

PETERSBURG 06: Virginia Mercury

01: Virginia Mercury (1807-1808)

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 second and longer-lived of those two journals, so evidently better supported, but still incapable of displacing the older newspaper.

The *Virginia Mercury* was one of about two dozen American newspapers issued before the War of 1812 that employed the name of the messenger of the Olympian gods as their title; most of those papers were Federalist ones started in the early 1790s that claimed to carry the latest news from the wars between France and the rest of royalist Europe; but this Petersburg sheet was one with a Republican perspective, a common feature of the post-1800 iterations who asserted they conveyed news of the anti-democratic machinations of those opposed to the Jefferson administration. In this case, it appears that the Petersburg weekly represented tensions within the Republican ranks in that area as well.

In early 1807, the established *Petersburg Republican* of Edward Pescud (324) was edited by the twenty-four year-old William Winston Seaton (373), later the eminent editor-proprietor of Washington's *National Intelligencer*; he had come to Petersburg just a year before after having worked for Thomas Ritchie (360) on his still-young *Richmond Enquirer*. Those two posts evince Seaton's early association with the state's Republican leaders, and so his status as a rising star nationally in the party's editorial circles during Jefferson's presidency; that status led, in turn, to an invitation for the young editor to remove to Halifax, North Carolina, to take up publication of the then fading *North Carolina Journal* in the former state capital, becoming a newspaper proprietor for the first time.

Seaton's removal to Halifax in the spring of 1807 displaced journeyman printer James Lewis Edwards (156), who had once produced the paper for William Boylan, the owner who sold the *Journal* to Seaton. Edwards was a Petersburg native who was trained on the Raleigh press of Joseph Gales Sr., Seaton's soon-to-be father-in-law; at the time of Boylan's disposal of the *Journal*, Edwards was employed in printing the *Savannah Republican* for proprietors John F. Everett and Norman McLean; but the dissolution of that partnership after McLean's death in early 1807 made Edwards a contender for the proprietorship of the *Journal*. Yet his former master's recommendation of Seaton over him as Boylan's successor apparently alienated the printer from the growing band of Republican journalists associated with Gales. The result was that Edwards returned to Petersburg to publish a weekly there that would challenge Pescud's *Republican* as the true democratic voice of the Appomattox River Valley.

The first number of the *Virginia Mercury* issued on April 22, 1807, almost simultaneously with the first number of the *North Carolina Journal* issued by Seaton. But more importantly, Edwards was immediately faced with competition from another new Republican newspaper there: the *Virginia Apollo* of bookseller Nathaniel McLaughlin (294) and printer John L. Cook (105), another former Ritchie associate. Their twice-weekly paper had appeared just a week

before the *Mercury*, trying to forge a middle course between Pescud's *Republican* and the longer-lived Federalist organ of John Dickson (134), the *Petersburg Intelligencer*. Evidently aware of the changing journalistic milieu, Edwards issued his new journal in conjunction with Cincinnatus Stith (403); Stith was a contemporary from Dinwiddie County, son of the respected Col. John Stith, and possibly a childhood friend of Edwards; thus, the Stith family seems to have been the financial backers of this venture, as well as a crucial link to a part of the area's Republican constituency. Consequently, the *Mercury* survived into the next year, with the *Apollo* closing after just seven weeks.

The fact that only five numbers of the *Virginia Mercury* now survive means little can be said about its content and tone. But the insolvency that Edwards experienced after December 1807 suggests that he was unable to secure financing to replace Stith's initial contributions; he made a relatively early departure from the *Mercury*, probably in late October after a six-month commitment. Early in 1808, Edwards apparently attempted to enhance his financial situation by publishing *A Compendious View of the Trial of Aaron Burr* by William Thomson, a lawyer from Abingdon – so tapping into popular interest in that controversial event. Yet, his project was an open challenge to a well-respected Petersburg attorney, David Robinson; he had been the official recorder of that trial for the Federal District Court in Richmond, and was then preparing his two-volume transcription of the trial's proceeding for publication in Philadelphia. What is more, Robinson was then also the chief legal educator in Petersburg, and had just taken in a recent student as his partner – Winfield Scott, later a military hero in the Mexican War; Scott was also brother-in-law to Thomas Field (162), the founder of the *Republican* and a mentor to Edward Pescud, his successor. Hence, Edwards was defying the network behind that journal, as well as the litigious Robinson, who vigorously defended his rights under federal copyright law.

The combination of his financial difficulties and a growing estrangement from the region's Republican leadership apparently led Edwards to close the *Virginia Mercury* less than a year after it began; the last known number is that issued February 10, 1808, although the paper was cited elsewhere into March of that year, indicating a closure at about that time.

Edwards soon set out for the printing centers of the North where work as a journeyman printer would help him to pay off the debts he had accrued in Petersburg. But he could not satisfy those debts without assistance from one-time supporters. His Petersburg press went south to Augusta, Georgia, where it was used to print the *Columbian Centinel*; in late 1810, he offered that press for sale, so forcing a reorganization of that Republican paper. Then in August 1811, Edwards tried to collect \$1000 from Thomas Jefferson, asserting that he had promised that princely sum to the founders of the *Savannah Republican* – James Lyon (274) and Samuel Morse – for services they had rendered to him, and that obligation had passed to him with the death of successor Norman McLean; Jefferson rejected the claim out of hand and suggested that Edwards take the matter up with Lyon, who was then still an active Republican journalist in Carthage, Tennessee. Whether his Petersburg debts were ever paid remains uncertain. But Edwards did go on to a successful non-journalistic career after the War of 1812. He obtained a clerkship in the War Department after serving with distinction as a Marine Corps officer during the war; there he reorganized and managed the military

pension system until 1850, when he retired from public service.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025889; Brigham II: 1135; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; WPA *Guide to Dinwiddie County*; notices in *Richmond Enquirer*, *Petersburg Intelligencer*, and *Petersburg Republican* (1807-08), as well as in *Boston Repertory* (1810-12), *Washington City Gazette* (1818-21), and *National Intelligencer* (1824-67).