

NORFOLK 06: American Gazette

- 01: The American Gazette, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Weekly (1792-1794)
 - 02: American Gazette, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Advertiser (1794-1796)
 - 03: American Gazette (1796)
 - 04: American Gazette & General Advertiser (1796-1797)
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The *American Gazette* was the first Federalist paper published in Norfolk, though it did not start out that way. Rather it was the fourth in a line of mercantile advertisers issued there in an effort to support and expand the port town's trade and commerce. It became a partisan paper with the separation of its Federalist editor from its Jeffersonian printer in the summer of 1794 and continued as such until its demise in November 1797.

In the winter of 1791-92, Norfolk was host to a single weekly, *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*, produced by two Virginians, William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter (027), both Williamsburg-trained journeymen. The post-war recovery of the war-devastated port had generated an ever-growing demand for advertising space that the *Chronicle* was now failing to satisfy. As much of such demand came from Norfolk's maritime trade, the potential for a second paper – as well as the job-printing that sustained that trade – was likely known on both sides of the Atlantic, so steering a London-trained printer to Norfolk in early 1792.

Charles Willett (445) trained in the office of Jessintour Rozea (1752-91) before working for John Stockdale (1750-1814), a major London publisher and bookseller. Stockdale was both a supporter of American independence and a supplier of the American book-trade, and so someone familiar with printing and publishing opportunities in the United States. It seems he suggested that Willett relocate to Norfolk in late 1791, and the printer took his advice, given the growing political turmoil then surrounding the printers and presses who opposed a government espousing the anti-revolutionary ideas of Edmund Burke. Landing in Norfolk in early 1792, Willett began organizing a rival to the *Chronicle*, finding a willing financier and editor there in William Davis (127). Consequently, the new firm of Willett & Davis issued the first number of their new weekly *American Gazette, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* on July 18, 1792, offering merchants a ready alternative to the *Chronicle*.

The venture proved a prescient move, quickly gaining acceptance in the Virginia tidewater. It also presented an unusual appearance, as it was issued as an eight-page quarto edition, rather than the standard four-page folio one, a format consistent with many printed books of that era, indicating that the proprietors hoped their readers would have the completed annual volumes bound for preservation in their libraries. But the passage of the first federal postal laws – which tied newspaper postage rates to the number of printed sheets – Willett & Davis were forced to adopt the folio standard, a move which likely changed their supply and production practices. Moreover, the format change altered the balance between space devoted to advertising notices and that for essays and articles, at just the moment that the reporting of political events began to dominant its non-advertising content.

That reportage regularly concerned the Revolution in France, which turned violent in 1793

with the execution of Louis XVI and the ensuing war between the monarchies of Europe and the revolutionary French government. President Washington declared the United States to be a neutral in the European war in apparent contravention of the 1777 treaty of amity and commerce with France; Secretary of State Jefferson and his "republican" partisans opposed Washington's directive and tried to build public support for aid to France in its war with the Britain; conversely, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and his "federalist" partisans backed Washington's proclamation and began employing the country's mercantile advertisers to vilify any one in American who championed the French over the British in the conflict. As the editor of the *American Gazette*, Davis advanced the Federalist argument in its pages, just as did his Richmond-based relative, Augustine Davis (119), the state's public-printer and a friend of Washington. While his course reflected the views of most merchants in the town, it also drove a wedge between him and his partner; Willett had fled London in 1791 in response of the British government's reactionary policies against the ideas spread by French revolutionaries; he was still sympathetic to those ideals in Norfolk, if not to the tactics used to advance them, so finding himself in the Republican camp, opposed to Davis.

Eventually, the two proprietors parted company. It appears that in late July 1794, about the time of the completion of the *Gazette's* second volume, Davis forced Willett out of the firm, taking control of the office's tools and the *Gazette's* subscriber list. So dispossessed, Willett decided that the appropriate way to deal with Davis and his Federalist friends was to start a competing paper. Within a month, he commenced publication of *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* as a counterpoint to the *American Gazette*. The ensuing competition between the two partisan journals brought about the death of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*; that paper attempted to follow a middle course, and so offer an alternative, but Willett's *Herald* found support among the area's larger advertisers, while Davis's *Gazette* secured the town government's patronage; hence the predecessor to both papers closed in December 1794.

Davis was clearly more interested in the political influence his paper could wield, and as a result his *Gazette* would eventually fail from his inattention to its finances. He had already experienced such a failure in 1793. Before news of events in Europe that spring reached America, Davis had moved to Petersburg to start a partisan paper there on his own, leaving the *Gazette* in Willett's hands. As his *Independent Ledger and Petersburg & Blandford Public Advertiser* focused on politics and not on advertising, the paper soon foundered from a lack of money to operate it, particularly in opposition to a paper that offered a similar political perspective, the long-established and well-funded *Petersburg Intelligencer*; hence it closed after two months. His *American Gazette*, however, benefitted from the polarization of that later era; Davis found advertising support from Norfolk's most ardent Federalist merchants and so he was able to sustain the paper for another three years. But that vital sustenance evaporated as Norfolk's maritime trade declined with the Quasi-War with France. Yet rather than appeal to Republicans there who could act as new sources of revenue, Davis continued publishing arch-Federalist commentaries of his own and other editorial writers. As a result, Davis ran out of money in November 1797 and was forced to close the paper.

The demise of the *Gazette* did not end Davis's journalistic career. In 1805, he assumed the editorial chair of the anti-Republican *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* published by the

Norfolk maritime trader John Cowper (110); the pair continued the *Ledger* together until declining revenues once again forced that paper's closing in 1816. By then Willett had been dead for nine years; but his journal – the *Norfolk Herald* – survived him and three successive proprietors, before its life was terminated by the occupation of Norfolk by Federal forces during the Civil War.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025683, 86-071956, 86-071957, & 86-071958; Brigham II: 1123; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*.