

NORFOLK 03: Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal

01: The Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal (1786-1789)

The third newspaper published in Norfolk was the first issued in that seaport town after the Revolutionary War. It was, like the first journal issued there in 1774, a mercantile advertiser that attempted to avoid political discussions, but was soon advocating the adoption of the 1787 Federal Constitution as an expedient for the commerce its advertising supported.

Norfolk had been the largest town in colonial Virginia, but the early course of Revolution in the Old Dominion left the town in ruins, partially burned by British forces in January 1776, and then completely by Virginia forces in February 1776, in order for each side to deprive the other of its use. Reconstruction of the port town did not begin in earnest until after the evacuation of Lord Cornwallis's army in early 1782. But it was not until 1786 that Norfolk was deemed able to support a mercantile advertiser again, as it had before its devastation.

When such a weekly did finally appear in Norfolk, it was also a unique marketing tool. Its owner was John McLean (297), publisher of the *Independent Journal or General Advertiser* in New York City. His new *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* was designed to be the southern end of a two-way advertising conduit with that established paper. New York merchants could employ the *Norfolk Journal* to market their services to Virginia planters, and Norfolk agents could promote their clients in the *New York Journal*, while the coastal traders in both ports could use both advertisers to secure cargoes for vessels bound for the other port. To make the concept work, McLean left his New York office in the hands of trusted tradesmen in early 1786 and moved south to Norfolk. When his second paper appeared on June 21, 1786, the firm of John McLean & Company became the first American publishing house to issue newspapers concurrently in two places – an indication of McLean's larger goals. Not surprisingly, the typography and layout of both papers was essentially identical, down to a similarly composed masthead in each that covered the upper-third of the front page.

For all of the weekly's three-year existence, the commercial function of McLean's paper was inescapable. Rarely did it carry less than three full pages of advertisements. Those occasions that it did not do so seem to ones where the unusual length of an essay or article could not be contained on the single page that was normally devoted to non-advertising content. Such was clearly the case in the winter of 1787-1788 when McLean published the entire run of *The Federalist* essays, usually with a sidebar comment supporting the ratification of the proposed constitution as being a benefit to the port's commerce and trade. But that was an exception to his general rule to use that reserved space for news, national or international, that effected the port's maritime commerce.

McLean's two-newspaper project was clearly a successful one. By mid-1788, the Scottish-born publisher was able to bring his younger brother, Archibald Mclean (296), from Glasgow to run the New York office; when Archibald arrived in the city, John made him a partner in the new concern of J. & A. McLean, which now published both newspapers. By year end, the brothers has decided to increase the publishing frequency of the *New York Journal* from twice-weekly pace to daily one in response to an increasing demand for advertising space in

that paper. Archibald issued the recast *New York Daily Gazette* starting in December 1788, while John remained in Virginia conducting their weekly *Norfolk Journal*. The joint concern apparently provided a cozy and profitable working relationship for the brothers. But their business association lasted just a few months. On May 18, 1789, John died unexpectedly "after a short indisposition" in Norfolk, taking the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* with him.

Archibald moved swiftly to settle John's Virginia estate, probably so he could return to New York and the new daily there. In July, he sold both the office and the *Journal's* subscriber list to William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter (027), two one-time Williamsburg journeymen. Baxter possibly worked for the McLean brothers in Norfolk, and so would have already had a working knowledge of their business, while Prentis had opened Petersburg's first paper after having been part of the contentious Richmond printing-trade between 1780 and 1786. By late August of 1789, just three months after John's death, the firm of Prentis & Baxter was publishing another mercantile advertiser in the port town. Consequently, McLean and his innovative weekly quickly passed from the memory of Norfolk-area readers.

Sources: LCCN No. 86-071716; Brigham II: 1124; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Wertebaker, *Norfolk*; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Papers of the Common Hall of Norfolk.