

## **RICHMOND 09: The Examiner**

01: The Examiner (1798-1803)

02: Examiner (1803-1804)

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The first Republican-oriented journal-of-record published in Virginia was the ninth paper issued in Richmond before 1821. It was a paper built on the ruins of a struggling partisan sheet and survived only as long as its proprietor served as the state's public printer. Yet during that short life, the paper became a nationally-recognized exemplar of anti-Federalist journalism, even as it functioned capably in its semi-official capacity.

Like many of its predecessors, the *Examiner* reflected of the perspectives of its founder and proprietor. Meriwether Jones (242) was a descendant of a Cavalier refugee from the English Civil War and so a child of the colonial elite; a son and nephew of Revolutionary War leaders from the counties northwest of Richmond, he was elected to the Assembly in the 1790s as a delegate from Hanover County and served on the most powerful standing committees in that body. In the November 1796 Assembly, Jones was elevated to a seat on the Council of State, replacing James Wood of Frederick County, who had been elected governor at that session. Following complaints from delegates from the state's western counties received at the ensuing Assembly, Wood asked Jones to conduct an investigation of the public-printing concession and the performance of the incumbent printer, Augustine Davis (119), in that role. He became a part of Virginia's printing trade as a result of that investigation.

### **Background**

The report Jones presented in the fall of 1798 was telling. First, he found that Davis – who had held the post since 1791 – had become essentially an absentee manager, and not the practicing printer that he had once been; thus Davis knew only the general outlines of what his office produced for the government; Jones could only obtain a detailed accounting of what that office did produce and how quickly from Samuel Pleasants (331), formerly Davis's shop foreman and now a subcontractor. From that accounting, he discovered that the Davis press produced fewer copies per county of each Assembly's session laws – the main focus of the complaints received – than had Virginia's first public printer, William Parks (321), even as the total number of copies that were printed grew. Moreover, distribution of those laws was hampered by an ill-considered requirement imposed in 1783 that those session laws be signed for by a sitting delegate who would then deliver them in his county. As production was completed only after those legislators had already returned home, many of the county courts did not receive those laws until long after their promulgation, if at all. With Jones's report in hand, the Council asked Davis to increase the scale of his production; when he refused to do so without greater compensation, he was fired.

In November 1798, Wood and the Council chose Jones to replace him, a selection confirmed by the Assembly in early December. This abrupt change in the state's public printer, coming in the midst of the political controversies attending the Alien & Sedition Acts, was seen by most as pure political patronage, a Republican Assembly rewarding one of their own out of

the public treasury. But while Jones was an avowed Republican, he was also an advocate for an informed electorate, meaning open communication between public officials and citizens, as were many of his Council peers and the Assembly members who elected him annually for the next five years. Still, Virginia's Federalists – who championed Davis and his newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* – saw such justifications as window-dressing for Republicans' punishment of an opposition editor, citing Jones's lack of training as a printer. But Davis had proved that the position was more managerial than vocational, meaning that Jones could readily assume that role if aided by competent printers, particularly as he now understood what was required from that concession better than anyone else in Virginia.

With his appointment as public printer, Jones was essentially obliged to publish a paper to carry the government's official notices, if much of his limited salary was not to be spent on advertising in other journals. It is clear that Jones had planned for this eventuality; in short order, he formed an alliance with a practical printer to establish a printing office to produce the work required of him. John Dixon Jr. (141) was the son of the like-named Revolutionary publisher, and had been a part of the public-printing concession when his father held that appointment between 1786 and 1791. The choice of Dixon as his partner also gave Jones immediate access to a press that had been producing the twice-weekly *Observatory or A View of the Times* for the preceding year-and-a-half. Dixon's paper was the most politically-oriented one then issued in Richmond, a decidedly Republican sheet that opposed Davis's Federalist *Virginia Gazette*, while contending with the advertising-laden *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants for Republican patronage in the state. On joining Jones, Dixon ceased publishing his newspaper in order to begin printing a new one for Jones. Many authorities suggest that the two 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 now just the journeyman printing his journal, albeit with an interest in the paper for doing so, though not the proprietor he had been previously; his *Observatory* expired with his independence.

### **A New Partisan Journal**

Jones and Dixon issued the first number of *The Examiner* on December 3, 1798, the first day of 1798 Assembly and three days before that body ratified Jones's appointment. The new journal evinced an even sharper tone than Dixon had displayed before in his *Observatory*, so reflecting the views of the most ardent Republicans in the state, of which Jones was often the most strident. In his introductory essay, Jones wrote the *Examiner* would represent the interests of the people, and not the central government, and so warned "men high in office" that they should take note of a comment made by the Whig author William Belsham (1752-1827) in his history of the Hanoverian kings of England (1796):

"that 'the best, and indeed the only mode of avoiding public ridicule and censure, is to avoid ridiculous and vicious actions; for the people will neither ridicule those they love and esteem nor suffer them to be ridiculed. An administration destitute of esteem or respect among the people will be censured and ridiculed, nor will the severest edicts be found of force to prevent it.'"

The "severest edicts" that Jones implied in using this quotation were the Alien and Sedition

Laws enacted by the Federalist-dominated Congress in June and July 1798. With the Virginia Assembly about to consider the state's response to those acts, he expected a lively debate in his paper that could lead to prosecutions under those laws. Indeed two such actions had proceeded in the months prior to the *Examiner's* appearance. In August, Benjamin Franklin Bache, editor and publisher of the *Aurora and General Advertiser* in Philadelphia, had been indicted for sedition over his published criticisms of President John Adams and his Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering; before his October trial could be held, Bache died of yellow fever, leaving many to believe (erroneously) that he had died in his jail cell at the hands of his Federalist warders. Then in October, Matthew Lyon, a Republican editor who then also represented Vermont in Congress, was convicted and imprisoned by a Federalist-controlled court for publishing (from his own press) a tract "libeling" the Adams administration for not prosecuting Connecticut congressman Roger Griswold for having beaten Lyons on the floor of the House of Representatives during the debate over those same Alien and Sedition Acts; Lyons was reelected from his jail cell in November, raising the spectre of a Federalist judge in Vermont keeping a popularly-elected representative from attending the next session of Congress in 1799. So Jones also made the bold declaration that he would shield the identity of any correspondent from such suppressive activity, in order for his paper to present the views of the people and not just the political elite. The *Examiner* press, he said, would be:

"... as free and unrestrained as any of those in the United States have been since the declaration of American independence, and that the name of any author, the respectability of whose production shall induce them to give it a place in their paper, shall be secretly withheld from the knowledge of any person."

This policy made Jones a lightning rod for Federalist editors for the entirety his journalistic career, particularly for those with the *Gazette of the United States* in Philadelphia, a sheet founded with the financial support of Alexander Hamilton; proprietor John Ward Fenno had inherited the ardently Federalist paper that September, following the death of his father, John Fenno, in the same epidemic that claimed Bache. Initially, Fenno reiterated the same "political patronage" critiques of Jones advanced in Davis's *Virginia Gazette*; but as Jones built a reputation for scathing ant-Federalist commentaries, Fenno turned his focus to Jones specifically, rather than to Virginia's Republican leaders generally, as before. Still in doing so, Fenno and his Federalist peers failed to recognize that Jones was actually one of those leaders, and had been since he was first elected to the General Assembly, so was not the "puppet of the party" they regularly claimed that he was.

Even though the *Examiner* found quick success as a partisan journal, Jones also soon found that his choice of a printing partner was a flawed one. 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. As a result, he was unable to complete the public work for him on the schedule ordered by the Council, so threatening Jones's appointment. Hence, Jones set out to establish a new press office of his own to produce the public work, as well as publish the *Examiner*. At the end of May 1799, he bought out Dixon's minority interest in the newspaper, so leaving his tradesman without the sustenance of either the government contract or the journal; he never again published a newspaper. The independent office that Jones now built became a key player in both local

and national politics. In hiring trained journeymen – some from the old Dixon office and some from the old Davis-Pleasants shop which produced the public work previously – the *Examiner* office soon matched the capacity of his principal Richmond rivals and surpassed that of smaller ones like Dixon's. Over the next five years, three key tradesmen emerged from his office: John L. Cook (105), Seaton Grantland (186), and William W. Worsley (462), who were all Richmond-trained and who all went on to conduct their own partisan papers.

With his production problems resolved, Jones turned to political friends and his brothers to write copy for his *Examiner* as the 1800 presidential election campaign dawned. It appears that brothers Jekyll (a Richmond lawyer) and Bathurst (his successor as a Hanover County delegate) contributed anonymous essays for the paper, while brother Skelton (a Richmond lawyer as well) wrote for the *Examiner* under his own name. But the most startling addition to the endeavor was that of James Thomson Callender (075). His polemical contributions to Bache's *Aurora* brought the Scottish émigré a threat of prosecutions under both the Alien and Sedition Acts alike; so he fled Philadelphia just before Bache's death, finding refuge in Loudon County with U.S. Senator Stevens Thomas Mason. On May 25, 1799, shortly before Jones parted from Dixon, Callender appeared in Richmond and went to work writing for the *Examiner*; it proved to be an association that Jones would later to regret.

Still, the May 1799 reorganization was not one of desperation; rather it appears to be part of a plan to extend the sway of Jones's press. Earlier that spring, he and other Republican leaders convinced James Lyon (274) – the eldest son and trade-partner of the imprisoned Vermont congressman, who was then also under threat of a sedition prosecution – to come to Richmond to assist in launching a series of new journals that would support Jefferson's candidacy in 1800. In April, he began circulating a prospectus for a magazine, the first such periodical to be published in Virginia, called the *National Magazine, or A Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository*; the first number of the semi-quarterly (i.e. eight times per year) publication issued on June 1, 1799 from the *Examiner* press. Thus the *Examiner* can be seen to have been one element in a coordinated effort to wrest both the presidency and the Congress from Federalist hands. However, the second number of Lyon's magazine did not issue until late in October, evidently because of a combination of financial issues, Lyon's involvement in initiating three other Republican papers in the state that year, and the threat of mob action against the *Examiner* office itself.

### **Partisan Warfare**

As these ancillary publications were being planned, Virginia's Republicans were alarmed by the Adams administration's militaristic response to the so-called Fries Rebellion of February and March 1799; the same Congress that had enacted the Alien & Sedition Laws also passed the first direct tax on personal property in the United States, commonly called the "House Tax" for its assessment of taxes from the number of windows in one's house; the tax was levied to both retire the revolutionary-era debt instruments still in circulation (held largely by Federalist speculators) and fund the construction of six frigates authorized for the Navy in 1794 (largely expected to protect Northern trade with Great Britain). When the German-speaking people of eastern Pennsylvania prevented the assessment and collection of that "unconstitutional" direct tax (see Article I, Section 9) in their district – just as the people of

western Pennsylvania had done with the federal whiskey tax in 1794 – Adams responded by sending a military force to put down the uprising and enforce the law – just as Washington had done before. Adams was authorized to do so by an act passed just 10 days before his declaration: the "Eventual Army Act" which gave "eventual authority to the President ... to augment the Army" in case of invasion or domestic insurrection.

Virginia Republicans like Jones and Lyon saw this deployment, and the legislation behind it, as an attempt by Federalists to establish a standing army that could be used against their political opponents anywhere in the country –frequently a concern then in the context of the growing number of sedition prosecutions in the country. In early May, both men joined a volunteer militia unit in the capital, the Richmond Republican Light Infantry Company, with Jones being elected as its captain and Lyon his lieutenant; Lyon noted that,

"the Republican cause in the United States may literally be said to rise or fall with the militia; as the latter is suffered to languish, standing armies will multiply, and the former will be borne down beneath the oppressing despotism..."

It was an opinion echoed by Jones in his *Examiner* two weeks later:

"It is certainly necessary that the people of this country should weigh well the consequences of entering into those standing armies which are now rising in this country. ... It is said that there are to be twenty-two sections in Virginia where the recruiting business is to be carried on and that to mark out the particular places of rendezvous is one of the objects of the military offices that are now in town. It is to be hoped that for the honor of Virginia there will be but few person so ignorant or so unprincipled as to associate with the miserable beings who generally compose standing armies. Fellow-citizens, let not their intriguing arts, ensnare you, but not their handsome coats and neat appearance captivate you, let not there impudence swaggers, and lofty areas frighten you into compliance. Be guarded. Freeman ought to adhere to the militia."

Callender added to the controversy shortly thereafter with the observation that:

"It is very fortunate for the peace of this country, that the late disturbances in Pennsylvania, chance to be the exclusive work of Dutchmen. If Irishmen had been the heroes of the tale, that circumstance would've furnished a fresh handle for libels against the whole Irish nation. But nobody dares to say that the Germans are not orderly and peaceable. They have the weakness, and a very lamentable weakness it is, to be fond of money. They do not perceive the necessity for covering the sea with privateers, and the land with mercenaries in blue coats faced with red, added expense, that must beggar the country."

Such commentaries eventually led one group of young Federalists to organize an assault on both Callender personally and the *Examiner* office. An "association" of about 50 individuals, headed by Conrad Webb, Thomas Wilson, and William Temple, was formed in mid-July with the intention of running Callender out of town by force and burning the *Examiner* office. When Jones heard of the plot, he sent Callender away to the countryside and reported the planned assault to his friends in the city's government; in response, they dispatched the

Richmond militia unit commanded by Alexander MacRae (299), lately a business associate of Jones's, to protect the *Examiner* office with about 100 volunteers under his command. So stymied, the associators were forced to defend themselves in the pages of the new *Virginia Federalist*:

"The object of which association was to acquaint Mr. Callender, that our feelings would no longer submit to be tortured and daily wounded, by an outcast from a foreign country, that we could no longer listen to the revolutionary admonition of a man whom we conceived possessed no right to intrude his opinions on the public, as the criterion of a Republican virtue."

But Callender brought suit against Webb, Wilson, and Temple – the signers of the published justification – and they were compelled to post bond guaranteeing their good behavior. In turn, several of their supporters brought charges against McRae for fomenting insurrection by calling out his unit and then proclaiming that they would defend the *Examiner* office by killing all those who would try to destroy it; the magistrates hearing the case dismissed the charges out of hand.

Although Federalist editors, particularly Davis, thought that the Republicans' response was unnecessarily alarmist, Callender and Jones had reason for concern, as brother journalists elsewhere experienced attacks similar to those apparently planned here. Most prominent was the March 1799 assault on William Duane, the newly-installed editor of Bache's *Aurora*, by a volunteer Federalist cavalry unit for his continuing advocacy for the repeal of the Alien and Sedition Acts. And as one account described the leader of the Richmond conspiracy as being "Lieutenant Pope, of the federal troops quartered here," Virginians were reminded of the assault on Augustus C. Jordan (244), proprietor of *The Epitome of the Times* in Norfolk the preceding August; he was severely beaten by a U.S. Army officer while working in his office shortly after publishing a pseudonymous letter critical of the commander of Norfolk's federal fort, the assailant's commanding officer, and then refusing to permit that assailant to control the content in Jordan's paper in the future. These episodes conformed to popular concerns that a standing army could be too easily employed to settle political disputes. Even the normally reserved Pleasants came to Callender's defense here:

"... the Examiner is little more than a historical commentary upon the address to the citizens of Virginia [i.e. the Virginia Resolution of January 1799], voted last winter by a majority of almost two-thirds of the house of delegates. The principles of that address, and of this newspaper are the principles of a still greater majority of the people of Virginia. What then does all this censure signify? Or why was the whole artillery of aristocrats to be pointed against a single man? Either *the friends of order* act with very little judgment, or they pay an uncommon compliment to the abilities of the man whom they have conspired to destroy."

Still, the thwarted attack turned Callender away from writing for the *Examiner* and toward participation in Lyon's *National Magazine*, while writing his scandalous history of the Adams administration, *The Prospect Before Us*, which Jones and Lyon both promoted.

Callender's slow withdrawal from Jones's employ meant that the proprietor himself became the principal writer for the *Examiner*, as well as its editor. Previously, he had written little,

preferring to print the contributions of Callender and others, though he carefully reviewed each piece before publication. That care gave his *Examiner* about 800 subscribers by August 1799, although Callender would later inflate that figure by half; that circulation appears to have been the largest in the city then, except perhaps for that of the *Virginia Argus*.

Consequently, Jones could now consider expanding his operation. Lyon was then setting up partnerships to publish Republican papers in Staunton, Petersburg, and Richmond starting in the following winter. Jones joined the Richmond effort as one in a trio of financial backers with Alexander McRae and John H. Foushee (170), both members of the city's Republican central committee. This group first issued the biweekly *The Friend of the People* on January 1, 1800; it was followed five days later by the weekly *The Press*, a sheet planned to be a vehicle to present material from both the *Examiner* and the *Friend of the People* to a wider audience beyond the city. However, it seems that the rapid increase in the production expected of Jones's office – especially as he now also took on book publishing, with Callender's *Prospect* competing for space in early 1800 – forced a consolidation of the two papers that February, with *The Press* being folded into the *Friend of the People*.

### **Duels and Disorders**

Despite that setback, the *Examiner* remained both a viable and widely read journal, not the least because of its standing as the state's journal-of-record. Indeed, Jones and his stable of writers were dynamic in their support of Jefferson's 1800 presidential campaign, regularly providing refutations of charges made against the Virginian by Federalist editors throughout the country. The intensity of that campaign was reflected in the growing animosity between the *Examiner* and its newest competitor, the *Virginia Federalist*. That journal made its first appearance just as Jones and Dixon parted ways in May 1799; it was a project encouraged by Federalists in the General Assembly – who had lost control of that body in the state's 1798 elections – edited by John Stewart (401), then the Clerk of the House of Delegates, and printed by William Alexander Rind (359), the eldest son of publishers William (358) and Clementina (356) Rind of Revolutionary-era Williamsburg; the task assigned to them was to first help to reclaim the Assembly and then help to defeat Jefferson.

James Rind (357), the publisher's younger brother, was one Richmond lawyer recruited for that effort and frequently contributed items to the paper as an anonymous correspondent. In March 1800, after an exchange of personal insults by Rind in the *Federalist* and Jones in his *Examiner*, Jones challenged Rind to a duel; the two met on the morning of April 8th, with Rind suffering a non-fatal, but incapacitating bullet wound to his abdomen; carried from the field, Rind never fully recovered from the injury. It was the first in a series of duels involving one of the Jones brothers over the ensuing five years, all occasioned by items published in Richmond papers. Thereafter, Jones found that a "pair of loaded pistols [were] as necessary on his desk as the ink stand and pens," or so his friend Samuel Brooks (054) later claimed.

Meanwhile, the first volume of Callender's notorious *The Prospect Before Us* was issued by the combined Republican presses of Richmond. While published in January 1800, it was not until May that Callender was indicted by a federal grand jury in Richmond on three counts of seditious libel for the content of that first volume; that June, he was tried and convicted

in a questionable trial directed by Justice Samuel Chase, an arch-Federalist long determined to apply the federal Sedition law in defiant Virginia, and was sentenced to six months in jail with a \$200 fine for his criticisms of Adams. As the book was printed in parts among several Richmond offices, Jones avoided prosecution for its publication, unlike Callender, who felt betrayed by that evasion. But more importantly, the polemicist was rebuffed by Jefferson and his associates in his demands for compensation for services rendered following the election, and so soon turned against Virginia's Republicans.

Early in 1800, a British émigré named Henry Pace (319) arrived in Richmond to start a new printing office, and was soon contracted to print Lyon's *National Magazine*; but when Lyon removed to Georgetown that summer, Pace was left to find his way among the contentious Richmond print trade on his own. In July 1801, he started publishing an apolitical literary weekly, *The Recorder or Lady's and Gentleman's Miscellany*, in an apparent effort to capture an unfilled niche market; but within months both paper and proprietor were in dire straits financially. Callender saw an opportunity in Pace's distress and approached the publisher in late 1801 with a suggestion: if Pace would give him editorial control over the content of the troubled weekly, the two could profit handsomely in the bargain. The strapped Pace quickly agreed. So as 1802 dawned, Callender became the new face of the *Recorder* and promptly launched a malicious assault on his old Republican associates starting with Jones.

Callender accused him of corruption in office, describing Jones's continuing protestations of poverty as bald-faced lies (even though Jones had to borrow unceasingly to keep his office solvent, as Callender clearly knew) as well as finding him guilty by association with similarly corrupt family members. Despite the falsity of those published charges, Jones still felt it necessary to leave Richmond for a time in mid-1802 to allow tempers to cool after his brother Skelton was involved in a duel that took the life of Armistead Selden, a Richmond Federalist. In his absence, Callender produced a series of letters that he claimed refuted accounts that Jones had published previously, and then printed them in pamphlet form when Federalist editors elsewhere failed to reprint his story. While those editors shied away from any association with this "turncoat," the *Recorder* quickly became a profitable paper locally; but rising legal costs ate into those profits, resulting in an acrimonious split between Callender and Pace in June 1803 over the division of such funds; a month later, a drunken and despondent Callender was found drowned in the James; without his star attraction, Pace was forced to close the *Recorder* a month after that sad event.

Although Jones was now free of his tormentors, the fight had gone out of him as well, a result of his declining health. While he had never evinced a strong constitution, Jones was now visibly and noticeably withering away to a disease that sapped his strength. So that August, he transferred ownership of the *Examiner* to his brother Skelton, who had been serving as editor for the prior few months, and began lobbying Jefferson for appointment to a less arduous and more remunerative Federal position than that of his state one. Eventually, Jones was appointed as Federal Commissioner of Loans for Virginia, resigned his state post in March 1804, settling into a less visible life before dying in August 1806 of his protracted illness.

With his brother's retirement from journalism, Skelton Jones (243) now had full control of



the *Examiner* for the first time. But the change in ownership did not improve its unstable financial state. In taking on the paper, Jones had also assumed its debts and soon found the entire proposition untenable. At the end of 1803, he sold the *Examiner* press to his shop foreman, William W. Worsley, and then contracted Worsley to print the paper for him. But when that business approach did not help relieve the fiscal pressures on the journal, Jones was compelled to close the *Examiner* in early January 1804, despite its ongoing status as the state's journal-of-record.

### **Epilogue**

Worsley continued to use the *Examiner* press to produce the public work for Meriwether Jones until the public-printer's resignation at the end of March, with official notices being placed in the *Virginia Argus*. But when Pleasants was named as Jones's successor in April, that work was relocated to the *Argus* office, leaving Worsley's press idle. Yet a new venture was then in development that required a press; a young Richmond bookseller and teacher, Thomas Ritchie (360), was intent of publishing a replacement for the *Examiner*, one that would continue to present the ardent Republican perspective offered by the Jones brothers for more than four years. Ritchie approached him, after Pleasants was made public printer, about their forming a new concern to publish his proposed journal; Worsley apparently was not interested in forming a long-term alliance with Ritchie as his tradesman in producing a paper whose success was uncertain; so he signed a one-year-long agreement with Ritchie to publish the journal. Their new *Enquirer* made its debut on May 9, 1804, issued on the same twice-weekly pace as had the *Examiner*. Despite Worsley's subsequent departure, Ritchie's journal long survived, serving as the foremost Democratic-Republican journal in the state until November 1877, making him the best known publisher of the antebellum era.

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Sources: LCCN no. 84-024732; Brigham II: 1139; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; notices in the *Examiner* (1798-1804), *Virginia Gazette* (1798-1804), *Virginia Argus* (1798-1806), *Virginia Federalist* (1799-1800), and [Richmond] *Recorder* (1801-03).