

RICHMOND 04: Gazette and Independent Chronicle

- 01: Virginia Gazette or The Independent Chronicle (1783-1784)
 - 02: The Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle (1784-1789)
 - 03: The Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser (1789-1793)
 - 04: Virginia Gazette & Richmond Chronicle (1793-1795)
 - 05: Richmond Chronicle (1795-1796)
-

The fourth newspaper published in Richmond was one issued by the publisher of the town's first journal. It was a mercantile advertiser that became the semi-official paper of the state government for the middle third of its life. But in its latter years, it was paper dependent on advertisers with political views differing from those of its proprietor, so leading to its closing from a decline in that essential support.

Following the Revolutionary War, Virginia's printing trades experienced a rapid expansion in the number of presses in operation and the places hosting them. In early 1781, there was but one press working in the state; by 1787, there were four in Richmond and one each in Norfolk, Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Alexandria, and Winchester, or nine in all. That growth was a result of the rebirth and expansion of the export trade on which Virginia's economy depended and the printed documents supporting it. That proliferation also meant that each town then sustained at least one mercantile advertiser.

Richmond's *Virginia Gazette or The Independent Chronicle* was just such a paper. It was first issued in August 1783, three weeks before the long-anticipated signing of the Treaty of Paris that ended hostilities with Great Britain. The weekly was produced by John Dixon Sr. (140) and John Hunter Holt (223), two men who had been a part of Virginia's pre-Revolutionary printing trade. Dixon was the older and more experienced of the two partners; originally a business agent, he became part of the trade after the 1766 death of Joseph Royle (368); in settling Royle's estate, Dixon partnered successively with Alexander Purdie (345), William Hunter Jr. (231), and Thomas Nicolson (315), in publishing the original *Virginia Gazette* of William Parks (321) in Williamsburg; in 1780, he and Nicolson moved that venerable paper to Richmond when the state government relocated there, making it the first and only paper in the new capital city until May 1781; the invasion of central Virginia by British forces that spring induced the dissolution of the Dixon & Nicolson partnership in the summer of 1781, so ending the life of Virginia's first newspaper as well. Holt had similarly bad luck with the King's forces in the fall of 1775; he was then editor and publisher of the *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer*, a weekly notorious for its relentless criticism of the colony's governor, John Murray, Lord Dunmore (153); exasperated by Holt's commentaries, Dunmore ordered the *Intelligencer's* press confiscated and its staff arrested on September 30, 1775; although Holt managed to escape Dunmore's raid on his office, the event ended his journalism career for the duration of the ensuing war; after serving in the Virginia line with some distinction, Holt settled in Richmond, evidently drawn there by the prospect of a business partnership with Dixon, who was also married to his maternal aunt, Roseanna Hunter Royle.

Despite this familial link, the arrangement between the two was the same that Dixon forged with all of his partners from Purdie onward: Holt was the practical tradesman conducting the technical side of their office, while Dixon financed the whole and conducted its business side. And while Holt was editor of the new *Gazette and Independent Chronicle*, the paper's tone was far less polemical than had been Holt's Norfolk paper, evidently tempered by the absence of an easily ridiculed opponent, such as Dunmore. Such tempering was also likely a calculated approach given that Dixon and Holt were now lobbying for their appointment as printer to the Commonwealth as well, a commission that would make their weekly into a subsidized outlet for official notices.

The tenure of the incumbent public printer, James Hayes (207), was marked by a growing financial insufficiency dating to his arrival in Virginia in October 1780, when he had lost a press and its supplies to a British ship while it was enroute to Richmond; thereafter, Hayes struggled to produce the government work out of a lack of financial resources and a series of unrealistic deadlines. And throughout that tenure, Richmond's other press offices were seeking his lucrative post for themselves, Dixon & Holt among them after mid-1783. Hayes's supposed malfeasance brought about his dismissal in May 1786, with Dixon & Holt gaining appointment in a highly competitive election that June. Yet the Assembly also reduced the public-printer's compensation and authorized the Governor to employ as many printers as he deemed necessary to meet their arbitrary schedule out of those reduced funds. Hence, Dixon & Holt were now obliged to complete the public work in a setting where competitors diminished their compensation, pressing their resources and skills, and making the revenue generated by the *Gazette and Independent Chronicle* ever more essential to the viability of their whole business.

Just as the two partners began to come to grips with this fiscal reality, new circumstances arose to challenge the survival of their weekly newspaper. In January 1787, the entirety of Richmond printing trade was disrupted by a fire that tore through the heart of the city's commercial district. While the Dixon & Holt office was undamaged, unlike others, their vital supply chain was interrupted and their potential advertisers impoverished. Holt, however, did not live long enough to have had a significant role in their firm's recovery from these travails. In early June 1787, Holt developed a fever and died quite unexpectedly. Lacking an immediate family, a settlement of Holt's estate does not appear to have been a priority for Dixon; this may have been because of the recent death of Holt's father John (222), whose estate would not be settled until later that year in New York. Accordingly, Holt's estate was not settled until September 1789, at which time the weekly that Dixon & Holt had published became *The Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser* of John Dixon & Company.

This new arrangement brought another family member into the mix: John Dixon Jr. (141). Not yet twenty, the son had been a part of his father's office since at least August 1783, and perhaps part of the earlier Dixon & Nicolson one. While he took his son into the business, so assuring that the press remained in the extended Dixon-Hunter-Holt family, Dixon Sr. did not resolve the problems created by Holt's death. From June 1786 onward, their press had been faced with two conflicting jobs: the weekly newspaper and the production expected of the printer of the Commonwealth. Holt had evidently handled the newspaper, while Dixon Sr. oversaw the public work, both with the help of hired hands. The loss of Holt increased

the effort of producing the weekly while impairing the required public work. So when the Assembly assigned the press the added task of publishing the laws of the newly-established federal Congress in late 1789, they created a situation that set the office into a downward spiral. By spring 1791, Dixon Sr. was in danger of losing his public contract as a result of both missed deadlines and slipshod work. That April, as the governor and the Council of State considered what to do about these issues, Dixon Sr. died unexpectedly, leaving his son to pick up the pieces. He appealed to Governor Edmund Randolph to be allowed to continue in his father's place, pleading the probable indigence of a now parentless family. His plea fell on unsympathetic ears and the public contract was withdrawn in early May.

Still, the Dixon press was essentially saved by the loss of the public work. Young Dixon could now focus the family business on the *Gazette and Public Advertiser* as its primary function. For the next two years, it was issued by him as a partner to his father's estate, retaining the corporate name of John Dixon & Company, before the weekly finally devolved to his hands alone with the settlement of the estate in February 1793. At that point, Dixon Jr. gave the journal a more political perspective, renaming it *The Virginia Gazette & Richmond Chronicle*, rather than continuing as a *Public Advertiser*, and increasing its pace of production to twice weekly. The changes allowed the sheet to survive for another three years.

Nevertheless, his restyled *Chronicle* did not thrive in the increasingly politicized setting of Richmond journalism. By keeping a centrist tone, as his father had previously, the paper was increasingly marginalized. In April 1793, an avowedly Jeffersonian journal appeared in Richmond; the clumsily named *The Virginia Gazette & Richmond and Manchester Advertiser* would eventually become the *Virginia Argus* in 1796, and its proprietor, Samuel Pleasants (331), one of that party's key leaders in the city. His *Argus* openly opposed the Federalist-aligned *Virginia Independent Chronicle & General Advertiser* issued by Augustine Davis (119), who had succeeded Dixon Sr. as printer to the Commonwealth.

The partisan newspapers that developed in the 1790s laid bare the fiction that any paper in the state was a "gazette" that delivered accurate and genuine official information. Dixon Jr. clearly understood that change in perceptions; in May 1795, he dropped the conventional *Virginia Gazette* name from its title, apparently attempting to set his *Richmond Chronicle* apart from the partisan contenders in both state government and local journalism. By the summer of 1796, though, he came to recognize the futility of this non-committal approach. So with the issue of August 27, 1796, Dixon closed the slowly-dying *Chronicle*, saying that the closing's immediate cause was his inability to buy new type founts that he desperately needed for the journal as a result of his financial circumstances. The office now became a job-printing concern while he considered his next journalistic venture.

That next venture was more openly political one that sought to elevate the level of public discourse, to recapture, it seems, the lost idealism of the Revolutionary era. Dixon's new *The Observatory or A View of the Times* (later simply *Dixon's Observatory*) issued its first number in July 1797, just ten months after the closing of the *Chronicle*. Evidently this new journal was only a slight improvement over its predecessor, and so faced the same slow death of the *Chronicle*, before it was rescued from oblivion by another change in the public-printing commission in 1798. But that saving came initially at the price of his losing control

over the paper and eventually with his unceremonious retirement from journalism. Dixon lived out his days as job-printer in Richmond, dying unexpectedly, as his father had, in May 1805, just age thirty-seven.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-034464; 85-034465; 85-026725; 86-071814; 85-026060 & 85-026043; Brigham II: 1148-1149 & 1136; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 4 & 5; York County Records Project files and Williamsburg People files for Dixon, Holt, Hunter, and Royle, Colonial Williamsburg; Papers of the Assembly, the Council of State, and the Governor at the Library of Virginia; notices in various Richmond newspapers (1780-1805).