

**Thomas Jefferson and the Origins of Newspaper Competition in Pre-  
Revolutionary Virginia**

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## **Thomas Jefferson and the Origins of Newspaper Competition in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia**

“Until the beginning of our revolutionary dispute, we had but one press, and that having the whole business of the government, and no competitor for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it. We procured Rind to come from Maryland to publish a free paper.” Thomas Jefferson<sup>1</sup>

Great changes came to the printing business in Virginia in 1765. About the time that Parliament passed the Stamp Act, a second printer was encouraged to open another shop in Williamsburg, marking the beginnings of competition in that field. This was an important watershed for the culture and government of the colony, for it signified a shift in the power structure. Control of public messages began to relocate from the royal government to the consumer marketplace. This was a transformation that had a major impact on civic discourse in the colony. Despite such significance, the motivations behind this change and the relevance of it have often been misunderstood. For example, it is widely accepted that Thomas Jefferson was responsible for bringing such print competition to Virginia. This connection has been constantly repeated by historians, as has early print historian Isaiah Thomas’s contention that Jefferson confirmed this in a letter written specifically from the former president to Thomas. This research shows that both these claims are apparently erroneous and attempts to reach a better understanding of both the specifics of these changes and their larger significance. This new comprehension of how print competition in Virginia changed the relationship between the printer, the government, and the readers is of some consequence. This study shows that each of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, quoted by Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Albany, 1874; reprint, edited by Marcus A. McCorison, from the second edition, New York: Weathervane Books, 1970), fn, 566.

the two printers became less an official mouthpiece, more a voice of dissent, and enabled the transition from a deferential society to one that openly questioned the government. The importance of an open and critical press became more evident to residents, and the practice of civic discourse became visible in the public prints. This research attempts to bring us a better understanding of these changes and how they influenced the press in this important colony on the verge of Revolution.

### Historiography

Early historian of print Isaiah Thomas was intimately involved in the world of print and printers in the early revolutionary period in America, and has left historians with important details as well as misconceptions. He was the first writer to seriously look at the history of printing in the United States, and he was also an early printer and the founder of the American Antiquarian Society. Thomas's *History of Printing in America* was first published in 1810 and contained considerable research plus his intimate personal knowledge of the early days of printing in the colonies and republic. As Susan Macall Allen noted in her dissertation on the Stamp Act and colonial printers, Thomas's eyewitness account provided invaluable details regarding American printing, and that, "Its accuracy has been trusted by scholars, and it is often cited as the authoritative source." She also pointed out that his work "has occasional errors of fact that subsequent scholars have pointed out."<sup>2</sup> His chapters on Virginia and Maryland were much shorter than his entry on Massachusetts, where he lived and worked, but also where printing in British America originated. Thomas observed, "As there was but one newspaper published in Virginia in 1765; and but one press in the province, which was judged to have an

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Macall Allen, "The Impact of the Stamp Act of 1765 on Colonial American Printers: Threat or Bonanza?" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1996), 1-6 & 24.

undue bias from the officers of government, a number of gentlemen who were desirous of having a free and uninfluenced Gazette,” encouraged a second printer, William Rind, to come to Williamsburg. Thomas added that a letter to him from Thomas Jefferson confirmed this, and that Jefferson said he was involved in procuring Rind.<sup>3</sup> Other historians have endlessly repeated these two claims.

Arthur Schlesinger, the elder, noted that the Stamp Act burdened largely those who were most capable of stirring up resistance: clergy, lawyers, merchants, and the printers—the most vocal and influential members of society. Newspapers were thus changed by this new tax, he suggested, from merely transmitters of information to opinion makers. Schlesinger quoted David Ramsay, from his 1789 *The History of the American Revolution*, who wrote that printers who generally favored liberty but were more interested in profits, universally opposed this tax: “A stamp duty, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, provoked their united zealous opposition.” While Schlesinger repeated Thomas’s claims, he also suggested that the new, second printer was not influenced by the governor, and that in the years ahead, both newspapers supported the patriot cause.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, historian Stephen Botein concluded that printers were more businessmen, or “‘Meer’ Mechanics,” than they were revolutionaries. He concluded that the Stamp Act profoundly changed their business. Printers’ normal, cautious tendencies to stay out of controversies were overridden by their financial interest. The standard viewpoint had been that a free press meant presenting both sides while staying out of extreme disputes that might have

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *Printing in America*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., 1970 reprint, 556 and footnote there.

<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), 61-79, also quoting David Ramsey, *The History of the American Revolution* (Phila., 1789), 1:61-62. Thomas quoted in Schlesinger, “The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act,” *The New England Quarterly*, 8, no. 1 (March 1935):78.

alienated any customer. This new tax not only threatened their livelihood, but political writing became a hot seller. Most printers, Botein suggested, abandoned neutrality and chose sides, the majority opting for the patriots' position.<sup>5</sup>

While printing was limited to one government-sanctioned press, there could be no real press freedom. As historian of the book Hugh Amory noted, printing was reflective of the power structure of the colony within which it existed. In Puritan New England, about which Amory was writing, printing was initially licensed and sanctioned, serving rather than challenging the power structure. It was initially the same in Virginia. By the 1760s, the pressures of trade and merchandising altered the function of a press from merely a duplicator of official governmental and religious works to one of commercial output. With a second press and consumer pressure, the very character of printing and the very idea of a "free press" changed. With a wider range of content, print was freed to function as a medium for the "diffusion of useful knowledge."<sup>6</sup> T. H. Breen theorized a rising marketplace and a consumer revolution that was an important preface to political change, and that newspapers—as part of this increased consumption—helped expand civic discourse.<sup>7</sup> As historian Jack Greene wrote in his exploration of the shifting of power in the southern colonies, government support for a printer was crucial in such colonies as Virginia before such a strong, commercial economy developed. He suggested that the royal governor had

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<sup>5</sup> Botein, " 'Meer Mechanics' and an Open Press: the Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers," in *Perspectives in American History*, 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 150-21. Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution" in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bailyn, Bernard and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 12-42.

<sup>6</sup> Amory, "Printing and Bookselling in New England, 1683-1713," in Amory and David Hall *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83-116.

<sup>7</sup> T. H. Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), xvi, 133, and 248.

a great deal of control over what was printed prior to 1766, and he repeated the claim that Jefferson was involved in changing that situation.<sup>8</sup>

More specifically focused on Virginia and its printers, Laura Godfrey wrote that the *Virginia Gazettes* had an “authoritarian” stance throughout this period, not shifting to a more “libertarian” revolutionary ideology until 3 to 6 months before the Revolution. Her analysis utilized Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm’s, *Four Theories of the Press*, and downplayed some obvious shifts in viewpoint in the 1760s. Godfrey did, however, get correct many of the important details that had eluded more prominent historians, and she did observe that the character of the press in Virginia did change after the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

#### A Government Press

From the very beginning, the government in Virginia tightly controlled the press and there was no real freedom of expression. From Governor William Berkeley’s warning about a troublesome press in 1671, to Governor Thomas Culpeper’s expulsion of a printing press in 1682, to the eventual welcoming of a press in 1730, government income and control were the key characteristics.<sup>10</sup> The press in colonial Virginia began as a royally-sanctioned and controlled

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 287-289.

<sup>9</sup> Laurie E. Godfrey, “The Printers of the Williamsburg *Virginia Gazettes*, 1766-1776: Social Controls and Press Theory” (Dissertation, Regent University, March 1998), especially iv. Godfrey did note that Jefferson was unlikely to be involved in the procurement of the new printer and that the Jefferson quotation did not come from a letter to Isaiah Thomas, 249-50.

<sup>10</sup> Berkeley’s oft-quoted, “But I thank God, *there are no free schools nor printing*, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years, for *learning* has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and *printing* has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!” William Hening, *The Statutes At Large; Being A Collection Of All The Laws Of Virginia, From The First Session Of The Legislature In The Year 1619* (New York: Printed for the editor, 1819-23. Facsimile reprint, Charlottesville: Published for the Jamestown Foundation of the Commonwealth of Virginia by the University Press of Virginia, 1969), 1: iv-vi. William Nuthead and his printing press were not allowed in Jamestown, see Douglas C. McMurtrie, *A History Of Printing in The United States; The Story Of The Introduction Of The Press And Of Its History And Influence During The Pioneer*

institution paid for and licensed by the government in power. As Amory and Richard D. Brown noted, knowledge is power, and in the early colonial period, information was in the hands of governmental and ecclesiastic authorities. Not until a second printer existed, and commercial competition began, could there be a free press.<sup>11</sup>

Without any large urban community or a strong commercial economy, all of the southern colonial printers before 1766 counted on a government salary as part of their support, but it was not always clear who in the government controlled the printer. The House of Burgesses in Virginia voted on the printer's salary, but it also had to be approved by the royal governor and his council. Greene suggested that despite the lower house's control of money, the governor was generally able to exert the most censorship, at least until the 1760s. However, former Governor Alexander Spotswood wrote a letter to printer William Parks in 1736, complaining that it was the burgesses who maintained a tight control over the content of printed matter. He prefaced what eventually did make it into print with a note to Parks; "If his Worship will permit you to Publish in your News Paper, this answer ...". The reference was to John Randolph, Speaker of the House of Burgesses, and Treasurer for the colony, with whom Spotswood was having a very public dispute. As Greene observed, the assembly struggled against the royal governor's authority, and control of the press was an important part of that power structure.<sup>12</sup>

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*Period In Each State of The Union* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1936), 277. McMurtrie, *The Beginnings of Printing in Virginia* (Lexington, Va. [Printed in the Journalism laboratory of Washington and Lee University], 1935), 15-21. William Parks was invited by the lower house to move his printing office from Annapolis to Williamsburg, and paid him a government salary. *Journals of the House of Burgesses* (June 10, 1732), 6:141-2.

<sup>11</sup> Amory, "Printing and Bookselling in New England, 1638-1713," 83-116, and Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Spotswood to printer William Parks, 1736. Washburn Autograph Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg; Parks, Dec. 17, 1736), 1-2. Greene, *Quest for Power*, 287-289. Spotswood and others are referred to here and in contemporary writings as "governor," when in fact they are lieutenant governors acting as governor.

This control over the content of the newspaper by the governor again became apparent in 1754, when a Virginia resident turned to the newspaper of the neighboring colony to complain, “the Press in this Colony [Virginia], either through particular Inclination, or some other cogent Bias, in the Proprietor of it [printer William Hunter], is, in many instances, shut against us ...” The Virginia governor had accused the burgesses of neglecting the safety of the colony by not taking any actions against French aggression. To counter that accusation publicly, the burgesses had to turn to the press in Maryland.<sup>13</sup> The Williamsburg press remained largely under the control of the government at this point. The printer was dependent on a government salary, and additional official printing business.<sup>14</sup> As Botein suggested, the colonial printer could little afford to offend powerful individuals or groups with anything he printed, and often avoided controversy altogether.<sup>15</sup>

Accusation of control by the burgesses surfaced again in later disputes. The controversy over pay for the official Church of England ministers in the mid-1750s again brought accusations of censorship by the Virginia printer. Reverend John Camm was forced to turn to the Maryland press to print a pamphlet in answer to comments by two burgesses that had been printed in

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<sup>13</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 24, 1754), 1-2. The dispute aired here was entangled with the “Pistole Fee,” imposed by Governor Robert Dinwiddie on land sales. The burgesses opposed this arbitrary tax imposed without their consent. Jack Greene, “Landon Carter and the Pistole Fee Dispute,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 14, No. 1. (Jan., 1957): 66-69. Greene identifies the author of the newspaper letter as Burgess Landon Carter. At the death of printer William Parks in 1750, he was succeeded by William Hunter, who was succeeded in 1761 by Joseph Royle.

<sup>14</sup> In 1762, printer Joseph Royle received a stipend of £350 per year, voted on by the House of Burgesses but also approved by the governor and his council. This was increased to £375 in 1764. *Journals of the House of Burgesses* (January 19, 1762), 10:38, (Nov. 5, 1764), 10:227, “for printing the Journal of the House of Burgesses, printing the Laws of each Session, and sending as many Copies to the County Court Clerks as there are Justices in the Commission in each respective County, and one another, which is to be half-bound, for the Use of the Court, and ten to the Clerk of the Court of Husting of the Borough of Norfolk, printing Inspectors Notes and Book, Proclamations, and other publick Advertisements.” The printer also received additional contracts for printing other things, such as paper money, compilations of the laws, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Botein, “Meer Mechanics,” 127-225.

Virginia. Apparently, printer Joseph Royle was afraid of offending burgesses who were satirized in Camm's response:

... if it should Displease, would be taken as ill by this Assembly, as if pointed directly at them; I am far from saying it would give them Offence, nay, I think otherwise; however as there is a Possibility in the Case, it will be most prudent in me not to risk forfeiting their Good-will upon such an Issue, as I cannot but own myself a Dependent upon the House of Burgesses, and the Public in general. I therefore return you your Pamphlet ...<sup>16</sup>

Royle appeared in this to be more timid than overtly controlled. While Camm argued that he should be able to use the press to tell his side of a story that had already been printed, he recognized the printer's editorial right: "I acknowledge as much Prudence as you please, in the Rule by which your Press is Conducted."<sup>17</sup> This view of the press demonstrates a theory of the press that was not so overtly controlled by the government, but rather more of one where the private printer had some discretion, which he needed to exercise with care.

One researcher has suggested that for a brief time, the *Virginia Gazette* opened its pages to increased local controversy, eventually leading to a reassertion of control by the governor just prior to the Stamp Act. Printer William Hunter was ill and spent much time out of the colony between 1756-1759. He apparently left his assistant John Stretch in charge of his print shop, the newspaper, and the post office. According to one local resident who wrote a letter to Hunter upon his return, the newspaper contained a bit more lively, local debate in that interim period, and was more boring after Hunter's return. "Tim Pastime" wrote a thirty-six page letter addressed to Hunter, "Demipostmaster, Printer and Linnen Draper." (The latter appears to be a bit of Cockney rhyming slang, perhaps insulting the newspaper business, as in "linen

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<sup>16</sup> Royle to Camm, Williamsburg, Aug. 5, 1763, quoted in John Camm, *Single and Distinct View of the Act, Vulgarly entitled, The Two Penny Act...* (Annapolis; Green, 1763), appendix, 48-49. This dispute, also referred to as the Parson's Cause, pitted the burgesses against ministers who contested an act that in essence lowered their pay.

<sup>17</sup> Camm, *Two Penny Act*, appendix.

draper/newspaper.”) The pseudonymous author suggested that now after Stretch, “that Flower of Beauty, and Cream of all Proportion, has left this Colony ... your Publications are but sometimes little entertaining and, at every other Time extremely dull.” (From the context, the seemingly positive description of Stretch reads as sarcasm.) While presumably not printed in its entirety in the *Gazette*, the text of the letter itself recommended another alternative of hanging it on a peg in the printing office where visitors could read it, and suggested that had been done before with other letters. This offers an interesting image of the printing office as a busy center of discourse and information beyond what printed material and post office business would offer. Local residents stopped by, read letters not yet printed, and discussed this latest news. According to historian David Rawson, Stretch was in charge of the newspaper for more than three years, and it offered more lively political debate under his stewardship. Rawson suggests that this resulted in governmental pressure on Hunter, and forced the reassertion of gubernatorial control over the newspaper. This is largely conjectural as there are very few extant *Virginia Gazettes* from this time period to confirm the content biases suggested by this one letter.<sup>18</sup>

It was control by the royal governors, however, that constantly frustrated more radical Virginians, eventually leading to action. In October of 1765, the *Maryland Gazette* published a letter written anonymously to the Virginia printer, but never published in that paper. It accused Williamsburg printer Royle of deceiving his readers and yielding to royal pressures. The Annapolis newspaper published this letter with an added note by the author saying that Virginia did not have a free press, “as the only one we have here, is totally engrossed for the vile Purpose

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<sup>18</sup> “Tim Pastime” [pseudo.], letter to William Hunter, Williamsburg [?], [c. 1760], Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Emma L. Powers, Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, provided a transcript and some annotations of references within this letter, which was discovered in the 1990s. David A. Rawson, “ ‘Guardians of their Own Liberty’: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society, 1750 to 1820” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1998), 100-115. An advertisement from “deputy Postmaster” John Stretch in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter, April 22, 1757), 3-4, suggested that he was editing the newspaper but also leaving the colony in the summer.

of ministerial Craft: I must ...apply to you ... Bold and honest Assertor of the Cause of Liberty ...”<sup>19</sup> This insinuated not just gubernatorial control of the Williamsburg newspaper, but also implicit bias in favor of corrupt ministers back in England. The more radical political element in Virginia turned increasingly to the Maryland press for distribution of their ideas, and this partly fulfilled their goals, as the Maryland newspaper was read by a substantial number of readers in Northern Virginia.<sup>20</sup> In a later *Virginia Gazette*, a “Man of Principle” wrote that Royle’s Williamsburg press, “was not renowned for its freedom,” and alleged that the governor was allowed to read the newspaper before it was circulated, and actually censored it:

If a Counselor or a Burgess was only squinted at in any thing sent to the press before this period, it was wither too low or too-----but if a Governour was----- O Horrible!---Has it not been said that Mr. Royle owned a private license, and that a paper was constantly carried to a certain house in Palace street to be inspected before it could be seen by the publick?<sup>21</sup>

The author of this piece claimed that Royle acted as though he was dependent upon a license to print, and that the governor was checking everything before it could be published. This view is one of a press tightly controlled by the royal governor. This describes a press that was not suited to the needs of political allies attempting to oppose official British colonial taxation policies.

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<sup>19</sup> *A Supplement to the Maryland Gazette, of last week* (Oct. 17, 1765), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Advertisements from Fairfax and Alexandria in Northern Virginia often appeared in the newspaper from Annapolis, and with transportation by water being faster than by land in the eighteenth-century, parts of the southern colony were served faster by the northern printer. There were notices for home sales in Alexandria, and George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Fairfax County’s Truro Parish in the *Maryland Gazette*. See, for example, house sale advertisements for Alexandria, VA in *Maryland Gazettes*, Feb. 2, Feb. 23, 1764, Oct. 2, 1764, the church builder ad May 17, 1764, and a May 26, 1768 advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* from William Rind, now printing in Williamsburg, for a revised edition of the Laws of Virginia, price 40 shillings. See also introduction to Edith Moore Sprouse, *Along the Potomac River: Extracts from the Maryland Gazette, 1728-1799*. (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon: August 22, 1766), 2. This was written after Royle’s death, after Purdie & Dixon took over the business.

### Press Competition Comes to Virginia

It is clear from the correspondence of Governor Francis Fauquier to his supervisors at the Board of Trade that he closely monitored what was printed in the newspapers. He often included copies of the *Virginia Gazette* and occasionally the *Maryland Gazette* in his letters to London. He noted that the Stamp Act forced the shutting down of the newspaper, and that new print competition was on the way:

From the first of November we have been without any newspaper till very lately. The late printer to the Colony is dead, and as the press was then thought to be too complaisant to me, some of the hot Burgesses invited a printer from Maryland, upon which the foreman to the late printer, who is also a Candidate for the place, has taken up the News paper again in order to make Interest with the Burgesses.<sup>22</sup>

The governor wrote that a second, competitive newspaper was about to begin, one that would be in addition to the original *Virginia Gazette*, now being published by Alexander Purdie, the foreman of the late Joseph Royle. He suggested that it was the work of some of the more radical burgesses who were unhappy with the old press because it was too willing to please the royal authority in the colony. As colonial opposition to British taxation policies gained ground, some readers in Virginia were not content with their local printer, his newspaper, and their ability to publish political pamphlets locally. Those with patriot leanings hoped that a new, competitive press and newspaper would allow for a more critical civic discourse.

Historians have generally been in agreement about who was involved in this somewhat rebellious move to bring in an opposition printer. In an article about newspapers and the Stamp Act, Schlesinger wrote, “before word of the [Stamp Act] repeal had reached Virginia, Thomas Jefferson and his friends persuaded William Rind, formerly of the *Maryland Gazette*, to settle in

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Fauquier to the Board of Trade, Williamsburg, April 7, 1766. Handwritten transcription, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain PRO CO 5, container v. 1331:97- 106 [137-148].

Williamsburg and on May 16, 1766, to begin the *Virginia Gazette*, the second journal of that name in the town.”<sup>23</sup> In his influential book, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, Philip Davidson wrote that “Thomas Jefferson, dissatisfied with the old *Gazette* . . . brought William Rind from Maryland, and the second *Virginia Gazette* was begun.”<sup>24</sup> In a more recent anthology edited by Bernard Bailyn, Jefferson’s involvement was repeated: “William Rind had come to Williamsburg at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson and some other leading local men.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to these well-known scholars, numerous other works have repeated the claim that Jefferson invited the printer, and that he wrote that in a letter to Thomas.<sup>26</sup>

A deeper look into the evidence casts doubt on both the claim that Jefferson was directly involved and that he wrote directly to Isaiah Thomas about it. This raises some questions about memory and historical research, but it also sheds new light on the origins of print competition in the colony. When the origin of the Jefferson claim was cited, it was either directly from Thomas’s influential *History of Printing in America*, or a subsequent source that took it from there. Thomas wrote, “a number of gentlemen who were desirous of having a free and uninfluenced Gazette, gave an invitation to Rind,” and he footnoted that as follows:

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Schlesinger [Sr.], “The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act,” *New England Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (March, 1935): 78, citing Thomas as his source.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution: 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 231. He did not credit any source for this.

<sup>25</sup> Robert M. Weir, “The Role of the Newspaper Press in the Southern Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution” in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn, and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 109.

<sup>26</sup> See also, for example, “Old Virginia Editors,” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 7, no. 1. (Jul., 1898): 9-17, Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1915), 2: 255-6, Douglas McMurtrie, *The Beginnings of Printing in Virginia*. (Lexington, Va.: Journalism laboratory of Washington and Lee University, 1935) 20-21, who quotes Thomas that Jefferson wrote about it to Thomas, Calhoun Winton, “Eighteenth Century Southern Book Trade” in *Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 239, and Martha Joanne King, “Making an Impression: Women Printers in the Southern Colonies in the Revolutionary Era.” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, December, 1992) 122.

This fact is corroborated by the following extract of a letter to the author from Thomas Jefferson, late president of the United States, dated July, 1809.

“... Until the beginning of our revolutionary dispute, we had but one press, and that having the whole business of the government, and no competitor for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it. We procured Rind to come from Maryland to publish a free paper.”<sup>27</sup>

It was only in the second edition of his book, however, that Thomas claimed Jefferson wrote this directly to him. This letter does not exist in either Thomas’s extensive papers nor in Jefferson’s, despite the fact that the former president kept complete records of his letters and copies of virtually all of his correspondence in this period.<sup>28</sup> Jefferson did write those words, with only minor discrepancies of capitalization and abbreviation, to William W. Hening just the year before Thomas’s book was first published.<sup>29</sup> It is also known that Hening wrote to Thomas about another matter within a year of Jefferson’s letter.<sup>30</sup> The first edition of Thomas’s book only states it was a letter from Jefferson, and does not indicate to whom it was written.<sup>31</sup> In a copy of that book that Thomas notated for a revised second edition, he wrote in the addition, “to the author,” indicating the former president’s letter was to him, and that is how it ended up in the subsequent edition of the book.<sup>32</sup> It seems probable that either Thomas stretched the truth to

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., 556.

<sup>28</sup> J. Jefferson Looney, Editor of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, email to author, Feb. 4, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William W. Hening, July 25, 1809, The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1. General Correspondence. 1651-1827, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, also published in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 1-369-370.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas G. Knoles, Curator of Manuscripts, American Antiquarian Society, emails to author, Dec. 29, 2005, notes that Thomas left a handwritten note in an annotated copy of his first edition, stating that Hening had written to him on July 21, 1810 about a fact regarding earlier Virginia printing.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *History of Printing*, 1st ed., 2:148 fn.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, *History of Printing*, annotated 1st ed., Isaiah Thomas Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Box 12. Thomas was not able to publish the second edition of his *History of Printing* before his death. A committee served as editors, following Thomas’s notes for changes, and it is they who ultimately included the footnote citing a letter from Jefferson to Thomas as the source, but that decision was based on Thomas’s notes.

make the point that a former president of the United States corresponded with him, or that time and old age had distorted his memory. (He would have been well more than 61 years old and as old as 83 when he made the notation.) What is remarkable is that this claim, reasonably easy to double-check, has been passed on by other historians for more than one hundred years.

The suggestion that Jefferson was a key player in the recruitment of the new printer also does not stand up to close examination. It would have been necessary, to convince Rind to leave his lucrative partnership in Annapolis, to offer him either cash or a promise of becoming the official printer of the colony, which would guarantee an income.<sup>33</sup> Jefferson was a mere 22 years old at the time.<sup>34</sup> Jefferson did not become a member of the House of Burgesses until three years later, and he was not even a practicing lawyer until the following year. According to his own autobiographical draft, he was simply a law student in 1765.<sup>35</sup> Jefferson later had enough of a relationship with Rind's competitor, printer Alexander Purdie, that Purdie promised to pack up Jefferson's books for him.<sup>36</sup> When Jefferson wrote, "we procured Rind," close analysis reveals that he was referring to his political associates in Williamsburg who were later to be identified as

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<sup>33</sup> Rind's name last appears on the *Maryland Gazette* dated October 10, 1765. By the next issue of October 17, the name of his former partner, Jonas Green, appears alone. While Rind's first Virginia newspaper did not appear until May, 16, 1766, the Stamp Act interrupted publication of many newspapers. It appears likely that whatever negotiations brought Rind to Williamsburg were completed by October of 1765.

<sup>34</sup> By the new calendar, Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743. (was actually April 2, 1743, old calendar, use of which was discontinued while he was a boy.) Dumas Malone, *Jefferson, the Virginian*, vol. 1, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston : Little, Brown, 1967), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. "Autobiography Draft Fragment, January 6 through July 27, 1821" from *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*. Federal Edition. Edited by Paul Leicester Ford. Accessed online at [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(tj010010\)\)>](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(tj010010))>) (27 March 2005).

<sup>36</sup> William Fleming to Thomas Jefferson, Williamsburg, June 22, 1776, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 1, 1760-1776*, ed. Julian Boyd (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1950) 1:406.

patriots, including some who were senior to him and in a better position to do the actual procuring.<sup>37</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that some of the “hot burgesses” to whom the governor referred, and very possibly the Lee family specifically, had greater involvement in recruiting a new printer than did Jefferson. When Rind moved to Williamsburg, he lived in and worked out of a brick house on Duke of Gloucester Street that belonged to Philip Ludwell III, uncle of the Lee brothers: Thomas Ludwell, Richard Henry, Francis Lightfoot, William, and Arthur. Richard Henry Lee and Arthur Lee contributed many essays to Rind’s newspapers, and in 1770, William Lee inherited “The Mansion” in which Rind lived. Edmund Randolph, who was a young contemporary in 1766, describes a new group of burgesses at the time of the Stamp Act, who very likely correspond with the governor’s “hot burgesses.” Randolph suggests that new “upper counties,” farther from the old power base of the James River, were supplying burgesses who were no longer displayed the traditional “fortune, rank, and perhaps fashion.” He mentions specifically Patrick Henry, John Fleming, and George Johnston. Later Randolph lauded the oratory and patriotism of Richard Henry Lee, who Godfrey also included in the group.<sup>38</sup> These were men who supported Henry’s resolves against the Stamp Act and who later became leading Virginia patriots, supporting the American Revolution.

The selection of William Rind to be official “Public Printer” of the Virginia colony was a disputed one. In November 1766, four different printers, or groups of printers, petitioned the burgesses for the appointment. The successors to the former public printer, the deceased Joseph

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<sup>37</sup> Godfrey, “Printers of Virginia Gazettes,” 249-250, is the only writer who apparently got this correct. She concluded that Jefferson was likely only an interested onlooker at the time.

<sup>38</sup> Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia*, ed. Arthur H. Shaffer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for The Virginia Historical Society, 1970), 167-168, and 184. Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 247-248.

Royle, were a likely leading candidate, but Alexander Purdie and John Dixon's combined petition received only 10 votes in the House of Burgesses, while Robert Miller received 17 votes, William Stark 19 votes, and Rind received a majority of 53 votes. The governor and his council later agreed, despite the fact that the Royle/Purdie & Dixon press had a history of subservience, and Rind was paid £375 a year for his official printing.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that someone with a great deal of influence in the government—which Jefferson did not yet have—lobbied hard to get Rind this appointment.

Rind's arrival and appointment as official printer meant that there was now competition for local printing in Virginia, and that had an immense impact on the printed material available in the colony. Two printing houses now operated in Williamsburg.<sup>40</sup> Rind immediately undercut his rivals' newspaper sales price, from 15 shillings per yearly subscription to 12 shillings, 6 pence. The new paper was originally called, *Rind's Virginia Gazette*, but soon the printer removed his name from the title, leaving the colony with two newspapers with the exact same name.<sup>41</sup> The very first issue of Rind's paper boldly stated his intent to run "a well conducted NEWS-PAPER" which he noted was essential just then, "especially at a Crisis, which makes a quick Circulation of Intelligence peculiarly interesting to all the AMERICAN COLONIES." The only extant copy of this issue has an interesting editorial insertion penned in, apparently by the original owner, noting this is the first well-conducted newspaper ever in the colony: "and the first

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<sup>39</sup> *Journals of the House of Burgesses* (Nov. 7, 1766), 11:18, 11:72, 11:75. Purdie began publishing the *Virginia Gazette* under his name, but soon joined with Dixon in a partnership.

<sup>40</sup> (It is not clear from the records who Robert Miller or William Stark were or what happened to them after they lost the vote, but only two print shops remained.)

<sup>41</sup> "Gazette" was the name normally used for the official newspaper, and Rind may have dropped his name from the masthead because official business traditionally went to the *Virginia Gazette*. See Godfrey, "Printers of the Virginia Gazette," 254.

that has ever been Established in this Province.” While that writer is unknown, his comment does demonstrate the hope of Virginia residents of 1766 to have a better-run newspaper that would be freer to publish criticism of the government. Rind claimed his newspaper would be, “Open to all parties, but influenced by none.”<sup>42</sup>

The original *Virginia Gazette* was quick to join the competitive fray, matching the new competitor’s moves and gaining for itself a reputation as a “free press.” Now published by Alexander Purdie, who was soon joined by John Dixon, they quickly matched the lower price, and even announced a new, open press policy, before Rind’s even came out: “my press shall be as free as any Gentleman can wish or desire; that is, as free as any publick press upon the continent.”<sup>43</sup> Just a few months later, two writers arguing opposing sides of an issue did agree on one thing. The press run by Purdie and Dixon was now well-run and renowned for its freedom: “the press, one of the principal handmaids of liberty, is become a free channel of conveyance whereby men may communicate their sentiments on every subject that may contribute to the good of their country,” and “You, Sir, have behaved yourself as the director of a press ought to do.” However, these writers’ praise was for both presses.<sup>44</sup> A notice in Purdie’s paper acknowledged that only with real competition, only with at least two newspapers, could a free flow of information be sustained. With the loss of the government subsidy, Purdie was in danger of being forced out of business, and he pleaded with the “friends of liberty” to help keep his newspaper and print shop in business; “we have reason to believe it the almost universal desire

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<sup>42</sup> *Rind’s Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg; William Rind, May 16, 1766) 1:1. The original is at the New York Historical Society; see Clarence Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Worcester; American Antiquarian Society, 1947), 2:1160-1163.

<sup>43</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie, March 28, 1766), 3.

<sup>44</sup> “Philanthropos,” and “A Man of Principle,” *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Aug. 22, 1766), 1, and 2.

that there should be two presses maintained, for the security of freedom to one or both.”<sup>45</sup> It was believed that only with two presses, only with print competition, could the press be free.

For a short period of time, Rind included a claim that his was the official newspaper, demonstrating that this was a confusing transition period for the press. The masthead of his version of the *Virginia Gazette* included the claim, “Published by Authority,” beginning early in 1767, just months after his appointment as “Public Printer.”<sup>46</sup> This phrase had often been used in English papers since the days of licensing to indicate an official government imprint, but it had never before been used in Virginia.<sup>47</sup> In a letter published in the other *Virginia Gazette*, “A Man of Principle” wrote questioning that claim: “Several of your readers are very solicitous to know what authority you have for publishing a paper now, more than formerly. Some, I suppose of the most intelligent, allege that because you have had the good fortune (for certainly you cannot ascribe it to anything else) to be chosen Publick Printer, that gives you an exclusive privilege.” The author pointed out that anyone who wished could publish a newspaper and call it the *Virginia Gazette*.<sup>48</sup> This demonstrates the confusion of the period, as printers shifted from functioning as official government printers to public businesses. While Rind still had a lucrative government contract, the profit center had shifted to one where satisfying the public was paramount. By July, Rind had dropped from his masthead the claim that he published by

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<sup>45</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 27, 1766), 1.

<sup>46</sup> The *Virginia Gazette* Rind published at the end of December 1766 did not include this claim. The first extant issue of the next year, February 19, 1767, includes the phrase, “Published by Authority” in the masthead on the top of page one.

<sup>47</sup> Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 254.

<sup>48</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Feb. 12, 1767), 2.

authority.<sup>49</sup> The newspaper in Virginia had moved from a quasi-governmental source to one where public opinion and marketplace competition was paramount.

The content in the pages of the two gazettes reflect this change. With an enormous amount of coverage of the Stamp Act crisis and later taxation issues, neither newspaper any longer displayed the tendency to buckle under royal pressure. The two *Virginia Gazettes* ran more stories critical of the colonial government, Parliament, and the British ministry, including stories that would not have run just a few years earlier. Purdie's paper printed an item that referred to the Stamp Act as a flagrant violation of the British constitution, and called the idea of virtual representation in Parliament a "despicable subterfuge."<sup>50</sup> Each newspaper also covered the scandal following the death of the very powerful Virginia Treasurer and Speaker of the House of Burgesses, John Robinson. It was discovered that he had illegally loaned some £100 thousand of public money. One planter complained that "very large Sums of the Public Money have been misapplied," and recommended that in the future, the offices of treasurer and house speaker be held by separate individuals. He noted that his participation in this civic debate "would not have been in my Power without the Benefit of a Free Press."<sup>51</sup> Both newspapers ran letters critical of several of the colony's chief justices regarding their actions in the killing of Robert Roulidge by Colonel John Chiswell.<sup>52</sup> As Godfrey concluded, "Rind and Purdie ...

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<sup>49</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, July 23, 1767), 1, no longer ran this claim. The March 12 issue still did. There are no extant issues in between.

<sup>50</sup> From the *Gentleman's Magazine*, quoted in the *Virginia Gazette* (April 4, 1766), 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Rind's Virginia Gazette* (August 8, 1766), 2.

<sup>52</sup> The well-connected Chiswell was released from jail without bail after a very public murder. Several of Virginia's leading elite, members of the Governor's Council and members of the highest court came under intense scrutiny for his release. See for example, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, July 18, 1766), 2, (Purdie & Dixon, Sept. 12, 1766), 2. J. A. Leo Lemay, "Robert Bolling and the Bailment of Colonel Chiswell," *Early American Literature* 6 (1971), 127 suggests that Rind's *Virginia Gazette* of Jan. 1, 1767 also published at least one letter, but the issue is no longer extant. See also Jack Greene, "'Virtus et Libertas': Political Culture, Social Change, and the

provided the same voice for the community.”<sup>53</sup> This was not simply because of Royle’s death, as Godfrey noted, rather it was primarily because of the new commercial pressures requiring both printers to respond to the needs of the customers. After a second printer arrived in the colony, leading political elites, the Parliament, and the British Ministry were subject to criticism on the pages of the Virginia newspapers. Civic discourse in the colony, as displayed in the public prints, had reached a level of criticism not seen earlier.

### Conclusion

The myth of Thomas Jefferson corresponding with Isaiah Thomas, confirming that he invited Rind to bring his printing press to Virginia, offers a patent example of questionable memory, misinterpretation, and weak historical method. For nearly two hundred years, authors have passed on Thomas’ story—even elaborated on it—without checking out its veracity. Human memory is not as precise as we sometimes presume, and our language is often ambiguous. “We procured Rind ...” did not mean that Jefferson himself was a leading actor, as several historians have inferred from the line. Jefferson did not have the means to arrange Rind’s election to the public printer post.

More importantly, closer examination of the situation reveals much more about the evolution of print—and press freedom. The character of the newspapers in the colony of Virginia changed as competition came to Williamsburg. The causes of this transformation were more complex than simply because Jefferson or other patriots had imported a new printer to publish a newspaper with more radical sentiments. New competitive pressures that accompanied an

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Origins of the American Revolution in Virginia, 1762-1766,” in Jeffrey J. Crow, and Larry E. Tise, ed. *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 55-108, and Lemay, “Robert Bolling and the Bailment of Colonel Chiswell,” 99-142.

<sup>53</sup> Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 289.

emerging consumer economy brought a change in factors of power and domination. Government control dramatically lessened, and marketplace pressures became paramount. The Virginia press became freer, more open to a wider range of opinions, including those critical of powerful members of government. Dissent was printed openly, even harsh words aimed at the elites written by those farther down the social scale. The new competition in the newspaper and overall printing business in Williamsburg assured a broader public of more outlets for wider viewpoints. The new printer did not provide the only open press, however. The older press, now run by Royle's successors, proved just as open to the faction that eventually became the patriots. Governmental pressure no longer reigned supreme. Civic discourse in the colony of Virginia had broadened and become more radical.

Such new discourse and the economic competition that spurred it led to the flowering of an important new concept in pre-revolutionary Virginia. The Declaration of Rights and its article protecting a free press come directly from the recognition that such open discussion was essential to a republican government and that such discourse was impossible when a powerful and potentially corrupt government could control the press. This was the first explicitly stated constitutional guarantee for press liberty and both directly and indirectly inspired the free press clause in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.<sup>54</sup> Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, and other founders of this nation realized that only through a competitive, unfettered, and potentially annoying free press could a powerful government be balanced in the public interest.

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<sup>54</sup> The conclusion of the evolution of the free press doctrine is more completely developed in another paper by this author; Roger Mellen, "Liberty of the Press: The Emergence of the Constitutional Doctrine in Colonial Virginia," (being presented at the AEJMC Convention, Law and Policy Division, August 11, 2007), available at <http://mason.gmu.edu/~rmellen/liberty.pdf>.

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