

RICHMOND 03: Weekly Advertiser

- 01: The Virginia Gazette or Weekly Advertiser (1781-1782)
 - 02: The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser (1782-1792)
 - 03: Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser (1792-1797)
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The third newspaper published in Richmond issued from the press that had printed the first, following the disordering of the capital's printing offices caused by British military activity in the state in 1781. The journal was also the first mercantile advertiser appearing in the city, a result of the weekly lacking any tie to the state government, unlike its two predecessors.

The Revolutionary War devastated the printing trade in Virginia, paring four pre-war presses in the Old Dominion – three in Williamsburg and one in Norfolk – to just one that was able to move to Richmond when the state government relocated there in early 1780. That press was conducted by John Dixon (140) and Thomas Nicholson (315), who brought with them from Williamsburg their unofficial *Virginia Gazette*, making it the first journal issued in the new capital city. The weekly became the state's "authoritative" gazette by default when the incumbent public printers, John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis (119), failed to bring their press from Williamsburg and so lost their commission; with the press office of Dixon & Nicolson then being the only alternative to that of Clarkson & Davis, the printers and their paper became the government's new outlet for official information when the Assembly met on May 1, 1780. Their tenure in that role lasted almost exactly a year. The government soon engaged John Dunlap (152), the noted Philadelphia publisher, and his protégé, James Hayes (207), as the new public printers; however, their execution of the commission was stymied by British military activity and straitened finances until May 1781, when another *Virginia Gazette* was planned to issue from their new Richmond office, managed by Hayes. Yet, the firms of both Dunlap & Hayes and Dixon & Nicolson were compelled to cease publishing any papers by the arrival at that time of the lead elements of Lord Cornwallis's Southern Army in central Virginia; Hayes fled to Charlottesville with the government, while Dixon & Nicolson chose to dissolve their partnership, bringing an end to their transplanted *Virginia Gazette*.

Nicolson stayed in Richmond with the former Dixon & Nicolson press, although little work presented itself to keep him busy. But the British surrender at Yorktown that October and the ensuing November Assembly session held out the promise of a return to business as usual in the capital. So Nicolson forged a partnership with William Prentis (340), a colleague from Williamsburg, in an apparent attempt to exploit the printing void created by Hayes's Charlottesville exile. So pressured, Hayes asked the Council of State to help him bring his press back to the capital before the Assembly turned to Nicolson & Prentis in his stead, as they had with Dixon & Nicolson in 1780; once back in Richmond, he moved quickly to begin publishing his official journal – *The Virginia Gazette or the American Advertiser* – before Nicolson & Prentis could match his move. Hayes barely succeeded, issuing the first number of his sheet on December 22nd, exactly one week before the *Virginia Gazette or Weekly Advertiser* of Nicolson & Prentis appeared on December 29th.

Still, that preemption does not seem to have affected the new Nicolson & Prentis office. While running a printing office anywhere in Virginia in the 1780s was a problematic venture, beset with supply deficiencies, credit realignments, and cash shortages, Nicolson managed these uncertainties by keeping their press at his house at Twenty-Second Street and Main at the foot of Church Hill. Early in 1782, less than six months after the first *Weekly Advertiser* appeared, the thirty-two-year-old Nicolson lived there with the twenty-year-old Prentis, a sixteen year-old apprentice, William Alexander Rind (359), a son of the Williamsburg Rinds; and Peter (506), an African slave age twenty-three, whose presence shows that Nicolson & Prentis followed the practice of that period of using enslaved men to physically pull their press. Their revenue was evidently more consistent than their competitor's; their journal carried advertising notices that were paid for on publication, while the government paid for their official notices in the Hayes weekly on a quarterly basis; moreover, they could take on far more job-printing than could Hayes, whose press was required to produce public work before anything else. Even so, it would seem that the best indication of the profitability of their newspaper was the introduction of a competing mercantile advertiser by John Dixon in August 1783: *The Virginia Gazette or The Independent Chronicle*.

Despite this manifest success, the partners were pulled apart by forces beyond their control after three years together. On the evening of Thursday, January 6, 1785, fire destroyed their office; beside that week's edition of their newspaper, the fire took all of the printed (though unbound) pages of a revisal of the state's laws that had been subcontracted to them, in the interest of speeding the work, by the new firm of John Dixon and John Hunter Holt (223), who were contracted by the state after Hayes was deemed incapable of producing the work on time. Compelled to replace the lost work at less than their costs, while also rebuilding their press, journal, and sizeable bookstore, the episode effectively killed the partnership of Nicolson & Prentis. The two old friends parted ways in May 1785 once their commitment to the derailed revisal was fulfilled. Prentis soon moved to Petersburg; there he began a job-press that issued that town's first paper, the *Petersburg Intelligencer*, a year later.

Nicolson continued in business alone in Richmond, with the *Weekly Advertiser* apparently missing just two issues as a result of the fire. Such a short hiatus indicates that the demand for both his newspaper and the job-printing his office produced was sufficient for Nicolson to quickly secure financing for a new press. Yet he was soon faced with further competition, apparently because three presses in Richmond could not meet the growing demand there. That summer, Augustine Davis finally moved the remnants of his old Williamsburg office to Richmond, both to fill the job-printing demand Nicolson could not, and to pick up the public work left undone by Hayes. With Davis now contending for the post of public-printer at the same time that Dixon & Holt were also actively undermining Hayes, Nicolson chose to stay on the sidelines and concentrate on his weekly and his job-printing, rather than participate in that contentious political struggle.

That choice meant Nicolson's office remained a small-scale endeavor for the rest of his life. While all of the other presses in Richmond grew in size and capability, it appears that the only alterations he made were occasional changes in his supporting cast, as in early 1787 when young Rind departed the shop and was replaced by Edward Charlton (089); thereafter the office was manned by just Nicolson, a journeyman, and an enslaved pressman. Rather,

Nicolson expanded his business by conducting a subscription library that he had brought to Richmond from Williamsburg in July 1785 to replace his lost bookstore; that establishment eventually became the Library Company of Richmond, incorporated in December 1805 with Nicolson as its librarian.

One observer described Nicolson as being "persevering, conscientious, and a man of little passion," qualities suiting a librarian. Still, such qualities made him and his journal ever-less influential over time. The *Weekly Advertiser* continued the non-confrontational miscellany form Nicolson had learned thirty-years earlier in Williamsburg; but in the highly-politicized environment of Richmond in the 1790s, his paper no longer fit contemporary tastes and so slowly lost its profitability from its lack of a political perspective. Evidently recognizing that such an approach was simply passé, and being keen to concentrate on his library business, Nicolson decided to cease publishing his fifteen-year-old newspaper early in 1797. The last number he issued was evidently that for April 22, 1797.

That ending left Richmond with two partisan papers – one Federalist, one Republican – and a series of young publishers who tried to claim the middle ground that Nicolson had held between the two poles with new journals over the next decade. Nicolson remained outside that fray, however, quietly conducting his library and press until his death in late 1808.

Sources: LCCN No. 95-067615 & 84-024702; Brigham II: 1149-1150; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; Hubbard on Richmond; *Annals of Henrico Parish*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*.