

## PETERSBURG 05: Virginia Apollo

01: Virginia Apollo (1807)

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In April 1807, two Republican papers appeared in Petersburg – the fifth and sixth published there before 1820 – offering perspectives that differed from those seen in the established *Petersburg Republican*. This sheet was the first and shortest-lived of those journals, and so evidently the more problematic of the two.

The *Virginia Apollo* was one of at least seven newspapers started before the War of 1812 using the name of the Greek god of prophecy and oracles in their titles; it was the second in Virginia with such an association, following the example of *The Apollo* in Fredericksburg in 1804. As all those broadsheets were Republican in their viewpoint, the practice suggests an intent to shape opinion by evaluating the consequences of opposing the policies and actions of the Jefferson and Madison administrations – a prophecy, if you will.

In this case, it appears that the proprietors' goal was to promote domestic manufacturing, so as to keep the country independent of Britain's economic influence, rather than continue to import foreign goods, as Federalist merchants preferred. The key players here were the brothers McLaughlin – Nathaniel (294) and William (295); it seems they were Irish émigrés brought into the print trade in Philadelphia, where William conducted a successful bookstore from 1801 to 1811; that concern was likely the source for financing joint ventures with Nathaniel in Petersburg. Nathaniel arrived in town in the winter of 1806-1807, apparently intending to start and conduct a paper-mill there. He soon connected with local Republicans interested in promoting domestic industry, including the well-known Jeffersonian essayist John Daly Burk (063), himself an Irish émigré. Consequently, McLaughlin also soon linked to Richmond's Republican print-trade circle, engaging printer Seaton Grantland (186) as his agent in the state capital. That agreement introduced him, in turn, to John L. Cook (105), Grantland's job-printing partner; the Richmond-trained journeyman had returned to the city the year before from Baltimore where he had struggled in conducting the *Baltimore Evening Post* with George Bourne (043), the Episcopal evangelical later known for his anti-slavery writings. With Cook looking for a new journalistic venture, and with McLaughlin wanting to publicize and expand his planned mill, the two found common cause for starting a new paper in Petersburg that would advocate for domestic manufacturing.

The resulting firm of McLaughlin & Cook issued the first number of their new *Virginia Apollo* on April 15, 1807. In publishing the *Apollo*, the partners knew that their twice-weekly paper would immediately be in competition with the town's established partisan newspapers: the Federalist *Petersburg Intelligencer* of John Dickson (134) and the *Petersburg Republican* of Edward Pescud (324). But it appears that the two were not anticipating competition from another Republican weekly, one that issued its first number just one week later: the *Virginia Mercury* of James L. Edwards (156) and Cincinnatus Stith (403); thus, almost from the start, that less-expensive weekly paper undermined the potential market for their more-costly twice-weekly one.

Yet it appears that a larger problem was competition for the raw materials for McLaughlin's planned mill – rags – and newspaper publishing diverted him from properly pursuing that business. In the winter of 1806-07, the mill that was the primary paper supplier for all of Petersburg's newspapers was destroyed in a fire; that event likely initiated the McLaughlins' plan for a Petersburg mill, as only one other paper-mill existed in Virginia at that time. So in support of their effort, Charles Donaldson, apparently the merchant they had designated as their rag collector, placed a long advertisement in one of the *Apollo's* early issues, with the headline:

"MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS MIGHT BE SAVED IN VIRGINIA,  
By only preserving those old and apparently useless **RAGS** which are now suffered to rot and be destroyed as if they were of no manner of use to mankind."

The advertisement, however, was plagiarized, taken without attribution from the April 18th issue of the *Impartial Observer* of Samuel Brooks (054) in Richmond; on May 16th, Brooks reprinted the original notice with a comment chastising Donaldson for the blatant misuse of someone else's writings for his own personal enrichment. But the real problem, it seems, was that the Richmond notice was penned by Jacob Johnson (237), the Virginia-based half of the Philadelphia bookselling firm of Johnson & Warner; Johnson was attempting to move Virginia rags north to the Pennsylvania mills that provided paper for their firm there. Now Donaldson was using Johnson's text to divert those rags to the not-yet-open McLaughlin mill in Petersburg, depriving him (and likely Brooks) of the benefit his sizeable efforts.

The complaint reflects the mounting competition between two Philadelphia-born concerns in their concurrent attempts to tap into Virginia's markets, one where the McLaughlins were at a disadvantage against the better capitalized firm of Johnson & Warner. So by the end of May 1807, the brothers were forced to choose between the newspaper and the paper mill, and the *Virginia Apollo* lost out to the planned manufacturing effort. The *Apollo* issued its last number on May 30th, announcing that it would be moved to Norfolk, suggesting that Cook was willing to continue the venture there. But that plan was apparently abandoned, as the paper was never issued there, with Cook returning to Richmond by early 1808. It may be that the commotion experienced in Norfolk after the Chesapeake-Leopard affair just three weeks after the *Apollo* closed (June 22, 1807) ended the move.

Meanwhile, the new paper-mill – called Battersea – opened less than a month later under the management of Nathaniel & William F. McLaughlin. The roster of the mill's supporters evinces the wisdom of their choice; it included John Dickson of the *Intelligencer* and John Daly Burk, who was then drafting his *History of Virginia* outside the city. That opening even encouraged the Federalist Dickson to call for similar investments in local manufacturing in the pages of his journal, leading to the creation of a "Manufacturing Society of Petersburg" which eventually built other mills along the Appomattox. So despite its brevity, the *Virginia Apollo* did have a hand in boosting domestic manufacturing in the Southside, as intended.

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Sources: LCCN No. 85-025888; Brigham II: 1135; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; Hubbard on Richmond; Brown, *Philadelphia Book Trade Directory*; notices in [Richmond] *Impartial Observer*, *Richmond Enquirer*, *Petersburg Intelligencer*, and *Petersburg Republican* (1807-08).