

RICHMOND 01: Virginia Gazette

00: The Virginia Gazette [1] published in Williamsburg (1736-1780)

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The first newspaper published in Richmond was a continuation of the first paper published in Virginia. It was transplanted when the state government removed from Williamsburg in order to safeguard it from British predations during the Revolutionary War. However, the journal was ended by such military activity in the months before the Yorktown surrender.

When Thomas Jefferson became governor of Virginia in the spring of 1779, he presented a plan to the Assembly to remove the state government from Williamsburg to Richmond; his rationale was two-fold: the new locale was considered to be more secure from attack by the British forces that were then roaming the Chesapeake Bay, as well as a place more centrally-located for much of the Commonwealth's growing population. The resulting June 1779 "Act for removing the Seat of Government to Richmond" established a plan where government business would cease in Williamsburg on April 7, 1780, a Friday, and resume in Richmond on April 24th, a Monday, with the ensuing Assembly session beginning there on May 1st.

At the time this relocation was being debated, only two weekly newspapers were published in Virginia, both in Williamsburg. One was the *Virginia Gazette* of Alexander Purdie (345), then the printer to the state government; the other was the *Virginia Gazette* of John Dixon (140) and Thomas Nicholson (315). The two journals bore the same name in consequence of their proprietors laying claim to being the proper source of legitimate, official information, a tactic embraced by all of Virginia's newspaper publishers before 1790. But during that 1779 legislative session, Purdie died, throwing his printing office into confusion. As a result, when the time came for removing the government, only the Dixon & Nicolson office could follow it to Richmond. And they brought their *Virginia Gazette* with them, making it the first paper to publish in the new state capital.

The Dixon & Nicolson *Gazette* was a direct lineal descendant of Virginia's first newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette* issued by William Parks (321) in July 1736. It had passed to their hands by way of Dixon's association with the Hunter family of Williamsburg and Yorktown. When Parks died in 1750, his weekly passed to his foreman, William Hunter Sr. (230); on Hunter's death in 1761, the paper passed to his foreman, Joseph Royle (368), who was married to his master's sister as well. Royle conducted the sheet for himself and Hunter's illegitimate son, William Hunter Jr. (231), until his death in 1766, when Dixon entered the picture, marrying Royle's widow as well; Royle's foreman, Alexander Purdie, declined to take on the paper without ending its links to the estates of Hunter and Royle; Dixon became administrator for both estates to effect that severance, selling the paper to Purdie outright, and settling the two estates; he then bought an interest in the paper, as Hunter Jr.'s guardian, to provide for the minor child until he reached his majority. Hunter reached that benchmark at the end of 1774; Dixon then bought out Purdie's interest in the Purdie & Dixon press and paper and transferred that share to young Hunter as his father's legacy to him. The resulting firm of Dixon & Hunter took control of the original *Virginia Gazette* in January 1775, just as Purdie

began publishing his new *Gazette*. However, the familial relation between Dixon and Hunter could not overcome the political differences that now emerged; the Loyalist Hunter was soon out of step with his guardian; at the end of 1778, the two dissolved their partnership, with Hunter taking the concern's considerable book stocks and operating a bookstore in the former printing office, while Dixon kept the press and the *Gazette*. Dixon quickly formed a new partnership with his foreman, Thomas Nicholson; they were conducting the long-lived paper when the move to Richmond occurred in April 1780.

The last number of their *Virginia Gazette* to be issued in Williamsburg appeared on April 8, 1780, the day after the business of government had ended in the town. The closing piece in its news columns was a short note announcing that the paper would move as well:

"The printers hereof think it a duty ... to inform their good customers in the lower parts of the country, and the public in general, that they propose removing their office to the town of Richmond immediately, which will suspend the publication of this Gazette two or three weeks; and as soon as they can get properly fixed, their best endeavors shall not be wanting to forward the paper by post as usual."

The next day, Dixon & Nicolson published a supplementary sheet that carried news received by mail after they had finished setting their paper the day before, seeming an effort to clear their office of outstanding advertising commitments before the move; that half-sheet marks the end of the original *Gazette's* residence in Williamsburg. The town would continue to be served for the rest of that year by Purdie's *Gazette*, now conducted by his journeyman-nephews, John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis (119), who professed a financial inability to relocate to Richmond as well.

Being the only printers operating in Richmond that spring gave the Dixon & Nicolson office certain unexpected advantages. After Purdie's death, the government printing contract was divided between Clarkson & Davis and Dixon & Nicolson until a new public-printer could be induced to relocate from the north to Richmond. Jefferson's choice was John Dunlap (152), the noted Philadelphia printer who first published the Declaration of Independence under his supervision; Dunlap decided to send a partner south in his stead: James Hayes (207), his former apprentice who was conducting a Dunlap & Hayes office in Annapolis at that time. However, negotiations over their accepting the Virginia position delayed Hayes's relocation into the fall of 1780, and then his press and supplies were lost to a British ship patrolling the Chesapeake while enroute to Richmond. The catastrophe that had befallen Dunlap & Hayes became a windfall for Dixon & Nicolson. First, their *Gazette* became the semi-official journal of the state government by default; then their press became the only one available to print forms and bills that the government needed; it was a temporary situation, to be sure, but one that continued until Hayes was replenished and ready to start work in Richmond.

Still, the Dixon & Nicolson concern had its problems as well. Supply shortages and financial disruptions plagued their office, as they did all Virginia businesses at that time. Moreover, it appears that Nicolson was the only partner who resided in Richmond, as Dixon continued to pursue his business interests in Williamsburg. Then in January 1781, the supposed security of Richmond was revealed to be illusory; a raiding party, led by turncoat Benedict Arnold, trashed the homes and businesses of several prominent patriots in the new state capital,

including the printing office of Dixon & Nicolson. That was followed in April by the arrival of the leading elements of Lord Cornwallis's Southern Army; the government fled west from the city, first to Charlottesville, and then Staunton; Hayes was about to start his commission at that time, and so joined the exodus to Charlottesville, which left Dixon & Nicolson, once again, as the sole printers and journalists in Richmond.

Even so, the April invasion proved a larger problem for Dixon & Nicolson and their *Gazette* than had the January raid. They suspended publication of their weekly following the issue of April 21, 1781, but remained in the capital; they then attempted to resume publication on May 19th, but the number that they published that day proved to be the last of the original *Virginia Gazette*. Transport links and trade arrangements with the North were disrupted by the presence of massed British forces in central Virginia, and that situation continued until the Franco-American force under the command of Washington and Rochambeau laid siege to Cornwallis at Yorktown in September. Consequently, not a single newspaper was issued in Virginia until December 1781.

The first weekly to appear in Virginia after Yorktown was that published by James Hayes; his *Virginia Gazette or The American Advertiser* issued on December 22nd. Knowing that Hayes would eventually publish such a new government vehicle, and with Dixon still residing in Williamsburg, the incentive for continuing the Dixon & Nicolson *Gazette* in Richmond soon vanished. Hence, the partners dissolved their concern sometime in the fall of 1781, so ending the life of the weekly that William Parks had founded some forty-five years before.

Nicolson retained the tools used to produce the *Gazette*, and soon followed Hayes back into print with a competing mercantile journal in Richmond – *The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* – which he published in partnership with William Prentis (340), a one-time Dixon & Hunter apprentice, as had been Nicolson. Dixon did not finally move to the new capital until 1783, when he too offered a new mercantile advertiser – *The Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* – in conjunction with John Hunter Holt (223), son of his wife's sister, who had published *The Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* in 1775.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-024739; Brigham II: 1158-1163; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 4 & 5 (based on Dixon's York County Records Project files at Research Dept., Colonial Williamsburg, and on papers of the Assembly and the Governor at Library of Virginia); *Annals of Henrico Parish*; notices in Dixon & Nicolson's *Virginia Gazette* (1780-1781).