

PETERSBURG 04: The Republican

- 01: The Republican (1799-1802)
 - 02: The Republican & Petersburg Advertiser (1802)
 - 03: Petersburg Republican (1802-1805)
 - 04: The Republican (1805-1816)
 - 05: Petersburg Republican (1816-1827)
 - 06: The Old Dominion (1827-1831)
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The first successful Republican journal issued in Petersburg was the fourth paper published there. Initially, it was circulated in support of the presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson in 1800. But its association with influential Republicans in that neighborhood allowed the paper to survive into the Jacksonian era.

The mercantile nature of American newspapers in the years after the Revolution meant that in the mid-1790s they largely became Federalist organs, journals reflecting the interests and perspectives of the merchants advertising in them. That prevalence was manifest during the debates over the Jay Treaty in 1795 and the presidential election of 1796; most of those papers then reported vast support for the Federalist side in those contests, when sizeable numbers of Americans opposed both the treaty and its champion, John Adams. As a result, Republicans across the country began setting up partisan papers intended to counter such one-sided reporting; that activity led, in turn, to the Federalist-controlled Congress passing the Alien & Sedition Acts in 1798 in an attempt to suppress the agitated criticisms of Adams and his administration published in those new journals.

Founding Era

In Virginia, an effort emerged in 1799 to build a network of such Republican newspapers in the state to counter the influence of the long-established Federalist journals in Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond, Petersburg, and Winchester. It was guided by the political circle around the incumbent vice-president, Thomas Jefferson, and so focused in its earliest days on the forthcoming presidential contest between Adams and Jefferson. They induced James Lyon (274), the twenty-three year-old son of Vermont congressman Matthew Lyon, to move to Richmond to manage the effort; the son was then in danger of being prosecuted under the Alien & Sedition Acts for printing and publishing anti-administration materials from his father's Fair Haven press, including the campaign pamphlet his father wrote that landed the congressman in jail for "seditious libel" in 1798. In due course, Lyon would edit a nationally-circulated monthly magazine and three local weekly newspapers in Virginia, all published in unison with a printer who was the resident proprietor for that periodical, all in support of Jefferson's campaign.

The first of those partisan weeklies to issue was *The Republican*, appearing in Petersburg on December 19, 1799. Thomas Field (162), then just nineteen, was its resident printer; Field was a Petersburg native who learned the printing trade in Frankfort, Kentucky, at the press

of *The Palladium* of William Hunter, formerly an associate of Mathew Carey in Philadelphia; that office underwent a change of ownership in fall 1799, at which time Field returned to Petersburg to conduct this new political weekly. Field immediately became the face of the state-wide effort in this Appomattox River port as Lyon now went on to start similar papers in early 1800 in Staunton, Richmond, and Georgetown (District of Columbia).

The editor resided in Petersburg only briefly, and then only as a result of Field's new-found prominence. In late April 1800, Field was attacked in the Petersburg's market house by John Cross, a boot-maker offended by a letter published in *The Republican* attacking his integrity; warned that Cross was armed and looking for him, Field armed himself, and so shot and killed Cross while defending himself during the assault; several of the town's more notable Federalists stood by and allowed the confrontation to continue, though promptly arresting Field for murder once his assailant died. The city's Hustings Court bound him over for trial on manslaughter charges instead and he remained jailed until his trial in early June. Lyon was thus forced to come to Petersburg to take charge of their office, bringing with him the notorious polemicist James Thomson Callender (075), who was now in Lyon's employ as a writer for his Richmond paper; Callender was arrested in Field's residence, in his absence, for the "libel" he had perpetrated with *The Prospect Before Us*, which was published in Richmond the month before. With the two men linked in the public prints, Callender went on trial in Richmond just as Field was acquitted in Petersburg.

These affairs, along with the concurrent exile residence of Republican journalist John Daly Burk (063) in adjacent Amelia County, gave Petersburg a Republican identity that effectively masked the Federalist inclinations of its most prominent inhabitants, who enthusiastically supported the competing *Petersburg Intelligencer* of William Prentis (340). Thus, Field drew sustenance for his *Republican* in the town's hinterlands rather than from within its borders. Accordingly, he was able to continue the paper without Lyon's assistance once his partner removed to Washington in August 1800, even increasing its publication frequency to twice-weekly while he was in jail; it remained so until Field sold the paper in October 1805.

But in the summer of 1802, Field evidently decided to deemphasize the partisan nature of his journal, and so broaden his patronage, as evinced by its new title of *The Republican & Petersburg Advertiser*. Following the issue of July 1st, he suspended publication of his paper to reorganize his financial arrangements so as to implement his plan. In that number, he also published a prospectus detailing the changes he wanted to make.

"Having a reason to believe that it is expected by some persons that the publication of this paper would tend to increase and perpetuate those party feuds and animosities, which have unfortunately existed at times amongst the citizens of Petersburg; and by others that it would no longer support the principles on which it was originally established, and here to four continued, it may not be improper to state what it's political complexion will be. To give to his readers every information respecting the proceedings of the general government, will be the object of primary importance to the editor; and this shall be done with the most scrupulous impartiality. The people having the power of removing their servants at certain periods, if found guilty of a breach of trust, it is only necessary that their conduct

should be fairly stated. When it editor of a newspaper does this, he has certainly performed his duty to the public, in a political point of view. As violent party publications, which originate in other papers, and generally perceived from interested or disappointed persons, can answer no public good, but on the contrary tend to keep alive the spirit of party, and destroy all social intercourse between citizen and citizen, the editor will carefully abstain from their publication. Original essays, however, either federal or republican, will meet a ready insertion!"

Field's plan immediately found resistance among his existing patrons. His prospectus was taken by some to be a declaration that he was about to recast the journal as a Federalist sheet. The resulting flight of subscribers and financiers led to an extension of his suspension from the planned week or so to three full months. When his *Republican* finally reappeared on Friday September 30th, Field offered a comment indicating that he had acquiesced to pressure exerted by his previous patrons:

"Finding that the plan proposed for the publication of this paper, is not acceptable to that part of the community which is hitherto supported it; and that most of them shew a disposition to withdraw that support, the editor feels himself placed in a very delicate situation. From the present state of public opinion, a newspaper must take a decided stand with one of the political party; and as the editor of *The Republican* cannot think of attaching himself exclusively to that party whose political principles he always differed with, and finding the neutral ground which he had taken untenable, he will now resume that station from which he had been reluctantly drawn. This paper shall support with *firmness and moderation* the principles of representative democracy, and the present administration of the federal government. A more particular account will be given Monday next."

Annexed to his explanation was a certificate from seven of the most prominent Republicans in the Petersburg area – Gen. Joseph Jones, John Shore, James S. Gilliam, Thomas B. Robertson, Robert Birchett Sr., John McRea Jr., and William Twitty – who testified that "the publication of the *Republican* [now had] their entire approbation." The abrupt change in course was, it seems, tied to editorial assistance provided Field by that same circle of Republican leaders. A key figure among those aides was Col. Charles Yancey (1766-1825) of Albemarle County, a close friend and associate of Jefferson himself; local histories report that Yancey was editing the *Republican* when Field finally sold the paper in October 1805.

That sale was evidently the result of personal issues rather than political ones. In August 1804, Field lost his young wife in childbirth, as well as their new-born son; six months later, he married Susan Scott, a sister of Petersburg attorney Winfield Scott, later the celebrated hero of the Mexican War; Scott was pulling Field away from journalism toward the law when his new wife died accidentally on a Petersburg street in September 1805; within three weeks of her death, a bereft Field sold the *Republican* and went into seclusion at the Scott family's Laurel Branch estate; he emerged three years later as successor to Scott's practice.

Maturity

The new proprietor of the *Republican* was Edward Pescud (324), then one of the owners of

the paper's cross-town rival, *Petersburg Intelligencer*. The York County native learned the printing trade in that press office before he bought the journal in January 1804 from William Prentis in conjunction with John Dickson (134), a fellow Prentis journeyman. By October 1805, however, the collision of Dickson's Federalism with Pescud's Republicanism had the printer looking for a simple way out of their joint concern; Field's *Republican* provided him such an exit. The following spring, he was aided in the venture by Thomas Ritchie (360) of the *Richmond Enquirer*; he sent new editorial talent to Petersburg in the person of William Winston Seaton (373), the future publisher of the celebrated *National Intelligencer*, who had worked for Ritchie over the preceding year. Pescud was also assisted by an ongoing association with the Jeffersonian essayist John Daly Burk, who had issued the first three volumes of his *History of Virginia* from the Dickson & Pescud office. Thus, the *Republican* developed a greater presence and authority under his care than it had before under Field.

Still, Pescud's stewardship of the *Republican* was not without its difficulties. In late 1807, both Petersburg papers were challenged by the destruction of the paper mill on which both were dependent, making the supply of needed paper uncertain for about six months – just as Jefferson's embargo also ravished the town's maritime commerce. Similarly, it seems that Pescud was obliged to limit the scale of his production during the War of 1812, as only eight numbers of the *Republican* now survive from the thirty-two months of that conflict. The most traumatic event of his ownership, however, was the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815, which destroyed all of the town's press offices. Nevertheless, Pescud survived those disruptions and emerged more prominent after each.

Yet even as Pescud's *Republican* thrived after the War of 1812, his patrons gradually pushed him in directions he was loath to follow. With James Monroe choosing to follow the two-term precedent set by Washington, the presidential election of 1824 was contested by four candidates who claimed leadership of the "unitary" Democratic-Republican party; Virginia's leading Republican newspapers initially backed William H. Crawford, Monroe's Treasury secretary, but Crawford's 1823 stroke pressed them to decide on either Andrew Jackson or Henry Clay in his place. The cross-town *Intelligencer* backed Clay, setting that journal down a path to its long-lived Whig identity, while Pescud favored Jackson, seeing the Tennessean as the most suitable successor to the mantle of Jefferson and Madison. But a significant number of Pescud's patrons thought John Quincy Adams a more seemly president than the head-strong Jackson, and so forced Pescud to support the controversial outcome of that election in the House of Representatives in the *Republican* – the "corrupt bargain" in which Clay facilitated Adams's win by released his electoral votes to the Massachusetts candidate, purportedly in exchange for the office of Secretary of State.

This situation presented Pescud with a dilemma: whether to adapt his paper to the thinking of those influential patrons, or to embrace the populist views of the majority of Petersburg-area residents. In the early days of the Adams presidency, his dependence on those patrons meant the *Republican* did not openly dispute the actions and policies of the administration, helping create the mythology of an "Era of Good Feelings." But as the 1828 election neared, Pescud found himself in the unhappy position of agreeing with the *Intelligencer* which, as a result of its support for Clay, was backing the president's reelection. That position seemed untenable to Pescud because though the town was "*the birth spot of Mr. Clay*, there is no

place in which his late political association can be more emphatically censured" as in Petersburg, as one northern observer noted. So he moved to sever ties with those patrons who caused the paper's growing deviation from its original populist (i.e. democratic) objectives.

On October 16, 1827, announced a suspension of the publication of the *Republican*, saying:

"Circumstances beyond my control have compelled me to suspend for a while, but I trust for a short period only, the publication of the *Petersburg Republican*. I regret this step exceedingly, especially at this moment, when the efforts of every man ought to be enlisted by the truly great and interesting election on which the American people will shortly be called upon to act: And I cannot, in this, the last address, which, for a time, I shall be able to make to my fellow citizens, omit to remind them of the necessity of guarding against the many venal efforts that are made to mislead them in regard to that important question."

That notice concluded with the telling comment that "influential friends of Mr. Adams" had offered him "pecuniary aid" to continue the *Republican*, evincing their attempts to limit the Jacksonian effort on the Southside.

Nine days later, on October 27, 1827, Pescud made clear the depth of his frustrations with those "friends of Mr. Adams" in introducing his restyled paper, *The Old Dominion*.

"[O]ur opposition to the present administration, has no connection to the individual who is at its head, or to the persons whom he has called to his aid. We object to the political character of Mr. Adams, or rather to his total want of political character. ... We object to all the leading measures of his unfortunate administration—his quixotic "demonstration" at Panama—his destruction of colonial trade—his extraordinary appointments—his great fondness for negotiation. We object, and will for ever raise our voice, against the manner of his coming into office. He may have ascended the Presidential chair honestly—there may have been no bribery and corruption—no intrigue—no management—no bargain and sale—no whisperings and understandings—no interchange of nods and shrugs of the shoulder. All this may be true; but in the honesty of our heart ... we do conscientiously believe, that John Quincy Adams was elected President of these United States by foul and corrupt means, and that the honor of our beloved country, the character of her political institutions, the supremacy of the people's will, require, that those who corruptly obtained office, should feel the chastening rod of the people whom they have abused and contemned, and be made to disgorge their ill-gotten power..."

Many Whig papers – such as the *Alexandria Gazette* of Samuel Snowden (393) – promptly claimed that Pescud's previous report that financial insufficiency had forced the suspension of the *Republican* were simply disingenuous, as the appearance of this vitriolic successor proved. But the partisan realignment that arose during the Adams years is readily evinced in this event, as the journal's supporters in 1824 became its foes in 1827. Still, Pescud was now held in a contempt equal to that which those Whig journals showed for Thomas Ritchie and his *Richmond Enquirer* or Duff Green of the Jacksonian *United States Telegraph*. Yet Pescud clearly reflected the views of a substantial part of the state's body politic; in 1829, he was nominated to replace Ritchie as printer to the Commonwealth; although losing to the long-

servicing incumbent, Pescud easily outdistanced John Hampden Pleasants (330), the Whig candidate (114-56-30).

As the reorganization of Pescud's journal conformed to the political reordering of that era, the *Old Dominion* soon superseded the *Intelligencer* as the leading paper in Petersburg, so undermining the fiscal foundation of that long-lived broadsheet – a condition that reached crisis proportions upon the death of its latest proprietor, Francis G. Yancey (463) in July 1833. It appears that Pescud understood the precarious nature of his competitor's existence soon after that paper reverted to Yancey's hands in late 1829. In August 1830, he announced a planned expansion of the *Old Dominion* in both size and pace. The two rivals had issued twice weekly on alternating days since 1800, and now Pescud proposed a publishing on a thrice-weekly pace, which the financially-constrained Yancey could not soon match.

"So soon as a sufficient number of additional substantial subscribers shall be obtained, to justify the undertaking. The *Old Dominion*, it is, perhaps, useless to say, will continue to advocate and defend sound Republican doctrines, and will support the existing pure and patriotic administration, in all measures having for their object to the maintenance of the great principles of '76 and '98-'99. While the *Old Dominion* will be thus Republican in character, its Editor will not engage in a blind partisan warfare, and, losing sight of principles, support any man, or set of men, however exalted to their talents or prominent their situation in life. Although the *Old Dominion* will continue to be, as formerly, uniform and deviating in his Republican course, yet it will not be exclusively political. The additional room which it will possess, when it shall be enlarged, will enable the Editor to render his columns more acceptable to the public, in many respects. When the proposed enlargement shall take place, the Editor would wish to consult every taste and feeling, which shall not militate against his political principles. He will not make any laborious protestations, but thinks he can promise to render the *Old Dominion*, should success attend his present undertaking, a vehicle of varied and valuable information, equal in general interest to any other paper in Virginia."

Whether Pescud succeeded in this plan, or not, is uncertain, as no issues are known to have survived from the following months. The numerous references to the journal seen in other Jacksonian broadsheets in late 1830 suggest that he did, although the absence of hypercritical comments regularly seen in Whig papers previously on Pescud indicates otherwise.

An Abrupt End

Regardless of Pescud's ability to expand his paper, its life was shortened by Jackson himself. In December 1830, John H. Patterson, surveyor of customs for the Petersburg region (City Point and Bermuda Hundred), died. Within three weeks, Jackson had appointed Pescud to succeed him. The publisher was now faced with the prospect of moving to City Point, some ten miles east of Petersburg at the confluence of the Appomattox and James Rivers, in order to execute his commission. So Pescud chose to close *The Old Dominion* rather than try to sell it hurriedly, a decision that ended his twenty-five-year-long career in journalism; the

last number of the *Old Dominion* was issued about January 29, 1831. Snowden reported Pescud's selection with the mocking comment that the current era was one of "fine times for Jackson editors," a parting shot to his long-time foe.

A year later, Marvel W. Dunnavant (154), returned to Petersburg to start a new Jacksonian paper in the place of the *Old Dominion* in advance of the 1832 elections. Previously, he published *The American Star* there (1817-18), competing with Pescud's *Republican* at a time when he was trying to draw more broadly among readers in Petersburg. Dunnavant bought Pescud's press and types to produce his new thrice-weekly *Petersburg Messenger*; but the publisher could not find the support that had sustained Pescud and his journal for so many years, and so abandoned the project after never having issued a number.

Sources: LCCN No. 86-071744, 94-051498, 94-055780, 85-025979, 85-025962, & 86-071796; Brigham II: 1133-1134; Cappon 1095 & 1082; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; notices in [Petersburg] *Republican* (1799-1827), *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-25), *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1805-30), *Alexandria Gazette* (1820-31), *National Intelligencer* (1820-31), and [New York] *National Advocate* (1824).