

PETERSBURG 08: Mercantile Advertiser

01: Mercantile Advertiser, and Daily Vehicle (1816-1817)

The second daily newspaper published in Petersburg was a successor to the first, as well as the eighth journal issued there before 1820. Published by the proprietor of its predecessor, this sheet was similarly short-lived, evidence that the town could not support such a paper in the face of two long-established and well-financed rivals, even as it eschewed politics.

Daily newspapers were a rarity in early-Republic Virginia. Only one town, Alexandria, had grown to the point where it could support such a paper by 1810, though others had been attempted unsuccessfully in Richmond and Norfolk before then. During the War of 1812, the first viable daily in Richmond, the *Commercial Compiler*, issued there and was promptly imitated by John Wood (456) in Petersburg in 1814.

Wood's *Daily Courier* was hamstrung, however, by his checkered past as a partisan writer, and so the paper quickly passed into the hands of George A. Martin (281), a printer in the *Courier* office. While his tenure as proprietor was evidently twice that of his predecessor, Martin's term also seems to have been problematic. Apparently, the daily was experiencing a steep decline in readership when Martin's office was destroyed in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815. He was unable to recover from the disaster, unlike his two competitors, and so the *Daily Courier* passed from the scene after ten months in print.

Another victim was the job-printing business of Marvel W. Dunnivant (154); when his office reopened that October, he brought Martin into his employ to help publish the long-delayed final volume of *The History of Virginia* by John Daly Burk (063) – completed early in 1815 by Louis Hue Girardin (180) but destroyed in the fire as well. Martin remained with Dunnivant for the ensuing year, evidently rebuilding his lost press and organizing an effort to publish a new daily paper in place of the deceased *Courier*.

Martin's new *Mercantile Advertiser and Daily Vehicle* was a journal designed to emphasize business and commerce rather than politics and literature, as Wood's first daily had done. The long interval between the *Courier* and the *Advertiser* – some fifteen months – evinces careful planning amid the rebuilding of Martin's independent business while he worked for another. Still, it appears that his *Advertiser* was a "small" paper, one with a narrow appeal and so a limited circulation. Only one number of the daily is known to have survived into the present time – no. 104 for February 17, 1817 – suggesting very short print runs. Counting back from that date, Martin presumably issued its first number on Saturday, October 19, 1816, almost exactly one year after he joined with Dunnivant, a typical span then for trade-employment contracts. Remarkably, that number also bears a misspelling of its name in the masthead, styling it "Merecantile" rather than "Mercantile" – hence the title noted above.

Such spare evidence of Martin's second daily has led some authorities to suggest that this new paper expired about the time of that solitary number, some four months after its start. But Martin's subsequent association with a newspaper published by Dunnivant suggests something of a transition from one to the other. In June 1817, Dunnivant began issuing *The*

American Star, a thrice-weekly journal he conducted in partnership with Petersburg-born printer, Thomas W. Lorrain (270); that July, Martin placed notices in the *Star* offering books from his old office for sale, stating he could then be found in the *Star* office. That sequence suggests that Martin continued his *Advertiser* until sometime just before the *Star* appeared, likely until April 1817, so completing a six-month run. As he then rejoined Dunnavant, it also seems likely that he sold his tools to Dunnavant & Lorrain for them to use in publishing their *Star*, so gaining monies he could use to pay off any debts that still had remained his *Courier* and *Advertiser* ventures. While speculative, this supposition makes perfect sense when one also recognizes that Martin was still in Dunnavant's employ later that fall.

Martin's life after *The American Star* is unknown. He may have been the Mr. Martin (280) who was manager (and later proprietor) of the Steam Boat Hotel Reading Room in Norfolk after 1817; he may also have simply returned to work as an anonymous journeyman in the American print trade, as had several contemporaries, broken financially by their journalistic ventures. But what is clear is that his two attempts at publishing a daily in Petersburg were his last as a newspaper proprietor. The Appomattox River port would not again see a daily paper published there until the venerable *Intelligencer* adopted that pace in January 1850.

Sources: Not recorded by U.S. Newspaper Project or Library of Congress; Brigham II: 1132; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*; notices in *Petersburg Daily Courier* (1814-15) and the *American Star* (1817).