

RICHMOND 08: The Observatory

01: The Observatory or A View of the Times (1797-1798)

02: Dixon's Observatory (1798)

The eighth paper issued in Richmond before 1820 was the second one to adopt an openly Republican perspective. Yet the viewpoint it presented was just a reflection of those offered by the country's leading Republican journals, ones whose content was also reprinted in this paper's local competitors. Consequently, the sheet struggled to find an audience before it was closed so that its proprietor could publish another journal for a more strident editor.

The Observatory or A View of the Times was the creation of John Dixon Jr. (141), the son of the renowned Revolutionary-era publisher John Dixon Sr. (140) and Roseanna Hunter Royle, a sister to one colonial-era public-printer, William Hunter (230), and the widow of another, Joseph Royle (368). That setting ensured that the scion would be brought up in the printing trade, and so become a central figure in his father's Richmond office from its start in 1783 until the senior's death in 1791, when the son inherited the father's business. An important part of that business was *The Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser*; the son was resolved to follow his father's lead by following a centrist path politically with his new paper and so appeal to readers on both ends of the emerging partisan spectrum; but such an approach proved detrimental for Dixon's paper, as the partisan divisions that emerged and deepened after his father's death changed the journalistic climate throughout the country. So by 1796, Dixon's remodeled *Richmond Chronicle* faced thriving competitors who staked claims to the opposing partisan poles: the *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* of Federalist Augustine Davis (119) and the *Virginia Argus* of Republican Samuel Pleasants (331). Eventually, those two papers undermined the viability of Dixon's, forcing its closure in August 1796.

Dixon was not deterred by this set back, as ten months later he commenced publishing *The Observatory* as a successor to the *Chronicle*. While the new paper was more openly political than its predecessor, it seems that he was trying to recapture the now-lost idealism of the Revolutionary era, at least initially, by elevating the level of political discourse in partisan journals. The practice of American journalism was headed down the path of *ad hominem* attacks and fallacious reporting then, rather than presenting reasoned debates on principles and policy, as his father's newspaper once had. So Dixon embraced that past by adopting a motto for his new journal – "Impartiality Our Guide" – one that evinced that commitment.

Still, the *Observatory* almost immediately became an outlet for the growing chorus of critics of the administration of John Adams and the Federalist-dominated Congress, meaning that its claimed impartiality was contradicted by its content. That claim was further undercut by Dixon's frequent reprinting of articles from Philadelphia's *Aurora & General Advertiser*, the most caustic of all Republican journals then in the country, published by Benjamin Franklin Bache (1769-98), named after his celebrated grandfather. The *Observatory's* anti-Federalist tone deepened in the six months after its introduction as the administration first proposed, and then the Congress enacted the Alien & Sedition Acts, so openly challenging each state's naturalization laws, as well as the free-speech strictures of the First Amendment. While the

Virginia-originating critiques he published, combined with Bache's comments, drew intense fire from Davis's *Virginia Gazette*, a greater controversy developed between the two men in the spring of 1798 when issues of Dixon's paper sent via the federal postal system failed to reach readers in the Norfolk and Williamsburg neighborhoods; as Davis was also Richmond's postmaster, Dixon accused him of deliberately diverting his newspapers in order to blunt its ability to present information contrary to that seen in his *Gazette*; Davis brushed off the charges by suggesting others had simply purloined the papers for personal amusement.

Yet the growing rift between Virginia's Republicans and Federalists did not provide Dixon the support that he anticipated would nourish the *Observatory* – despite this evidence of an outward attempt to suppress the Republican perspective. He was also contending with the *Virginia Argus* for such partisan sustenance, and that established journal was better funded and managed than was this newer one; the *Argus* was also more subdued in its criticisms over time, in contrast to Dixon's increasingly harsh tone, and so appeared more judicious, even as it assumed an ever-more censorious quality. Indeed, it appears that the two papers came to draw on differing markets, with the *Argus* being supported by the party's leaders in the capital (as evinced by Pleasants's role in circulating material from the state coordinating committee) and the *Observatory* by the party's county committees at some distance from Richmond (as seen in the many addresses from such committees published in his paper). To strengthen his connection to that readership, Dixon dropped all claims to neutrality in mid-August 1798 by abandoning his "impartiality" motto; then in September he recast his paper's title as *Dixon's Observatory* in an apparent attempt to establish his journal as one more representative of the people – his readers – and not of the party elite.

By November 1798, however, Dixon was still faced with financial issues that threatened the life of his *Observatory*, some dating to the settlement of his father's estate some five years before. So when an opportunity for him to become part of the state's public-printing outlet then presented itself, with the promise of a more stable revenue flow, he decided to cease publishing the *Observatory* in order to print a journal-of-record for the new public printer.

Earlier that year, the Council of State, headed by Governor James Wood, set out to reform the public-printing sinecure because of complaints about insufficient quantities of session laws and official circulars sent to the state's western counties. Councilor Meriwether Jones (242) was asked to investigate and found that while the incumbent printer, Augustine Davis, produced more such imprints than had any of his predecessors, he actually produced fewer copies per county, which was the cause of those complaints. When Wood and his Council suggested that Davis should increase his production to meet the demand, he insisted on a salary increase; Davis was fired and promptly replaced by the now well-versed Jones; not being a printer, Jones found Dixon a readily available partner; the two immediately formed a partnership with Dixon expected to actually produce the public work, as well as to publish a twice-weekly journal edited by Jones. So Davis closed his struggling *Observatory* with the issue for November 29th; the state's new journal-of-record, entitled *The Examiner*, issued from his press on December 3, 1798.

Many authorities suggest that these two newspapers are one and the same, with a simple change in title; but the *Examiner* was Jones's paper and continued to be so until its demise

in 1804; Dixon was just the tradesman printing the journal, with an interest in the project for doing so, and not the proprietor that he had been with the *Observatory*. That situation is plainly visible when Jones cut his ties to Dixon just six months later. In accepting Jones's offer, Dixon was soon confronted by the same internal conflict that had beset his father's office a decade before: producing the newspaper impeded the public work, and vice versa. Finding that Dixon was unable to complete the public work for him on the schedule ordered by the Council, Jones established a new press office, with hired hands, to take on the public work, as well as publish the *Examiner*; he then bought out Dixon's minority interest in the new paper at the end of May 1799, leaving his tradesman without either the government contract or the journal, while taking several of Dixon's journeymen into his new office.

After this abrupt termination, Dixon did not publish or print a newspaper again. Rather he maintained a simple job-printing concern, one which evidently provided him a secure living until his unexpected death in May 1805, then just thirty-seven.

Sources: LCCN nos. 86-071812 & 85-025988; Brigham II: 1141; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; notices in *Dixon's Observatory* (1798).