

RICHMOND 20: Spirit of Union

01: The Spirit of Union (1817)

The twentieth and last journal to issue in Richmond before 1820 was an ill-fated venture that attempted to draw on the patriotic fervor pervading much of country after the War of 1812. Its seven-week existence was terminated by the abrupt seizure of its printing office in a debt execution and the subsequent suicide of the proprietor involved in that action.

The Republican print-trade group that developed in Richmond after 1798 created a series of business associations among those tradesmen who decided to strike out on their own after working for either Meriwether Jones (242), or Samuel Pleasants (331), or Thomas Ritchie (360). One such association was one formed in summer 1817 by Thomas Burling (066) and William Waller Gray (193) to publish the weekly *Spirit of Union*.

Burling was a New-York-trained printer who came to Richmond from Baltimore in 1804 to supervise production of the newly-founded *Richmond Enquirer* for Thomas Ritchie; he had served in the same capacity previously in both of those earlier locales, and had met Ritchie in Baltimore in 1803 when the editor was contemplating buying the press of Meriwether Jones on that publisher's retirement; in the intervening years, Burling had proved to be the key to keeping Ritchie's press on track, especially after the *Virginian* was named the public printer at the end of 1814; that effort brought Burling the concurrent assignment of printer to the Virginia Senate when Ritchie relinquished that lesser role to take on the larger one.

Gray, a native Virginian, had a similarly solid trade history. Trained by Samuel Pleasants, he had moved west in 1810 to take over conduct of the year-old *Lynchburg Press* from Fleming Grantland (185), another journeyman from the Richmond group; on returning to the capital in 1811, he went to work in the *Enquirer* office under Burling until early in 1816, when he went back to Lynchburg to start publishing a Republican campaign journal there called the *Echo*. His withdrawal from that situation appears to have been instigated by Burling, who had decided to resume publishing a paper of his own, as he had in Baltimore and New York.

In August 1817, the new firm of Burling & Gray began circulating a prospectus for a new Richmond weekly with the title of *The Spirit of Union*. It was a remarkably short statement, running only three times the width of a newspaper column (termed "three squares") in length, and comprising less than 200 words.

"The subscribers having been solicited, by many gentlemen, to publish a Paper, once a week, in the City, inform the public, that they will perform that duty so soon as a sufficient number of Subscribers are obtained, to warrant the undertaking. They pledge themselves to publish nothing acrimonious; nothing to wound the feelings (intentionally) of any man.—As much *truth* and *light* as can be introduced into their columns, shall be published, with a *Summary of Foreign and Domestic NEWS, Prices Current, &c.*

The *Agriculturalist*; the *Artist*; the *Mechanic*; the *Merchant*; the *Lawyer*; the

Doctor and the Divine, shall have a portion of the columns of THE SPIRIT OF UNION."

The tone of their prospectus bears a striking resemblance to that issued two months before in the proposal for publishing *The American Star* in Petersburg. In eschewing acrimony, both plans evinced a desire to heal the partisan wounds inflicted by political papers of the day, as well as an aspiration to offer an alternative that drew on the nationalistic fervor that then pervaded the country in the wake of the War of 1812. Indeed, the *American Star* was one of two papers in which Burling & Gray published their prospectus continuously from August to October that year, the other being the *American Beacon* in Norfolk, conducted by another former Richmond journeyman named William C. Shields (381).

Within three weeks of the first publication of their proposal, Burling & Gray announced that they had obtained a sufficient number of subscribers to begin their labors. Yet it seems that that number did not encompass the 500 names they initially deemed necessary. Moreover, at \$3 per annum, its subscription price was 50% more than that charged by most weeklies then published, a sum that was supposedly payable in advance; given their ensuing financial problems, it is clear that most of those subscriptions were promises and not payments, and that the partners began their endeavor with undue optimism.

The first number of *The Spirit of Union* issued on October 17, 1817. Ritchie took note of the accomplishment of his old employees much as would a proud father of his child, saying:

"We have seen with much satisfaction, the 1st No. of 'The Spirit of Union,' a weekly paper edited in this City by Messrs. Burling & Gray. With one of the gentlemen we have the pleasure of a long and most intimate acquaintance—we know his worth—we wish him every success in his present meritorious undertaking. The paper is very handsomely printed, and its contents very judicious and interesting."

But even such a glowing endorsement did not keep the enterprise from quickly foundering. The *Spirit* apparently issued its last number on December 26th, just seven weeks after its first; four days later, a notice in the *Enquirer* revealed that their press and office had been seized for non-payment of the note that they had signed to finance their venture, and that the whole would be sold at auction just one week hence – Tuesday, January 6, 1818.

The seizure proved to be the end of the *Spirit*, as Burling died the day before the auction, apparently by his own hand. The sale of the *Spirit's* effects proceeded despite his death. After the sale, Gray advertised that he intended to resume publishing the *Spirit* again, but never did, perhaps because Burling's intestate estate was not settled until late 1818. Gray continued in the Richmond print trade until about 1823, when he turned to other pursuits.

Sources: No copies of this paper are known to survive; title not recorded in the Library of Congress catalogue; Brigham II: 1142; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in the *American Beacon* [Norfolk] and the *American Star* [Petersburg], as well as various Richmond newspapers (1817-18).