

FREDERICKSBURG 05: Virginia Express

01: The Virginia Express (1803-1805)

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 fourth paper in that series was *The Virginia Express*, published in 1803 by Samuel Chiles (092) and Isham Burch (062). When their *Express* closed less than two years later, it proved to be the last viable challenge faced by the *Herald* until the 1820s.

The previous such challenge was the *Fredericksburgh News-Letter* of Philip Temple (409). By early in 1802, it had emerged as the Republican alternative to Green's *Virginia Herald* in the Rappahannock River Valley. But after just a year in print, Temple was apparently forced by ill health to close his successful paper in mid-May 1802 and sell his printing office.

The buyer was evidently Isham Burch (062); it seems he trained as a printer in the Richmond office of Samuel Pleasants (331) in the late 1790s and then worked in the Republican press complex established there by Meriwether Jones (242), the state's public printer from 1799 to 1804. When Burch actually arrived in Fredericksburg is unclear; as his tenure there was his first independent press operation, it likely began as a job-printing office in late 1802. But his time in the demanding political press scene in the state capital, as well as the trade and partisan contacts resulting from that association, made Burch a fitting candidate to conduct a successor to Temple's *News-Letter*.

By early 1803, Burch had found funding for such a project, and likely an editor for the paper as well, in Samuel Chiles (092); Chiles was a well-to-do planter from nearby Caroline County who, at age thirty-two, was looking to establish a political reputation in the area and so build toward his ambitions to electoral office. The combination of Burch's trade skills with Chiles's partisan perspective led to publication of *The Virginia Express* on May 2, 1803. Their paper was apparently one aligned with the views of Jefferson's critics within his own party (the *Tertium Quids*) later exemplified by Chiles's neighbor, John Taylor of Caroline, among others. That approach meant that the proprietors quickly encountered competition from James Walker (425), publisher of the late *Courier*, the town's only Republican journal during the heated 1800 election contest. He resurrected that newspaper in September 1803 after a twenty-month long hiatus as *The Apollo*, apparently at the behest of local Jeffersonians who were unhappy with the new *Virginia Express*.

With two Republican papers now issuing simultaneously in Fredericksburg, there appears to have been pressure brought on the proprietors of both journals with the approach of the 1804 election campaign. It may be that an accommodation was forged between supporters of both journals, as the ensuing course of events created a paper that advocated Jefferson's re-election. First, Walker ceased publishing his *Apollo* after a six-month run in March 1804, reporting that doing so was a financial necessity. Then in May 1804, less than two months later, Chiles withdrew from the concern publishing the *Virginia Express* (he later served as a Whig in the Assembly). In the wake of his retirement, the *Express* began to focus more on the faults of the president's foes than on Jefferson's perceived ideological failings as before.

This transition gives the impression that the original partnership agreement between Burch and Chiles facilitated these changes. It seems that the firm of Chiles & Burch was built upon a one-year contract between printer and financier (from May 1803 to May 1804) with each contributing to the paper's content. Such a limited commitment was common among those starting journals in this era, a limitation that often led to the paper's demise when that initial contract ended. Yet here, the dissolution of the Chiles & Burch firm did not doom the *Virginia Express*. Rather, Burch had enough capital from the first year that, with other funds provided by his brother, Elisha Burch (1761), he could purchase Chiles's interest and continue issuing his twice-weekly journal. Moreover, once Chiles had exited, the brothers found new support among Jefferson's supporters in the Fredericksburg area.

Emblematic of the change was the new motto that the Burch brothers now adopted for the *Express*, one taken from a popular English play, *The Mourning Bride* by William Congreve:

"Swift as occasion, I myself will fly; and earlier than the dawn, wake thee to freedom."

Their choice is interesting, as anyone familiar with that line would also know the next one:

"Now 'tis late, and yet some News, few minutes past, arriv'd, which seem'd to shake the temper of the king. Who knows what racking cares disease a monarch's bed..."

The use of a literary passage subliminally critical of monarchy fit nicely with commentaries during that election year that censured Federalists, especially Jefferson's opponent, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, and the pseudo-Republican supporters of his nemesis, Aaron Burr, who were regularly declared to be monarchists.

However, the Burch brothers' effort appears to have had little effect on the outcome of the election in either Fredericksburg or Virginia, as Jefferson easily defeated Pinckney that fall, carrying 15 of the 17 states then a part of the Union. Rather, that unproblematic re-election seems to have undermined financial support for the *Virginia Express*, probably because of its earlier criticisms of a popular favorite son that might soon reappear in its pages. As the erosion of their paper's fiscal foundation became evident after the November election, the Burch brothers decided to close the journal once Jefferson was inaugurated for a second time. So the *Virginia Express* ceased publishing at the end of March 1805, some three weeks after that event.

In the wake of that 1805 closing, Fredericksburg did not again see 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 No. 85-025085; Brigham II: 1115; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in [Richmond] *Virginia Argus* and *Richmond Enquirer* (1802-29).