

## RICHMOND 18: AMERICAN STANDARD

### 01: American Standard (1811-1812)

---

The last new journal issued in Richmond before the War of 1812, and eighteenth published there before 1820, was a paper that sought to find unity among Virginia's political factions via an appeal to nationalism. Yet this small newspaper could not bridge the large divisions in the state in the months before the war, and so lived for just a very short time.

A lawyer from Louisa County named William Shelton (378) was the motive force behind this effort; he had served as one of that county's two delegates in the 1810-11 Assembly, where he advocated the democratization of the Old Dominion and public investment in internal improvements that would enhance the economic fortunes of the state's middling farmers; he then remained in the capital after that Assembly's rising to practice law while pursuing a larger public role in realizing the changes he championed through journalism.

In July 1811, Shelton published a nearly full-page prospectus for a new weekly to be called the *American Standard*, employing the motto: "United, We Stand; Divided, We Fall." While asserting that his *Standard* would not be a party paper, he explicitly asserted the view that the then-ongoing interference with the country's maritime trade in the Atlantic, especially that exercised by Great Britain, should be the united focus of all true Americans:

"Entertaining the most sacred regard of the federal compact, and all of our republican institutions; looking upon the preservation of the union as the ark of our political salvation, we will contribute our *aid* in uniting all *honest* men in support of our violated rights against the machinations all those who have prevented the nation from vindicating her honor, stripped of her former glory and rendered us the scorn and contempt of our enemies."

His rhetoric was reminiscent of that he employed in an 1808 election circular, arguing that a conspiracy of private interests was undermining the liberties and unity of the country.

Still, it seems that Shelton had difficulty selling his proposed journal to the public. His July prospectus promised a start date of October 15th; yet the *Standard* did not actually issue until November 20th. And that first number is one of just two issues of his newspaper that have survived the intervening years, indicating a very short print run with few subscribers.

The second survivor is also the better known iteration of the *Standard*. That number was an "extra" that issued on the morning of December 27, 1811, providing the first account – and so the most reprinted version – of the Richmond Theater Fire of the evening before. Shelton had attended that ill-fated performance, and assisted others in fleeing after making his own escape. In hindsight, it is obvious that his account contained many inaccuracies and errors, reflecting its hurried production. But Shelton's initial report was the one from which most Americans learned of the event, even as later, longer accounts of the catastrophe from the other Richmond papers were reprinted as pamphlets.

Yet that "extra" issue is also the last one known for the *Standard*, indicating that Shelton

ended production of his financially-tenuous journal shortly thereafter. Given that the fire report was published four days before the new year, the journal probably continued into 1812; and given that most short-lived papers of this era ceased publication after three months, it is also likely that the *Standard* expired sometime in February 1812. Such a quick demise was evidently the combined result of the political polarization he tried to constrain in the weeks before war was declared against Great Britain and persistent competition from the long-established Richmond papers that benefitted from that polarity: the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331), the *Virginia Gazette* of Augustine Davis (119), and the *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360).

Shelton apparently turned to teaching after closing the *American Standard*, while offering himself as an essay-writer for hire during the war years. In 1817, he published a collection of essays of internal improvements that may have included some of his own for-hire pieces. But after that publication, Shelton vanishes into the mists, as he bore a name that had too many contemporaries to trace his life after his Richmond residence.

---

Sources: Not in Library of Congress catalogue; Brigham II: 1135; Wisconsin Historical Society catalogue (LCCN no. 84-024504); prospectus in *Virginia Argus* (July 29, 1811) and *Alexandria Herald* (August 15, 1811).