

547 MACALESTER, HECTOR

Editor, Compiler

Norfolk

Editor and Compiler for the official *Virginia Gazette* of Lord Dunmore (153) in 1775-76.

Hector MacAlester was a Scottish merchant residing in Virginia when the Revolutionary War began. He became a part of the print trade in the Old Dominion after the only colonial-era press in Norfolk was confiscated by the last royal governor and he was asked to manage the short-lived "official" journal that was then issued from that press.

By the summer of 1773, the three *Virginia Gazettes* published in Williamsburg had reached a point where they could not fulfill the demand for mercantile advertising in the colony, largely as a result of the growth of the merchant-factor system in Virginia, though partly because of the increasing volume of political news associated with the deepening rift with the imperial government. Norfolk's merchant community responded to this shortage by organizing a company to publish a local journal that was capable of meeting their needs. The effort was headed by Scottish merchant-factor William Duncan (151), who travelled to Britain the following winter to find a printer and press; in June 1774, his *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* was issued from an office conducted by master-printer Robert Gilmour (179) and journeyman-printers Alexander Cameron (076) and Donald McDonald (286), all loyal Scotsmen. It quickly became evident that the *Intelligencer* was designed to "divide and weaken the Friends of American Freedom," as well as to promote the merchant interests in the port. Consequently, when the provisions of the Continental Association passed by the first Continental Congress went into effect on December 1, 1774, Duncan found himself a target of the local associators; he was compelled to transfer control of the paper in January 1775, to John Brown (056), another Scottish merchant factor there. Then in March, Brown was forced, in turn, to sell the weekly to a new firm headed by John Hunter Holt (223), the son of New York's patriot printer, John Holt (222), a former mayor of Williamsburg.

In Holt's hands, the *Intelligencer* became a vocal critic of the imperial government generally, and specifically of the administration of royal governor John Murray, 4th Earl Dunmore, also a Scotsman. That turn proved unfortunate for Holt, however. He assumed control of the Norfolk paper less than a month before Dunmore fled from Williamsburg after his plans for suppressing the growing rebellion in the colony were leaked to the *Virginia Gazette* of John Pinkney (325); that summer, Dunmore and his refugee administration operated from a fleet of ships anchored off Norfolk, drawing withering commentaries from Holt in his journal. So on September 30, 1775, after a particularly coarse assault on the character of one of his lieutenants, the governor ordered Holt arrested and his press seized as a public nuisance. Holt escaped, but Dunmore found hands willing to operate the confiscated press for him in Cameron and McDonald, who began printing official documents and a newspaper that fall and winter. Meanwhile, Norfolk became a major bone of contention between the patriot forces on land and the imperial ones afloat, causing an abandonment of the port by its Scottish merchants; in the end, the town was burned by Dunmore in January 1776.

Hector MacAlester was one of those merchants who fled that fall. He had made Norfolk his

home since at least February 1769. At that time, he became a partner in the new concern of Donalds, MacAlester, & Co.; previously he had been the "American manager of the Glasgow firm of James & Robert Donald & Co." That tobacco-trading house had first employed him in 1760, as well as his brother Archibald, as apprentice factor-store managers in Virginia. From the outset, he evinced a ready familiarity with the tobacco business in the colonies; it seems that Hector and Archibald arrived in North America in the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745-46, joining the kinsmen of their father, James MacAlester of Argyll, in the Cape Fear settlement led by Alexander MacAlester [McAllister] (1715-96). (Ironically, he was later a leading Revolutionary figure in North Carolina, in contrast to Hector's overt Loyalism.) The MacAlester boys were sent north from there in 1760, with a background in tobacco trading and land speculation, apparently after their father had arranged for their employment with the Donalds back in Scotland.

Over the next decade, Hector earned that partnership through his shrewd management of his masters' stores in the colony – six to nine, in all. At some point between 1769 and 1774, his alliance with the Donalds changed when Robert McDonald, Jr. opened his own store in Chesterfield County and he formed a new partnership with MacAlester. But by the summer of 1774, the younger Donald had determined to return home; hence, the firm of Hector MacAlester & Co. was dissolved on August 1st, leaving MacAlester an independent entity in Norfolk at just the time that the Scottish merchants there were coming under suspicion for their support of the mercantilist policies of the government in London. In the dissolution, MacAlester retained ownership of at least two trading vessels – the brigantines *Adventure* and *Dolphin* – which became his temporary home when he fled the port in the fall of 1775.

Still that flight was evidently a choice forced upon him. Two weeks before Dunmore ordered Holt's press seized, MacAlester wrote to St. George Tucker (1752-1827), then a newly-made lawyer in Williamsburg, saying that while "you are enjoying tranquility and a serene climate - here we are in a state of uncertainty and anxiety - in a region of political darkness - not knowing what to fear or what to hope for." Yet once Dunmore acted against the forces of the *de facto* government in Williamsburg, MacAlester had no problem rallying to the royal standard; the governor appointed him "Treasurer and Paymaster of H.M. service in Virginia" that October, with the rank of Captain.

That choice soon proved problematic both commercially and personally. In December, a trading ship that he owned – the sloop *Swallow* – was intercepted on its return from the Caribbean with a cargo of salt; it was diverted into patriot-held Hampton and "seized for the use of the inhabitants of this colony." MacAlester promptly wrote to Edmund Pendleton (1721-1803), then both chair of the Committee of Safety and president of the Virginia Convention, asking for compensation for his loss, stating that "it is not my intention to withdraw any part of my effects out of this Country until I pay my debts in it, which without payment of my claim I will be unable to do." The Convention refused to pay his claim, even as this activity did not violate the exclusions of the standing Continental Association. It seems that his newly-formed official association with Dunmore was the cause.

But his fortunes declined even more precipitously, once it became public knowledge that he was conducting Dunmore's new *Virginia Gazette*. Two weeks before the fifth (and final)

session of the Virginia Convention met in May 1776, a report describing the coterie that Dunmore had assembled around him appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* of Alexander Purdie (345), then the new public printer. MacAlester was a prominent character therein:

"Hector M'Alester is lord Dunmore's right-hand man, acting as secretary to his lordship, and is, besides, compiler of the *New Virginia Gazette*, published, occasionally, for the edification and amusement of his majesty's faithful subjects in this colony, and distributed by them, like pious books, among the weak and ignorant, to lead them into the true faith and understanding of the present unhappy dispute between Great Britain and the American colonies."

That same article reported that John Brown, the late owner of the *Intelligencer*, was now serving as clerk for a new Admiralty Court that Dunmore had constituted with the intention of condemning cargoes seized from patriot traders, possibly retaliating for the treatment of merchants like MacAlester. Thus for both of these Scotsmen, the report demolished any credibility they still retained among Virginians.

Consequently, MacAlester left Virginia with Dunmore when the governor departed for New York in August 1776. But he remained determined to return to the Old Dominion to recover the monies still owed him by his former customers. Throughout his residence there, he engaged in correspondence with Philadelphia merchants who had Virginia ties over settling accounts with his clients there, particularly for paying off his debts to planters from whom he had bought wheat and tobacco. Still, these efforts appear to have been fruitless, as MacAlester filed a claim with the British government in November 1777 detailing his losses in service to the crown (i.e. the buildings and goods that were burned in January 1776, as well as the loss of the *Swallow*).

These disappointments led MacAlester to take a more active part in conducting the war against the insurgents who destroyed his business. While employed in Sir Henry Clinton's headquarters in New York, he submitted a plan to Clinton for "the reduction of Virginia," one Benedict Arnold later used, in part, in his raid on Virginia in January 1781. Then in the winter of 1779-80, he travelled to South Carolina with Charles Cornwallis, who was tasked with executing the so-called "Southern strategy" of subduing the rebellion moving a British army northward from South Carolina; in June 1780, MacAlester offered Cornwallis a similar plan for the "reduction of North Carolina," one which adapted the Virginia plan by using Petersburg as a forward base, rather than Portsmouth as before. Because of this second assignment, MacAlester was with Cornwallis when he entered Virginia after Arnold's raid, serving as his Deputy Commissary of Prisoners, apparently so as to utilize the merchant's knowledge of people and perspectives in both North Carolina and Virginia.

MacAlester's association with Cornwallis meant that he was among those taken prisoner at Yorktown in October 1781. Under the terms of the Articles of Capitulation, he was allowed to depart for New York as a member of the paroled general staff in Cornwallis's command. But his subsequent role is unclear. He was given "permission to go to St. Augustine for the recovery of his health" in 1782, then the southern-most port held by the British in North America, though his official salary ceased at the end of that year. In early 1783, MacAlester wrote to Sir Guy Carleton, Clinton's successor as commander-in-chief in New York and the

officer charged with resettling British loyalists, seeking arrearages and reinstatement; but Carleton rejected his request, citing its lack of specificity. He immediately asked Maj. Robert Molleson, wagon-master for the British forces in North America, to intercede on his behalf. Molleson was a friend from the Chesapeake tobacco trade, a Scottish military officer who came to Maryland in the 1770s to join his brother in a mercantile concern there. He told his old colleague that he:

"little thought after the services he had made he should be obliged to solicit with disappointment a small pittance of pay for his support until the situation of affairs would admit of any other pursuit."

Still, MacAlester's appeal does not seem to have succeeded. He is not seen in any record concerning Loyalist claims thereafter, or any other official record. Following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which ceded the Floridas to Spain, British subjects in St. Augustine evacuated to either the Caribbean or Britain proper. That event suggests MacAlester either returned to Scotland, or joined the new governor of the Bahamas, Lord Dunmore, in Nassau that fall. But his abrupt departure from public records more likely indicates that the infirmity that induced MacAlester to remove to St. Augustine claimed his life before either his appeal was adjudicated in London or the forced relocation of the Floridians. Thus his fate is unknown.

NB. His surname also spelled McAlester, M'Alester, MacAllister, and McAllister. The form used in this Index is one seen in subject's own published notices and correspondence with government officials in Virginia and Great Britain.

No definitive Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Trade role established by [Williamsburg: Purdie] *Virginia Gazette* (26 Apr. 1776). Biography derived from DeWolfe, *Discoveries of America*; Dobson, *Scots on the Chesapeake*; Dobson, *Scottish Transatlantic Merchants*; Eckenrode, *Revolution in Virginia*; Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*; Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods*; Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*; Cleggett, "McAlester's Plans for Subjugation of Virginia" (VMHB: 1974); *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*; *Papers of George Washington*; Tucker-Coleman Papers, Swem Library, College of William and Mary; *Archives of Maryland*, vol. 12; Charles Cornwallis Papers, Public Records Office, Great Britain; *Calendar of American Manuscripts in Royal Institution of Great Britain* (1909); Coldham, *American Loyalist Claims*; notices in [Williamsburg: Purdie & Dixon] *Virginia Gazette* (1768-74), [Williamsburg: Rind] *Virginia Gazette* (1768-74), [Williamsburg: Purdie] *Virginia Gazette* (1774-78), and *Virginia Gazette and Norfolk Intelligencer* (1774).