

WILLIAMSBURG 03: VIRGINIA GAZETTE III

01: The Virginia Gazette (1775-1780)

The third newspaper published in Williamsburg was a derivative of the first, begun when the partnership issuing that weekly was dissolved in 1774. This newer journal supplanted both of its precursors as Virginia's journal-of-record as a result of its proprietor's reputation, but could not sustain that status after he died, leaving the journal to simply wither and die in Williamsburg once the seat of government was removed to Richmond in 1780.

The title *Virginia Gazette* has been one adopted by numerous papers in the state, especially during the "long eighteenth century." That label was essentially an assertion by its publisher for the legitimacy of the journal's content, and has its origins in the manuscript newsletters circulated among government officials in the Renaissance era that conveyed authoritative information. In British North America, the first journals printed in each colony were closely tied to the imperial administration of that colony and so embraced the term "gazette" out of course, leading to our current understanding of the word as an "official publication of a government organization or institution, listing appointments and other public notices" [per *O.E.D.*]. While that definition nicely fits the role of this weekly assumed shortly after it began publication, initially the title was more of an assertion than a fact.

Context

In early 1775, there were four newspapers published in Virginia: three in Williamsburg and one in Norfolk; ten years earlier, only one journal was published in the colony. Over that decade, distinct political factions emerged with each faction's members being the principal patrons for a newspaper embodying their agenda. The three published in Williamsburg represented the center-left, center-right, and center of a contemporary political spectrum, while the Norfolk weekly was initially a Loyalist sheet that was commandeered by the Sons of Liberty, who made it over into the most radical paper published in Virginia in 1775.

The longest-lived of the Williamsburg *Gazettes* was the one founded by William Parks (321) in 1736; it devolved from Parks to William Hunter Sr. (230) in 1750, from Hunter to Joseph Royle (368) in 1761, and then from Royle to Alexander Purdie (345) and John Dixon (140) in 1766. All through that succession, the paper was considered the official voice of the colonial administration, but when Purdie & Dixon took control of the weekly, they made it into the voice of the colony's old Tidewater elite, depriving the royal governor of a ready outlet for his opinions and directives, as had been the original function of that journal.

At the same time, a faction in the Assembly that favored westward expansion, then limited by the Proclamation Line of 1763, brought a new press and printer to Virginia to challenge the *Gazette* of Purdie & Dixon; that second *Virginia Gazette* was founded by William Rind (358) in May 1766, and passed to his wife, Clementina Rind (356), in August 1773, and then to their shop foreman, John Pinkney (325), in September 1774. Over that time, it served as the colony's journal-of-record, supplanting its predecessor when Rind was elected public

printer over Alexander Purdie in late 1766.

This counterbalanced journalistic rivalry – with one representing the old order and one the rising elite – continued until 1774, when Purdie and Dixon brought their eight-year-long association to an end. Dixon was the administrator for both the Hunter and Royle estates, and so the guardian of William Hunter Jr. (231); when young Hunter attained his majority in late 1774, he was entitled to a share of the Williamsburg printing office once conducted by his father; hence Dixon bought Purdie's half-interest in that established business and began a new partnership with his former ward to publish the original *Virginia Gazette*.

This was a fortuitous moment for Purdie to start a new office. The death of Clementina Rind meant that when the Assembly met in 1775, it would elect another public printer; the new concern of Dixon & Hunter was evidently not a viable candidate, as Hunter was well-known as a Loyalist by then, so hostile to both Assembly factions; meanwhile, the Rind office was in shambles financially, raising concerns that Pinkney would not be able to function as public printer because of the indebtedness of the two Rind estates, even as he moved to acquire their press before the Assembly met. So by separating himself from Dixon, Purdie became an alternative to those awkward situations. But to fill the bill, he needed to publish a paper.

A New Gazette

Purdie's new *Virginia Gazette*, however, did not appear as quickly, or as cleanly, as he had originally hoped. And the reasons for his disappointment were a result of the contemporary political and economic environment.

In October 1774, the First Continental Congress adopted an agreement – commonly called the Continental Association – in response to Parliament's ongoing attempts to govern and tax the American colonists, particularly the so-called "Intolerable Acts" they had enacted that spring in response to the Boston Tea Party. The colonies covenanted to one other that each would prohibit the importation of any British manufactured goods into North America after December 1st, and the exportation of American produce to anywhere in the British empire after September 10, 1775, if Parliament did not repeal the laws it had enacted since 1763 that exerted "illegitimate" authority over Britain's overseas provinces. While designed to generate pressure on Parliament from British merchants, the Association also disrupted commercial connections generally by reducing the ebb and flow of British currency across the Atlantic; this worsened the growing shortages of currency experienced in the American colonies that resulted from Parliament's prohibition on colonial emissions of paper money in 1764 via the Currency Act. This combination of restricted imports and currency shortages made it increasingly difficult for all printers in North America to obtain the supplies they needed to conduct their presses, especially paper and type.

Unfortunately for Purdie, he set out to establish a new printing office in Williamsburg at just the moment that this pinch on American commerce began to tighten. By the time that his partnership with Dixon ended in December 1774, the import embargo had gone into effect, leaving him to the mercies of American suppliers alone, at ever increasing cost. Thus, he did not receive the press he required until mid-January 1775 – after having ordered one late in the previous summer. That delay, in turn, stalled the start of his new weekly until the first

Friday in February, a full month later than intended. Even then, Purdie had not obtained all of the materials he had sent for:

"As I, at present, am under the disagreeable Necessity of printing my Gazette upon a Type uncommonly large, it will be proper for me to acquaint to the Publick that the Quantity of Matter it should contain will not be diminished upon that account, as I shall never be sparing of Paper when I am possessed of Materials that may deserve their attention. In a few months, I expect to be as amply furnished with every requisite for carrying on my Business, in the best manner, as any printer on the Continent."

Purdie made good his promise by issuing supplements with 35 of the 49 numbers he printed that year, including two four-page editions in August, even as his weekly did not evince the use of the smaller type he wanted until well into 1777. That demonstrated commitment to being the most inclusive vehicle of public information in the colony brought Purdie election as the new public printer on June 1, 1775, despite his business being "circumscribed within narrow bounds." A week later, he offered thanks to his public and private patrons alike:

"A slender stock to enter into business upon, a scarcity of necessary implements and materials, which, if to be purchased at all, were unattainable in America, but at the highest prices, through difficulties into my way which the benevolence and candor of the publick could alone retrieve me from. However, the never to be forgotten distinction which I have so lately received from the Honourable the House of Bur-gesses, in their condescension to appoint me their printer, has enabled me to extend my business upon a larger plan, and to furnish my office with those conveniences that will assist my intentions to give satisfaction upon all occasions."

Yet what went unsaid here was that Purdie was also working as printer for the extralegal conventions held that year, and was so involved when the Fifth Virginia convention of May 1776 swept aside the institutions of the colonial government. Purdie thus became the last printer to the *ancien regime* and first printer to the new one, publishing the proceedings of both entities in his *Virginia Gazette*. Consequently, by the end of the first year of publishing his new weekly, his correspondents could easily attest to the fact that his *Gazette* was "more generally read than the others" – meaning those in Williamsburg and Norfolk alike.

Still, Purdie's *Gazette* would be constrained by the multiplying costs of his supplies and the scarcity of "ready money" to pay for them, as resistance became revolution. In March, June, August, and December of 1776, he printed dunning notices that promised he would stop sending his paper, within a month's time, to those still in arrears on their subscriptions, reporting in the August notice that "there are upwards of ONE THOUSAND who have never paid me a single farthing" since he began its publication nineteen months before. In each of those notices, Purdie made it clear that his fervent requests were mandated by the ever-increasing cost of paper, which by December 1776 had "risen to more than triple its former value, and now can hardly be procured at any price."

This constraint continued in 1777 and was exacerbated by the occupation of Philadelphia in September by British forces who took "possession of all the paper mills near Philadelphia, from whence we derived our chief supplies." By July 1777, Purdie seems to have purged his subscriber list of its delinquents, and was now compelled to raise the price of a subscription

from 12s/6d per year to 15 shillings to cover the ever-rising expense of paper. In October, he attempted a new tack by asking the government to supply the paper needed to produce the public work, thereby passing that expense on to the public treasury. Yet by December, paper had become so scarce that he was obliged to announce a suspension of the *Gazette* at month's end, even as he expected a "speedy supply, which I look for daily both from France and the Southward" – evincing the role played by the Caribbean islands as conduit for European manufactured goods into the United States during the Revolutionary War.

Purdie might have avoided the need for such a suspension had he charted the same course followed by Dixon & Hunter; when paper first became scarce in the summer of 1776, they reduced the size of their sheet, producing a four-page edition on a half-sheet, so effectively halving the paper required, though with a parallel reduction in its content. But being public printer at so crucial a time in the war, Purdie felt himself obliged to continue the format he had offered from the start, even to the point of issuing supplements for more than half of the numbers he published in 1777. Still, when he resumed publication on March 6, 1778, he was again forced by the exorbitant cost of paper to raise the annual subscription price from 15 to 20 shillings, or a two-thirds increase in just three years; and still, that increase was not sufficient to secure enough paper by the following summer to print the number of copies he needed to satisfy all of his customers, as he revealed in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in July 1778, apologizing for not having sent copies to Albemarle County that week.

The paper problem and the growing disrepair of his presses also impinged Purdie's ability to produce the work required of him as public printer. The mounting delays in that production were addressed by the Assembly when it next met in October; Purdie informed them of his ongoing problems with securing paper, even after the British withdrew from Philadelphia that June. While the Assembly provided him sufficient quantities to complete the required work from the public stores, the legislators also charged him £1200 against his £1500 salary (which was now more than three times that granted in 1775) for that 250-ream supply and began investigating his business practices. Some apparently suspected malfeasance, based on suggestions that Purdie had used the prior supply for his *Gazette* and not for the public work; such may have been the case, as after this new provision was delivered, no copies of his *Gazette* until that of May 15, 1779 are known to have survived, indicating that Purdie had reduced his weekly production count to preserve this indispensable item – just as he had the previous summer, the other lengthy gap in the *Gazette's* run of extant issues – in the face of that skepticism.

That seven-month-long void leaves the last weeks of Purdie's life something of a mystery. It seems that in the winter of 1778-79, Purdie was not a well man, apparently the result of an addiction to drink. In early 1778, Edmund Pendleton, Speaker of the House of Delegates, had asked the Scotsman to publish a patriotic song in his *Gazette*, but later complained to a friend that "Mr. Purdie has had the battles of the Keggs since I came to Town, and it don't yet appear." Alcoholism was common among printers then, resulting in many early deaths, notably that of John Dunlap (152), the first printer of the Declaration of Independence. Still, whatever the cause, Purdie was dead before the Assembly could meet again in May 1779 to consider their investigators' report and determine his fate.

Decline and Demise

The numbering of the two surviving issues on either end of that gap indicates that Purdie's *Gazette* was published without interruption over the course of those seven months. If his health was in decline, as his obituaries suggest, then his office was conducted by his staff, which was largely a combination of family hands and slaves. As his successors were his two nephews John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis (119), they were likely the most senior journeymen in that office at that time; a third nephew, Joseph Mathews Davenport (115), was documented as a part of Purdie's press in 1777, and apparently still worked there with hired-hand Samuel Major (277), a hold-over from the former Purdie & Dixon office; all four tradesmen were then in their twenties. Three enslaved African men were listed in Purdie's estate inventory with values twice that of the other three males recorded there – Jordan (£825), Harry (£1000), and Jack Booker (£1000) – suggesting that they had been trained to work in the office as well, as Purdie did not own a farm; indeed, it was a common practice in Virginia in this era to own and use enslaved pressmen, as Davis would do later in Richmond, rather than pay free tradesmen to perform that manual task.

Within days of Purdie's death during the second week of April 1779, Clarkson and Davis had formed a new concern to continue publishing this *Virginia Gazette*. And when the Assembly convened on May 3rd, they officially informed that body of their master's passing and asked to be continued in the role of public printers in his stead. But both the Assembly and now-governor Thomas Jefferson were thinking along more-sweeping lines that spring.

The continuing presence of British naval forces in the Chesapeake was seen a threat to the security of Williamsburg, situated as it was within a few miles of two major tidal rivers; so that Assembly session decided that moving the seat of government inland was critical, as was placing it nearer to the center of the state's population; so they directing that buildings be secured in Richmond where the offices of the state government could be relocated in early 1780, before the Assembly met there the next May. In addressing the logistics of this removal, Jefferson proposed, and the Assembly agreed, that he be allowed to hire a new "printer to the Commonwealth" from beyond Virginia, and bring that person to Richmond before that next session convened, consequent to the dire fiscal state of the two printing offices that now survived. As a result, neither Clarkson & Davis, or the competing office of John Dixon & Thomas Nicolson (315) – Dixon having cast aside his Loyalist partner at the end of 1778 – were granted that appointment; rather the public work was divided between the two concerns, though Clarkson & Davis were allowed to retain that title as the printers of the state's journal-of-record and the Assembly's session laws.

Despite the sustenance that this continuation afforded their *Virginia Gazette*, Clarkson and Davis quickly found their financial fortunes fading. The few surviving copies of the *Gazette* issued under their names amount to just seventeen numbers over the next twenty months, suggesting the foregoing problems of paper and currency continued as well, forcing them to limit the number of copies produced weekly as Purdie had; indeed, by November, they were obliged to increase the paper's subscription price by at least twice its former rate in order to "be enabled to lay in a stock of printing paper" – although now at \$50 per annum, the value of the new charge relative to its former £1 price is unclear, given the hyper-inflationary

environment of the time. Moreover, while dealing with these circumstances, the partners were obliged to sign promissory notes to acquire Purdie's press and its accessories when their uncle's personal property was sold at public auction in June 1779.

Yet even encumbered by such onerous debts, they also felt it necessary to refit their office late that year with "a complete set of new printing types; by means of which they can hope to render it more agreeable to the eye than it has lately been." That purchase in December 1779, undoubtedly one relying on debt instruments as well, appears to be an act taken in desperation. Their fiscal situation meant that Clarkson and Davis were unable to afford to move their office to Richmond that winter, and making their products more attractive than those of the competing Dixon & Nicolson press seems an attempt to stave off the certain loss of their public subsidy from such a failure.

Such was exactly what happened when Assembly met in May 1780. Jefferson's attempts to persuade Philadelphia printer John Dunlap to move to Richmond were dragging on, making the temporary appointment of one of the two surviving Virginia presses as public printer a necessity; Clarkson & Davis petitioned to be continued in that role, claiming an inability to pay the newly-exorbitant rents that Richmond property owners expected for their buildings, leaving their other financial difficulties unstated, and asked for assistance in relocating. But Dixon & Nicolson had successfully moved their office to the new capital in the month before the Assembly met, and they were ready and willing to take on the temporary assignment. Hence the Assembly turned a deaf ear to the pleas of Clarkson and Davis, which allowed Jefferson time to continue his negotiations with Dunlap over a permanent solution.

Stranded in the abandoned capital, the future was now bleak for the two tradesmen. They continued publishing their *Virginia Gazette*, but it was soon a shadow of its former self; by summer, it had been reduced to a small half-sheet, two-page paper that was largely devoid of advertising. The last known number is that issued on December 9, 1780, and is probably the last number they published, as that date corresponds roughly with the end of the first volume offered under the new \$50 subscription price. It would be more than thirty years before another newspaper was published in the town.

Clarkson seems to have turned to real-estate speculation in the emptying town, leaving Davis to attend to their small bookstore & library and to produce what little press work they were offered. Yet the partners were handed a windfall in September of 1781. French forces under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau arrived as part of Washington's siege of Yorktown and remained in the neighborhood until the promulgation of the Treaty of Paris, so providing their press with job-printing work for the next two years. The profits realized from that unexpected work allowed Davis to move the press to Richmond in the summer of 1783. However, Clarkson did not join him there; indeed, he disappears from the historical and bibliographic record after he paid his taxes in Williamsburg in 1782.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-024742; Brigham II: 1158; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 2-5; Williamsburg People and York County Project files for Purdie, Clarkson, Davis, Dixon, Nicolson, Royle, and both Hunters in Research Dept., Colonial Williamsburg; and notices in all *Virginia Gazettes* published in Williamsburg (1774-1780).