

RICHMOND 07: Virginia Argus

- 01: The Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser (1793-1795)
 - 02: The Richmond and Manchester Advertiser (1795-1796)
 - 03: The Virginia Argus (1796-1804)
 - 04: Virginia Argus (1804-1816)
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The first Republican newspaper issued in Richmond was also the seventh journal published there. Born out of the ruins of the city's first daily paper, this sheet was never issued at that same pace, evincing the conservative business practices of its Quaker proprietor. Yet it was his attachment to the liberalism of Jefferson and his associates that allowed his newspaper to survive for nearly a quarter of a century.

In the fall of 1792, Augustine Davis (119), Virginia's public printer, persuaded James Carey (080), brother of the Philadelphia publishing entrepreneur Mathew Carey, to come to the state capital to conduct *The Virginia Gazette and Richmond Daily Advertiser* for their mutual benefit. Though Davis was already publishing the semi-official *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser*, his paper was obligated to devote its limited advertising space to government notices, so losing out on revenue found in the growing demand for advertising in the city; moreover, he unmistakably believed that the other two weeklies then published there – the *Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* of Thomas Nicolson (315) and the *Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser* of John Dixon Jr. (141) – were incapable of filling that unmet demand. So he decided to invest in a second paper to profit by exploiting the shortfall. Unfortunately, Carey did not manage the daily's business very well, forcing their journal to close after just twelve weeks in print in early January 1793.

Beginnings

Davis was not deterred by the failure; rather, he now determined to finance a twice-weekly adjunct to his semi-official weekly, this one conducted by his reliable shop foreman, Samuel Pleasants Jr. (331). However, while Davis thought he had created a paper allied with his in setting Pleasants up as a journalist, what he had actually done was create a formidable competitor, one he would have to contend with for the next twenty-one years.

The twenty-three-year-old Pleasants was a York County native raised among the Quakers of Henrico County and probably trained in the Davis office after he moved it to Richmond from Williamsburg in 1783, as he first appears in the public record as a journeyman printer in that office in 1787. Pleasants agreed to conduct this new twice-weekly journal in place of the closed daily, and so the two formed a partnership to produce the paper wherein Pleasants was the titular owner but in which Davis was the financial power – Samuel Pleasants & Co. Their new *Virginia Gazette and Richmond & Manchester Advertiser* first issued on April 15, 1793, "in consequence of Mr. Carey's removal from the city."

While that comment demonstrates the clear link between the two successive papers, it also obscures the fact that the two partners soon found themselves at odds politically, and they

probably were so before their paper ever appeared. Partisan factions had emerged in the country shortly after the new federal government began operation in 1789, but the year 1793 was a pivotal one in their development and deepening, largely a consequence of the execution of Louis XVI of France and the activities of the emissary that was then sent to America by the new revolutionary government there. With long-established connections to Washington and his cabinet, stemming from his ardent support of the 1787 Constitution during its ratification, Davis was ready to follow a pro-administration course in his weekly; at the same time, Pleasants was inclined to follow an opposition track in his, reflecting his Quaker ties to James Madison, among others. As a result, the partners chose to part ways in the fall of 1794; Pleasants acquired Davis's interest in their shared venture following the issue of October 13, 1794, and became sole proprietor of the twice-weekly *Gazette*, leaving Davis to conduct his older weekly *Gazette* as he saw fit. Nonetheless, Pleasants remained a professional subsidiary to Davis in executing the public-printing contract, with his new press serving as an adjunct to Davis's until about 1797.

The political polarization of American newspapers at this time brought about a process wherein many publishers abandoned claims of official authority and legitimacy – as seen in the use of the title "gazette" – and assumed an identity independent of competing papers. In Virginia, the 1790s were a period in which the various "*Virginia Gazettes*" reflected all shades of partisan opinion, so muddling public perceptions of authenticity and reliability.

Pleasants was one of the first journalists to abandon the *Virginia Gazette* phrase in the title of his paper. With the issue of April 30, 1795, he assumed the simpler title of *The Richmond and Manchester Advertiser* for his twice-weekly sheet. (John Dixon Jr. followed suit within a month, shortening his paper's title to *The Richmond Chronicle*.) At the same time, he added an ornamental "and" to his paper's title banner based on a portrait of the multi-eyed face of Argus, the all-seeing guardian of the Olympian goddess Hera – plainly indicating his intent to look beyond the "official" channels of information. This allegorical note was first presented in a journal title by an opposition paper in Boston in 1791, and then by journals in New York and New Jersey later in 1795. In using this decorative figure, it appears Pleasants was then also considering such a move as well, though obviously reluctant to abandon his paper's identity as an "Advertiser". But with Thomas Jefferson's defeat in the 1796 election – after having been pummeled in most American newspapers, then nearly all Federalist in their perspective – Pleasants decided to fully embrace that inquisitive trope, adopting the title of *The Virginia Argus* with the number of his journal issued on November 22, 1796. Now nearly four years into publishing his paper, Pleasants had finally settled on a name gave his journal a unique and reliable identify, one still familiar to students of Virginia history today.

That same election had the effect of trimming Richmond's newspaper competition, albeit temporarily, to just the two papers of Pleasants and Davis. John Dixon Jr. closed his failing *Richmond Chronicle* shortly before the election, while the aging *Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* of Thomas Nicolson (315) breathed its last in early 1797. That ascendancy meant that neither Pleasants nor Davis strayed far from the middle of the local partisan spectrum, with the center-left held by the *Argus* and the center-right by the *Gazette*. Yet some found this balancing act unsatisfying, with one contemporary later reporting that:

"Mr. Pleasants was, like his rival, more expert in wielding the scissors than the pen. The two editors did not draw their weapons on each other sanguinarily, though espousing opposite parties, and seldom came in collision in their editorials, unless when represented by champions under their masks, and as the editor of the 'Argus' was a Quaker, there was no danger of a duel, or of a resort to the peace-maker 'if' to avert one."

Their restraint may have been the result of a mutual respect between the former partners, as Davis later said that Pleasants was someone "admirable for the purity of his sentiments [and] the integrity of his conduct." But such an editorial approach meant that each man faced challenges over the ensuing years from new papers that embraced the far end of their side of the partisan spectrum.

Republican Stalwart

For Pleasants, his Republican competitors became useful allies – particularly as he rose to leadership in party circles in the city – allowing his *Argus* to serve as a quieter alternative to their stridency. The first of those competitive allies emerged in the context of the Alien & Sedition Acts controversy in 1798. From its start, Pleasants had asserted that his newspaper was a defender of civil rights, proclaiming in its masthead that "A Free Press Maintains the Sovereignty of the People." Hence, he gave ample space in his *Argus* to writers opposed to those suppressive measures after their enactment that summer. That opposition coalesced in the fall and winter of 1798, leading to the legislative assemblies of Virginia and Kentucky passing resolutions that not only challenged those acts on constitutional grounds, but which argued that the states retained the power to prevent their enforcement by interposing state officials between federal ones and those accused of violating the acts. The Kentucky Resolution was adopted first, on November 10, 1798; twenty-five days later, the full text of that declaration was printed as an extra edition of the *Argus* while the Virginia Assembly debated the wording of their expected objection. That resolution was drafted anonymously by Jefferson himself, then the vice president, and so probably found its way into Pleasants's paper through his offices. It was not until much later that the Kentucky text was published in the pages of the state's new semi-official journal-of-record, *The Examiner* of Meriwether Jones (242), recently elected as successor to Davis as the state's public printer.

This new *Examiner* had succeeded *The Observatory or A View of the Times* begun by John Dixon Jr. in July 1797; that journal was designed to offer a sharper political edge than had the paper Dixon inherited from his father in 1791; but it did not draw the readership he had hoped for and so struggled from its start. In November 1798, Dixon was engaged by Jones to serve as the trade-partner in a new firm that would produce the public work under the commission granted to him. Jones had been a member of the Council of State the preceding spring when Governor James Wood asked him to assess the state of the public-printing concession and Davis's conduct while in that office; his resulting report led to Davis being dismissed and the now well-versed Jones being appointed in his place; not being a printer himself, Jones found Dixon a readily available partner, as his struggling *Observatory* would now become the state's journal-of-record. So he closed his failing paper on November 26th, with the new *Examiner* appearing on December 3rd, the first day of that year's Assembly,

with an even sharper tone than Dixon had exhibited previously, reflecting the views of the most ardent Republicans in the state. But Jones soon found Dixon an unreliable partner and so dissolved their partnership at the end of May 1799; Jones built his own press office to conduct the public business and publish his semi-official paper.

Pleasants played a crucial role in supporting Jones, feeding trained workmen into the new office, reprinting commentaries from the *Examiner* in his *Argus*, while subcontracting some of the public work as he had done before with Davis. That support allowed Jones to expand his operation in advance of Jefferson's 1800 presidential campaign; his office began to issue a second paper in January 1800 – *The Press or Friend of the People* – edited by James Lyon (274), son the controversial Vermont congressman Matthew Lyon; he also published *The Prospect Before Us* of notorious polemicist James Thomson Callender (075) early that same year, with Pleasants printing parts of that controversial imprint for Jones. So while assisting his Republican colleague, Pleasants ably distanced his *Argus* from the more provocative and scandalous works emanating from Jones's press, especially his vituperative *Examiner*.

While the *Argus* was the keystone of his business, Pleasants understood that his long-term success required a more diverse set of goods and services. By 1796, Pleasants had already forged a business alliance with Mathew Carey, elder brother of his ill-fated predecessor, a connection initiated at the suggestion of Carey's famed itinerant bookseller, Mason Locke Weems (435). So for the rest of his life, Pleasants advertised copious lists of books procured through Carey in his *Argus*, books that became the basis of reports that "the Argus Office was the best-stocked book store" in Richmond between 1795 and 1812. But his job-printing work was likely more important; he began with a small one-press shop, but gradually added capacity as his clientele increased; Pleasants acquired a second press in 1801, and a third in 1809, additions that compelled the relocation of his office about every five years.

As his non-newspaper business grew, so too did the prominence of the *Argus*. In 1802, he was rewarded with the federal license to publish the laws enacted by Congress at each meeting of that body by now Secretary of State James Madison – for whom Pleasants had named his eldest son. The work was substantial, bringing a hefty subsidy to any newspaper holding such a license (with three in each state) as the page-space used was paid for by the Federal government at the set advertising rate; that subsidy did much in the ensuing two years to further develop the elements of his business. So too did cross-fertilization between the *Argus* and his job-press. The most successful of those parallel productions came in 1803 with the publication of *The Letters of the British Spy* by William Wirt (1772-1834), the future U.S. Attorney General then a Richmond lawyer. From August to October that year, Pleasants printed a series of "letters" in the *Argus*, purportedly from an anonymous British observer of American culture, though actually penned by Wirt; their immediate popularity increased his paper's circulation that fall, and brought Pleasants many requests to publish the series as a collected work; such a collection issued from his press when the Assembly met that December; but demand exceeded even the unusually large market seen in Richmond during an Assembly session, so prompting Pleasants to publish two more editions from his job-press over the next two years.

The Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai marked the publication of Wirt's *Letters* as the

apex of the popularity of the *Virginia Argus*:

"They furnished much to interest and amuse the public, and brought a great increase to the subscription list of the paper; but with the departure of the Spy, departed many of the subscribers, and after the war excitement was over, the 'Argus' closed its eyes."

However, Mordecai's assessment fails to recognize that shortly after publishing the first edition of that popular work, the role of the *Argus* and the life of its publisher took a turn that many apparently saw coming then, but that he had clearly forgotten fifty years later.

Public Servant

In March 1804, four months after Wirt's collected letters were issued, Meriwether Jones, the incumbent public-printer, resigned his state office in order to accept a federal position; he had already transferred ownership of his *Examiner* to his brother Skelton (243) in August 1803; Skelton, in turn, closed that slowly-failing paper in January 1804, two weeks before the aforementioned session of the Assembly adjourned. Pleasants picked up the slack by printing official notices in his *Argus* once the *Examiner* closed, and so became the logical choice to succeed Jones when he tendered his long-anticipated resignation in March. Thus, when Pleasants was formally appointed on April 3rd by Governor John Page, a close friend and ally of Jefferson, his *Argus* became the state's journal-of-record and his press the locus of all the government's printing. With that appointment, the state of his finances changed dramatically; his paper's entertainment value quickly diminished and with it those casual readers he had obtained the preceding fall; the space available for advertising notices was constrained by his official obligations, so shifting his advertisers' allegiances; and the now limited availability of his job-press sent potential customers elsewhere. Indeed, the extent of his government work was probably the impetus for his acquiring the third press in 1809.

With the state's Republican leaders deprived of their accustomed access to both the *Argus* and the *Examiner*, it was now necessary to find a new journal to replace them in fairly short order. A young bookseller and teacher new to Richmond named Thomas Ritchie (360) was aware of the impending changes in late 1803 when he convinced a Baltimore journeyman, Thomas Burling (066), to serve as his shop foreman once he established a press office in the capital; and when Skelton Jones closed the *Examiner*, Ritchie promptly acquired the paper's subscriber list and began circulating proposals for publishing a new Republican paper to be called *The Enquirer*. But he was slowed in his plans because the *Examiner* press was needed to produce the public work while Meriwether Jones was still public printer; his resignation finally made both the press and its manager, William W. Worsley (462), available to Ritchie; he presently formed a partnership with Worsley to publish his proposed newspaper, with the two acquiring the now idle press; together, Ritchie, Worsley, and Burling issued the first number of their *Enquirer* on May 9, 1804, just a month after Pleasants was named public printer and his *Argus* became the state's journal-of-record.

Initially, the *Argus* and the *Enquirer* operated in the same symbiotic manner as Pleasants and Jones had originally. But over time, as partisan divisions deepened further as a result of the long war between France and Britain, Ritchie's *Enquirer* became the state's foremost Republican journal; meanwhile, the older *Argus* slowly waned in influence in consequence

of its requisite official functions. Those functions secured a renewed importance for the journal when that war finally reached American shores in 1807. In June that year, marines from the British warship *HMS Leopard* boarded the American frigate *USS Chesapeake* in U.S. waters off Norfolk and seized three American citizens who had escaped their impressment on a British naval vessel; the ensuing political uproar led to the controversial Embargo Act that December; yet the more immediate impact in Virginia was a mobilization of the state militia to defend the Commonwealth's ports, especially Norfolk; so over the next two years, military-unit orders and official declarations were not only a significant part of the paper's content, but an important element in sustaining demand for the *Argus*.

After Madison's inauguration in 1809, however, it seems that readership for the *Argus* again began to wane. Such would be a logical result of a lessening of military tensions in the state, as well as international ones after the replacement of the Embargo Act by Congress with a Non-Intercourse Act. Yet, at the same time, the size of his page-sheet was beginning to limit Pleasants's ability to print detailed news emanating from both sides of the Atlantic as the conflict between France and Britain increasingly disturbed American maritime commerce. In the spring of 1811, he modified his title banner to take up less space on the paper's front page, most notably abandoning the "Free Press" motto that had adorned his paper from its start, while employing a smaller type face throughout; but Pleasants achieved a greater expansion of the *Argus's* available space that December by completely refitting his paper, increasing his page from a crown (50 cm.) to an imperial sheet (54 cm.), and acquiring sharp new typeface in the smaller scale seen previously. The overhaul was clearly an expense that challenged his financial stability, given the concurrent, war-associated decline of Virginia's export trade; Pleasants reluctantly announced a 20% increase in the price of his *Argus* in the first number he issued in the new form; he justified the raise by simply noting that the new incarnation of his paper now matched both the page-size and cost of his chief competitors, Ritchie's *Enquirer* and Davis's restyled *Virginia Patriot* – both also twice-weekly journals. The timing of these alterations proved fortuitous in the short-term, at least, as they provided space for Pleasants to publish the flood of reports resulting from the disastrous Richmond Theater Fire of December 26, 1811, items that were widely reprinted throughout America.

What effect these changes had on longer-term circulation, whether positive or negative, is difficult to assess, as the ensuing months were ones where popular support grew for war with Great Britain, occasioning a Congressional declaration in June 1812. With that avowal, the *Argus* resumed its importance as a vehicle for official and military communications, as it had after the Chesapeake-Leopard affair. Nonetheless, a new journal emerged during the war years that challenged all of Richmond's papers: *The Daily Compiler* of Leroy Anderson (011) and Philip DuVal (155); the pair were determined to publish a non-partisan newspaper that would present news of the ongoing war in a more timely and less opinionated fashion than the city's three twice-weekly journals then could. While Anderson, a well-respected educator, was the daily's editor and the driving force behind the venture, DuVal was the tradesman that made the project work; he was one of the many printers who emerged from the *Argus* office after it became the locus of the public-printing business in 1804; and as such DuVal was one in a series of Richmond journeymen who started papers there that attempted to dethrone those of their more prominent masters.

For Pleasants, the problem of ambitious journeyman was probably the most acute, given that his press office was the largest in Richmond from 1804 onward, and so employed the greatest number of hands. He lost three such tradesmen before the 1809 expansion, with Isham Burch (062) departing for Fredericksburg in 1803 and William Waller Gray (193) for Lynchburg in 1809, while Thomas P. Manson (278) left to start the competing *Impartial Observer* with Richmond engraver Samuel Brooks (054) in 1806. But the most ambitious of all was likely John McDonald Burke (065), foreman and manager of his office in 1814.

In October 1814, while the War of 1812 still raged on, and while he continued to serve as the public printer, Pleasants died unexpectedly, just days after his forty-fourth birthday; his death also came several days before the Assembly was to meet in emergency session after the British incursion into the Chesapeake that left Washington in ruins that summer. The *Argus* continued uninterrupted with its cadre of experienced journeymen, but its masthead recorded the transition, stating that the paper was now "published by Samuel M. Pleasants, for the benefit of himself and the other Representatives of Samuel Pleasants, deceased." It was a notable pronouncement as the printer's eldest son, Samuel Madison Pleasants (332), was just fourteen-years-old; the actual manager here was his self-assured mother, Deborah W.L. Pleasants (328), who stayed in the shadows at the *Argus* while serving as administrator of her husband's estate. When the Assembly met, they allowed her to retain her husband's public position in her own right until January 1, 1815, after she made known that the work would be "done by persons in her employment" as it had been under her husband. These swift moves gave the widow Pleasants time to plan for the dissolution of the Argus Office, with its many parts. Burke became the central player in that dissolution, despite being, as one observer wryly noted, a man "with major schemes and minor capital."

Decline and Demise

In December 1814, Deborah Pleasants sold the *Argus* and its printing office to the new firm of Philip DuVal & Company; DuVal had sold out of the successful *Daily Compiler* earlier that year and provided Burke the wherewithal to acquire those two elements; the promissory note they gave to the estate would, in turn, be paid off by the sale of the printing plant at a later date. Hence, the firm of DuVal & Company dissolved in late March 1815, with Burke taking control of the newspaper, with the press going to a new firm led by Arthur G. Booker (041), a journeyman who had been employed by Pleasants as well, and with DuVal joining bookbinder Frederick A. Mayo (284) to buy the estate's large stock of books which Deborah Pleasants had not sold when the other assets were divided the preceding December. Thus Burke retained a share in both the *Argus* (as John Burke & Company) and the printing office (as Arthur G. Booker & Company), while DuVal retained one in the bookstore alone (as Frederick A. Mayo & Company).

This arrangement seems to have worked well until December 1815, as the surviving copies of the *Argus* show little evidence of declining patronage, either in fewer advertisements or shop-worn type. Yet, the paper was undoubtedly fading in prominence as a consequence of the loss of its official function and the government subsidy that January and the success of the *Daily Compiler* in drawing to it the majority of local advertisers once the War of 1812 formally ended that February. But circumstances changed on December 2nd, when Booker

retired from the printing concern because of his "increasing ill health." Burke induced DuVal to return to the press as part of the new firm of DuVal & Burke; but DuVal seems to have recognized the increasingly perilous nature of Burke's finances, and severed his ties with all three concerns at the end of April 1816. His withdrawal set Burke on the path to disaster.

Burke tried to stem the bleeding by bringing in two new partners; brother David Burke (064) became a partner in the job-printing business, replacing Booker, while Louis Hue Girardin (180), the editor of the *Daily Compiler*, was offered a partnership in the *Argus*. Girardin sold his interest in that successful daily to take on the task of reinvigorating the aging (and less frequently issued) paper as its editor. But Burke's two operations now carried considerable indebtedness; the promissory notes from the original December 1814 purchase had not yet been retired, nor those issued to divide the *Argus* Office into three parts in March 1815, nor those used subsequently to buy out DuVal and Booker. And at the same time, the *Argus* was fading away and so could not generate the revenue to pay down those debts.

In retrospect, by bringing Girardin into the *Argus* office, Burke seems to have ensured the demise of his paper. The *Daily Compiler* was sold to a firm headed by Daniel Trueheart (420) and the departing Philip DuVal, but the actual financier was Thomas Ritchie, now the public printer. Samuel Mordecai later described that transaction with brevity and clarity:

"Such was the success of the 'Enquirer,' that Mr. Ritchie found it expedient to attach to it a sort of tender, as a vehicle for city advertisements, and so he purchased 'The Compiler'..."

With the *Enquirer* now the state's journal-of-record and with the *Compiler* drawing the bulk of the capital's commercial advertising, the *Argus* quickly lost readers and revenue, despite Girardin's considerable literary talents, as did Augustine Davis's competing *Virginia Patriot*. In his two newspapers, Ritchie oversaw a publishing operation that exceeded the previously unprecedented one built by Pleasants. So just five months on from the *Compiler* sale, Burke and Girardin conceded the *Argus* could not compete with Ritchie and ended its publication with issue of October 19, 1816, almost exactly two years after its founder's death.

The Burke brothers continued to conduct their job-printing office even as it had now lost its leading client, the *Argus*. But the pressure from creditors mounted, and that office could not generate the funds needed to retire their debts. But rather than face bankruptcy and allow abler hands to administer their business, the two fled Virginia in January 1817, after shuttering the press a few weeks before. Deborah Pleasants, it seems, was still their largest creditor, and their flight left her no choice but to pursue restitution in the courts, a process that dragged on until at least 1826 without complete satisfaction. It was an ignominious end for a newspaper that had served the Commonwealth for so long and so well.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-026726, 84-024709, & 84-024710; Brigham II: 1148, 1136, & 1142-1143; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; Edward Pleasants Valentine Papers, Valentine Museum, Richmond; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in various Richmond newspapers (1793-1826).