937); Prince William County Order & Will Books (1783-1804); *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*; Revolutionary War Pension & Land Warrant Files; town acts (1786-88) in *Hening's Statutes*, vol. 12; *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* (1944); notices in [Dumfries] *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* (1791-93); *Republican Journal*; and *Dumfries Advertiser* (1795-96); and *Alexandria Gazette* (1804). Genealogical information drawn from family charts posted on Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com (April 2016), and Kentucky deed records.