

PETERSBURG 09: American Star

01: The American Star (1817-1818)

The ninth and last newspaper issued in Petersburg before 1820 was one that attempted to draw on the patriotic fervor pervading much of America after the War of 1812. However, the existence of two well-established competitors in the town, combined with a rapid turnover in the partnership arrangements behind the paper, made the effort a short-lived one.

The American Star was a project initiated by Petersburg job-printer Marvel W. Dunnivant (154). He first appeared as an independent tradesman in the town in early 1815 as a partner in the three-year-old job-press and bookstore of Samuel Dillworth (138); their business was quickly challenged by the loss of their press in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815; the two reconstructed their shop that fall, but Dillworth left their arrangement in 1816 to join Charles Keemle (246) in conducting a similar office in Norfolk. Dunnivant continued the shop on his own, evidently reputably, as he was engaged shortly after Dillworth's departure to print the long-delayed final volume of *The History of Virginia* by John Daly Burk (063), succeeding Petersburg's John Dickson (134) and Edward Pescud (321) in that role.

In the spring of 1817, Dunnivant set out to publish a new Republican journal, as an addition to his successful job-press. To do so, he formed a partnership with Thomas W. Lorrain (270); he was also a Petersburg native, the son of a father bearing the same name, who was then evidently tiring of his situation in Columbia, South Carolina, where he published the thrice-weekly *Telescope*. Dunnivant apparently convinced him to sell the *Telescope* and return to his hometown to assist in producing *The American Star*.

Lorrain & Dunnivant chose a title for their paper that had a clear connection to Petersburg and the circle of United Irishman émigrés who had found refuge among the supporters of Jefferson and Madison there. "The American Star" was a patriotic song set to an old Irish tune by John McCreery (d. 1825), author of many such revisions; the song first appeared in a published collection in a Philadelphia work in 1808 (*The National Songster*) though it was undoubtedly already in wide circulation by that time, so prompting its inclusion. By then, McCreery was working with John Daly Burk and other Petersburg-area exiles to transform Irish melodies into American tunes, most often as patriotic songs; the group proposed publishing a collection of their compositions in early 1808, but that project was apparently impeded by Burk's death in duel that spring. In August 1814, Peter Cottom (107), another Irish émigré with a penchant for music, and then a Richmond bookseller, published the first version of the group's song collection, using McCreery's "American Star" as the book's title and opening tune, including at least one of Burk's contributions. That choice reflected the popularity of the song – with its openly martial character (see lyrics below) – during the War of 1812. Apparently, Lorrain & Dunnivant sought a similar patriotic connotation for their paper in their use of the phrase, as well as appealing to that influential group for support.

The partners' subscription campaign began in April 1817, at about the time that the daily *Mercantile Advertiser* ceased publishing; its proprietor, George A. Martin (281), had worked

for Dunnavant after the 1815 fire had destroyed his previous paper, the *Daily Courier*; he apparently left Dunnavant's employ in October 1816 to start the *Advertiser*, but by April 1817, Martin had decided to cut his losses and close that newer daily as well. The timing of these two events – the closing of one paper and soliciting subscribers for another – suggests that they are linked, especially as Martin was once again in Dunnavant's employ when the *American Star* finally issued in June. Thus, it is quite possible that the availability of Martin's soon-to-be idle tools prompted Dunnavant to attempt publishing his own paper, though at a pace that was half that of the *Advertiser*.

Lorrain & Dunnavant issued the first number of their *American Star* on June 23, 1817, more than two months after the subscription campaign began. In their introductory address, the two reported that they were "from the principal and education of Republicans," but that they also reveled in the apparent disappearance of partisanship from the American political landscape with the end of the war:

"A liberal tolerance towards the ... weaknesses of humanity, is one of the noblest attainments of philosophy; and surely it is a proper subject for congratulation to our citizens, that they may rejoice in the Union of the parties, and the dissolution of faction; that our Legislative bodies are no longer degraded by the intemperate effusion of petty malignity; in short that the motives and character of a man are no more condemned by premature verdict, because his opinions on an unimportant subject may not happen to coordinate precisely with our own."

Still, they were not completely convinced that their approach was one that would now bring paying customers to their door. The pair published "a card" at the end of their introductory address that asked their readers to decide the new paper's fate:

"Having now presented a fair specimen of their work, the publishers of the *American Star* respectfully give notice, that, considering the heavy expenses attendant on a publication of this kind, they cannot venture to proceed in it without the assurance of patronage sufficient to cover the cost of its printing. For this reason the publication of the 2nd number will be delayed for a few days, in order that the public may be enabled to judge properly the merit of the paper; to which end, copies of the present number will be generally distributed in town and through the post offices of this Commonwealth and the adjoining states."

Lorrain & Dunnavant were manifestly pleased with the result of their appeal, as that second number appeared exactly one week later, on June 30th.

However, Dunnavant soon found that he had a partner who was always looking for the next opportunity. Lorrain had already resided in two widely-spaced locales in the three years before his return to Petersburg, having finished a short apprenticeship in late 1815 in the Raleigh, North Carolina, office of the illustrious Joseph Gales Sr., before moving on to South Carolina for just fifteen months; now he was pressed by his elder brother Edwin, a lawyer serving as the naval officer for the port of New Orleans, to join him in Louisiana and start a new journal there, one that would be Democratic-Republican in its political opinions and Anglo-American in its cultural outlook. With blood being thicker than printer's ink, Lorrain decided in his brother's favor and withdrew from his agreement with Dunnavant following

the issue of the *American Star* for October 9, 1817; by the next February, he was soliciting subscribers for a daily *New-Orleans Chronicle*.

Dunnivant published the *American Star* alone for the next three months, apparently while also searching for an experienced and well-heeled replacement for Lorrain. Martin seems to have not been a viable candidate, most likely because of his prior financial reverses; yet it could also be that Martin had already departed Dunnivant's employ by then, if he was the "Mr. Martin" (280) who became manager of the Steam Boat Hotel Reading Room in Norfolk that summer. Whatever the case may be, Dunnivant at last engaged John H. Perkins (323) as his partner; he appears to have been a journeyman trained in Boston and who seems to have worked in Baltimore in early 1816; he joined the *Star* office sometime that December.

The presence of Perkins, and the capital he brought to the venture, allowed Dunnivant to finally enlarge the size of his paper's sheet, as he had hoped to do from the first; however, he was obliged to suspend publication briefly to accomplish that change. In the issue of December 23rd, Dunnivant told his readers of his plan:

"The present number closes the first volume of the *American Star*; and having previously notified the public of our intention to enlarge, they are now informed that the paper will not be issued again until the necessary arrangements have been made for such a change, which we hope will be completed by the first of January."

The exact date of the reappearance of the *Atlantic Star* is not known, as there are no extant copies of the paper from the months following that December suspension notice. Indirect references indicate that it resumed publication about January 7, 1818, under the auspices of the new firm of Perkins & Dunnivant.

Yet, Perkins also proved a foot-loose choice; by April, he had decided to move on to Milton, North Carolina, to start his own weekly paper there. His parting after just four months gave Dunnivant pause; the fiscal upsets caused in his two partners' departures probably ate into whatever financial reserves he then had, and the limited patronage he drew (in the face of larger, well-established competitors: the *Intelligencer* and the *Republican*) seems to have been insufficient in restoring those funds. Hence, his buying Perkins's interest in the paper appears to have brought an end to Dunnivant's journal.

The last known reference to the *American Star* is an article from the issue of April 18, 1818, in Norfolk's *American Beacon*; thus the paper likely ceased publication at about that time. Perkins began publishing his new paper six weeks later, showing that his partnership with Dunnivant had been dissolved for some time. Moreover, Dunnivant proposed publishing a new paper that October, indicating that his *American Star* had long since expired.

THE AMERICAN STAR

Words by John McCreery (Tune: *The Humours of Glen*)

Come, strike the bold anthem, the war-dogs are howling,
Already they eagerly snuff up their prey;
The red cloud of war o'er our forests is scowling,
Soft peace spreads her wings, and flies weeping away.

The infants affrighted cling close to their mothers,
The youths grasp their swords and for combat prepare,
While beauty weeps fathers and lovers and brothers,
Who rush to display the American Star.

Come, blow the shrill bugle, the loud drum awaken,
The dread rifle seize, let the cannon deep roar!
No heart with pale fear or faint doubtings be shaken,
No slave's hostile foot leave a print on our shore.
Shall mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters left weeping,
Insulted by ruffians, be dragg'd to despair?
Oh no! from the hills the proud eagle comes sweeping,
And waves to the brave the American Star.

The spirits of Washington, Warren, Montgomery,
Look down from the clouds with bright aspect serene;
Come soldiers, a tear and a toast to their memory,
Rejoicing, they'll see us as they once have been.
To us the rich boon by the gods has been granted,
To spread the glad tidings of liberty far,
Let millions invade us, we'll meet them undaunted,
And conquer or die by the American Star.

Your hands then, dear comrades, round liberty's altar,
United, we swear by the souls of the brave!
Not one from the strong resolution shall falter,
To live independent, or sink in the grave.
Then free men rejoice, see the striped banner flying,
The high bird of liberty screams through the air,
Beneath her oppression and tyranny dying--
Success to the beaming American Star!

Sources: LCCN No. 83-026163; Brigham II: 1133; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; notices in *The American Star* (1817), the *Richmond Enquirer* (1817-18), and the [Norfolk] *American Beacon* (1817-18).