

FREDERICKSBURG 02: Republican Citizen

01: Republican Citizen and Farmer & Planter's Chronicle (1796-1797)

From 1796 to 1811, a series of short-lived papers issued in Fredericksburg that challenged the primacy of the town's first newspaper, the Federalist-aligned *Virginia Herald* of Timothy Green (194). The first of those challengers was the *Republican Citizen* of Lancelot Aylett Mullin (307), which first issued in the midst of the 1796 presidential campaign.

The 1796 election pitted Virginian Thomas Jefferson against John Adams of Massachusetts for the office then still held by George Washington. Each of them headed a political faction that emerged during Washington's presidency. Once Washington announced his intention to retire at the end of his second term in March 1797, a heated contest developed between those factions of the succession to Washington. Jefferson represented a perspective that espoused a "strict" interpretation of the 1787 federal constitution, enhancing the political power of the states and the farming majority of the American population. Adams, in turn, represented those embracing a "loose" interpretation of the constitution, so increasing the power of the Federal government, and of the urban merchants dependent on its power to protect their commercial interests. As most newspapers published then in the country were mercantile advertisers, and so Federalist journals, there was a distinct journalistic mismatch between the two parties as the 1796 election neared.

Early in 1796, Jefferson's supporters in the Rappahannock River Valley moved to limit the damage that Fredericksburg's *Virginia Herald* could wreak against their champion there; that paper was published by a Connecticut-born Federalist, Timothy Green, who had long-standing links to other Federalist presses in the North, several of which were operated by his kinsmen. To compete with Green, those supporters enticed Lancelot A. Mullin – a young printer in the Fayetteville, North Carolina, office of John Silbey, publisher of the *Fayetteville Gazette* – to take on their Fredericksburg-based project. To sweeten the deal, they offered Mullin the opportunity to sell books from the stocks of Philadelphia publishing entrepreneur Mathew Carey, having recognized that a journal backed solely by a group of local political leaders lacked the financial base needed for long term success. Carey employed Mason Locke Weems (435), the celebrated "bookselling parson," as his agent in Virginia; Weems knew well the locals behind this venture (essentially his neighbors, as he lived in nearby Dumfries) and so he vouched for Mullin as a worthy credit risk for consignments of Carey's wares knowing that those local backers could supply ample security. With the deal in place, Mullin acquired a press and types and moved to Fredericksburg.

His resulting *Republican Citizen and Farmer & Planter's Chronicle* made its first appearance on June 1, 1796. Its agrarian perspective was evinced not just by its title, but also by the motto on its masthead: "Agriculture is above all." Yet despite that overt appeal, the new weekly was a problematic venture. From the beginning of his Fredericksburg residence, it is clear that Mullin did not have the business acumen that he needed to juggle the competing imperatives of his new business. While the election campaign proceeded, he found liberal financial support in the subsidies afforded by printing paid-for essays and letters from his

backers and other Jefferson advocates. Moreover, Jefferson himself made an effort to steer material into Mullin's pages that was favorable to his campaign and those of his partisan allies. But once Adams had defeated Jefferson, Mullin's *Republican Citizen* could not find support like that which local merchants provided for Green's *Herald*, and so did not realize a profit from the paper. Hence Mullin was compelled to suspend publication of his weekly with the issue of June 14, 1797, just 54 weeks into its run.

Mullin remained in Fredericksburg and conducted his press as a job-printing office over the ensuing summer, apparently expecting that the *Republican Citizen* would be issued again at some future date. He also increased the size of his consignments from Carey, recognizing his increased dependence on book and stationery sales now. But pressure from his creditors increasing over that summer, as trade declined in the port in consequence of the Quasi-War with France. As Mullin's situation deteriorated, he made the fateful decision to flee Virginia. He left Fredericksburg about September 15th, taking with him what little cash he then had on hand and his latest supply of books from Carey, apparently one step ahead of a seizure by the sheriff. He left those books behind in Norfolk, when a Weems friend intervened, and boarded a Charleston-bound ship; remarkably, he died enroute on September 29th.

Within days of Mullin's departure, his office and other abandoned property were sold in an auction conducted by the county sheriff. The whole was purchased by Robert Mercer (301), the Commonwealth Attorney in Fredericksburg's courts, who was also likely one of Mullin's backers. Mercer promptly formed a partnership with George Carter (082), his wife's cousin, to pick up where Mullin left off. Thus just one month after Mullin had fled town, the firm of Mercer & Carter issued the first number of their *Genius of Liberty* – the ensuing competitor to Timothy Green's *Virginia Herald*.

Sources: LCCN No. 94-055783; Brigham II: 1115; *Weems Letters*; Will & Order Books, Fredericksburg Hustings Court; Quinn, *Fredericksburg*.