

Editor

Richmond

Editor of the *Virginia Patriot* for Augustine Davis (119) in about 1819.

John Archer Robertson is now known to have been a part of the Virginia print trade from one editorial comment appended to an essay analyzing a series of letters that he reportedly published in Baltimore papers in the winter of 1821-22, renewing charges against Thomas Jefferson of malfeasance in office while he was minister to France forty-years before.

"Some may wonder, says the Lynchburg Press, that a man in this country, where the freedom of the press and of enquiry affords so unlimited an opportunity to discover the truth, as well as disseminate falsehood, of sufficient hardihood to publish such a statement, in the teeth of the facts, and with the most unblushing confidence. The admiration of our readers will cease, when they learn that the author is no less a man than JOHN ARCHER ROBERTSON, late an Editor of the Richmond Patriot, but at present a resident of the city of Baltimore. This man is so well known to infamy in his native State, that any attempt to delineate his character, or to impress an opinion of his unworthiness of credit, would be an act of supererogation."

Robertson responded through the pages of the Baltimore's notorious *Federal Republican*, then published by Frederick G. Schaeffer (1794-1823), disclaiming responsibility for these essays, signed "A Native of Virginia." But the character issue would not be one that was so blithely denied, as it continued to plague him until his death.

Robertson's tenure as the editor of Richmond's *Virginia Patriot* appears to coincide with his attempt to overturn the January 1814 decision of the General Assembly to grant his wife a divorce from him on the grounds of spousal abuse, both physical and emotional. The exact date of his service is uncertain as that journal's proprietor, Augustine Davis, did not usually identify the editors he employed unless they acquired an interest in his paper, or sold such an interest. His last identifiable editor – Charles Prentiss (341) – withdrew in July 1817, and Davis retired and sold his dying paper in April 1821. Hence, Robertson's term falls between those dates, most likely about the time that he lost his appeal in December 1818, as Davis's *Virginia Patriot* was the only Richmond paper supporting his effort.

The ostracized editor was born in the part of Amelia County that became Nottoway in 1789, the son of James Robertson (1751-1828) and Anne Archer (1757-1828). In 1795, he married Elizabeth Royall, the daughter of John Royall of Caxanata Plantation in Amelia County, who had commanded the militia unit in which Robertson's uncle served during the Revolutionary War; his father may have served in that unit as well during the 1781 invasion of Virginia by Lord Cornwallis. The family trees of the Robertson, Royall, and Archer families of Southside Virginia are heavily intertwined, leading to a confusion in genealogical sources of this John Archer Robertson with a like-named cousin who died in 1808.

That intermingling also led to entangling claims to property when the fathers of Robertson's generation died. Here it seems that the death of John Royall in 1805 let loose a war among his heirs over who controlled the many parts of his estate. From a screed that Robertson

published in Davis's paper after his wife was granted a divorce in early 1814, it appears that her family had been unwilling, on many occasions in the first decade of that marriage, to transfer to him property that he felt entitled to own. But at the same time, he was involved in two suits with his brother George over debts owed; the first was a Chancery case in which he sought a mere \$40 from his brother, one that dragged on for a nearly dozen years; the second was over a purchase-and-sale agreement in which George sold him a tract of land, one where John sought title to that property despite not having paid his brother in full for the tract. (He lost on appeal in 1824, the court finding that Robertson was trying to use that title to secure a loan he wanted to use to pay for the property he did not yet own.) As these cases brought his honesty into question, it is unsurprising that his better-off in-laws did not want to engage in any real-estate deals with him.

However, Robertson was particularly aggrieved over his wife's inheritance, which it seems that both Elizabeth and her siblings wanted to keep out of his hands. In December 1813, a divorce petition was presented to the General Assembly in her name; the primary reason given was the abuse she had suffered at his hands. It was reported that she had contracted a venereal disease almost immediately upon their marriage, that he had deprived her of medical care for the condition, and that he had tried to kill her by exposure to the elements; eventually, she was rescued by her father, although her flight purportedly led Robertson to banish their children (all under 10) from his house and take in another woman to bed. It is unclear whether these charges were true, but it is clear that Robertson did not attend the Assembly in order to contest the divorce, even as her family provided multiple witnesses in support of her assertions. Consequently, his wife's petition passed through both chambers of the Assembly in just four weeks, and resulted in the grant of a divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Yet the most notable features of the resulting act were its provisions that neither party was allowed to remarry – apparently to prevent the unnamed disease from spreading – and that Elizabeth was granted the right to own property in her name alone, without any interference from Robertson. Thus the Royall estate was protected from his predations.

Despite not having contested the divorce, Robertson was furious after it had been granted. He attempted to have a rebuttal published in the *Richmond Enquirer*, which had printed the committee report recommending the divorce; but publisher Thomas Ritchie (360) declined to do so, evidently because the report was considered irrefutable as the public record of a legitimate legal proceeding. Robertson soon engaged Davis to print the rebuttal in Ritchie's stead, adding a scathing assault on Ritchie in the process. When his disclaimer was finally published some three months after the divorce was approved, the text consisted largely of an *ad hominem* attack on unnamed individuals who wanted to deprive him of property that was his martial due; only one paragraph in his full-page outburst spoke to the charges that were the basis of the Assembly's decision, while offering sworn testimonials from fifteen of his friends and three of his overseers that he was a scrupulous man who they had not seen abusing his wife – all gathered after the divorce had been granted.

The matter should have died with this diatribe, but Robertson would not be denied. He said partisan forces were at work here, as well as covetous ones. He was an avowed Federalist, while the Royalls were Republicans; and with an Assembly controlled by the party agreeable to his in-laws' views, the truth of his claims had been rejected out of hand. Thus when the

1818 Assembly elections brought a body into office more to his liking politically, Robertson filed a petition asking that his rights to Elizabeth's property be reinstated. His rationale was that he had been deprived of his property by a body other than a Chancery Court, and so the act, and expressly the unchallenged testimony on which it was based, constituted an illegal *ex parte* proceeding. But questioning the Assembly's long-exercised authority in such matters meant his pleas fell on deaf ears, regardless of party; it took that body less than a week to reject his request in December 1818.

Accordingly, it looks as if Robertson had joined Davis sometime before this session met as a tactic to secure the reinstatement that he desired. Yet it may also be that he became Davis's editor in the wake of this disappointment. But as his name does not appear anywhere in the *Virginia Patriot*, outside of his diatribe in April 1814, determining the precise period of his service is speculative.

In late 1820, Robertson took a new tack in his efforts to reclaim his ex-wife's property. On December 20th, he wrote two letters to Thomas Jefferson; the first was an essay justifying his behavior by rehashing both his 1814 complaint and his 1818 petition, complete with the supporting "evidence," inferring an attempt to secure his influence; the second was clearly an attempt to curry favor with the former president, soliciting his assistance in resettling in Albemarle County – now that "Mrs. R." had died – and writing a "correct history" of Virginia, this just four years after the monumental *History of Virginia* begun by John Daly Burk (063) was at last completed by Louis Hue Girardin (180). Jefferson's letter-book shows that he ignored the first and made a polite response to the second, encouraging his removal to Albemarle, as he did to all such suggestions, while noting that he was unable to help Robertson with his history as his vast collection of documents had been sent to Washington in 1816, along with his library, to replace the recently-burned Library of Congress. Needless to say, Robertson neither relocated to Albemarle, nor wrote a history of the state.

That Robertson sought support from Jefferson, the figurative head of the party that he said opposed him, shows that the account of his wife's supporters was thought by the public the more accurate one, apparently from the official nature of the legislature's actions. But he continued to believe that this situation was the result of newspaper editors not publishing his "factual" account. And his denial of the "Native of Virginia" letters in early 1822 clearly manifested that belief. He was incensed that,

"private character should be held up to execration, from one end of the continent to the other, by a set of *ignorami* & slanderers upon an assumed fact, merely suppositions or ideas, cannot be tolerated, under any pretext, derived from the foregoing premises. The series of letters addressed to the people of the United States, by 'A *Native of Virginia*,' upon the *assumed fact*, that I am the author, has drawn down upon me the anathemas and philippics, as a private sinner, of a host of printers in the union. Not satisfied with dubbing me the '*Native*' and attacking his publications as such, they vilify and abuse the supposed author in his *private* morals!!"

Nonetheless, his authorship of those letters was implicit among those Virginians familiar with his writings, as Ritchie noted: "Now, any one who is acquainted with Mr. Robertson's stile, &c. needed 'no ghost to come from the grave to tell him this'." Furthermore, the

comment in the *Lynchburg Press* was certainly written by John Hampden Pleasants (330), a rising star among dissident Virginia Republicans (later Whigs) and someone who should have found a fellow traveler politically in Robertson. Instead, that commentary evinces just how much of a pariah that he had become in Virginia. And such a reputation explains why he now resided in Baltimore and not Albemarle.

Still, it seems that Robertson fared little better in Maryland than in his home state. In 1824, he announced his candidacy for the seat in Congress representing Kent, Cecil, and Harford counties, all immediately north and east of Baltimore; regrettably, he polled just 8 votes out of nearly 5400 cast. Then in January 1826, he filed a petition with the Maryland Assembly seeking the removal from office of Stevenson Archer (1786-1848), Chief Judge of the Circuit Courts of Baltimore and Harford Counties, and his associate justices, for malfeasance in office after they had not licensed him to practice in those courts. In doing so, Robertson was taking on an influential Republican who had recently been appointed by that same body to the Maryland Court of Appeals, a seat he would hold until his death in 1848. Consequently, his petition was never considered, even after it was referred to the appropriate committee in each of the following three sessions; in February 1829, Robertson conceded the futility of his quest and asked it be withdrawn. Once again, he had challenged an official government decision on the basis of personal animas and found only disappointment.

Being deprived of the ability to practice law in Maryland, it appears that Robertson returned to Virginia in the ensuing months. His name next appears in newspapers in April 1830 as the presenter of an after-dinner toast at a gathering that honored Norfolk's recently displaced congressional representative Thomas Newton (1768-1847); the Anti-Jackson Newton had lost his seat as a result of a contested election decided in favor of his Jacksonian opponent, George Loyall (1789-1868) at the start of the second session of the 21st Congress; his return home was greeted with a dinner organized by city's merchants and businessmen; Robertson was among the guests, and he offered a characteristically sarcastic toast, pointing to the hypocrisy of Jackson's administration. His participation in this proto-Whig meeting indicates he was an established presence there by the spring of 1830, and his subsequent journalistic activity suggests that he may have been in Norfolk for as much as a year by then.

Another dinner guest was James C. West (1797-1840), then the publisher of the *People's Free Press* in Norfolk. That journal issued initially in adjacent Portsmouth as the semi-weekly *Portsmouth Republican and Virginia Commercial Gazette* in May 1829. While purportedly a non-partisan sheet, West was a supporter of Henry Clay's American System for the duration of his publishing career; hence, he removed his newspaper early that fall to the friendlier confines of Norfolk, where it became the daily *Norfolk and Portsmouth Evening Bulletin*. His partner in this expanded venture was Stephen T. Mitchell (1804-31), a Richmond lawyer and playwright who conducted the short-lived literary magazine *The Spirit of the Old Dominion* there in 1827. As a daily paper was still a novelty in Norfolk, West soon shifted publication to mornings so as to broaden its reach – making it the *Morning Bulletin* – but by year's end he was compelled to close the *Bulletin*, probably because of Mitchell's departure for Gates County, North Carolina, where he practiced law until his death a year later.

When West resumed publishing a paper in January 1830, it was the weekly *People's Free*

Press. But what was left unsaid was that Robertson was a silent partner in West's new and supposedly non-partisan journal. Thomas Ritchie lifted the apparent veil of secrecy in his *Richmond Enquirer* in June of that year:

"We have seen the very liberal strictures in the Norfolk "Free Press".... It is sufficient answer, that one of the conductors or contributors to that Press, is **JOHN ARCHER ROBERTSON!** — The article in question abounds with *misrepresentations of facts, absurdities of reasoning, and the vilest ascriptions of the vilest of motives.*"

It may be that Robertson was a contributor to West's previous ventures, as he is not seen in Maryland records or papers after February 1829. West was a journeyman printer who came to Virginia from Baltimore in early 1829 to publish the *Portsmouth Republican*; so it may be that he knew Robertson there, and that the provocative writer was a factor in his relocation to Virginia. However, it was not until June 1830 that his association with West was reported by a knowing observer of Virginia journalism. Still, it appears that finding a viable readership in an area dominated by two long-lived journals – the Democratic-leaning *Norfolk Herald* and the Whiggish *American Beacon* – proved to be a larger problem than was Robertson's reputation, though that dynamic may have impeded West's publication. The latest known number of the *Free Press* issued in November, suggesting that it survived just a year.

Ritchie's report of Robertson's connection to West's journal provides the latest definitive evidence of his activities. The identity confusion seen in the genealogical sources makes it difficult, if not impossible, to assign him a date and place of death. But knowing of his work in 1830 makes dates before that year invalid. The only post-1830 date seen in those sources states that he died in Nottoway County in 1834, based on court records now lost. That loss brings that report into question, even though it fits with the extant record of his life. So this Index reports that he died after 1830, but cannot say what pursuits filled his final days. Yet it is quite clear that his reputation was tarnished irreparably by the 1814 divorce report, despite his unremitting efforts to refute common knowledge. That ill-repute may even have led to the demise of an innovative Norfolk newspaper in 1830.

Personal Data

Born:	ca.	1775	Amelia (now Nottoway) County Virginia.
Married:	Nov. 19	1795	Elizabeth Royall @ Lunenburg County, Virginia.
Died:	After	1830	Nottoway County, Virginia [?].
Children:	Seven born to Elizabeth; four survived infancy: John Royall, Henry Clinton, Sarah Randolph, and Ann Elizabeth.		

Sources: *Notes on the Southside*; *Robertson v. Robertson*, 1824 (3 Randolph, or Virginia Reports 24); A New Nation Votes (<http://elections.lib.tufts.edu>); *Journal of the Maryland House of Delegates* (1829); notices in *Richmond Enquirer* (1813-30), [Richmond] *Virginia Patriot* (1814), [Baltimore] *Federal Republican* (1821-24), [Wilmington] *American Watchman & Delaware Advertiser* (1822), *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* (1824), *Baltimore Gazette & Daily Advertiser* (1826), and *Halifax [NC] Minerva* (1830).