

RICHMOND 15: The Virginian

01: The Virginian (1808)

The first dedicated campaign newspaper published in Richmond was the fifteenth journal to issue in the capital before 1820. This ephemeral purpose meant that the paper lived only so long as the 1808 campaign season lasted, even as it embodied a persuasive dissent from the policies of the leaders of the state's prevailing political party: the Democratic-Republicans.

Background

When Jefferson declined to stand for a third term as president in 1808, the underlying ideological and geographical divisions in the Democratic-Republican party appeared, ones that were revealed via the process of nominating a candidate to succeed him. With two of the first three presidents being Virginians, who had served for sixteen of the twenty years that the Constitution had been in operation, there was a party faction that wanted to put a Northern figure into that office, and so backed Vice President George Clinton of New York. Yet Jefferson was himself nominated for his second term in 1804 by a party caucus in the Congress, and a new caucus in that body in 1808 was poised to choose Secretary of State James Madison as the "official" Democratic-Republican candidate. But that caucus was seen by many within the party, North and South alike, as being "aristocratic" by an unquestioned adoption of a Federalist practice, and thereby appropriated the sovereignty of either the states or the people, according to one's perspective; many dissidents, if not most of them, coalesced around the candidacy of James Monroe, who was then retiring as Jefferson's minister to Great Britain.

With two Virginians being advanced as Jefferson's successor, the choice between the two in their native state became a pivotal contest nationally; there, it was primarily a referendum over the Congressional caucus (seen as anti-democratic) and the rejection by Jefferson and Madison of a treaty that Monroe negotiated in London to end tensions over maritime trade (seen as pro-British). The debate found broad coverage in Virginia's newspapers. Initially, the *Richmond Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360), the organ of the leaders of the party in the Old Dominion, tried to find compromise between the factions by publishing essays from each side; but as the date of the "grand caucus" in Washington in January 1808 neared, Ritchie came out in favor of Madison, the candidate preferred by Jefferson.

The retiring president's involvement with the selection of his successor now added to the sense of an "aristocratic cabal" corrupting the democratic process, especially among the "Old Republicans," as they are termed by historians today, then known as the *Tertium Quids* (a third way). While it was a group with a national following, two Virginians were recognized as its ideological leaders: John Randolph of Roanoke and John Taylor of Caroline. Both men saw the consolidation of power in Washington as a blow to state sovereignty and individual rights alike. Still, their argument with Madison, Jefferson, and the presumed "republicans" around the two failed to reach the state's electorate because of its exclusion from papers controlled by party leaders, particularly from Ritchie's authoritative *Enquirer*. Hence, a new

partisan journal was needed to challenge the influence of those leaders, and *The Virginian* became the vehicle to that end.

Founding Promise

Virginia's *Quids*, presumably including Randolph, convinced Gerard Banks (019), a member of the politically-active Banks family from the Fredericksburg area, to edit their paper for them. Banks had a lengthy record of polemical writing dating to 1792, when he published a pamphlet backing universal white-male suffrage in Virginia; after that, he often contributed essays to Republican papers throughout the state, ones usually endorsing democratization of the Commonwealth's political and economic processes, especially during the pivotal 1800 campaign. So with the *Quids* offering Monroe as a non-caucus candidate, Banks bought into their proposed venture as a way to help reinstate the democratic principles he held dear.

When *The Virginian* issued in January 1808, Banks made it clear that, while the nominating process was an immediate concern, a larger problem was the threat to the sovereignty of the states and their citizens posed by the centralizing tendencies of the federal government:

"Shall the Members of Congress elect the next president, or shall he be chosen by electors appointed by the state legislatures, or by the people? Shall the state sovereignties have no weight in designating the person who is to fill the Presidential chair? Shall the voice of the people expressed throughout the union by their representatives from each county and senatorial district not be heard? Or shall we sanction the principle that no man is to be brought forward as President, unless he be nominated by a GRAND CAUCUS held at Washington? ... If no person with safety can be held up as President without the approbation of the members of Congress, then the sovereignty of the states and the will of the people in relation to the election of President are but empty sounds."

Those concerns were quickly multiplied when, even before the Congressional caucus met to formally nominate Madison, his supporters in the Virginia Assembly held a public meeting in Richmond to coordinate efforts for the coming campaign, one explicitly excluding anyone not supporting Madison. Banks was incensed:

"The zeal of the partizans forgets its ancient maxims and the Caucus at the Bell [Tavern] offensively and defensively entered into a league to support the pretensions of Madison to the Presidential chair. Thus a *body*, without consulting the *minority*, who might have gained ground from *discussion*, have been completely excluded from a voice in this grand convention; thus is the temper of a *club* to be transferred to the *nation*, and thus have men been excluded from notice by gentlemen elected for ordinary purposes of legislation, and who kindly inclined toward their friend, have lost sight of the great principles ... they are designed to support."

As a result of his disaffection with party leaders, Banks found that conducting *The Virginian* was problematic financially. Later that summer, he reported that the journal did little to help sustain his efforts, as "besides the small pittance of subscriptions, it neither affords me means or information or any thing else." Not being a printer himself, he relied on the city's job-presses that he contracted to produce the paper twice each week, and those tradesmen

expected regular payment for their work. Initially, it seems that Banks engaged two printers in successive three-month-long contracts; from January through March 1808, his choice was Seaton Grantland (186), a Richmond-trained printer who became Georgia's public-printer in 1809; then from April through June 1808, Banks employed Thomas Pescud Manson (278), a nephew of Edward Pescud (324), publisher of the *Petersburg Republican*. But starting with the issue of July 4, 1808, *The Virginian* no longer bore a producer-identification, suggesting that Banks's fiscal problems obliged him to change printers whenever his creditworthiness came into question. Yet it may also be that by July 1808 none of the Republican printers in Richmond wanted to be openly associated with the anti-Madison *Virginian*, particularly as both Grantland and Manson subsequently evinced enthusiastic support for Madison.

All the same, Banks continued on, producing his oppositional journal until election day on November 8, 1808, even after Monroe made it known in April that he was not inclined to compete with Madison for the presidency. After that pronouncement, the editor turned his attention to the Federalists and their candidate, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney; his principal focus was on efforts to support the ongoing embargo against Britain and France, which Pinckney and his supporters criticized for its devastation of the country's merchant class. As an adherent to the agrarian values of Virginia Republicans, his reply to such censures was to encourage the Revolutionary-era practice of wearing "homespun," thereby demonstrating Americans' willingness to live without the foreign imports circumscribed by the embargo; in reporting plans for Fourth of July celebrations in nearby Goochland and Powhatan counties, Banks noted that:

"...nothing but homespun is to appear. Liberty is to exhibit her attire! the labour of her daughters. ... Like the sons of Columbia, they are willing to add to the happiness and independency of their country, by concurring in plans which may be calculated to show to the transatlantic world, that while we deplore the excesses of their warfare and ambition, we can live without foreign supplies."

Disillusioned Demise

Still, as the summer of 1808 wore on, Banks found that he was in conflict with his original backers. Despite Monroe's demurrals in the spring, his supporters pressed for his election over that of Madison. Thus, when *The Virginian* turned its focus away from the presidential campaign and toward the embargo, Banks found that several of the men who had induced him to commence publishing this campaign vehicle moved to start a competing journal – so unhappy were they with the disruption of trade caused by the controversial ban. The new *Spirit of Seventy-Six* would be edited by Edward Carter Stanard (399), an Albemarle County lawyer who was part of the Monroe coordinating committee, with the support of both John Randolph of Roanoke and John Taylor of Caroline, two of Banks's original patrons. Once Stanard began circulating a prospectus for the venture in mid-August, Banks published a biting commentary in his paper that expressed his anger at the turn of events; he noted that rather than allowing him to follow their agreed course, his backers "let me understand that they wanted a machine."

"Unused to printing, and looking at declarations as truths, I hesitated not to declare

that I wished the election of Col. Monroe as President. My preference of him was based on my own idea of his character, combined with the opinions of the junto who had determined to support him. But this junto either deceived me, or they were deceived by Col. Monroe. In either case, a deception was practiced on me. I have just heard that Mr. Monroe must now be supported, several months having elapsed since his name has been mentioned as president — this man has been injured by his avowed friends ... and the newspaper called the 'Spirit of 'Seventy-Six,' about to be started, tells plainly what is to happen [to *The Virginian*]."

Shortly after making his disappointment known publicly, Banks published a letter from an naturalized citizen who "for near three and twenty years a denizen of this Commonwealth," who took exception to Stanard's denigration of the immigrant population of the state that enthusiastically supported Madison:

"Those who you illiberally, and unjustly accused of '*want of patriotism,*' or '*feeling a solicitude for the honor and welfare of this country*' are all the great bulk of adopted citizens of these United States, for it is in vain, to say that your calumniators are confined only to editors. Every adopted citizen is bound by his *solemn oath* to the duties of a patriot, yet in such a man should say that he '*feels a solicitude for the honor and welfare of this country,*' you have the rudeness to tell him, in the face of his *oath*, that '*it is false,*' and that none will believe him but '*the ignorant and credulous alone.*'"

Banks's correspondent closed his missive with the Latin phrase "*ubi libertas, ibi patria mea*" ("where liberty is, there is my country") in an apparent jibe at Stanard's chosen motto: "A Frequent Recurrence to Fundamental Principles is Essential to the Liberties of a Republic."

Nonetheless, the appearance of the *Spirit of 'Seventy-Six* in mid-September doomed Banks's paper to oblivion. The *Petersburg Intelligencer*, long a Federalist paper, took gleeful note of the intraparty conflict, reporting that *The Virginian* was "fast descending to the 'tomb of the Capulets,'" evidently expecting Stanard's paper would soon follow suit. Yet Banks satisfied his obligation to his subscribers by publishing his campaign paper right up until the moment that ballots were cast. He only ceased publication of *The Virginian* after the voting for the Republican electoral ticket in Richmond was done, where the Madisonian faction prevailed 110-70. His paper reported the results the next day – November 8, 1808 – and then closed its run without further comment.

Banks attempted to resurrect *The Virginian* in Fredericksburg in late 1810, after returning to the area to tend to family affairs. When he finally produced a "prospectus issue" in February 1811, however, it bore the new title of *Impartial Observer or the Rights of Man*, leaving its Richmond roots and associations behind. Despite the change, that single issue was the only number of the succeeding paper that Banks published, finally bringing the entire enterprise to an end. Later, he would edit campaign papers in Staunton (1814) and Lynchburg (1816) for others, but never again did Banks own a newspaper in Virginia.

Sources: LCCN no. 85-026860; Brigham II: 1153; newspaper notices in Petersburg (*Intelligencer, Republican*) and Richmond (*Enquirer, Virginia Argus, Spirit of 'Seventy-Six, Virginian*) in 1807-08.