

RICHMOND 10: Virginia Federalist

01: The Virginia Federalist (1799-1800)

xx: Washington Federalist (1800-1809) in Georgetown, D.C.

The most ardent Federalist journal to be published in Richmond was the tenth newspaper issued there before 1820. It was a paper instigated by Federalist members of the Assembly after the loss of the public-printing concession to a fervent Republican and his publication of a similarly censorious journal in late 1798. Yet, the new sheet did not find sufficient support to sustain it in Virginia, so it was relocated to the national capital in the summer of 1800.

The *Virginia Federalist* was a newspaper whose birth was a direct result of changes to the state government in 1798. With the General Assembly of December 1797, majority control of that body shifted from the Federalists to the Republicans for the first time; when that session adjourned two months later, the Council of State was given a series of instructions adopted by that majority to review and correct purported deficiencies in the government's administrative functions. Councilor Meriwether Jones (242) of Hanover County was asked to investigate the public-printing concession and the performance of the incumbent public printer, Augustine Davis (119), in that role. When Jones's investigation found that Federalist Davis had failed to increase production to meet the state's growing population, he was fired by the governor, James Wood of Frederick County; Wood then appointed Jones as the new public printer, despite his not being a printer, because he understood the demands on that office better than anyone then living in Virginia. The Assembly's Republican majority agreed and confirmed that appointment when the next session convened in December 1798.

Commencement

The Assembly's Federalists saw the displacement of Davis as simple partisan patronage, and the ensuing appearance of Jones's semi-official paper, *The Examiner*, as an attempt by the state's Republican leadership to silence any criticism of the new order. Of particular concern was mounting opposition to the administration of John Adams, especially that seen over the Alien & Sedition Acts, as evinced by the "Virginia Resolution" adopted in that same session. With Jones and his new journal-of-record condoning and promoting that opposition, those legislators – led by Speaker John Wise and John Stewart (401), the Clerk of the House of Delegates – set out to establish an alternative that could counter the *Examiner's* influence and help return control of the Assembly to the Federalists in the 1799 elections.

Requiring a like-minded printer to conduct their new journal, the Assemblymen approached William Alexander Rind (359), eldest son of William (358) and Clementina (356) Rind, the late Williamsburg printers of the Revolutionary period. Though he had trained in Richmond in the mid-1780s, Rind achieved his independence as a tradesman in Charlottetown on the Island of St. John in maritime Canada, today called Prince Edward Island; there he served as "the King's printer" in that small province, marrying into a Loyalist family that had resettled there. By 1799, however, his salary was insufficient to support his growing family and he decided to return to the United States in search of a more profitable opportunity. While his

ensuing partnership with Stewart shows that he was wooed by the disaffected Assembly members, it seems clear that he knew of the project through his brother James (357), a Richmond lawyer with dependable Federalist opinions; for some time he had been writing polemical pieces for Davis's staid *Virginia Gazette* and would be a regular contributor to his brother's paper during its life in the state capital. The elder Rind soon returned to Virginia, with his fifteen-year-old apprentice and brother-in-law, James Bagnall (467), in tow.

In May 1799, the new firm of Stewart & Rind commenced publishing the *Virginia Federalist*, and immediately engaged in editorial combat with Jones's *Examiner*. The paper's short-term goal was to regain Federalist control of the Assembly in the elections that year, but it also professed the larger purpose of defending the power of the Federal government generally, and the laws promulgated by the Federalist-controlled Congress specifically:

"Unawed by the anathemas of antifederalism, and uninfluenced by the opprobrious designations which embellish, with prostituted frequency, the writings of the self-denominated Republicans, we have dared to believe these measures wholesome, and that on the score of real worth, wisdom, and patriotism, their Advocates may claim, and cannot suffer by a comparison. Adorned with private virtues, and famed for a love of country equal to any of their opponents can boast, the sanctity of these qualities should have interdicted the use of epithets, which instead of derogating from their merits, was a wanton departure from the common rules of politeness, and a feeble effort to succour the imbecility of argument by the most pitiful auxiliaries."

In that same introductory address, the partners reiterated the well-known Federalist trope that the so-called Republicans were not true "republicans" but rather "democrats," and that impugning the authority and character of elected representatives was unconstitutional in this republican form of government. Moreover, challenging those representatives' decision was an "attempt to supplant the sober and dispassionate judgment" which would undermine the country's economy, as agrarian pursuits were viable and profitable only because of the merchant class.

"The selfishness that could dictate a policy going to a suspension, and thence to a certain destruction, of our Commerce, is unworthy the head or heart of an American Statesman, who professes to venerate the principles of equality and government; because a sacrifice of the rights of so considerable a part of our citizens as the merchants of America, which would inevitably have involved that of a great portion of our Mariners and Mechanics also, is to cut up by the roots the very principles he professes to revere. Yet this temporizing, ridiculous, and ruinous system was brought forward as a miserable alternative for the manly and vilifying policy of the government. A system so direful in its nature and consequences cannot be sufficiently reprobated."

The proprietors closed their address by noting "that the frankness with which we have disclosed the politics which will be acrimoniously attacked by the newfangled Republicans," and it was, even before their first number issued. The *Examiner* published a caricature of the new paper's prospectus about a week before it was finally published:

"We the conductors of the future *Virginia Federalist* are determined to publish *only half the news of the week*. When a French privateer captures an American merchant man, we shall expiate on the barbarity of these brigands. When by some wonderful good fortune an Austrian general can retain his fortified post, against the Republican troops, for three days, we shall celebrate this *unprecedented and decisive victory!* But when a British pirate seizes an American vessel, without the smallest shadow of justice, when a French general takes his Austrian adversary, with half of his army, prisoner we *shall say no more of the matter*. This is our plan for conducting an impartial, and independent, and a *truly federal* newspaper. When you want to hear of British piracies, or the extinction of German tyrants, you must apply to the *Examiner* or to the *Genius of Liberty*. We are the friends of order and supporters of regular government. Hence we consider it to be a sacred duty to suppress as far as it may be practicable, notice of the victories of French *Anarchy*, and French *Atheism*."

So began the partisan battle between the two Richmond journals, a struggle that quickly gave rise to a plot to eliminate the *Examiner* by supporters of the *Federalist*.

Partisan Warfare

Shortly before Stewart & Rind published their initial offering, Jones added a controversial polemicist as a regular correspondent to the *Examiner*; James Thomson Callender (1768) was a Scottish émigré who had fled Philadelphia under threat of a prosecution for sedition for his contributions to Benjamin Franklin Bache's *Aurora and General Advertiser*. His work for Jones produced similar outrage among Richmond's Federalists, occasioning the forming of an "association" of about 50 individuals in mid-July, led by Conrad Webb, Thomas Wilson, and William Temple, with the intent of forcibly running Callender out of town (if not beating him to death) and burning down the *Examiner* office. When the plot was revealed and suppressed, the associators were forced to post bond and defend themselves in the pages of the *Virginia Federalist*, claiming a non-violent purpose:

"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."

Many Virginians believed this conspiracy clearly corresponded to the growing number of prosecutions of Republican journalists elsewhere under the Alien & Sedition Acts; with the adoption of the "Virginia Resolution" by the last Assembly, those laws became the central issue in the local elections that the *Federalist* now hoped to influence; but in opposing the Assembly's actions, that effort fell flat; the paper and its partisans fell on the losing side of that pivotal issue. So when the Assembly reconvened in December 1799, a greatly enlarged Republican majority removed both Speaker Wise and Clerk Stewart from their long-held public offices for resisting the will of Virginia's polis.

While Stewart provoked enmity by using his public position to oppose Republican efforts to check the power of the Federalist administration of John Adams, Rind had an even larger

problem. His service to imperial authorities in British Canada seemed to confirm specifically accusations then aimed at Federalists generally: that they desired a return to monarchical governance in America; it was a charge that would haunt Rind for the remainder of his journalistic career.

Their combined reputations helped to undermine their newspaper's credibility as the 1800 election campaign began in earnest after the 1799 Assembly rose. Simultaneously, the tone and content of the *Virginia Federalist* became evermore shrill and frantic at the prospect of Republican victories. By March, James Rind was exchanging spiteful personal insults in print with Jones, who promptly returned the favors; after a particularly obnoxious attack, 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; carried from the field, he never fully recovered, and so ceased being a contributor to his brother's paper for the remainder of the campaign. By July, the desperation that the two proprietors evinced over the near-certain defeat of Adams led to a series of scathing commentaries on Jefferson's character, ones that dredged up every accusation made against the *Virginian* to that date:

"How long my countrymen, will you suffer yourselves to be deceived and abused by a man unworthy of your confidence? Why do you persist in the exaltation of him who hath so frequently and so shamefully debased himself? Who was it that being governor of Virginia, disgracefully abdicated in the hour of danger and on the approach of Tarleton with a few ragamuffins, fled with such awkward precipitation as by a fall from his horse to distance his shoulders? Who was it that holding an important office in the federal government, and honored with the friendship and confidence of the great Washington, unseasonably deserted the post, abused the friendship and betrayed the confidence reposed in him? Who was it that in a letter to a babbling foreigner, slandered and belittled the best and greatest patriot of America, and traduced and vilified that very government which on the holy Evangelists he had sworn to support? In short, who is it that at this moment holds the second office in the U. S. and forgetting or abandoning the interest of his own country, secretly and treacherously heads a faction, the object of which is to subject America to a foreign yoke? Why should he be raised to grandeur, and hypocrisy be honored, with the suffrages of Freeman?"

Still, such diatribes had little, if any, effect. By August 1800, it was evident that Jefferson would prevail over Adams in the fall election. Recognizing that reality, Stewart and Rind also saw the futility of continuing their paper in Richmond, facing the prospect of a slow death by many small cuts. But the pair also believed that they could still play a vital role as censors of the ascendant Republican majority. So rather than close their dying paper, they chose to relocate it instead and lay claim a place on the larger national stage in the process.

Relocation

With the issue of August 2, 1800, Stewart and Rind suspended publication of the fifteen-month-old journal in Richmond and moved their press office to Georgetown in the District of Columbia. The proprietors took James Bagnall with them, along with a new apprentice,

twelve-year-old Thomas W. White (442), a nephew of Augustine Davis and future publisher of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Six weeks later, on September 25th, the *Washington Federalist* issued from their new locale with Charles Prentiss (341), a Federalist polemicist from Massachusetts, prominently reported as editor. Prentiss may have been a part of the venture while it was still housed in Richmond, given the closure of his prior *Political Focus* in Leominster, Massachusetts, in late 1799, although his explicit connection with Stewart & Rind was not recorded until the move. Prentiss proved more proficient at this essential task than Stewart had been, which allowed the financially-strapped Virginian to sell his interest in the paper to Rind in May 1801 – just eight months after its removal – and retire to more profitable pursuits in Baltimore. He died there early in 1823.

Many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators went on at length to say that the change in title of Rind's journal was intended to tie the publication to the city of Washington, even as it issued from Georgetown. But just a brief perusal of the *Federalist's* content shows clearly that Rind, Prentiss, and their backers were now a part of an effort among Federalists, particularly those outside of New England, to distance themselves from the rejected policies of the Adams administration; rather, they embraced ideals embodied in the person of George Washington, a reverential appeal fashioned in the wake of the founder's unexpected death in December 1799. This approach gave the *Federalist* a better chance to survive in the District than it had in Richmond, as did its accelerated publication pace, which became daily whenever Congress was in session.

By early 1802, Rind could think about expanding and reorganizing his business, a course that involved both an addition and a subtraction. On January 29th, Rind acquired *The Museum & Washington and Georgetown Advertiser* published by Charles D. Green and David English, folding that sheet into his *Washington Federalist*. Then in March, Prentiss sold his interest the journal back to Rind so as to finance a new Baltimore paper he had started on January 1st: the *Republican or Anti-Democrat*. The two transactions significantly increased the debt encumbering the new concern of William A. Rind & Company, which proved to be a long-term problem. But in the shorter term, the changes created a fire storm among the newly expanded paper's subscribers. Cancellations ran rampant, with one reader writing that Rind was "too much of a Tory for me and therefore I will not have his paper."

The *American Citizen* in New York, edited by Republican controversialist James Cheetham, carried the critique of Rind further, reporting the common, inaccurate perceptions of him:

"Born and educated in Nova Scotia, that region of contamination and the receptacle of everything vile, his groveling and innervate mind has not been able to rise superior to that polluting spot that imparted to him his youthful ideas."

Prentiss was also lambasted in Cheetham's comment on the changes made in Georgetown, prompting a verbatim reprinting of the attack in his new *Republican*, followed by a point-by-point rebuttal of the numerous errors therein, without much effect.

Clearly, the taint of Loyalism that hung over Rind in Virginia still had not been expunged in the three years of his association with the *Federalist* press. Consequently, the merger did not generate the expected revenues that Rind needed to redeem the promissory notes he had signed to effect the changes of early 1802. In May 1803, he was forced to again dissolve

the company that he headed to bring new financing that could allow payment of overdue notes. But shortly thereafter, Rind was sued in the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia by three of his largest creditors for payment of monies that were still due to them. Rind lost all three suits, which resulted in a public auction in July 1804 of all of his salable property: his three presses, their various printing supplies, and all of his furniture – office, household, and kitchen; he evidently did not own any real estate. Remarkably, the sale of his tools did not destroy Rind's newspaper. He still continued to publish the *Washington Federalist* by employing job-presses in the District, slowly rebuilding his press office with the revenues generated by a journal that now issued just thrice-weekly year round.

Dénouement

In August 1808, Rind decided to leave behind partisan journalism and its tenuous viability in order to shift his editorial focus to religious periodicals; he sold his *Federalist* to a group headed by Jonathan S. Findlay, a schoolmaster and the librarian of the Washington Library. He then began soliciting subscriptions for a weekly Methodist paper that would be entitled *The Religious Repository*; however, that project never came to fruition. Rind did not publish a periodical again, religious or political, preferring instead to become a job-printer, as many failed printer-journalists then did.

The *Washington Federalist* did not prosper under its new proprietors, despite its finally being freed from Rind's reputation. The election of James Madison as Jefferson's successor reinvigorated the journal's Federalist competitors and initiated new ones, making it difficult for the fading *Federalist* to find sufficient support to continue publishing; so following the issue of June 20, 1809, Findlay ceased publication of the nine-year-old paper. One Edgar Patterson quickly acquired both its office and subscription list in order to produce another thrice-weekly journal – the *Independent American* – on July 1, 1809. Yet his new paper also found little support, being a minor player in the city's journalistic battles; it survived just eighteen months, almost the same time that the *Virginia Federalist* held forth in Richmond before bowing to determined competition there.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-026175, 82-014335 & 82-014606; Brigham II: 1145 & I: 95-96; Hubbard on Richmond; Williamsburg People and York County Project files, Colonial Williamsburg Research Department; Dodson, *Speakers and Clerks*; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*; Bryan, *History of National Capital*; notices in Richmond newspapers (1799-1800) and the *Washington Federalist* (1800-09).