

FREDERICKSBURG 03: Genius of Liberty

- 01: The Genius of Liberty and Fredericksburg & Falmouth Advertiser (1797-1798)
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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 second of those challengers was the *Genius of Liberty* of Robert Mercer (301), which was built on the ruins of the first challenger, the *Republican Citizen*.

The title of this Fredericksburg weekly was one with a clear connection to the revolutionary ideals of the continental Enlightenment, particularly with those of the French Revolution – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (liberty, equality, brotherhood). At that time, the common axiom "genius of liberty and equality" was often portrayed in engravings and paintings as a winged female figure, which led to that image's enshrinement in the statue by Augustin-Alexandre Dumont atop the *Colonne de Juillet* (July Column) in the *Place de la Bastille*, the site of the notorious Paris prison whose sacking in July 1789 symbolizes the start of that Revolution. From that date on, the radicalism of the "Jacobins" there was assailed by more conservative elements in the American body politic (Federalists), who applied that label to their rivals here (Republicans) as one of derision. Some Republican journalists embraced the inference, however, using the phrase "genius of liberty" as the title for their newspapers, seeing that ostensible insult as an honorific instead. From 1795 to 1845, eleven journals, from Vermont to Illinois, adopted that title, including two in Virginia.

The Mercer Period

In the spring of 1796, Rappahannock River Valley supporters of Thomas Jefferson – who was then campaigning for the presidency against John Adams – decided to establish a journal in Fredericksburg that would advocate for his election, and so counter the influence of the port town's established Federalist paper, the *Virginia Herald*, a strident exponent for Adams and opponent of Jefferson. They convinced a young printer from North Carolina, Lancelot A. Mullin (307), to come to Fredericksburg to publish such a paper for them. However, Mullin's *Republican Citizen* issued just 54 numbers (June 1, 1796 to June 14 1797), closing as a result of a lack of local support after Jefferson's defeat by Adams. That summer, Mullin attempted to make good as a job-printing, stationery, and bookselling concern, apparently hoping the *Citizen* would issue again in short order. But by that September, he was feeling the pressure of unpaid creditors and decided to abscond with whatever funds he then had on hand and leave Virginia forever.

Mullin left his press and its supplies behind. Within days of his exit, that office was sold at a sheriff's auction to Robert Mercer, the Commonwealth Attorney in the state courts meeting in Fredericksburg, and probably one of the Jeffersonians who had instigated the *Republican Citizen* project. Mercer was someone with deep roots in the Northern Neck, as well as being

part of a widely-respected family that was sharply divided along the same partisan lines that had prompted publication of the *Citizen*. Yet it seems his marital connections now became the most important elements in play. He was married to a niece of Landon Carter, the noted Revolutionary-era pamphleteer and political leader from Lancaster County, and he shared Mercer's political perspective; her father provided the funds Mercer needed to buy Mullin's press on such short notice; and her cousin, George Carter (082), quickly became his partner in publishing a successor to Mullin's failed paper. The combination proved a more stable foundation for a Jeffersonian journal in the Fredericksburg area than that deployed in the earlier ill-fated effort.

The first number of *The Genius of Liberty and Fredericksburg & Falmouth Advertiser* issued on October 13, 1797, just four weeks after Mullin's departure. While the thirty-three-year-old Mercer was the senior partner, the twenty-one-year-old Carter was the voice of the firm as the paper's editor. As neither partner had any journalistic experience, the two proceeded with some caution initially. They started the *Genius of Liberty* as a weekly paper, unlike the twice-weekly frequency of the *Republican Citizen* which had tried to match the pace of the *Virginia Herald* to Mullin's detriment. The pair also laid claim to representing their locality by adopting a subtitle for their weekly that Green's *Herald* abandoned in August 1797.

This approach gave Mercer & Carter sufficient stability to increase their pace of publication to twice-weekly some ten months on, matching that of Green's *Herald*. In announcing the planned expansion, the partners restated their motivations, taking a passing shot at their competitor:

"...the press must be regarded as a most important engine of good or evil to a community; information flowing thence in the diversity of channels, if one rill shall be tainted with poison, in another more pure may be found its antidote. This diversity of views, interests, and opinions is the sole resource of the ingenuity of Man, against that corruption to which all human institutions must be liable..."

They also challenged a common Federalist trope, often repeated in this heavily Baptist region by Green, that the Jeffersonians were radical atheists:

"Connected with and inseparable from Politics they consider Public Morals; and whilst they indulge all free enquiry as the only source of truth Political or Moral, they will never violate that decorum to which the opinions of the truly religious have with them a sacred claim. The shaft of ridicule, if leveled at all, will be pointed only at Vice and Folly."

Their prospectus promised that the expanded form would start "as soon as 500 subscribers are procured," which turned out to be September 7, 1798, not quite four weeks after they first advertised their plan on August 12th, and just two weeks after the pair reported that the count of subscriber had easily exceeded their requisite number.

Yet it appears that Carter resigned from the successful firm at about the end of 1798. The last number extant with his imprimatur issued on December 14, 1798, with the next extant number being that published on February 8, 1799 by the firm of Mercer & Pittman. On April 2, 1799, the *Genius of Liberty* office was destroyed in a fire that ravaged Fredericksburg, one

that left Timothy Green's business in ruins as well; the *Herald's* account of the catastrophe reported that the proprietors of the *Genius of Liberty* were then Mercer & Field, indicating a departure of the unknown Pittman sometime in that two month interval. That chronology suggests that Carter left the concern at the end of December 1798 and was replaced by the enigmatic Pittman, who was supplanted, in turn, by a man named Field after just a three-month-long contract with Mercer. Yet the numbering of the newspaper continued without interruption (as did Green's *Herald*) indicating that at least some of the office's equipment was saved from the inferno, allowing Mercer to continue the business with new partners in Carter's place. However, the reasons behind the changes remain unclear from the dearth of surviving issues of the *Genius of Liberty*.

In consequence of Mercer's skillful management, the only real impediment to his journal's success was his unexpected death on September 11, 1800. That sad event follows the last number of his paper known extant (July 22, 1800) by almost two months. The *Genius of Liberty* continued publication uninterrupted immediately after his death, suggesting that a transition plan was already in place as a result of Mercer's engaging another new partner that summer in place of Field. And during that interregnum, the journal was conducted by Mercer's employees for the benefit of his estate.

The Walker Period

Being in the midst of the heated rematch of Jefferson and Adams for the presidency, it was essential to Fredericksburg-area Republicans that this counter-weight to the *Virginia Herald* continue for the foreseeable future. Hence on October 14, 1800, the *Genius of Liberty* was transformed into *The Courier* under the proprietorship of James Walker (425). It appears Walker was a trained printer in Mercer's employ at the time of his death; he acquired both paper and press from Mercer's estate sometime during the ensuing month, likely with some assistance from Mercer's family, friends, and allies. That crucial support sustained Walker through that winter and into the following year. But Jefferson's election and inauguration proved to bring new competition to Fredericksburg and threatened Walker's *Courier*.

In May 1801, a third journal appeared in town, the *Fredericksburgh News-Letter*. Published by Philip Temple (409), a young Caroline County planter of some means, his paper drew on the moderating tone of Jefferson's inaugural address that March and his assessment that "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." For Temple, the peaceful transfer of power from Adams to Jefferson offered "the pleasing prospects of returning Unity" to the country, a prospect incompatible with Walker's strident partisanism. Conciliation would be the guiding principle for his *News-Letter*, even as it supported the new administration, and it evidently found an audience. By mid-November, Walker found it prudent to suspended publication of his *Courier*, indicating that Temple had drawn off a sizeable portion of his business, likely both in subscription and advertising revenue; the *News-Letter* thus became the town's Republican voice. Yet Temple could only sustain the effort for about a year; ill-health forced the *News-Letter's* closure in June 1802; he retired to his King William home, where he died in August, just twenty-two.

In spite of the void created by Temple's withdrawal, Walker deferred restarting his *Courier*

until after another Republican newspaper appeared in Fredericksburg. In May 1803, Samuel Chiles (092), another Caroline County planter with political ambitions, and Isham Burch (062), a printer from the press offices in Richmond, began issuing the *Virginia Express* there. Their paper was apparently one that aligned with the views of Jefferson's critics within his own party, the *Tertium Quids*, later exemplified by John Taylor of Caroline, among others. So with two Fredericksburg papers challenging the president, Walker returned to journalism in September 1803 at the behest of local Jeffersonians, employing the tools used to publish the *Courier* to issue a restyled paper, *The Apollo*. Once again, the Republican audience in the Rappahannock River Valley was divided between the two journals, which made each one's survival problematic. Walker evidently recognized the futility of the situation first, closing his *Apollo* after just a six-month run in March 1804. The *Virginia Express* continued on for another year, acting as Fredericksburg's default Republican journal during the 1804 election campaign, closing three weeks after Jefferson's second inauguration in March 1805.

The demise of both the *Apollo* and the *Express* suggests the end of an era in Fredericksburg. An avowedly-partisan journal, initiated by a respected Virginia family and its network of friends and associates, and continued twice by the resolute Walker, had lost any claim to legitimacy or representativeness in that neighborhood. As a result, there would not be a truly viable competitor to the long-lived *Virginia Herald* until there was an alteration in the political landscape there as well – a change that did not emerge until the Jacksonian era, some two decades later.

Sources: LCCN nos. 84-024676, 84-024677, 85-025097, & 85-025096; Brigham II: 1114-1115; Will & Order Books, Fredericksburg Hustings Court; Howison, *Fredericksburg*; Quinn, *Fredericksburg*.