

NORFOLK 08: Epitome of the Times

01: Epitome of the Times; or, Historical, Political, and Commercial Miscellany (1798)

02: Epitome of the Times (1799-1802)

The first literary newspaper published in Norfolk was the eighth issued there. It was also a journal that quickly became an openly-partisan Republican paper in the context of the Alien & Sedition Acts which were a threat to its editor. The paper expired because of the ill-health of that editor, despite its reputation among Republican journals in the country.

The *Epitome of the Times; or Historical, Political, and Commercial Miscellany* reflected the personality of its editor and proprietor, Augustus C. Jordan (244). He was a descendant of a family with deep seventeenth-century roots in the lower tidewater, as well as one of three brothers named for figures in classical history – Augustus Caesar, Alexander, and Marcus Tullius Cicero (245); all three of them would hold positions of considerable responsibility in the community in their lifetimes, with Augustus coming to the fore first.

It appears that Jordan was sent to Philadelphia in his teenage years to learn the print trade there and that he returned to Norfolk in the winter of 1797-98 to start publishing his twice-weekly *Epitome*. At that time, the only newspaper issued in the town was *The Norfolk Herald & Public Advertiser* of Charles Willett (445) and James O'Connor (317), two London-trained journeymen who had fled the suppression of "radical" printers and publishers there in the early 1790s. The two had just prevailed in a three-year-long contest with the *American Gazette* of William Davis (127), an ardent Federalist who had dispossessed Willett of his interest in that journal, so instigating the ensuing competition. With the end of Davis's paper in November 1797, the mildly-Republican journal of Willett & O'Connor was now dominated by the advertising that fueled the town's commerce, so leaving little space for literary matter. Jordan evidently moved to fill that void by issuing a paper predominately offering such content.

However, Jordan quickly found that the "enlightened" rationalism promoted by his journal under fire from Federalist critics. On August 4th, he was beaten, while working in his office, over a letter he had published; that letter criticized the commander of Norfolk's federal fort for his conduct in that command; the commander and a lieutenant appeared in the *Epitome* office demanding the identity of the author and set about to beat the name out of him; when Jordan refused, despite his injuries, the commander's lieutenant told him that "if he ever dared to publish any thing against the Government of the Military, or indeed any thing that he did not like, he would suffer ten times as much" and then ordered Jordan to print a paper that they would edit for him; he again refused, and the fort's commander drew his subordinate away before he could do Jordan further harm. Jordan published a transcript of his deposition before local magistrates on the affair, which was widely reprinted in papers throughout country – with Republican ones deriding the commander for his brutality and indifference to the freedom of the press, and Federalist ones justifying the beating as a way to keep seditious editors under control.

Following quickly on the heels of this episode, Jordan was savaged in Federalist papers

nationwide for having printed an account of a Fourth of July celebration in Williamsburg at which featured the burning of an effigy of President John Adams. The Federalist-dominated city council there protested that no citizens of the town had been aware of the burning, much less participated in the act, accusing Jordan of publishing falsehoods; later reports suggested that only students from the College of William & Mary had been involved, even though the school was not then in session. For Federalists, the report was further evidence of Jordan's seditious practices, even as they could not disprove his account or the event.

In consequence of such attacks on his character, Jordan wrote frequently and articulately over the ensuing months against the Alien & Sedition Acts recommended that summer by John Adams, which made him an ongoing target for Federalist journalists. One such editorial comment brought a rebuke from a contributor to the Federalist paper in Fredericksburg, the *Virginia Herald*, that tradesmen like Jordan had no business in debating public affairs; it was the province of gentlemen. Jordan replied in a long letter signed "A Mechanic" that:

"Those contemptible wretches who boast that they are gentlemen because they do nothing for their living are perpetually insulting those ingenious and industrious citizens whose skilled labor contributes so essentially to the support and comfort of human life. To those well born (tho' far from well bred) gentry, the very name of handcraft man is an abomination, and if one of those aproned fellows should presume to open his mouth on what concerns his dearest rights and interests, with what contempt they affect to treat him and all that he says."

These episodes were central to the radicalization of Jordan and his *Epitome* from that first summer onward. Yet style and logic mattered as much to him as did promoting Republican perspectives; as a result, he wrote much of the non-advertising content of his paper. It was an exertion that led Jefferson to later comment that Jordan's *Epitome of the Times* was the most literately-edited paper in the country.

Remarkably, Jordan avoided being prosecuted under the Alien & Sedition Acts even as he continued to editorialize against their infringement of the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. In the fall of 1798 he offered the brief comment that "Congress shall make no law abridging the liberty of *speech*, or of the *press*—so says the *federal* constitution. *What is a law?*" But most often, he was less direct, simply printed letters from others reporting the most dubious activities of Federalists in Virginia and elsewhere. Jordan also recorded what he had heard in common conversations in Norfolk, and so could sidestep charges of bias or falsehood. An example can be seen in a piece that was widely reprinted during the 1800 presidential election campaign, which reported:

"It has been the chat of the Norfolk Solons, since the arrival of the William and Mary from London, that if Jefferson is elected President England will declare war against us. They insist upon it as an undoubted fact, for it was generally believed that the London coffee-houses. These people forget that such conversations furnishes the democrats with weapons to combat them; that by holding out the consequences of choosing a republican President, in order to intimidate us, they infuse a suspicion of foreign influence, and rouse the energies of the nation against an interference not one tittle less degrading than with which the French Directory were charged by the

same persons who now with us consult the dispositions of Britain in our elections."

Jordan's exertions did not wane after Jefferson's election, as he now reported frequently on activities within the new administration. Federalist journalists took particular umbrage at a June 1801 report that documents had been found in the surviving files of the Treasury and War Departments – following suspicious fires in each of those department's offices after Jefferson's election – that indicated that vast sums had been spent without Congressional appropriation under Adams and that the War Department had colluded with the British to stymie French attempts to suppress the Haitian Revolution of 1791. John Ward Fenno, the new editor of the *Gazette of the United States*, the old Hamiltonian organ in Philadelphia, was particularly incensed that unwarranted character assassination was being promulgated by Jordan after the Federalist Congress had found no reason for further investigation into the "accidental" fires just a week before Jefferson's inauguration.

But such unceasing editorial effort undermined Jordan's health. In 1801, he contracted a prolonged illness that slowed his work through that summer and into the fall, a situation that may explain Fenno's widely-reprinted assault on his character that July. Still Jordan was also being presented with offers of non-journalistic, civic duties in Norfolk by that time, as a result of his sterling reputation locally, that he felt obliged to accept as a good citizen. So as 1802 dawned, Jordan faced a conundrum; he could reduce his editorial work in order to take on those civic responsibilities, but in so doing lose the close control over the paper that he had exercised since its birth; or he could turn down the offers and so violate his personal political principles. The effect on his health in conducting the *Epitome* apparently led Jordan to decide to close the paper, rather than undercut its quality, and so continue in business as a bookseller and job printer while serving the community. Hence, the *Epitome of the Times* issued its last number on April 2, 1802.

His departure from the editorial fray prompted local Republicans to encourage Meriwether Jones (242), then the state's public printer in Richmond, to publish a replacement; Jones sent his shop foreman, William W. Worsley (462), to Norfolk that fall to conduct the new *Commercial Register*; however, that newspaper died the following January, when Worsley returned to Richmond exhausted by the effort, replicating Jordan's experience.

After closing his paper, Jordan advertised his business as printer, stationer, and bookseller, and continued to do so until his death in 1810. In that role, his bookstore quickly developed a reputation as the best source for French language titles in Virginia; his press also issued Norfolk's first city directories in 1801 and 1806. Jordan's retail plan seems to have buffered his business from any negative associations with his political views and so provide him with a respectable living. But the decision to retire from journalism did not restore his health; he died in March 1810, not yet thirty-three years old.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-025813 & 85-025814; Brigham II: 1125; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; notices in [Philadelphia] *General Aurora* (1796-1801), [Philadelphia] *Gazette of the United States* (1798-1801), [New York] *Greenleaf's Daily Advertiser* (1798-1800), and [Georgetown, DC] *Cabinet* (1800).