

RICHMOND 14: Impartial Observer

01: Impartial Observer (1806-1807)

The fourteenth journal published in Richmond before 1820 was an attempt at depoliticizing the social and economic discourse of its day. Yet the editor's views in support of "republican principles" brought that paper into the partisan newspaper wars that were then raging, so making it short-lived, minor-player in that conflict.

With the emergence of partisan journalism in the 1790s, nearly all of the newspapers in the country carried content of uncertain origin and questionable veracity, items that were then reprinted as authoritative accounts of persons and events, often in an attempt to debase the individual involved or denigrate their party. Thus, efforts were made by some editors to offer journals that scrutinized such content from a supposedly disinterested perspective in search of fact and certainty. The most visible of these efforts were papers that adopted a title of *Impartial Observer*, as did ten American journals before the War of 1812.

The Richmond variant of this unique title was issued by Samuel Brooks (054), a silversmith and engraver transplanted to the city from Philadelphia. Brooks first rose to public notice in 1804 when he helped to bring a counterfeiting ring to justice at the behest of the Council of State and then Governor John Page (1744-1808). Subsequently, he found himself in a long-distance, print-based debate with Jacob Perkins (1766-1849) of Boston, on printing methods that could best be employed to prevent such illegality in the future (Perkins later produced the country's first stereotype currency plates). But more importantly, that debate brought into question the motives of American bank executives as well, who Brooks believed were plainly unwilling to expend the funds needed to make their bank notes secure negotiable instruments. In doing so, he was defamed by Federalists for his supposedly "partisan" views on a subject that was then key issue in American political debate: banks and banking.

This experience motivated Brooks to publish a new weekly in Richmond that could present politically-neutral and socially-necessary debates without becoming involved in a politicized exchange, such as that he faced in discussing the security of bank notes. In January 1806, Brooks circulated a prospectus for his proposed *Impartial Observer* which, he said, would "publish candid and impartial observations" on both current events and original items from other American journals:

"In the execution of this part of his duty, as well as in his selection from other newspapers, public utility shall be his principal object, uninfluenced by party attachments. Fearless of the passions of men, he means to act fairly the part he is undertaken, and regardless of the hopes he might indulge by devoting his labours to a few, while the interests of the whole are concerned, he will always exhibit the same impartiality of conduct in the capacity of an Editor, as his duty would require him to do in that of a Judge, if his merits had fitted him for such an office, and his country had so appointed him."

It appears that convincing Virginians to subscribe to his paper was a difficult process, as his

start-date slipped from March 15th, the date proposed, until May 1st, when it appeared. Brooks was dependent on a job-printing office to produce the paper for him, as he was not himself a printer, and so needed a cash-reserve to pay for that work; therefore, he required subscriptions be paid in advance. While the price (\$3 per annum) was relatively inexpensive, cash was a scarce commodity in this period; so to draw the needed revenue, Brooks offered an unusual incentive for his potential subscribers: one month of advertising space (one square) *gratis* for each subscription. Still, when the *Impartial Observer* finally issued, Brooks felt compelled to defend his subscription policy:

"The necessity of the condition of paying the money in advance, is so obvious, that it is hoped few, if any, will object to it; already nearly all the printers in the United States have adopted a similar plan. We conceived the difficulty to be great, of faithfully discharging our duty to the public, even when I'm embarrassed by pecuniary affairs, but it would amount to an impossibility, were we compelled to spend our time in the unpleasant, and frequently unprofitable occupation of dunning."

That *apologia* also evinced dissatisfaction with the physical appearance of his new weekly:

"Several unforeseen incidents prevented are laying the *Impartial Observer*, before the public until this day. It is now our intention to continue the publication regularly every week; and in the proportion as it receives encouragement, to improve its appearance by new and elegant type, and paper of the superior quality."

Indeed, Brooks did not assign a production credit to his journal until five weeks later, when the name of printer Thomas Pescud Manson (278) appeared on the masthead, suggesting a change of press offices in those early weeks – as does its improving typography.

Not surprisingly, Brooks first launched into a commentary on the Bank of Virginia, a project of Virginia Federalists that was commandeered by Republicans in 1805. It was a recurring topic over the life of the *Impartial Observer*, with Brooks taking exception to complaints about his commentaries expressed verbally in the city by a bank supporter in early 1807; in comparison to the paper's usual tone, his response was uncommonly virulent:

"True, I have ventured to lift up one corner only, of a curtain, which conceals the deformities of that monster, which was begotten by Avarice, upon the loathsome body of that diseased prostitute, the Bank of Virginia. If he thinks he has a right to protect the monstrous progeny—let them do it openly, in print, as I have assailed it: But let him take care how he privately uses the influence of his wealth against *his superior, in every sense of the word*. God knows, though he may have forgotten, how he has acquired that wealth, which he vainly supposes can give him consequence."

Still, Brooks more often found fault in Federalist newspapers to the north. In the summer of 1806, the editor thundered at length over a report in the *Boston Centinel* that a \$2 million appropriation secretly made by Congress to acquire East and West Florida from Spain was actually payment of a bribe demanded by France:

"It might be sufficient to DENY all the facts and charges which the [article] contained; but this will not now do. The Federalists who circulate such stuff appear to rejoice in every opportunity which occurs of degrading and disgracing our country. If

it were true that two millions of dollars had been paid as a tribute, or as a *douceur* to France, to promote the Treaty with Spain, then why should the Federalist rejoice in promulgating that act, by which they say the independence of America has been lost. If, as it really is, the federal promulgators knew it to be false, how can they reconcile it to their hearts, as Americans, to fabricate a monstrous falsehood, for the purpose of disgracing the administration, when the greatest dunce of the whole fraternity must know, whether true or false, whatever disgrace was attached, or grew out of the transaction, would attach to the country?"

As this commentary shows, the *Impartial Observer* was transmuted from its original analytic purpose into a provocative critic early in its life largely as a result of Brooks' incredulity at such blatantly false reportage. Consequently, his weekly became just one of many partisan broadsheets, rather than a uniquely judicious alternative; moreover, its evident republican sympathies put Brooks in competition with two proven partisan newspapers in Richmond: the *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360) and the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331). Hence, his subscriber base did not grow appreciably in its first six months; that condition led to an apparent inability to pay Manson for producing the paper for two weeks at the end of November 1806, only to be followed by a smaller form in early December.

Brooks attempted to address these problems in January 1807 by proposing changes to his paper; the weekly would issue twice weekly "to better extend the usefulness of the paper, to check the progress of error, and to enable him to convey earlier intelligence;" it would now be offered for \$4.00 per year, payable quarterly, rather than all in advance as before; and a weekly edition would be continued once the new twice-weekly began publication. He also presented a testimonial from John Page, the former governor and life-long friend of Jefferson who had employed Brooks in the pursuing 1804 counterfeiting case:

"I take pleasure in recommending to the notice and patronage of true Republicans, the paper published by Mr. Brooks, called the "Impartial Observer." — Should that publication meet with the support to which I think it is entitled, I have no doubt of its becoming, in the hands of its present Editor, a valuable acquisition to the public — and a vigilant watch upon the conduct of the enemies of liberty."

Despite such conspicuous support, Brooks suspended publication of the *Impartial Observer* just one week later without any proffered explanation. As the suspension continued for ten weeks, it is likely that his deteriorating finances prevented any further publication following the issue of February 2, 1807. Moreover, when the paper reappeared on April 18th, it was still issued as a weekly, meaning his plans to increase the frequency of publication had been abandoned in the interim.

"For many reasons which need not now be mentioned, the "Impartial Observer" has been long suspended, which has been a source of serious regret to the publisher....The indulgence with which is friendly subscribers have borne the imperfections and delays of the "Observer," claimed his gratitude in bespeak his best exertions to make all possible amends."

The most significant change evinced in his resurrected *Observer* was in the engagement of a new job-press – that of John Courtney Jr. (109), the son of the city's leading Baptist elder.

Brooks acknowledged Manson's previous role with gratitude, noting that:

"His industry, attention and professional abilities are worthy of much greater reward than this establishment could possibly afford. The editor will continue to cherish with sentiments of cordial steam, the remembrance of those sacrifices which that gentleman has made of his time and talents, to sustain the publication of the paper, which she well knows was intended only for PUBLIC UTILITY — sacrifices which many professing Republicans would not, perhaps dare not make."

The timing of the *Observer's* reappearance matched that of start of the treason prosecution of Aaron Burr in Richmond's Federal Court in April 1807. Brooks appears to have thought that he could provide an impartial accounting of the proceedings, and so restore the claim of independence seen in the paper's title. But over the course of the ensuing three months, Brooks came under fire from Republican journalists for taking a neutral course over Burr's guilt. In response to criticisms uttered by the *National Aegis* of Worcester, Massachusetts, Brooks wondered just how he had

"...erred or strayed from the principles of sound republicanism. Justice and equal rights, fearless independence of opinion, candor and impartiality, we have considered as Republican attributes, a constant preference of truth to error, we have ever considered to be a characteristic of republicanism. Now every prejudice is an error, and can the Aegis deny that it has exhibited a great deal of prejudice in Burr's case? Admit that Burr may be found guilty on his final trial next August; still the Aegis has no right, nor is it consistent with the principles of Republicanism, to prejudge his cause & pronounce him guilty before he is heard in his defense. Let such Republicans as have done this, whether president or printer, reconcile such conduct to their principles if they can."

Nevertheless, by treading the middle course between defaming and supporting Burr, Brooks found little support for his restored *Observer*. The paper ceased publication in July 1807, a month before the actual jury trial of Burr commenced.

Thereafter, Brooks returned to his trade as a silversmith and engraver, conducting business in Richmond through at least 1820, when he disappears from public records. His *Observer* proved to be the last paper issued in the capital that attempted to offer an analytic view of occurrences and personages. With its passing, the norm became one of overt partisanship, replete with the dueling editors who are now recognized as the central figures in the history of journalism in antebellum Virginia.

Sources: LCCN no. 85-026548; Brigham II: 1140; MEDSA Index; trade advertisements in Philadelphia (1792-1800) and Richmond (1804-11) newspapers; counterfeiting story in *Virginia Argus*, May to June 1804; notices in Brooks' *Impartial Observer* (1806-07).