

## PETERSBURG 07: Daily Courier

01: Petersburg Daily Courier (1814-1815)

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The first daily paper issued in Petersburg was the seventh one published there before 1820. While proposed as an equivalent to Richmond's successful and apolitical *Daily Compiler*, this journal was published by a partisan editor whose checkered past earned him little respect, leading to his leaving the paper three months after it began. His successor did not find the patronage needed to improve the daily, so it died in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815.

The introduction of a daily newspaper in any of Virginia's principal cities before 1820 was a venture fraught with difficulties. It was typically a new journal that immediately competed with an established mercantile advertiser there, and so withered from a lack of advertising revenue needed to sustain it. Those conditions meant that the first daily issued in any town was regularly a short-lived publication, a project that was ahead of its time.

The *Petersburg Daily Courier* followed a similar path, though with the added complication of being published by a controversial editor whose loyalties were fluid and inconsistent. When the paper first issued in September 1815, it was conducted by John Wood (456), then the provisional president of the Petersburg Academy.

### Background

Wood was Scottish émigré who had fled his teaching position in Edinburgh facing a sedition prosecution after writing pieces against Presbyterian authorities there; landing in New York in 1800, he was drawn into the political circle around Aaron Burr, whose daughter attended Wood's new school in the city. That affiliation led to Wood writing a "muckle-book" on John Adams for Burr, who was then intent on rebuilding his reputation after his attempt to usurp the presidency from Thomas Jefferson; the ensuing work alienated Wood from Federalists and Republicans alike, forcing his flight from New York in order to avoid another sedition prosecution. He found refuge in Virginia, taking up his pen in support of Federalists there in 1802, as Republican polemicist James T. Callender (075) had done before him, as editor of the staid *Virginia Gazette* of Augustine Davis (119); while now in the Federalist camp, Wood continued to defend his old patron until the infamous duel between Burr and Hamilton in 1804; thereafter, he gave increasing credence to rumors of Burr's traitorous activities in the West. In 1805, he left Richmond for Kentucky where he edited a Frankfort newspaper – *The Western World* – with the backing of Federalist leaders who had close ties to Chief Justice John Marshall, who knew Wood in Richmond; his reportage in Kentucky opened the way for others to investigate Burr's activities which led, in turn, to his infamous trial for treason in 1807. By then, Wood had moved on to Washington where he began another paper devoted to revealing scandalous behavior among the Republicans – *The Atlantic World* – in union with Thomas Willis White (442), Augustine Davis's nephew; that paper came to an abrupt end when Wood fled the District of Columbia after defaming John Beckley, Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, and finding that he faced yet another criminal prosecution. He landed in Richmond once again, though now intending to teach rather than edit a paper; he

ultimately joined Louis Hue Girardin (180) as an instructor in his well-regarded Hallerian Academy; but Wood eventually deviated from the agreed curriculum, and was terminated by Girardin in mid-1811 in a public spectacle that played out as a partisan drama in the Federalist *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis and the Republican *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360). A year later, he was invited by the trustees of the Petersburg Academy to take a teaching post in their institution as a trial for his possible appointment as the academy's president. After two years in that role, Wood circulated a prospectus for Petersburg's first daily paper in the summer of 1814, evidently longing for the editorial prominence he had lost.

His prospectus is a curious composition, one in which Wood appears to be trying to distance himself from his Federalist past, appealing instead to his earlier Republican roots:

"With respect to the political sentiments of the Editor, he can declare with confidence, that the pages of his paper will be devoted to the interest of no political party or set of men whatever. He highly approves of the principal acts of the administration of Mr. Madison, and his sole object will be the support of the Constitution of the United States, and the defence of the principles of Republicanism, and the preservation of the rights and privileges of free people."

Given that he was presenting this proposal in the midst of the invasion of the Chesapeake by British forces that summer, it is unsurprising that Wood wanted prospective subscribers to ignore his recent editorial affiliations. But he also seems to be disingenuous in saying that the proposed venture was not one pursued for its a money-making potential:

"The Editor of the present undertaking is neither influenced by necessity, by mercenary views, or the voice of party. He is at present engaged, and has been for several years past, occupied in a profession which affords him a liberal competency; but he is induced with the chance of being able to produce a vehicle of political and literary information, which may both afford amusement to his own mind, and prove advantageous to the public. For all literary Journals, there is certainly none more interesting or important than a Newspaper; and although the Press of the United States teams with this species of periodical publication, yet there are few the plan of which merits approbation."

It appears that his proposal was greeted with skepticism, and so his subscription campaign carried through all of that summer.

### **Publication**

That interval created a problem for Wood when John Dickson (134), publisher of the well-established *Petersburg Intelligencer*, died on July 11th. Dickson had been ill for quite some time before, and Wood likely saw his impending death as an opportunity for a new journal to replace the *Intelligencer*; that view is supported by Wood's recruiting of Dickson's shop foreman, Francis G. Yancey (463), as his printer-partner in the *Daily Courier*. However, on Dickson's death, Yancey clearly had a change of heart; he joined with Thomas Whitworth (443), a local manufacturing entrepreneur, to acquire the *Intelligencer* and its office from his master's estate; that change in course indicates Yancey thought that the prospects for

the proven *Intelligencer* better than those for the unproven *Courier*, given Wood's fabled erratic behavior. Yet having committed to the schoolmaster, Yancey was obligated to serve as a partner in both papers until Wood could replace him.

Accordingly, when the new *Daily Courier* issued its first number on September 21st, Wood was already under pressure to find a suitable partner, while still conducting classes at the Academy. The stress quickly effected his health; he posted a notice in his daily on November 1st announcing that he had taken on substitute teachers to finish his fall-term courses so that he could recover from "the unhappy state of my health for several months past;" he did offer a tuition discount for those students that continued under the new regime. Shortly after that notice, Wood convinced one John Netherland (312), probably a merchant-planter from nearby Powhatan County, to purchase Yancey's interest in the *Courier*, which allowed the printer to return to the *Intelligencer*. The new firm of Wood & Netherland took control of the *Daily Courier* on November 14th, in an agreement that gave Wood the means to hire a new printer and the time to find a replacement partner.

However, just as Wood began that search, controversy descended on his venture. Rumors were circulating in the neighborhood about his qualifications to teach drawing and painting at the Petersburg Academy. Some residents were evidently in possession of a recent history of Edinburgh – John Stark, *Picture of Edinburgh: Containing a History and Description of the City, with a particular account of every remarkable object in, or established connection with, the Scottish Metropolis* (Edinburgh & London, 1806) – that reflected poorly on Wood; Stark reported he had been dismissed from his post at the Edinburg Academy in 1799 as a result of the school's trustees discovering that the portfolio he had used to gain appointment in 1797 was completed by another. Wood quickly identified the source of those rumors as Dr. Thomas Robinson, an Irish expatriate who was part of the circle of United Irishmen émigrés in Petersburg that had included John Daly Burk (063), a key Republican leader in the area. In a series of editorial comments, Wood "refuted" the rumors with signed affidavits from local physicians who resided in Edinburgh at the time of his departure, all of whom attested to Wood's voluntary removal in the face of likely prosecution, rather than an involuntary one predicated on his dismissal.

The last of those acerbic comments appeared on November 26, 1814, just two weeks after Netherland joined Wood in publishing the *Courier*; two weeks later, on December 10th, Netherland withdrew from the joint concern, after having been associated with the paper for less than a month. It is unclear whether this was a planned departure or not. Yet what is clear is that Wood now faced a crisis: he was saddled with more responsibilities than one man could fulfill. On December 6th, Wood again placed an advertisement for an instructor for the Academy who could reduce his workload. But at the same time, he appears to have pressed the school's trustees to make his provisional appointment permanent. They were evidently convinced by Wood's performance, as well as his published rebuff of the charges in Stark's recent book, and offered him the presidency of the Petersburg Academy effective January 1, 1815. That offer gave Wood a way out of his dilemma.

On Saturday December 24th, Wood informed his readers that there would not be a paper issued on the following Monday, so as to allow his staff a Christmas holiday on Sunday;

when the *Courier* reappeared on Tuesday December 27th, it was now printed and published by George A. Martin (281). Wood explained the change noting that, when he started the daily three months before, he had

"...flattered myself that the labour and attention bestowed on the Courier, would not have interrupted those duties incumbent upon me as the Pres't. of the Petersburg Academy. But it has been tho't by many of the Patrons of this institution, that I could not with propriety, devote the necessary time to youth, while I continued the Editor of a newspaper: From this cause, and this cause alone, I have been induced to dispose of the Establishment—for ... I have always regarded the education of youth as the most important occupation in society. Could I consistently have continued the exercise of both professions, it would have been most pleasing; but perceiving the necessity of relinquishing one I had no hesitation as to the choice."

This brief explanation proved to be Wood's parting words to the world of journalism.

George Martin was then a printer in the *Courier* office, and so likely Wood's foreman. In his farewell address, Wood solicited editorial help for his former employee; the phrasing of that appeal suggests that Martin was well-known in Petersburg's press offices – at least four in number then – and Wood hoped the city's literary talents would assist this accomplished tradesman with the paper's editorial content. As Martin then continued the daily through at least June 1815, it seems he found such assistance.

## Endings

Still, Martin's tenure also appears to have been problematic. Three months later, he moved the newspaper's office to a new location on Sycamore Street; remarkably, the number of surviving copies of the *Daily Courier* dwindles immediately after the move, following near complete runs of the paper previously; that decline suggests a concurrent reduction in the paper's production numbers. The last known issue of the paper is from June 22, 1815; that number carried a notice dated June 17th, that Martin intended to increase the size of the *Courier's* sheet at the start of the paper's second volume that September "should adequate encouragement be offered." That comment is curious, as it indicates that he had secured sufficient advertising to fill that larger sheet, but that the expense of producing it was not covered by the revenue those advertisements generated. Martin also thought it necessary to reassert the doctrine on which he had conducted the daily since acquiring it from Wood:

"the Editor...takes leave to promise, that the PETERSBURG COURIER will be conducted on principles congruent with those, for the establishment of which, a WASHINGTON unsheathed his sword,—combated,—and conquered."

However, it seems that Martin never got the chance to pursue his planned enlargement that fall. Three weeks after that June issue, the Great Petersburg Fire of July 16th destroyed all of the structures along Sycamore Street; among the more than 400 buildings lost that summer day were all four of the town's press offices, so forcing its three newspapers – the *Courier*, the *Intelligencer*, and the *Republican* – to suspend their publication. It appears that Martin was unable to recover from the disaster, unlike his competitors, and so the *Daily*

*Courier* passed from the scene.

This sad experience, however, did not sour Martin on journalism. He eventually rebuilt his office and planned for another paper – the *Mercantile Advertiser and Daily Vehicle* – one that would focus on commerce rather than on politics and literature, as Wood had done. Yet Martin's new journal did not issue until mid-October 1816, suggesting that he struggled in the interim, and so may have been employed in other Petersburg shops in that period, as the first to be rebuilt after the fire were the most fiscally stable ones.

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Sources: LCCN No. 83-026161 & 85-025951; Brigham II: 1130; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*; Barnes *Artisan Workers in the Upper South*; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Isenberg, *Fallen Founder*; notices in *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1814-16), *Petersburg Daily Courier* (1814-15), *Richmond Enquirer* (1814-16), and [Norfolk] *American Beacon* (1814-16).