

FREDERICKSBURG 04: Fredericksburgh News-Letter

01: Fredericksburgh News-Letter (1801-1802)

The *Fredericksburgh News-Letter* was the first attempt to publish a third paper in the town as competition for two existing ones. It was also a journal that tried to navigate a middle course between the political extremes represented by those other papers. While evidently a successful effort, the *News-Letter* ceased publication shortly before its founder's death.

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 most successful of those challengers was the *Genius of Liberty* published by Robert Mercer (301); however, his death in September 1800 put that paper into the hands of a tradesman, James Walker (425), who lacked the prominent social standing held by Mercer; being then in the midst of the 1800 presidential campaign, Walker adopted the severe political tone common to Republican papers of that day, so identifying his newly-retitled *Courier* with the most virulent partisan rhetoric seen in that campaign.

Despite the success seen in his ability to continue Mercer's paper, Walker's confrontational style was not appreciated by many of Jefferson's supporters in the Fredericksburg area. One of those disaffected was Philip Temple (409), a young planter from Caroline County with the means needed to start his own newspaper. In spring 1801, he offered a prospectus for a new twice-weekly journal drawing on the conciliatory tone of Jefferson's inaugural address that March and the new president's 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; hence he tendered

"the opinion that it is high time to draw a veil over the scenes which have for a considerable time agitated the public mind, and conceives it would accord with republican principles, for the party which has been aggrieved to forgive the persecutions with which they have been afflicted, and endeavor by paying the strictest regard to Elections, to guard against such evils in future."

Conciliation would be the guiding principle for his new *Fredericksburgh News-Letter*, even as it supported the new administration. Temple's approach clearly found an audience in the Rappahannock River Valley once he began publication on May 18, 1801. By that November, Walker found it prudent to suspend publication of his older *Courier*, indicating Temple had successfully drawn off a sizeable part of his business by then, likely from both Walker's subscription and advertising revenue. So as 1801 came to an end, Temple's *Fredericksburgh News-Letter* was now the established alternative to Green's *Herald* in the two-paper town.

As just one number of Temple's *News-Letter* survives (May 25, 1801), modern observers are left with only the reflected image of his paper as seen in contemporaneous journals; that is quite a problematic view given that most of the echoes are found in the competing *Virginia Herald*. But even in their judgmental tone, Green's commentaries indicate a popularity and

stability for Temple's paper that Walker's had lost after Mercer's unexpected death.

But as was the case with Mercer's *Genius of Liberty*, the *Fredericksburgh News-Letter* came to an abrupt end from the ill health of its founder. On June 21, 1802, Temple offered to sell the office of his "late" *News-Letter* in an advertisement in Green's *Herald*. The wording used points to his paper closing in the month before that notice, probably about mid-May when the *News-Letter* would have completed its first annual volume; that notice is also instructive as Temple reported that he now resided in nearby King William County, a residence where the twenty-two-year-old publisher would die just two months later. The proximity of the two events suggests that the journal's demise resulted from Temple's fast-declining health and not from the common financial problems that beset other Republican publishers of that time, such as those seen in Walker's experience with his *Courier*.

Apparently, Temple's office was acquired subsequently by another new publishing firm, that of Samuel Chiles (092) and Isham Burch (062); in May 1803, they issued the next Republican challenger to the dominant *Virginia Herald*: the *Virginia Express*. But as with Temple before them, Chiles & Burch encountered competition not only from Timothy Green, but also from James Walker, who resurrected his journal almost immediately after the *Express* appeared, so dooming both Republican journals to short lives and historical obscurity.

Sources: LCCN No. 94-055774; Brigham II: 1115; advertising notices in [Richmond] *Virginia Argus* (1801) and [Fredericksburg] *Virginia Herald* (1802); *Tyler's Quarterly*; *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*.