

## FREDERICKSBURG 06: Impartial Observer

### 01: The Impartial Observer or the Rights of Man (1811)

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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 last of those challengers appears to have issued only a prospectus number in 1811 before ending the project, despite its editor's well-known Republican credentials.

The mover behind Fredericksburg's *Impartial Observer* was Gerard Banks (019), a son of the politically-involved Banks family from the Rappahannock River Valley area above the town. From 1792 on, he was an active polemicist in the cause of Jeffersonian democracy, both as a pamphleteer and a journalist. His activity in that latter role began with the 1808 presidential election. That year, Jeffersonian leaders in the state divided over who should succeed the president – James Madison or James Monroe. Banks joined with his older brother Henry, to launch a journal that advocated for Monroe's election. Their new *The Virginian* was clearly a campaign paper that issued, in turn, from the Richmond offices of Seaton Grantland (186) and Thomas Pescud Manson (278); accordingly, with the campaign's end, so too ended their paper. Still, that experience whetted his appetite once again for publishing and polemics, as he was heavily involved in journalism over the next decade.

By 1809, Banks had returned to the area of his birth, buying a home in Fredericksburg, near to his family's Green Bank estate in Stafford County, where he conducted a school with his wife. In the 1790s, he had honed his polemical skills there by placing "advertisements" in the *Virginia Herald* – most notably in spring 1798 when Banks offered to sell his lands in Culpeper County in Green's Federalist paper, if he could find a similar situation elsewhere that was devoid of Federalist neighbors; needless to say, the ensuing exchange deteriorated from there. Now Banks found that the *Herald* had survived challenges from five Republican papers in the intervening years, leaving the region dependent on Alexandria and Richmond papers for perspectives differing from those presented in Fredericksburg's only journal.

So in the summer of 1810, Banks began circulating a proposal to resurrect his late *Virginian* in Fredericksburg. The project appears to have been troubled from the outset. It was not until February 1811 that he could offer potential subscribers with a taste of what they could expect in his final product. Yet in issuing a full-blown "prospectus" issue then, Banks gave doubters reason to withhold their support in his choice of a new name for the weekly: *The Impartial Observer or the Rights of Man*. That choice now consciously associated Banks with Thomas Paine, the controversial author of the anti-sectarian *Rights of Man*. In this heavily Baptist region, he likely alienated many Republican sympathizers in the Rappahannock River Valley with the change. As no other number of the *Impartial Observer* is known extant, this single issue is probably the only one that Banks actually published.

After this unhappy experience, Banks abandoned the idea of owning newspapers, turning instead to editing journals owned by others via short-term contracts. In 1814, his next paper was the newly-founded *Observer* in Staunton, and in 1816, it was *The Echo* in Lynchburg, in conjunction with his nephew William Waller Gray (193). The last of these editorial efforts

suffered the same fate as had the *Impartial Observer*. In 1818, Banks solicited subscriptions for a new political paper to be published in Winchester called the *Western Advocate*; that paper never issued because Banks died unexpectedly before it could come to fruition.

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Sources: LCCN No. 85-034354; Brigham II: 1115; *Tyler's Quarterly*; newspaper notices in Fredericksburg (1798-99), Norfolk (1817), and Alexandria (1818).