

NORFOLK 01: Norfolk Intelligencer

01: Virginia Gazette, or Norfolk Intelligencer (1774)

02: Virginia Gazette, or The Norfolk Intelligencer (1774-1775)

The first newspaper published in Norfolk was also the first one issued in Virginia outside of Williamsburg. And though it lived for just a year, the weekly was a key player in the early events of the Revolutionary era there, and so was suppressed by the royal governor for its libelous and seditious content.

The early growth of journalism in Virginia was fueled by mounting demand for advertising space from the colony's merchants and tradesmen. Once the vital link between the solitary *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg and the imperial administration was severed as a result of the Stamp Act controversy, funds garnered from regularly-paying advertisers became the foundation upon which two, and then three, *Virginia Gazettes* were built. But as resistance to Parliament's asserted authority over the American colonies grew in the 1770s, the space that those Williamsburg papers could offer advertisers was constrained by the competing imperative of publishing relevant political news and essays in their single-sheet periodicals.

So in the summer of 1773, William Duncan (151), a Scottish merchant-factor then residing in Norfolk, published notices in Purdie & Dixon's *Virginia Gazette* of his intent to publish a new weekly to be called *The Norfolk Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*. Those notices stressed that his journal would publish "nothing but what may be really useful and entertaining" so indicating his – and likely his peers' – annoyance with the increasingly politicized content of the three Williamsburg weeklies. Duncan then set off for Britain to acquire a printing press and journeymen to operate it, while associates collected subscriptions in Virginia. When he returned in early 1774, Duncan brought an entire press office with him, headed by master-printer Robert Gilmour (179), who kept ownership of the press itself, and two journeymen printers, Alexander Cameron (076) and Donald McDonald (286), all loyal Scotsmen.

On June 9, 1774, the restyled *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* issued from Gilmour's press. The change in name was an assertion of an official authority for the journal in light of the increasingly unofficial direction of Duncan's Williamsburg competitors. Yet in doing so, the paper and press soon found themselves on the "wrong side" of developing political events, even as they successfully promoted the port's mercantile trade, as he had planned. By November, open letters to Duncan and his supporters were being published in the three Williamsburg *Gazettes* decrying the *Intelligencer's* intent to "divide and weaken the Friends of American Freedom." One letter from Alexandria was signed by thirty subscribers to the *Intelligencer* demanding that he cancel their subscriptions and settle their accounts.

Yet Duncan's primary problem became his open defiance of the restrictions that were part of the Continental Association passed by the first Continental Congress that October. After they went into effect on December 1st, the publisher immediately came under pressure from the Norfolk committee charged with the association's enforcement. Rather than allow his mercantile advertiser to be closed by that group, he transferred editorial control of the paper in January 1775, though not its ownership, to John Brown (056), another Scottish

merchant factor there. Brown's role was hidden from the general public, however, as the paper noted that it was published "for the proprietors" by Gilmour and his printers. Still, Brown also ran afoul of the association that March; a ship arrived with slaves destined for his Norfolk auction house in violation of import restrictions; he was found guilty of violating the association and forced to relinquish his editorial role at the *Intelligencer*. Duncan was now compelled to sell the weekly to an owner more attuned to the cause of the colonists, not that of the crown. At the end of March, he sold the newspaper to a new firm headed by John Hunter Holt (223), dissolving the firm that had founded it the summer before.

Holt was a son of New York's patriot printer, John Holt (222), and nephew of Virginia's late public-printer, William Hunter (230), and so of impeccably "American" credentials; he was also well versed in the polemical style used by his father in his *New York Journal*, the voice of the dissident Sons of Liberty there. Holt became the Norfolk paper's "principal Proprietor, and sole Manager of the Press," with his father and his patriot associates becoming the unnamed partners in the new firm of John Hunter Holt & Company. After he took control of the *Intelligencer* on April 1, 1775, it quickly became clear that Holt was more interested in the "Variety and Novelty" he hoped would "furnish Amusement to his Readers" than he was in its original mercantile purpose. As a result, Holt obliged Gilmour and his journeymen to print a journal that did not now reflect their political views or trade motivations – and later events would evince their discontent.

Holt's proprietorship of the *Intelligencer* was more fleeting than that of his predecessors, however, as he soon ran afoul of imperial dictates rather than the continental ones that had ensnared Duncan and Brown. Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, Lord Dunmore (153), had fled Williamsburg just after Holt's arrival in Norfolk, a result of his plans for suppressing the nascent rebellion in Virginia being leaked to the Williamsburg *Gazette* of John Pinkney (325); throughout that summer, Dunmore and his wandering administration operated from a fleet of ships anchored off Norfolk, drawing withering commentaries weekly from Holt in his journal, much in the style of what his father published in New York City. On September 30, 1775, after a particularly coarse assault on the character of one of his lieutenants three days earlier, Dunmore ordered Holt arrested and his press seized as a public nuisance. The ensuing action seems to have stunned those who witnessed it, as Alexander Purdie (345) later reported:

"... on Saturday, between two and three o'clock, afternoon, an officer, with twelve or thirteen soldiers, and a few sailors, landed at the County wharf, in Norfolk, under cover of the men of war (who made every appearance of firing on the Town, should the party be molested) and marched up the main street to mr. Holt's printing office, from whence without the smallest opposition or resistance (although there were some hundred spectators) they deliberately carried off the types, and sundry other printing implements, with two of the workmen, and, after getting to the water side with their booty, gave three huzzas, in which they were joined by a crowd of negroes. A few spirited gentlemen in Norfolk, justly incensed at so flagrant a breach of good order and the constitution, and highly resenting the conduct of lord Dunmore and the navy gentry (who have now commenced downright pirates and banditti) ordered the drum to be beat to arms, but were joined by few or none; so

that it appears Norfolk is at present a very insecure place for the life or property of an individual, and is consequently deserted daily by numbers of the inhabitants with their effects."

The two workmen "carried off" were Alexander Cameron and Donald McDonald, who then worked the press that was still owned by Robert Gilmour to print official documents and a newspaper for Dunmore that fall and winter. The printers then accompanied the deposed governor when he left Virginia in August 1776, and were rewarded for their loyalty to the crown with employment as the official printers for the British forces then in North America commanded by Sir William Howe from New York City, the former residence of the Holts, father and son.

Deprived of his press, his paper, and his workers, Holt found that resuming publication of the *Norfolk Intelligencer* was impossible, making the inflammatory issue of September 27, 1775, its last number. Holt served in the Virginia Line in the following war before returning to journalism in 1783 as a partner to the noted Williamsburg publisher, John Dixon (140), in a new Richmond-issued *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle*, another journal that asserted the legitimacy of an official gazette, much as his former Norfolk weekly had done.

NB: Brigham notes Norfolk was occupied by British forces on September 30, 1775; it was not, as the account above shows; Dunmore repeatedly raided the town for various reasons into the fall before establishing a camp near Norfolk in late October 1775.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025871 Brigham II: 1129; York County Records Project files, Colonial Williamsburg Research Department; Siebert, "Confiscated Revolutionary Press;" Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*; notices in Williamsburg's *Gazettes*, 1767-80.