

RICHMOND 11: Friend of the People

01a: The Friend of the People (1800)

01b: The Press (1800)

01c: The Press or Friend of the People (1800)

xxx: **The Friend of the People (1800) in Georgetown, D.C.**

The eleventh newspaper published in Richmond before 1820 was a multi-faceted campaign paper supporting Virginia's Republican candidates. A foundation was provided by a biweekly journal from which separate weekly and biweekly variants were drawn, each with its own title. Yet their common editorial conduct made them all one and the same paper, with each variant ceasing publication as their utility came to an end.

The bitter partisan divisions that emerged in America in the 1790s had their root in differing interpretations of the Federal Constitution of 1787. Initially, those who saw that instrument as one granting broad powers to the "general government" used a "loose interpretation" of that compact to establish federal power over the individual states, especially in regard to commerce and foreign policy. Most American newspapers then published were mercantile advertisers, and so were also papers with perspectives supporting such centralized powers. These self-styled "Federalists" were quickly challenged by those Americans who preferred a "strict interpretation" of that charter, and so of clear limits on those centralizing tendencies. Yet these "Republicans" lacked the network of newspapers that could present their views as an alternative to those seen in the papers supporting the Federalist line. But after those key journals helped effect the election of John Adams as president in 1796 and the ratification of the Jay Treaty with Great Britain in 1797, Republicans set out to establish journals to engage and repudiate the rationales for the Federalist administration's policies; however, such oppositional journalism led to federal legislation restricting debate over those policies, in apparent contravention of constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and press. So as the elections of 1800 neared, new dissident journals arose to help rectify the situation by electing Republican officials to replace Federalist ones, starting with the presidency.

Campaign Journalism

The most broadly-conceived and tightly-coordinated effort to those partisan ends appeared in Virginia. At the center of this effort was editor and publisher James Lyon (274); he was the son of the Vermont printer-turned-congressman Matthew Lyon, who was convicted in late 1798 "under the sedition law, for a letter written before the law was made, and publishing an extract from a letter written by Joel Barlow, on the public affairs of the nation." Facing similar legal problems, the younger Lyon accepted an invitation to come to Virginia to coordinate and edit a series of periodicals that would support Republican candidates in the coming elections. Arriving in Richmond in early 1799, he was quickly involved in putting together a multi-part publication plan. The first part was launching a monthly magazine that would provide common matter for all of the country's Republican journals, as well as the Virginia ones Lyon would start during the next winter. In late April, he circulated proposals

for publishing the *National Magazine, or A Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository* – the first magazine to be published in Virginia; the initial number of that serial issued from the Richmond press of Meriwether Jones (242), then Virginia's public printer, on June 1st. The next piece was starting a book-printing firm, which created an independent press for the *National Magazine* and Lyon's later journals as well; among its first titles was the most controversial one published in Richmond in 1800: *The Prospect Before Us* by James Thomson Callender (075).

Yet the third and final element was the most important one of all – to commence publishing new Republican newspapers throughout the state. In each of these ventures, Lyon would serve as the editorial partner to a print-tradesman in each chosen locale, so dispensing a consistent partisan message across those papers. The first such venture was *The Republican* at Petersburg, with Thomas Field (162) as its resident printer; the initial number of that paper issued on December 19, 1799. It was followed on January 1, 1800, by *The Friend of the People*, the subject of this sketch, published in Richmond. Then lastly came *The Political Mirror or the Scourge of Aristocracy*, published in Staunton by John McArthur (285), Lyon's cousin, as its printer. The like-minded *Baltimore American* praised Lyon's work by remarking that "this gentleman, in the term of one year, has established no less than four Republican presses, from any of which more *truths* are issued in one day than the whole federal faction can *digest* in a month."

The Friend of the People was a unique journal for its time, reflecting a particular set of non-remunerative goals. Its relatively sedate biweekly pace allowed Lyon to edit content for all four periodicals, including his magazine. And while "published once a fortnight, on a sheet of paper of the largest size in use; printed with a fair type of newspaper size," it was offered for the comparatively low price of "ONE DOLLAR A YEAR" – when nearly all newspapers in the country drew a subscription fee of \$4 or \$5 per annum. That rate was designed to draw the widest circulation possible, but with such limited revenues, publication could only be sustained by the profits generated by Lyon's other publications and the patronage of those political leaders who had brought him to Virginia. Accordingly, Lyon could sincerely say that the "motives which have induced me to commence this publication are ... the most pure and patriotic," despite the contrarian attitudes so cynically offered by the Federalist writers who rejoined his disclaimer. Rather, Lyon saw an overt need for his new paper:

"In every state of the Union, to the honor of human nature be it said, there are a greater or less number of uncorrupted and firm republicans. These, in their respective spheres, will not suffer the sacred flame of liberty to be extinguished. In most instances their exertions are seconded by the aid of a press. But this too frequently is so involved in a certain circle of local politics, and personal affairs, that it often forms and imperfect link in the shattered chain of political intelligence: to render this chain more complete in the United States, to rally, concentrate, and nationalize, the efforts and the opinions of those on organized, persecuted, and worthy republicans, and to co-operate in any system which may be adopted by the friends of representative government—to advance the election of a person to the fourth presidency who is not engulfed in the vortex of British corruption—and for other

national objects of a similar nature, this paper has been established."

Still, the inauguration of the *Friend of the People* was not an isolated event in Richmond; it was actually the foundation for a multiple-title journal issuing from the press of Meriwether Jones – adding another layer to this already multi-layered scheme. In November 1799, the capital's leading Republicans met at the home of Col. Park Goodall to form a proprietary association to publish a "national paper" to be called *The Press*. The company consisted of 200 shares of \$5.00 each, providing a capital base of \$1000. *The Press* was to be produced in three distinct editions – thrice-weekly, weekly, and biweekly – with content being drawn from the *Friend of the People*, the *National Magazine*, and Jones's twice-weekly *Examiner*, then the state's journal-of-record, as well as from any other publication that was deemed appropriate by the publication's managers. That responsibility was vested in three trustees elected at that initial meeting – public-printer Jones; Alexander MacRae (299), a respected lawyer and local militia colonel; and Dr. John H. Foushee (170), son of the city's foremost Republican leader, Dr. William Foushee, who had chaired that organizational meeting. The trustees promptly put Lyon in editorial control of this off-shoot as well.

In December, Jones, McRae, and Foushee circulated throughout the country a prospectus for *The Press*, as well as its articles of association; the cover letter laid out their motives:

"Believing that the far greatest portion of that party which arrogates to itself the exclusive claim to Federalism, consists of men, moral, humane, religious, and well affected to the Republican Principle, but who from indolence or other motives attending little to public affairs, have been content with receiving their information from men interested in keeping them in ignorance; and believing in the omnipotence of truth, we have set on foot an establishment, as you will proceed by the subjoined project, on a base so broad, and shall be governed by a principal so extended and luminous, has to lead us to expect from it consequences most beneficial to the Freedom and Happiness of our countrymen. The frequent attempts to buy up the Republican papers, and put them down by harassing and ridiculous suits, or for libel and sedition, point out the necessity of establishing one beyond the reach of accidents. In full confidence of your coinciding with us an opinion as to the importance of such an establishment, we take the liberty of soliciting your interest in procuring subscribers..."

Clearly, the incomparable number of shareholders was what promised to place the paper "beyond the reach of accidents," as well as its location in Virginia, which had taken a stand against "harassing and ridiculous suits ... for libel and sedition." Moreover, they had every confidence in the project's success as the paper would "be issued gratis probably or at first cost," so making *The Press*, regardless of how frequently it was issued, the least expensive paper then available in the United States, outdoing even the allied *Friend of the People*.

Hartford's *Connecticut Courant*, a categorically Federalist paper, took note of this plan, and quailed at the prospect of its "most vile" contents reaching the hands of uncritical readers:

"The greatest obstruction which the Democrats have had to encounter, in the dissemination of their disorganized, immoral, atheistical sentiments, has been, not the expense of printing, but of transporting. Actual experiment shows us, that printing

can be done cheaply by them. A little while since, a company was formed in Virginia, to raise a fund, for the purpose of printing a newspaper, to be scattered thro' the United States. The plan was, to print their papers in such a manner, as they could afford to send them at a very low rate, and where they could not sell them, to give them away....Their contents are the most vile, false, seditious, and treasonable, they afford a melancholy proof, that the government which Mr. Jefferson terms a monarchy, has not enough force to protect itself against the basest falsehoods, the foulest reproaches."

Other Federalist journals evinced a similar distaste for the plan advanced in Richmond. And it was likely a reaction consciously cultivated by Lyon and his Republican colleagues in their choice of titles for the new journals. Federalist writers regularly described the Republicans as "Jacobins" in an effort to tie them to the most radical elements of the French Revolution; some Republican journalists embraced the inference, as Lyon did here; his new *Friend of the People* was an unmistakable reference to the *L'Ami du Peuple*, the Parisian journal edited and published by Jean-Paul Marat, perhaps the most radical revolutionary in France until his death in 1793. Similarly, the Federalists obsessed over the flood of Irish writers who had fled sedition and treason prosecutions in their native land during the 1790s, only to then act as Republican journalists here; so in choosing *The Press* as their title, Jones and company paid homage to the like-named Dublin newspaper published by Arthur O'Connor, one of the key figures in United Irishmen movement, who was imprisoned then in a Scottish castle by the British government for his seditious writings.

Fading Away

Still, the multiplicity of these papers proved to be an overwhelming production problem, even as they drew from a common editorial fount and issued from the same Richmond press. Only two numbers of the weekly variant of *The Press* are known extant (January 6 & February 7, 1800), suggesting that this version was published only twice before publication was abandoned; the biweekly variant – published with the title of *The Press, or Friend of the People* – evinces one surviving number (February 6, 1800), suggesting that single issue is the full extent of its publication run; and no extant copies of the thrice-weekly version are now known, indicating that it never issued at all. Rather, the productive effort of the press they employed thereafter centered on Lyon's biweekly *Friend of the People* and Jones's twice-weekly *Examiner* alone, allowing Lyon to confine his editing labors to his *National Magazine* and the three journals in Richmond, Staunton, and Petersburg.

There may have been irregular numbers of *The Press* issued that spring, as Federalist papers in Connecticut widely reprinted a diatribe from a "farmer" in Litchfield who was incensed at having received *gratis* copies of that "subversive" paper in March. And early in April, several Federalist journals in the Northeast reprinted an "Extract of a letter from a gentleman in Philadelphia, to his friend in Connecticut" in which *The Press* was the central subject:

"For the purpose of giving a more general circulation to their principles, and to all publications, which tend to excite discontent among the people, they have set up a new paper, called, 'The Press'—and the motto—'Congress shall make no law

abridging the Freedom of speech or of the Press.' To secure ample pecuniary funds for carrying on this business, a subscription has been opened for the shares, which amount to 200 and are already taken up by the leaders of the party. 'The Press' is to be under the especial patronage of Governor Monroe, and is to be the principal: the other antifederal presses in the several states, are to be denominated Branches. All are to co-operate and to derive aid in countenance from the general Association."

With this correspondence coming five months after the paper's stock-company was formed, it shows that the paper and its plan were still being distributed long after the last number now known extant was published.

But the common source of both *The Press* and *The Friend of the People* led to a continuing conflation of the two journals in the Federal prints, so making it unclear when the digested *Press* variants were issued and when they ceased. That March, a Federalist sheet in New Hampshire complained that it had received a solicitation for a "work" issued "under the influence of a galaxy of Jacobins." The editor reported that the offer came from Lyon, who had never been a signatory in the circulars issued for *The Press*, proposing a weekly version of his biweekly journal under terms similar to those offered before. Yet that paper's editor either did not know of the demise of *The Press*, or that it was still being circulated then, as he went on to say that:

"The real design of the publication, in connection with several other papers newly established in the same state, is to misrepresent the acts of the general government, and to vilify a wise and able administration. The address of the printer is drawn up in terms which may tend to fascinate and delude persons whose optics are not sufficiently keen to ken and fathom their dark designs."

Such commentaries obscure the dating for the two known variations of *The Press*. But the particulars of *The Friend of the People* are known by its full print run. As the 1800 campaign progressed, the perceived need for these various papers started to support that campaign waned among Republicans in proportion to their growing confidence in Jefferson's victory. At the same time, Lyon's interest in the project, as well as his energy, also waned. In June, he withdrew from the *Scourge of Aristocracy*, leaving cousin McArthur to fend for himself in Staunton. He then closed his *Friend of the People* following its July 5th number, having published just ten issues since January, rather than the projected thirteen.

Within a month, Lyon had moved his family, and his *National Magazine*, to Georgetown in the District of Columbia; there he began publishing a new weekly paper – *The Cabinet* – on August 26, 1800. At that same time, Lyon resumed publication of the *Friend of the People*, describing it as "a political paper," issued at the same biweekly pace as he had in Richmond, and at the same price of one dollar per annum.

"This paper is made up altogether of political intelligence, concerning the general government, and calculated for every interior part of the union. News, local affairs, and advertisements are excluded. It was first instituted at Richmond, Virginia, for the purpose of carrying Virginia politics into the New England States; to reflect the bright rays of light and truth from the South, into the dark regions of the North. It has had its effect; more than two hundred subscribers came forward in New

England, fifty of which are from Rhode Island."

As remarkable as Lyon's assertion here is, there are no copies of his Georgetown numbers known extant today; that void suggests that the *Friend of the People* did not long survive its transplantation to the national capital. Indeed, days after publishing this notice, Lyon issued a proposal for publishing a national edition of his new *Cabinet* in conjunction with James D. Westcott (437), the Republican publisher of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser*. He seems to have expected his *National Cabinet* would become the voice of the anticipated Jefferson administration, even though the election was still two months away. But when Philadelphia journalist Samuel Harrison Smith launched his new *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser* in the capital that October, Lyon's hopes were dashed. He suspended publication of *The Cabinet* during November, with the weekly reappearing in December as a daily, and without Westcott's participation. It is not unreasonable to suggest the *Friend of the People* expired either just before or during that period of suspension and reorganization.

At that same time, Lyon withdrew from the *Republican* in Petersburg, leaving that paper to the devices of Thomas Field alone. Of all of the journals Lyon started in the winter of 1799-1800, that twice-weekly sheet was the most viable, given its siting in a known Republican stronghold, which allowed it to survive into the 1830s. Still, his withdrawal marked the end of the project that initiated this noteworthy series of Republican newspapers in Virginia.

Despite the unwieldiness of the original plan, this partisan project provided a precedent in American publishing: the campaign newspaper. Though just two papers survived the year, the non-profit approach employed here was a model for succeeding campaigns, as well as a caution against sponsors being too grandiose in their editorial goals. Such was the ongoing legacy of the *Friend of the People* and its ancillary editions in the nineteenth century.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-026145, 85-026146, & 86-071813; Brigham II: 1140 & 1142; Hubbard on Richmond; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; "under the sedition law" quote from *Constitutional Telegraph* (Boston, July 9, 1800); *Connecticut Courant* quoted in *Massachusetts Mercury* (Boston, August 22, 1800); Litchfield complaint in *Farmer's Monitor* (Litchfield, March 26, 1800); New Hampshire complaint in the *Farmers' Museum or Literary Gazette* (Walpole, March 10, 1800); and notices from Richmond's *Examiner*, *Virginia Federalist* (later the *Washington Federalist*), and *Virginia Argus*, as well as *The Times* of Alexandria (1799-1800).