

## **RICHMOND 02: American Advertiser**

01: The Virginia Gazette, or The American Advertiser (1781-1786)

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The second paper issued in Richmond was the semi-official weekly of the Commonwealth's public-printer. Consequently, it survived only for as long as its proprietor held that position, which was problematic given the travails he faced during his five-and-a-half year term.

Virginia's few printing offices were ravaged by the Revolutionary War, a state of affairs that was exacerbated by the removal of the state government to Richmond from Williamsburg in early 1780. At that time, the only operating presses were those of John Clarkson (093) & Augustine Davis (119), the heirs of Alexander Purdie (345), and John Dixon (140) & Thomas Nicolson (315). Following Purdie's death in April 1779, the government printing contract was divided between the two offices until a new public-printer could be induced to relocate to Richmond from the north. Thomas Jefferson, the sitting governor then overseeing the removal to Richmond, asked John Dunlap (152), the Philadelphia printer who first published the Declaration of Independence in 1776 under his supervision, to take on the commission; however, Dunlap decided to send a partner south instead – James Hayes (207), his former apprentice who was conducting a press in Annapolis as Dunlap & Hayes, one that then held the contract for public-printing in Maryland.

Extended negotiations ensued that summer, during which Jefferson attempted to impose restrictions on the content that any new newspaper that Dunlap & Hayes might issue, so as to limit "illegitimate" criticisms of the government's conduct of the ongoing war. In the end, Dunlap separated himself from Hayes on this score, leading to the firm of Dunlap & Hayes being granted the position of "printer to the Commonwealth," while Hayes was allowed to publish a weekly that would carry official information at the state government's discretion, so giving Jefferson and his Council of State some control over its content. As a result, Hayes was not in a position to relocate to Virginia until early September 1780. But once committed to the venture, Dunlap and Hayes moved quickly to take up the commission.

Circumstances now began to work against them; in October, the press and supplies for their new Richmond office were lost to a British man-o-war patrolling the Chesapeake while they were enroute to Virginia. By the time they had secured replacements, and Hayes had finally set up their Richmond office, the British descended on Richmond. In April 1781, literally on the eve of the date Hayes chose to issue the first number of his new semi-official journal, the leading elements of Lord Cornwallis's Southern Army arrived in central Virginia; he managed to avoid the subsequent occupation of Richmond by following Jefferson and the Assembly to Charlottesville with his press in hand. The ongoing British presence that spring and summer denuded central Virginia of wagons and horses, either destroyed or seized, leaving Hayes stranded in Charlottesville, essentially in exile, and only able to complete a small part of his contracted work, and not his newspaper at all.

Any semblance of normality among Virginia's printing offices did not return until after the British surrender at Yorktown that October, meaning that no newspaper was issued at all in the state from May to December 1781. After Yorktown, Hayes was aided by the state militia

in bringing his printing office back to Richmond in order to serve the next Assembly session that began in November. But it still was not until December 22nd that he was finally able to publish his *Virginia Gazette or The American Advertiser*. The title represented his choice to lay claim to being the proper source of legitimate, official information – a *gazette* – even as such a claim was a tactic used by all of Virginia's newspaper publishers before 1790. And a challenge to that manifest claim appeared exactly one week later: the *Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser*, issued by the new firm of Thomas Nicolson & William Prentis (340).

Over the ensuing years, Hayes was faced by the intersecting problems of supply shortages, particularly of paper, and increasing journalistic competition. Under pressure to produce his *Gazette and Advertiser* without interruption, he felt compelled to use the limited supplies of paper available to him to print the weekly, rather than use that paper for his government work, leading to increasingly long delays in delivering such imprints. By 1783, the Assembly had imposed deadlines for completing that public work, just as a third journal appeared in the capital city: the *Virginia Gazette or The Independent Chronicle* published by the former Williamsburg publisher John Dixon (140) and his nephew, John Hunter Holt (223), the pre-Revolutionary Norfolk editor.

With two presses available as alternatives to that of Dunlap & Hayes, the Council of State now began to reassign the delayed work to both Dixon & Holt and Nicolson & Prentis, with the cost being deducted from the salary due Dunlap & Hayes. That reduction meant that Hayes had even fewer resources to draw on for his government work and was ever more dependent on the revenues generated by his *Gazette and Advertiser*, so making the weekly the focus of his office. His dire situation was further diminished in 1784 when Augustine Davis finally came to Richmond from Williamsburg and opened a job-printing office (though not yet a paper), apparently intent on claiming a share of the ever more delayed government work. This meant that Hayes now had three competitors, with deeper ties in Virginia than he had, lobbying Governor and Assembly for his public contract. Even so, Hayes did not interrupt or suspend the publication of his paper to counter the threat they posed.

The deteriorating relationship with the state government reached its breaking point in early 1786. Hayes missed the deadlines set in 1783 for work resulting from the 1785-86 General Assembly session; the Council of State investigated the delay and promptly recommended his dismissal; Governor Patrick Henry fired him in April 1786, and then divided the public work among his three competitors, choosing to not name a replacement. With the promise of a government subsidy, Augustine Davis quickly started publishing another journal: the *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, the first in Virginia to eschew the claim of being a *gazette*.

Now faced with three competing weeklies, and deprived of his government subsidy, Hayes sought out new financial partners for his *Gazette and Advertiser*, as he also settled accounts with John Dunlap in dissolving the firm of Dunlap & Hayes. Those partners became a part of James Hayes & Co. with the issue of August 30, 1786. However, the injection of new capital seems to have done little to extend the paper's life. No issue of his *Gazette and Advertiser* is known after that published on December 20th, indicating that Hayes closed the weekly by the end of 1786. He also evidently retired from the print trade at that time, settling into life as the master of his new wife's plantation across the James in Manchester, though often

seen in the public record thereafter as an angry man involved in litigation with another. He died in Richmond in October 1804 at the age of forty-five.

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Sources: LCCN No. 84-024703; Brigham II: 1150-1151; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; Ward & Greer, *Richmond during the Revolution*, notices in Richmond newspapers (1781-1804).