

NORFOLK 09: Commercial Register

01: The Commercial Register (1802-1803)

Although bearing a title that indicated it was a mercantile advertiser, the ninth paper issued in Norfolk was a partisan journal that was hastily organized to replace another such paper. It lasted just twenty-one weeks when promises made to encourage the resident proprietor to move to the port town to conduct the newspaper went unfulfilled.

In April 1802, the *Epitome of the Times* of Augustus C. Jordan (244) in Norfolk was forced to close in consequence of his declining health and eroding finances. His prominent Republican paper served as the party's primary voice in the lower tidewater after the *Norfolk Herald* of Charles Willett (445) and James O'Connor (317) had bested the Federalist *American Gazette* of William Davis (127) in November 1797; but as the sole mercantile advertiser, the Willett & O'Connor sheet yielded its place in the partisan newspaper wars to Jordan in March 1798, so it could remain a profitable venture. With Jordan's retirement, the town now lacked an activist voice supporting the Republican administrations then in Richmond and Washington.

Local party leaders asked Meriwether Jones (242), the highly-partisan Richmond journalist who was then the state's public printer, to publish a replacement paper for them. Being tied to a range of responsibilities in Richmond, Jones instead organized a new company with his shop foreman, William W. Worsley (462), to print such a journal as its resident proprietor. In their agreement, the two would be partners in the newspaper, while Worsley owned the printing office that produced it, and so profiting from its job-printing; it was a plan that gave the twenty-two-year-old journeyman an independent standing in the Virginia print trade for the first time.

Worsley removed to Norfolk sometime in the early summer of 1802 with an entirely new job-press office, where he began laying the groundwork for a twice-weekly paper called *The Commercial Register*. Inauspiciously, its initial number issued belatedly on August 16th, on a sheet of reduced size, after its supply of paper, "which ought to have been delivered on the 10th of last month," failed to arrive. At the same time, the *Norfolk Herald* was also forced to issue a smaller sheet then because of an "unexpected scarcity of Paper ... in this Borough" that had stymied the attempts of Willett & O'Connor to find paper for their newspaper. But Worsley assured his readers that after "having made engagements, by which we shall in future be regularly supplied, a few weeks will remove the inconvenience, and enable us to proceed with our first design."

Worsley described that design in that same editorial address which, while conciliatory, was also decidedly direct about his paper's Republican perspective:

"It has been apprehended by some persons, that the establishment of this Paper would produce discord in the Borough, and renew those factions which the Editor has been informed did once prevail with much bitterness, and to the extreme interruption of offices of civility and good neighborhood."

The prior discord indicated here was that between Charles Willet and William Davis; they

had jointly founded the *American Gazette* in 1792, but the pair became estranged politically over the next two years, leading the Federalist Davis to drive the Republican Willett out of the *Gazette* office in July 1794; Willett immediately founded the competing *Norfolk Herald* and waged war on his old partner until the financial foundation of the *Gazette* collapsed in late 1797. Hence, Worsley hoped that his address would calm fears that such a situation was about to recur between the *Herald* and his *Register*. And evidently it did not.

Rather, the burden of producing the *Commercial Register* fell almost entirely on Worsley's shoulders, which eventually obliged him to abandon the effort. In his introductory address, he made it clear that the *Register* would reflect "those opinions which he believes it to be his duty to promote and cherish," and not necessarily those of the firebrand Jones.

"It is therefore hoped, that, [differing] opinions resulting from a consciousness of their propriety will never give offence, when clothed in decent and temperate language. ... disposed to respect the feelings of individuals, the Editor will carefully avoid personal altercations; and when he is assailed, he will convince the world by the propriety of his conduct, that he has been basely and wantonly calumniated."

Thus began the brief life of Norfolk's *Commercial Register*, "published by W.W. Worsley for M. Jones and himself."

However, Worsley soon discovered that Jones was unable to live up to the promises he had made for providing editorial matter for their new journal. The printer was conducting the press alone, and so did not have time to write original material the *Register* as well as print it on its thrice-weekly pace. Throughout his tenure as public printer, Jones acted as a real-estate agent and land speculator as well as organizing races staged by the Richmond Jockey Club, while leaving the technical side of his printing office to hired hands such as Worsley. These distractions reached a new peak when Jones was named to a committee to divide Richmond into three wards and conduct elections for the reorganized government in January 1803. The trickle of material sent from Richmond ended immediately thereafter.

Exasperated, Worsley quit the venture, dissolving their five-month-long partnership, despite the fact that Republican merchants and readers in the area provided ample revenue for the *Register* to continue. On January 11, 1803, in the *Register*'s 64th number, he announced:

"I am under the unpleasing compulsion of making known to the public, that the "Commercial Register" will be totally suspended after the publication of the present number. I conceive (and every person endowed with rationality will doubtless accord with me in sentiment) that it is the height of folly, the very summit of madness, to remain longer in an ungrateful employment, by which I daily become deeper and deeper immersed in the vortex of ruin."

He offered full reimbursement for subscribers who had already paid in advance, as well as suggesting that he was willing to make such reimbursements through in-kind exchanges of job-press work for balances due. But in a separate notice, he offered his new office for sale as well, so indicating a secondary cause for the closure:

"The declining state of my health induces me to wish to relinquish the Printing Business: I would therefore sell the late Office of the Commercial Register (provided

immediate application is made) extremely low. The materials are all new, of the best quality, and in complete order for prosecuting a news-paper."

Here, Worsley revealed that, like Jordan before him, the herculean effort to write, compose, print, and publish a partisan journal in Norfolk had undermined his health; and rather than suffer any further degradation, he simply abandoned the project, as had Jordan.

The printer remained in Norfolk for some time after closing the *Register* in January, but it is unclear how long he stayed. Worsley did eventually return to Richmond where at the end of 1803, he bought the printing office that produced Jones's semi-official *Examiner* and briefly printed that newspaper for his former partner as job work. Anticipating his appointment to a federal post in Richmond, Jones closed that journal in January 1804 and sold its subscriber list to Thomas Ritchie (360); Ritchie then formed an alliance with Worsley that May to start publishing his legendary *Richmond Enquirer*. Still, Worsley's arrangement with Ritchie was limited to just one year, apparently out of a concern for the viability of yet another partisan paper. When their partnership expired in May 1805, Worsley sold his interest in the still-struggling *Enquirer* to Ritchie and removed to Lexington, Kentucky. There he set up another job-press and bookstore close by Henry Clay's law office; his ensuing *Kentucky Reporter* became the journalistic backbone of Clay's political network, so making Worsley a key figure in that state's print trade until 1850.

Sources: LCCN No. 83-026156; Brigham II: 1124-1125; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; Hubbard on Richmond; Perrin, *Pioneer Press of Kentucky*.