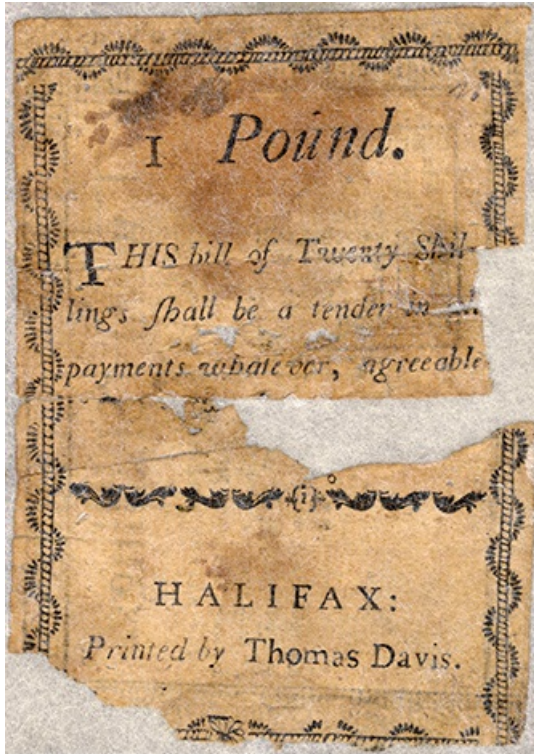


Davis, Thomas ^[1]

Davis, Thomas

by Thomas A. Bowers, 1986

8 Mar. 1761–after 1790



A 20 shilling (1 pound) note printed by Thomas Davis between 1783 and 1785 . "Money, Paper, Accession #: H.1971.96.1." 1783-1785. North Carolina Museum of History.

^[2]Thomas Davis, printer and journalist, was one of three sons of James Davis ^[3], the colony's first printer and journalist at New Bern. Thomas was the only son to enter the printing trade. In a letter of 2 Nov. 1778 to Governor Richard Caswell ^[4], James Davis said Thomas was his "chief hand in the Office, and if he goes, I must be forced to drop the Newspaper" ^[5]." This suggestion of Thomas's importance to his father's *North Carolina Gazette* ^[6] was affirmed by the suspension of its publication in late November 1778 about the time young Davis was drafted into the army. He returned to the New Bern area in late 1781 or early 1782 and began to make preparations to succeed his father as state printer. In a 15 Feb. 1782 letter to Governor Thomas Burke ^[7], Thomas Davis reminded Burke of a promise to arrange for a wagon to move his press to Halifax and expressed a desire to set up his equipment before the General Assembly met. On 18 May 1782 the Assembly approved his appointment as public printer.

Davis's term as public printer was beset with difficulty, largely caused by shortages of essential supplies. In September 1783 a citizen wrote to Governor Alexander Martin ^[8] to complain about the lack of printed laws ^[9] in the state. The letter said other printers, including one from Philadelphia, had applied for the job, and suggested that action be taken if the current state printer, Davis, did not print the laws correctly and punctually. In 1784, however, he was reappointed, relieved of some of his responsibilities for delivering the printed laws, and granted an annual salary of £500. On 20 Nov. 1784 a senate committee refused his request to be paid for expenses and labor instead of the salary. It also recommended that Charles Cist of Philadelphia be induced to come to North Carolina to take Davis's place, maintaining the laws could be printed faster and cheaper under someone other than Davis. In December 1785 the General Assembly selected the firm of Arnett and Hodge to replace Davis. When James Davis died in 1785, he left Thomas his printing office at the corner of Broad and Front streets in New Bern and some book binding material.

While engaged in state printing, Davis resumed the newspaper career that had been interrupted by the war. A letter from James Iredell ^[10] to his wife in March 1784 suggested that a newspaper was being published in Halifax. Since Davis was the public printer, he was the most likely publisher. The name of the newspaper is not known, and no copies have been located. The 9 Dec. 1784 issue of *The North Carolina Gazette* at New Bern says it was printed for Thomas Davis, suggesting he may have had some affiliation with the newspaper established by his father and continued by Robert Keith ^[11]. There is also some evidence that Davis published another *North Carolina Gazette* in Hillsborough in 1785 and 1786. A

27 July 1785 letter from Major Robert Fenner^[12] to Governor Caswell implied the existence of a newspaper at Hillsborough. A 16 Feb. 1786 issue of a *North Carolina Gazette* does not bear a city imprint, but the fact that most advertisements were for Hillsborough establishments has led historians to conclude that it was published in Hillsborough. A note at the bottom of the first page says it was printed by Robert Ferguson^[13] for Thomas Davis, which suggests that Davis was an absentee owner. This is the last known reference to Thomas Davis.

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