

RICHMOND 17: Visitor

01: The Visitor (1809-1810)

The second literary journal published in Richmond was the seventeenth newspaper issued there before 1820. It began life as a joint venture between two Irish immigrants who were at the center of the capital city's musical community, and so became the first newspaper in Virginia to regularly employ musical typography in its pages. In the end, the journal became a more conventional broadsheet that was unable to sustain itself in the highly-competitive arena of Richmond journalism.

The Visitor was a production with close ties to both the musical and immigrant communities in Richmond. John Lynch (273) was an émigré from Ireland who had trained in the office of Thomas Nicolson (315); when his master died in November 1808, he acquired Nicolson's press in conjunction with Charles Southgate (395); Southgate was also an Irish immigrant who landed in Richmond in the 1790s; by 1808, he was a popular music teacher who tuned pianos on the side. Each was well-known for their participation in musical productions in the city, and that fellowship clearly led to their joining together to offer a different kind of newspaper. With Nicolson's old press in hand, the new firm of Lynch & Southgate started to circulate a prospectus in early December 1808 for a literary journal that would fill a demand that was then unmet by the city's four partisan newspapers (*Virginia Argus*, *Virginia Patriot*, *Enquirer*, and *Spirit of 'Seventy-Six*).

The periodical the pair issued on February 11, 1809, was as distinctive as they were; even forty years after its demise, Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai wrote at length of the esteem in which its publishers were held in the capital; he was particularly taken with the contrasting physiques of its proprietors:

"Lynch, a practical printer, an Irishman of diminutive size, and Southgate, a musician, an Irishman of very large size, who filled many of the pages in musical type."

Despite its novelty, it is also plain that the venture was a problematic one. Few copies of the *Visitor* survive, indicating short print-runs for the paper, and so few chances for collecting and binding volumes of the journal. Mordecai confirms such an assessment, noting that:

"...the circulation of such a paper was very limited, and, after a few efforts and throbs, it ceased with its second volume, no successor appearing to claim the barren realm for many years."

Still, its relatively diminutive size – a small quarto imprint, rather than the large folio sheet of its contemporaries – allowed Lynch and Southgate to issue their *Visitor* twice each week because it required less content per issue. And almost immediately, their newspaper began to publish musical scores in full notation, using what appears to be the first complete font of music type employed in Virginia.

From the start, Lynch & Southgate gave space in their periodical's pages to the writings of Louis Hue Girardin (180); a refugee from the French Revolution, Girardin was then principal

of Richmond's respected Hallerian Academy after having served as the Professor of Modern Languages, History, and Geography at the College of William & Mary; he would later edit the city's first successful daily paper – *The Commercial Compiler*. Of particular note among his contributions was an epic Latin-language poem, *De Monomachia, sive Duello* (or *Lines on dueling, addressed to the legislative*), a work that is still reproduced in early-American literature collections today.

Yet despite drawing upon such capable assistants, the venture apparently exhausted editor Southgate, who had been seriously ill just before forming his alliance with Lynch. So with the issue of Saturday January 27, 1810, the partners closed the *Visitor's* first volume, and set about to make over the paper into a more conventional weekly; the first number in that new format was issued two weeks later. The partners also began to publish news articles, evidently in an attempt to broaden their paper's appeal.

It appears, however, that the changes did little to resolve the *Visitor's* financial problems. In April 1810, Lynch brought in George Davis (122) – a son of Augustine Davis (119), publisher of the Federalist *Virginia Patriot* – to edit the *Visitor*; Davis acquired Southgate's interest in the paper after the issue of April 7th, so allowing the Irish musician to permanently retire from journalism. This turn away from the paper's original purpose was completed a month later when the new concern of Lynch & Davis advertised the sale of a "complete fount of imported MUSIC TYPE, very little worn" on reasonable terms. Nevertheless, it also appears that Davis's involvement with the journal was consciously pre-limited, as it came to an end exactly two months later; the Lynch & Davis partnership was dissolved by mutual consent on Monday June 18, 1810, with Lynch becoming the *Visitor's* sole proprietor with the issue of Saturday June 23, 1810.

While this chapter gives the impression that these transactions were a way for Lynch to buy out the interest of an infirm and incapable Southgate, by using the Davis family as financial intermediaries, they were ultimately unsuccessful in reviving the fortunes of the *Visitor*. In shifting the newspaper's focus to politics and current events, Lynch put his weekly into the middle of the ongoing partisan war among the city's other papers; it may be that Lynch and Southgate saw an opportunity in the removal of the *Spirit of 'Seventy-Six* to Washington in late 1809, and so orchestrated the changes seen in the following spring. But the reality was that the other three contenders held significant advantages in correspondents, subscribers, and advertisers that Lynch could not match. So deprived, he could only continue to publish the *Visitor* for two more months; hence its last number issued on August 18, 1810.

Lynch continued in business as a successful job-printer after his paper's demise, just as had his master after he closed his newspaper in 1797. But unlike Thomas Nicolson, Lynch did not live long enough to enjoy the proceeds of that enterprise. Unfortunately, he died of an apparent stroke in August 1812; Southgate immediately stepped in to administer Lynch's intestate estate, evidently fulfilling his sense of obligation to an old friend and ally.

Sources: LCCN no. 94-051048; Brigham II: 1153-1154; Hubbard on Richmond; Christian, *Richmond*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in [Richmond] *Virginia Argus* and *Virginia Patriot* (1808-12).