

NORFOLK 10: Publick Ledger

01: Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger (1804-1816)

The tenth paper published in Norfolk before 1821 was the longest-lived Federalist journal issued there. It was a sheet reflecting the exceptionally anti-French opinions of its owner, which arose, in part, from the adversity his family's maritime trading company experienced during the Quasi-War with France. His paper expired when that approach lost its relevance.

The *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* was launched in July 1804 as a competitor for the decade-old *Norfolk Herald* published by James O'Connor (317) and his terminally-ill partner Charles Willett (445). Their thrice-weekly journal was a mildly-Jeffersonian sheet that had bested two more stridently Republican papers in the preceding five years, after compelling the closure of Norfolk's first Federalist newspaper, the *American Gazette*, in late 1797. That success was a result of their carefully balancing the journal's content between the business interests of their in-town merchant advertisers and the political ones of their agrarian readers in the lower Tidewater region.

Nevertheless, there was still a significant Federalist cohort in Norfolk proper who believed that their political interests were short-changed by O'Connor's *Herald*, a group that offered a possible foundation for a new partisan paper supporting their perspective. A key figure in that cohort was John Cowper (110), scion of a successful maritime-trading family operating out of the Hampton Roads; he had been personally victimized in 1798 by the undeclared Quasi-War between France and the United States; he was master of a merchant vessel with goods bound for Norfolk from Jamaica when it was seized by the French Navy off Haiti and sold as a war prize there; its loss was not fully covered by insurance, ravaging his family's business, while he was detained during the condemnation process; thereafter, Cowper held an antagonistic view of both the French and their American supporters. By early 1804, the Cowper family's long-lasting business was facing bankruptcy as result of the Haitian losses, the unprofitability of trade in the Atlantic generally during the ongoing wars in Europe, and a final settlement of his father's estate. Cowper saw his unhappy experience echoed by his contemporaries, and so decided to start a paper that would publicize the difficulties faced by Virginia's merchant classes and advocate for their interests. He would now try to shape public opinion, rather than depend on others to do so, offering "proposals to that effect on the 31st of January" 1804.

Cowper required experienced help in producing such a newspaper, however, as he lacked any expertise as a journalist himself. So while he was willing to publish a newspaper, he was unable to do so until he could find a suitable partner. Such a partner arrived in Norfolk in the spring of 1804. George Lewis Gray (188) had been editor and publisher of the vitriolic *Republican or Anti-Democrat* in Baltimore; that Federalist paper failed in December 1803 as a result of the debts Gray inherited when he bought the journal the preceding spring; by February 1804, he was mired in bankruptcy proceedings in Baltimore when he learned of Cowper's plan to start a new Federalist journal in Norfolk; the promise of a new start in

Virginia convinced Gray to flee Maryland, leaving his debts and creditors behind.

In April, the new concern of Cowper & Gray advertised a renewed prospectus for a thrice-weekly *Norfolk Gazette & Publick Ledger* with an initial number projected to issue on May 17th. That notice did not present an overtly partisan outlook, choosing instead to argue for a balance between mercantile and agrarian interests, as did the competing *Herald*:

"As every thing that relates to trade and agriculture, either at home or abroad, must be highly interesting to the people of the United States, generally, commercial and agricultural subjects will ... engage unremitting attention, and, when necessary, supersede every other."

Still, the conservative perspective of their proposed journal was intimated by the repeated spelling of words ending in a "hard c" sound with the archaic form of "ck," as seen explicitly in the title *Publick Ledger*.

Yet Gray's participation in the venture seems to have constrained the subscription effort, as the then four-month-long process now stretched to seven months, with suppliers balking at filling the orders lodged by the proprietors. After having missed the long-advertised May start date, their revised plan for issuing a first number on July 1st slipped to July 17th, owing to the fact that their "exertions were defeated by the difficulty experienced in procuring the necessary apparatus." Moreover, that initial issue was printed on paper of a quality inferior to that used by the *Herald* as a result of production delays at their supplier's Maryland mill, despite their own tardiness. But Cowper & Gray seem to have been most embarrassed then by the dearth of material in their journal for want of suitable (i.e. Federalist) newspapers and correspondents to draw upon.

Such dispiriting circumstances, however, did not keep the partners from making an overtly mercantile declaration in the introductory address on that mid-summer day.

"Our country may be said to exist by Commerce; as all its fiscal resources are derived from thence. The exertions of every person in the state ought ... to be directed to the advancement of the interests of the merchant, and the security of trade."

In making that declaration, Cowper & Gray openly justified their mercantile stance as being one that promoted the public interest generally:

"They bind themselves, therefore, to the publick, as often as the subject of internal politicks, or the operations of the general or state governments, are alluded to, give the candid and undisguised convictions of their mind. They will neither disgust their readers with fulsome panegyrick, nor a liberal distraction. They will neither praise through servility, nor condemn through malevolence. And they will carefully avoid giving offense to truth and delicacy, by making their paper a vehicle of general calumny or of private slander."

Yet they did not shy away from identifying the sitting president, then facing reelection, as the primary culprit for the difficulties faced by the country's commercial interests:

"As they disapprove of the manner in which the affairs of the nation are, and during the presidency of *Mr. Jefferson* have been, conducted, merely because that manner

does not correspond with their opinions of what is consistent with the interests of the state, and the purity of the Constitution; so their opposition, as often as it occurs publicly, shall be redirected to the correction of the evil, and will not extend farther. Because they have declared themselves *Federalists*, they do not relinquish their right of judging for themselves; they do not consider themselves pledged to accompany their party *per fas aut nefas* ["be it right or wrong"]; to adopt all the opinions of all its votaries; nor to decry every thing which is done by those of different sentiments. Neither do they wish it to be understood, that, in opposing their views to the views of those in power, they are, thereby, bound to censure all the acts of the administration or its adherents."

In portraying national and local interests as essentially commercial ones, the *Publick Ledger* found quick acceptance among Norfolk-area merchants and correspondents in those same communities in the major port towns of the Atlantic coast of the United States. By claiming that ground, they obliged the competing *Norfolk Herald* to assert a more avowedly partisan tone – with the more radically-minded O'Connor becoming its sole owner by year's end – in order to keep its hard-won prominence. Yet it appears that the *Ledger's* detailed recording of ship movements, prices current, and maritime notices were the most valuable services that it offered readers, rather than its political commentaries.

The *Ledger* was clearly Cowper's journal, even as he delegated significant authority to his partner; Gray ran the office on a daily basis, editing the paper's content and supervising production of the thrice-weekly paper; Cowper wrote essays and offered editorial guidance as he continued to manage his family's maritime-trading operations. The Cowper & Gray partnership was a successful and profitable one, so much so that after just ten months they were able to invest in an entirely new dress for the *Ledger* and sell their used type.

Still, it seems that Gray found the Norfolk arrangement limiting, being junior partner there after having previously conducted a paper independently. Consequently, the two partners announced the dissolution of their fifteen-month-old firm on July 26, 1805, because of Gray's declining health, which "render[ed] a change in climate necessary." The change had already been effected ten days before, at the close of the *Ledger's* first volume, when the paper's colophon was changed to show it was "Printed by William Davis for the Proprietor." By September, Gray had left Norfolk in search of new challenges in New York.

Cowper's choice of William Davis (127) as Gray's replacement was both a convenience and a reassurance to his readers that the *Ledger's* perspective was unchanged. Davis had been the founder and editor of the foregoing Federalist paper, the *American Gazette*, from 1792 to 1797; that sheet lost its support as the Quasi-War raged, so leaving the *Norfolk Herald* as the town's only journal when it closed. Cowper now brought Davis back into the journalistic fray, with the two splitting responsibilities as before with Gray. Under the management of Cowper and Davis, the *Publick Ledger* focused on foreign affairs and their effect on Norfolk's maritime trade rather than domestic politics; in doing so, they evinced a special antagonism for France – the source of the Cowper family's fiscal woes – and for any Republican editor or politician who expressed sympathy for the French Republic in general or for "the tyrant" Napoleon Bonaparte in particular.

This approach was a departure from Federalist journals of that day, in that the two partners did not routinely assume a view defending trade with Great Britain. Such was essentially a necessity in Norfolk following the seizure and boarding of the frigate *USS Chesapeake* off Cape Henry by marines from the *HMS Leopard* in June 1807. Cowper was obliged to defend Commodore James Barron, the *Chesapeake's* Virginia-born, Federalist-aligned commander, in the pages of his *Ledger*; the two were life-long friends, sons of Virginia maritime traders who had held commands in Virginia's navy during the Revolution, and allies in redeveloping Norfolk as a center of maritime trade after the war. Barron quickly departed the area after being found guilty of a gross dereliction of duty and suspended from duty for five years; but Cowper apparently felt continuing pressure over his defense of Barron and his editorializing against the Republican administration that had removed him from command. So in October 1808, Cowper offered the *Ledger* for sale, effective January 1, 1809, "giving preference ... to a gentleman of political sentiments congenial with those of the friends of the establishment." He said that his decision to dispose of the journal came from "considerations, too many, and too interesting to the Editor" that often diverted him from fulfilling his editorial duties properly. "Swayed by these considerations, he owes it to the public, either to devote his entire attention to the paper, or to relinquish it to one who will."

Even so, Cowper did not find such a "congenial" successor, likely a result of the economic disruptions attending the Embargo Act of 1807. Furthermore, the pace of military events in Europe accelerated that fall, presenting Cowper the pleasing prospect of Napoleon's defeat in the near future at the hands of the forces of the Fifth Coalition. So it appears that rather than removing him from the mix, the production responsibilities in the *Ledger* office were simply readjusted that winter to allow Cowper more time to pursue those other business interests, increasing the import of Davis's contributions to their joint venture.

Subsequently, the partners conducted a journal that was devoted to "ridiculing the policy of peaceful coercion and opposing the War of 1812," as one nineteenth-century historian reported, though generally without the *ad hominem* assaults that marked so many other anti-administration papers of the era. Their thrice-weekly pace comfortably accommodated that approach, though the unavoidable need to reduce their publication frequency to twice-weekly resulting from war-time shortages clearly sharpened their criticisms. Nonetheless, even as their paper became more relevant to Norfolk's merchants, it became more marginal in national affairs as the war progressed. For example, in October 1814, after British forces had withdrawn from the Chesapeake, the *Ledger* offered the opinion that to "meet the crisis" the federal government then faced, "party distinctions must cease, and the people ... must select men of talents and virtue" to now manage the war effort; a contributor to the *Norfolk Herald* responded the next day that "Mr. Cowper, however, is anxious that his own party should be at the head of affairs, as being wiser and abler than Democrats."

Cowper was not pleased with such reproaches, which were a part of a general repudiation of Federalists nationally, especially after the secessionist Hartford Convention in the winter of 1814-15. That disdain was evinced in Norfolk by a reduction of the *Ledger's* advertising revenues. While those decreases were akin to those experienced in 1797 by Davis's earlier paper, they were more keenly felt now from a third newspaper being launched in the port

town in August 1815.

The *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* was an advertiser that consciously side-stepped political concerns, so drawing support from patrons of both the *Norfolk Herald* and the *Publick Ledger*. Of those two papers, the *Ledger* was the more vulnerable, and it took just one year for Cowper and Davis to decide that continuing their journal was a futile proposition in the face of the amplified competition. Davis apparently made it known to Cowper that he wished to retire from journalism early in the summer of 1816; Cowper responded by, once again, offering his *Ledger* for sale on August 8th:

"The Editor of this paper, finding it not in his power to bestow the attention, which he would wish, and knows it necessary to the discharge of his editorial duties, without relinquishing other employments, has determined to dispose of the Establishment of the NORFOLK GAZETTE AND PUBLIC LEDGER. To a person of Federal Politics, a preference will be given, and must after the first of next month, the establishment will not be sold to any other; this preference is due to the great majority of the Patrons of the Ledger.—After the first of next month, the Editor will consider himself at liberty to consult his own interest.—Should the Establishment not be disposed of, the publication by the present Editor notwithstanding, cease upon Tuesday, the 17th of next month, to which time all accounts ... will be made up."

As with his tender in 1808, Cowper failed to find a suitable buyer for the *Ledger*, whether a congenial partisan or a tolerable journeyman. Consequently, the last number of the paper issued on Tuesday, September 17, 1816, as promised.

In that final issue, Cowper published a lengthy justification for the course and content of his journal over its twelve-year existence. Therein, he argued that his anti-French attitude was not directed at the revolutionary government, but rather at the dictator that had usurped the sovereignty of that nation:

"To the ambition of Bonaparte, the Editor has been uniformly opposed, he saw his success with pain and regret, and most sincerely rejoiced in his downfall. With these feelings, the Editor has occasionally expressed himself in terms, that brought upon him the charge of being an enemy of the French nation—nothing could be less true or more absurd. The French nation, had unhappily been made subservient to the unprincipled ambition of Bonaparte; so far was the success of his projects conducive to the happiness of France, that that unhappy country to charge him with her present unfortunate condition—by force and by fraud, the energies of France, were directed by Napoleon; the subjugation of all other nations was the object of out; our good wishes could not accompany the arms of France, when her purposes were unjust and dangerous; but in good wishes for the true happiness of that nation, and in sympathy for her present misfortunes, the Editor would yield to no one."

Cowper also argued that the policies then being followed by the Madison administration, in the wake of the War of 1812, were the ones that he and other Federalist editors had long advocated. That outcome, he said, validated his career as a journalist.

"Those with whom the Editor of this paper has so long acted, must see with satisfac-

tion, the triumph of these principles they have supported; great is the force of truth, when it is acknowledged by an opponent."

Whether this self-congratulatory valediction was factual or not, Cowper exited the editorial wars with a demonstrable belief in the correctness of his opinions and the flawed reasoning of his political opponents. Still, many of those adversaries spoke well of the *Publick Ledger* on its passing, mourning the loss of the reliable commercial intelligence that the paper had long provided. That function now fell to the competing *American Beacon*, along with the support of those merchants who had sustained Cowper's venture in its last years.

Cowper and Davis never again engaged in journalism. Cowper now focused on building the Marine Insurance Company of Norfolk into Virginia's leading merchant-marine underwriter, the business he undertook following the bankruptcy of the Cowper family business. Davis appears to have retired to a small farm in rural Princess Anne County (today Virginia Beach) just east of Norfolk. Both men died in the 1840s, long after Gray's passing. Remarkably, he died in March 1808 on St. Helena Island in the South Atlantic – Bonaparte's eventual place of decease – while on a voyage to India.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025815; Brigham II: 1122-1123; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; notices in *Alexandria* (1797-1816), *Richmond* (1802-34), and *Norfolk* (1792-1820) newspapers, as well as the [Norfolk] *Publick Ledger* (1804-16).