

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### *The Revival of the Aurora: a Letter to Tench Coxe*

IN THE Historical Society of Pennsylvania's recently acquired Brinton Coxe collection there is a letter from William Duane to Tench Coxe in which Duane describes the circumstances of the *Aurora* shortly after the death of its publisher, Benjamin Franklin Bache. Bache had died on September 10, 1798, a victim of yellow fever, and immediately publication of the *Aurora* had ceased. There seemed to be some question as to whether it would resume.<sup>1</sup>

Newspaper publishers throughout the colonial and early national periods complained frequently that their papers were dubious assets. Mathew Carey, for one, had sold his *Pennsylvania Evening Herald* after publishing it for less than two years. Evidently, he was quite happy to be rid of such a questionable property. The *Aurora* was no exception: Duane estimated that the paper's accounts receivable amounted to something more than \$15,000 in 1798.<sup>2</sup>

Under the terms of Bache's will his widow Margaret Bache inherited the *Aurora* as well as all the rest of Bache's property. The will named Richard Bache, her father-in-law, Dr. Adam Kuhn, and Joseph Clay as executors but gave them no special or discretionary powers. The executors must have found their position somewhat difficult. They were doubtless aware that with the suspension of the *Aurora* the Republicans were deprived of their most influential and effective voice in the nation's capital at a particularly unfortunate time. The XYZ affair still rankled. The Sedition Act, under which Bache himself had been arrested in June, was still on the books. And, although only four days after Bache had died the fever claimed

<sup>1</sup> The Brinton Coxe collection, as distinct from the papers of Tench Coxe, was received in 1970. A brief notice of Bache's death can be found in the *Gazette of the United States*, Sept. 11, 1798. For a brief publication history of the *Aurora*, see Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Worcester, Mass., 1947), II, 891.

<sup>2</sup> Brigham, II, 930.

John Fenno, publisher of the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*, Fenno's son continued the *Gazette* without interruption.<sup>3</sup>

It appears that the executors attempted to balance political concerns with their obligations to the family by advising Margaret Bache to sell the paper. There is some evidence that Bache himself might have suggested it in a memorandum he wrote to Coxe shortly before his death. Whatever the reason, Coxe, acting in concert with Joseph Clay, wrote to Duane shortly after Bache died making inquiries about the paper. Although Coxe's letter has not survived, it is clear from Duane's reply that Coxe was deeply interested in the *Aurora's* future. Coxe seems to have suggested that a number of Republican purchasers might be induced to underwrite the financially ailing but politically necessary *Aurora*. Coxe's questions would naturally have been directed to Duane, who had been Bache's associate on the paper. Moreover, Duane had remained in town during the epidemic, while Margaret Bache had moved her family to her father-in-law's country house, "Settle," and possibly had access to Bache's books.<sup>4</sup>

Duane's reply raises almost as many questions as it answers. For, while it tells us something of the *Aurora's* circulation and distribution patterns, it does not tell us whether Duane had been offered the editorship of the revived paper. Nor does it tell us whether Coxe and Clay were successful in finding prospective purchasers. Circumstantial evidence suggests that an offer had been made and that a purchaser was found. At all events, Duane was the paper's editor when it reappeared on November 1. And, significantly, the style of proprietorship changed shortly after the *Aurora* reappeared. From November 1 to 13 it was published by Margaret Bache. Beginning with the issue of November 14, it was published "for the heirs of Benjamin Franklin Bache." The change in wording suggests a change in the paper's ownership, but the exact details of the arrange-

<sup>3</sup> Bache's will is found as item 35, Book Y, Will books, Philadelphia County (on film at HSP). The first issue under the editorship of John Ward Fenno appeared Sept. 17, 1798.

<sup>4</sup> A check of the letter books in the as yet unopened papers of Tench Coxe has failed to yield Coxe's letter. Political angels for newspapers were certainly not unusual in Pennsylvania. Probably the best known were Joseph Galloway and Thomas Wharton, whose relationship with William Goddard is chronicled in Goddard's *The Partnership: or the History of the Rise and Progress of the Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, 1770). On Clay see *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1949* (Washington, D. C., 1950), 987.

ment must await further investigation when the Tench Coxe papers are opened to scholars.

In certain other respects the Duane letter is more satisfactory. It confirms, for example, the symbiotic relationship between a newspaper and the printing office, and, indeed, that the printing office was the more important part of the relationship. One learns, too, that time-worn business habits of printers still obtained in 1798: the fact that separate sets of books were kept for the paper and for the printing office illustrates the survival of venture accounting. And, under Bache, it appears that the circulation and distribution patterns of the *Aurora* did not differ markedly from those of other Philadelphia newspapers, whatever their political persuasion. Philadelphia's papers went south and west, following the city's trade. Subscription rates within the city and advertising rates seem to have been about the same as those of the competition; at least they squared with the *Gazette of the United States*.<sup>5</sup>

On the day Duane wrote to Coxe an advertisement appeared in the *Gazette of the United States*. In it Duane denied the rumor that the *Aurora* was dead. He stated, somewhat disingenuously, that it was only a "want of hands" that kept the paper from reappearing. And, on November 1 the *Aurora* did resume publication. But who was footing the bill?

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<sup>5</sup> The term venture accounting is used here to describe that system of business record-keeping which treats each business activity as a separate venture, the profit or loss for which is individually determined on pages in the ledger. To be sure, modern businesses use ledgers, but what is suggested here is a set of attitudes unconcerned with determining what one's real over-all position is. One of the best documented distribution patterns is that of William Bradford's *Pennsylvania Journal*. See the "List of Subscribers . . . 1775 . . ." in the Col. William Bradford Papers, HSP.

Philadelphia, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1798

Tench Coxe, Esq<sup>r</sup>

Sir,

A report having been spread in town on Saturday that M<sup>rs</sup> Bache was dead, I thought it expedient to go to Settle, and ascertain the course I had to pursue in the event of the report being true. I was happy, however, to find her all children and all the family in perfect health.

Your Queries to me which I had forwarded to her as you desired she returned; there are several of them to which I can give no answers.

1. About 700 Subscribers in Philadelphia
2. About 5 to 600 in the country
3. Cannot estimate the proportion in Pennsylvania
4. Very few north—Except N. York, where there are 40.
5. The annual Subscription 8 dollars, the Aurora sent at the charge of the proprietor, other daily papers charge a dollar extra.
6. For the daily paper, half-a-year paid in advance. (The subscription includes the daily and 3 times a week paper, for the latter the subscription for a year or half year is always paid in advance.)
7. Advertisements are inserted 1 square 3 times for a dollar, half a dollar for a single insertion
8. I do not know what articles are meant to be transferred, beside the proprietorship of a share in the property of the paper
9. I cannot anticipate the probable terms of payment on Security. I should presume from my conversation at Settle that credit was out of the consideration; but more of this when I have the pleasure of seeing you.
10. As to the inducements to purchasers, and M<sup>r</sup> B's doubts, these would require a separate explanation which I shall give as well as I can in a future letter.
11. This query is very comprehensive. I must therefore answer it in a future letter.
12. The neat annual income I don't know; I never looked into any of Mr. B's regular books it was out of my province.
13. I cannot say precisely what the outstanding arrears are, on either account of paper, advertisements, or common printing, but from some conversations which I had with Mr. B. I suppose that there is due south of the Delaware between 15 & 20,000 Dollars! Mark this plain observation from experience *Newspaper debts are the worst of all others!*
14. I cannot form an idea of the value of the Office that might be expected to continue; but I am sure the Separation of the paper from the Office would essentially injure both.

15. Since the 1st of July there has been near 200 additional subscribers, there have been some since Mr. B's death, but I have not the letters by me to ascertain the number; great anxiety is expressed about the revival of the paper, and I presume upon many new Subscribers immediately as it is published.

The remaining answers I shall take with me tomorrow to Germantown, where I am very anxious to see you and Mr Clay, if possible together, in order to mention some matters of the utmost interest to the *Aurora*. Excuse the paper and hasty writing.

Your faithful and grateful ser<sup>t</sup>  
Wm Duane