

## PETERSBURG 02: Independent Ledger

01: The Independent Ledger and Petersburg and Blandford Public Advertiser (1793)

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The second journal issued in Petersburg was a short-lived mercantile advertiser resulting from competition between established Federalist publishers in the Tidewater. The brevity of its existence reflects its proprietor's unfamiliarity with the town, making his paper incapable of displacing his competitor's well-supported one.

The history of journalism in early-Republic Virginia is full of personalized disputes between various editors and proprietors. Those conflicts were customarily political in nature, ones ending far too often in duels. But the rivalry between publishers William Davis (127) and William Prentis (340) in the early 1790s was clearly a financial one, with each challenging the business of the other in a place not his home. Davis appears to have been the instigator of this contest, as he started two different mercantile advertisers to compete with, and so undermine, established papers issued by Prentis.

Norfolk was the initial locus of this competition. The May 1789 death of John McLean (297), proprietor of that port's first post-war newspaper, put his printing office up for sale, along with the subscriber list for his *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal*. Printer Daniel Baxter (027), a journeyman trained in pre-war Williamsburg, was determined to buy both press and paper, and turned to Prentis, an old Williamsburg friend and coworker, to finance the purchase. Prentis then conducted the profitable *Petersburg Intelligencer*, a three-year-old advertising sheet there, after having managed a like paper in Richmond. The two formed a partnership to acquire McLean's properties and publish a successor to his *Journal*. Thus, when their new *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* appeared in August 1789, Prentis became proprietor of the only paper published in two of Virginia's principal port towns, plainly an enviable and lucrative position. By the spring of 1792, however, Prentis thought it necessary to refocus his energies on the *Intelligencer* alone, hearing rumors of plans to issue competing papers in both Norfolk and Petersburg; hence, he sold his interest in the *Chronicle* that May.

The Norfolk competitor appeared in July 1792, a result of a six-month long effort by Charles Willett (445), a London-trained journeyman-printer who arrived in Norfolk early in 1792, to organize subscribers and financiers for a second advertising sheet. He found both financing and editorial assistance in William Davis. Over the next two years, their *American Gazette and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* appropriated the customary support for the *Chronicle*, largely because of the ardent Federalist perspective the *Gazette* offered over that span.

The quick success Willett & Davis had in supplanting the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* encouraged Davis to attempt a similar coup against the *Petersburg Intelligencer*. The new firm of William Davis & Co. opened a press office there in February 1793, just six months on from the launch of the *American Gazette*, from which the new weekly *Independent Ledger and Petersburg and Blandford Public Advertiser* issued on March 6th.

However, Davis found Prentis was a more formidable foe in Petersburg than he had been in Norfolk. The *Intelligencer* was built, in part, on familial connections among the merchants

there, which generated dependable revenue that Prentis could then employ to back his friend Baxter's purchase of Norfolk's only newspaper. Such familial support was not so easily disrupted by Davis's advertising alternative in Petersburg as had been the case with the Norfolk *Chronicle*. Moreover, Prentis could use his accrued profits to counter the *raison d'être* for the *Independent Ledger*; at about the same moment that the new Davis sheet appeared – March 1793 – Prentis converted his weekly journal into a twice-weekly one; by doubling the advertising space now available in his paper, Prentis put an end to any unmet demand that Davis could have drawn upon with a more widely circulated medium.

Davis quickly recognized the futility of challenging such a well-financed and well-received journal as then was the *Intelligencer*. Consequently, Davis issued the final number of the *Independent Ledger* on May 8, 1793, ending its run after just ten weeks, and returned to Norfolk and his *American Gazette*.

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Sources: LCCN No. 86-071794; Brigham II: 1130-1131;; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*.; notices in [Norfolk] *American Gazette* and *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1793).