

## STAUNTON 09: Observer

### 01: The Observer (1814)

---

The ninth and last newspaper issued in Staunton before 1820 was the shortest-lived of all those periodicals. After issuing just three numbers, the weekly evidently ceased publication with the widespread militia mobilizations that followed the landings of British forces near Washington and Baltimore in August 1814, and was never resumed after they withdrew.

As Staunton was the seat of "Old Federal Augusta" County, publication of any Republican journal there was problematic before the Jackson era. Yet the partisans of Jefferson and Madison initiated several attempts to challenge the succession of advertisers sustained by Federalist merchants and professionals in the area. First came the *Political Mirror* of James Lyon (274) and John McArthur (285) from 1800 to 1802, then the *Staunton Eagle* of Jacob D. Dietrich (135) from 1807 to 1811, *The Spirit of the Press* of James Williamson (448) in 1811, and finally *The People's Friend* of Charles B. Rhoades (353) from 1812 to 1813. The common feature among these titles was their dependence on partisan subsidies, whether from party leaders directly, or from a federal license granted to publish the laws enacted by Congress.

*The Observer* was a newspaper founded in 1814 on the provision of party leaders, as can be seen in the pedigrees of its founders. Philip DuVal (155) was lead proprietor in this venture; he was an influential presence in the Virginia printing trade as a journalist and financier in the Richmond-based circle of Republican presses developed by Meriwether Jones (242), Samuel Pleasants (332), and Thomas Ritchie (360); in 1813, he was a founding partner in the city's first successful daily paper, the *Commercial Compiler*, as financier in that venture by editor Leroy Anderson (011); in February 1814, he sold his interest in Anderson's *Compiler* and began circulating a prospectus for a new Republican paper in Staunton to be edited by the peripatetic writer Gerard Banks (019). As DuVal needed a press and printer to produce this journal, the tendered project dragged on into the summer of 1814 until he found a tradesman willing to join the effort. Joseph Butler (069) was just such a person, another member of the Richmond circle of Republican printers; his joining with DuVal finally gave life to the proposed weekly, with its first number issuing on August 4, 1814.

That initial number carried the obligatory address from its proprietors that informed their readers of what course they intended to follow. DuVal and Butler offered one that was full of references to classical history, implying that their Federalist opponents were like Philip of Macedonia, who crushed the liberties of the Athenians. Yet while issued at the start of the third year of a war with Great Britain, their address mentioned the conflict only tangentially.

"Their greatest object being to render their paper useful, they will be industrious to obtain from every source, the most valuable Extracts and Communications, which a widely extended correspondence can supply. The Legislative proceedings, both of the General and State Governments, will command their particular attention — and Foreign news will at all times occupy a share of their columns, proportionate to with interest and importance."

DuVal, Butler, and Banks were true to their word in the three issues that they published. In those issues, the paper's content was predominately reprinted items concerning war-time events, primarily ones along the Niagara frontier and in the Atlantic, the principal theaters of the war up to that time. Indeed, the bulk of the content in the August 18th issue – the last that they published – related to the capture of Fort Erie by American forces on July 3rd, a British fortification opposite Buffalo that had been hotly contested throughout the war. And though it did note the actions of a British naval force in the Chesapeake, they presumed a raid on the small Yeocomico River port of Kinsale in Westmoreland County to be just one of many such raids that summer. Hence, there is no sense in that issue that British Admiral George Cockburn was about to land a large expeditionary force on the Patuxent River the next day, one with orders to burn the cities of Washington and Baltimore.

Once those landings occurred, those militia groups in Virginia that had not been previously mobilized were called to the defense of the Potomac region. That call-up ravaged many of the press offices in the state, particularly Republican ones that supported Madison, as their workers, including several editors, rushed to defend the national capital. From the absence of any further numbers of *The Observer*, it seems clear that the office of DuVal & Butler was one of those so affected. The militia units summoned at that time did not return home until after the British withdrawal from the Chesapeake in late September. By that time, though, DuVal and Butler had returned to Richmond, evidently anticipating the October 4th death of Samuel Pleasants, where DuVal became a pivotal figure in the subsequent dissolution of Pleasants's business. Consequently, the unexpected suspension of *The Observer* that had followed the British landings became a complete cessation of the weekly's publication.

It would be thirty years before another partisan paper was attempted to challenge the long-lived mercantile advertiser there, and then it would be a Jacksonian paper taking on a Whig journal, and not the former contest of Republican and Federalist organs.

---

Sources: LCCN no. 83-026158; Brigham II: 1155; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in the *Virginia Argus* and the *Richmond Enquirer* (1813-14); and content from the [Staunton] *Observer* (August 1814).