

## DUMFRIES 01: Agricultural Repository

00: The Times and Patowmack Packet (1789-1791) in Georgetown, DC.

01: The Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository (1791-1793)

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The first newspaper issued in Dumfries was one transplanted from the District of Columbia. It was a weekly published by a "Hessian" defector who experienced major fiscal difficulties throughout his five years in the printing trade, ones that also broke him physically.

Charles Fierer (163) is a unique figure in the history of printing in Virginia. He came to North America as part of the German forces loyal their Hanoverian sovereign, George III, king of Great Britain; so while not a mercenary, *per se*, he is often labeled as a "Hessian" as a result. Captured at Trenton at Christmas in 1776, he was sent to Dumfries, Virginia, as a prisoner of war and remained there until paroled in March 1778. His time in Virginia evidently changed his worldview, as he defected to Washington's forces outside New York that August. Denied a commission in the Continental Army by Congress, he received a commission as a major in the Virginia line from Gov. Thomas Jefferson in 1779. Fierer then served in the Southern campaigns that followed and was severely wounded, mustering out before Cornwallis's surrender in 1781. That November, he can be seen in Philadelphia seeking a position in the Confederation government, at just the same moment that he was convicted, *in absentia*, of treason and desertion by his German commanders. His activities over the next few years cannot be readily traced, but he later reported that he returned to Europe only to find his actions in America had made him an outcast at home. So by early 1788, Fierer was back in America, landing in Norfolk destitute but actively seeking work.

Fierer settled in Georgetown, Maryland (soon to be part of the District of Columbia) by late 1788 and had opened a printing office in partnership with Christian Kramer, a merchant there. With the incoming Federal government eyeing the Georgetown/Alexandria stretch of the Potomac as the site for the national capital, Fierer was one of several printer-publishers who established newspapers in the two locales in early 1789, anticipating that their journals would profit from their siting in the new capital city. However, Kramer objected to Fierer's unilateral decision to refocus their office's production from job-printing to journalism, and severed relations with his partner in April 1789. Kramer's defection proved to be the first in a series of financial problems that *The Times and the Patowmack Packet* would face in the ensuing two years. As his situation deteriorated in 1789, Fierer turned to the ever-generous William Goddard (lately publisher of Baltimore's *Maryland Journal*) for assistance; Goddard dispatched a kinsman from Rhode Island, Thomas Updike Fosdick (164), to serve as Fierer's partner and shop-foreman; the new firm of Fierer & Fosdick took control of the troubled paper with the issue of November 25, 1789.

Financial issues, though, still plagued the enterprise. Debt litigation soon followed, resulting in the mortgaging of their office's equipment in June 1791, ostensibly to pay the judgments against them. Yet the last number of *The Times and the Patowmack Packet* issued about a month later; the two had chosen that moment to flee Georgetown (and so the jurisdiction of Maryland's courts) for Virginia, rather than satisfy those obligations. Hence, Fierer was

*personae non grata* in Maryland by early 1792, a warrant having been issued for his arrest on sight there.

Fierer & Fosdick moved their press office to Dumfries, clearly because of the connections Fierer had forged there during his fifteen-month internment in the town. On September 29, 1791, they published a new paper there – *The Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository*. While not a true continuation or successor to the Georgetown weekly, this one was built on the ruins of the old, and reflected an understanding that the revenue that it could produce was essential to the concern's long-term survival. It seems that their plan was now to live in the reflected glow of George Washington (of nearby Mount Vernon) by embracing his well-known interest in scientific farming – a subject the partners believed was of general interest to Virginians, especially Washington's neighbors. Hence, their new *Agricultural Repository* embraced this largely apolitical credo.

Fierer's financial status was not improved by the change in venue and focus. Sometime in the following winter, Fosdick separated himself from the venture and left Virginia, likely in November at the end of a two-year commitment – an event that would have required some cash outlay by Fierer. Apparently, that departure also compelled a reduction in the weekly's page-size from a folio to a quarto scale. He carried on alone with the help of an apprentice bound out to him in October 1792 named John Rolls (514). But his problems were quickly compounded when his health began to fail. With the poorly-trained Rolls now producing the *Repository* for him, Fierer's weekly was a typographical embarrassment, resembling an imprint from two-hundred years before rather than the slick products then emanating from the larger American cities, such as nearby Alexandria. It is clear that talents and resources were increasingly unavailable to Fierer, resulting in the collapse of the whole enterprise at the end of 1793. He was forced to close his paper following issue of December 19, 1793.

Fierer lived just another year, dying in December 1794, six days after a bill providing for his relief (one supported by Washington) was filed in Congress. What little property he owned was sold at auction by his estate's administrators to satisfy his debts, as his will directed. His press and office supplies were acquired by Colonel Willoughby Tebbs (526); in May 1795, Tebbs used those tools to publish the subsequent *Republican Journal* as the silent partner to a practical printer named James Kempe (247).

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Sources: LCCN nos. 86-053061, 82-016304, & 85-025229; Brigham I: 95 & II: 1113. Lercher, "Printer Soldier of Fortune" (1936); notices in [Baltimore] *Maryland Journal* (1789) and [Dumfries] *Agricultural Repository* (1781-93).