

NORFOLK 04: Virginia Chronicle

- 01: The Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle (1789-1792)
 - 02: The Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk and Portsmouth General Advertiser (1792-1794)
 - 03: The Virginia Chronicle & General Advertiser (1794)
 - 04: The Virginia Chronicle &c. (1794)
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The fourth newspaper published in Norfolk was a successor to the third one issued there, printed on the same press and built on its predecessor's subscriber list. But that established foundation crumbled after its third year in consequence of rapidly increasing competition.

The *Virginia Chronicle* was the orphan child of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* of John McLean (297). He started that weekly in June 1786 as a mercantile advertiser intended to link the commercial interests of tidewater Virginia with ones in New York City, where he had conducted a similar paper since November 1783. This two-part project proved a successful symbiosis until McLean's unexpected, premature death in May 1789; the *Journal* died with him. Early that summer, Archibald McLean (296), his brother and business partner, came to Norfolk from New York to settle the late publisher's affairs; in July, he sold the *Journal* office and the paper's subscriber list to William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter (027).

Prentis and Baxter were trained printers who learned their trade during the Revolutionary War in the Williamsburg office of John Dixon (140) and Thomas Nicolson (315); they both relocated to Richmond with that office when the state government moved there in 1780. Prentis became Dixon's partner in late 1781 when the firm of Dixon & Nicolson was ended, apparently with Baxter still working their press. A major reorganization of Richmond's press offices in 1785 led both Prentis and Baxter to leave the capital city in search of independent opportunities elsewhere in 1786. By July 1786, Prentis had set up a new office in Petersburg from which he published the *Virginia Gazette and Petersburg Intelligencer*, that town's first journal, with Miles Hunter (229), another former Dixon hand. Meanwhile, Baxter settled in as McLean's foreman in Norfolk and so managed production of his *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* from June 1786 onward.

With McLean's death, Baxter evidently turned to Prentis to help him acquire the ruins of the *Journal*. By then Prentis had profited handsomely from three years of publishing the only newspaper in Petersburg and now was offered the chance to profit from the only one then published in Norfolk. Hence, the transition from the *Journal* to the *Chronicle* was fairly swift. On August 29, 1789, just fifteen weeks after McLean's death, the firm of Prentis & Baxter issued another mercantile advertiser in the port: *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*.

The rapidity with which Prentis & Baxter assumed McLean's role in supporting the trade and commerce of Norfolk brought about the quick demise of another potential successor. When McLean's death became known, William Davison (128), a Pennsylvania-born, Philadelphia-trained printer, brought his press to Norfolk to publish a replacement for the *Journal*: *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Gazette*. But he was faced with the challenge of overcoming the advantage held by Prentis & Baxter in their ownership of the *Journal's* large subscriber list.

So while Davison met his promise by issuing his *Gazette* on September 9th, the dominance of the *Chronicle*, which had appeared 11 days earlier, was insurmountable. Recognizing that his weekly was doomed, Davison ceased its publication after just five issues and returned to Philadelphia with his press.

However, the arrival of two later competitors did undermine the *Chronicle's* standing and so compel its closing at the end of 1794. Remarkably, both of those rivals were organized by Charles Willett (445), a London-trained printer who landed in Norfolk in early 1792. In July, he began publishing the *American Gazette and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* in alliance with William Davis (127), which offered advertisers there an alternative to the *Chronicle*. Willett was sympathetic to the emerging Republican stance embodied by Thomas Jefferson, while Davis was a relative to Augustine Davis (119), an ardent Federalist who was the state's public-printer in Richmond. Thus, the two proprietors were increasingly estranged politically over the ensuing two years. As a result, Willett sold his interest in the paper to Davis at the end of the *Gazette's* second volume and immediately started a new journal: *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser*. And so from the summer of 1794 on, Norfolk hosted two highly-partisan papers that found increasing numbers of like-minded subscribers among the *Chronicle's* readers.

As that contest arose, Baxter emerged as the only Virginian in the *Chronicle* office, and so the only person linked to it evincing an understanding of the state's political dynamics. Yet his paper was now edited by a Northern tradesman named Thomas Wilson (452). He had been persuaded to come to Norfolk in the late spring of 1792 to succeed William Prentis as Baxter's partner when their original two-year-long arrangement ended. Baxter & Wilson promptly restyled the weekly as *The Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk and Portsmouth General Advertiser* to emphasize its Virginia identity, as opposed to the *American Gazette*. They also countered the challenge posed by the *Gazette* by increasing their paper's literary content, often offering less than two pages of the vital advertising notices that sustained it – a sharp contrast to the three full pages that McLean had regularly printed in his *Journal*. In an effort to bolster their advertising revenues, they increased their pace of production in April 1794 from weekly to twice-weekly with a change in title a non-local one: *The Virginia Chronicle & General Advertiser*. Yet Willett & Davis matched their accelerated frequency just four weeks later; and when Willett began publishing his *Norfolk Herald* four months later, he issued that paper at that same twice-weekly pace. The resultant reduction in available advertising, in combination with the paper's ongoing loss of subscribers, meant that by the fall of 1794, the *Virginia Chronicle* was in serious financial trouble.

Evidently, Baxter recognized that the future of the *Chronicle* was bleak, as in October 1794, he joined a competitor. Following the issue of October 23rd, he sold his half-interest in the *Chronicle* to Wilson and went to work for Willett as the manager of the *Herald's* press office. Despite Baxter's withdrawal, Wilson was determined to continue the newspaper as before, promising readers "that nothing shall be omitted on his part to merit a continuance of their favors." But it soon became apparent that Willett's *Herald* had tied up the larger advertisers in the region, and Davis's *Gazette* had locked up the town's political patronage. Moreover, anyone in the area with any partisan inclinations found an agreeable voice in either of those papers, leaving Wilson with only a small and untenable readership. So just before the end of

the year – after the issue of December 18, 1794 – he closed the *Chronicle* forever.

By April 1795, Wilson had moved his entire press office to Washington in the new District of Columbia, where he published *The Impartial Observer and Washington Advertiser* until his premature death in February 1796. Prentis went on to a long and distinguished career in Petersburg as publisher of the *Intelligencer*, as mayor of the city for four terms, and as a key investor in public-works projects that improved the city's infrastructure; he died on his son's nearby farm in early 1824. Baxter proved to be the longest-lived of the *Chronicle's* owners; for the ensuing forty years, he directed the publication of the *Herald*, despite three changes in that newspaper's ownership; he retired from the print trade only shortly before his death in April 1836 at the age of eighty.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-025684, 85-025857, 85-025858, & 85-025873; Brigham II: 1123-1124; Williamsburg People files and York County Records Project files, CWF Research Dept.; Hubbard on Richmond; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*, Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; Hudson, *Journalism*; obituaries in [Norfolk] *American Beacon* (Baxter: April 19, 1836; Prentis: March 9, 1824) and [New York City] *Argus* (Wilson: March 6, 1796).