

016 ASPLUND, JOHN – [REV. JOHN ASPLUND]

Publisher

Norfolk, Richmond

Publisher of religious tracts issued from presses in Norfolk and Richmond in the 1790s.

Asplund was an influential Baptist minister of the early-Republic era who employed presses in both Norfolk and Richmond to advance his ministry and to trace the rapid growth of Baptist congregations through the faith's first statistical registers.

The venerated nineteenth-century histories of the Baptist Church all relate the same story of Asplund's life. He was a native of Sweden, who emigrated to Great Britain just before the Revolutionary War to seek his fortune as a merchant there; he then "joined" the Royal Navy during the war, but deserted his vessel while it patrolled the coast of the new United States, suggesting that he had actually been impressed. Asplund settled in North Carolina along the Chowan River near Edenton. There he came under the influence of the Baptist divine, David Walsh, who baptized him into the Ballard's Bridge Church in 1782. Shortly thereafter, he moved upriver to Southampton County, Virginia, and began an evangelical ministry of his own there. His travels evidently exposed him to the many varieties of the Baptist faith then practiced in the upper South, resulting in an aspiration to record the variations in doctrine in order to facilitate building a theological unity among the faithful. Asplund returned to Europe, visiting Britain, Scandinavia, and the Continent, to uncover the roots of Baptism, before returning to America to catalogue the differences to be found here. Starting in 1785, he traversed the country for about two years in total, walking about 7000 miles in all, "convinced I could not better spend my time, than in itinerating to preach the gospel, and to collect materials which may assist the future historians...." Once back in Southampton, he carefully compiled this material into a form suitable for publication.

Asplund discovered that the most telling difference between "Baptist" congregations was whether they proffered an open (Arminian) communion or a closed (Calvinist) one. With the conventional Baptist view favoring a closed communion, worship limited to adherents, he published a tract designed to effect conformity on that issue at the Norfolk office of William Prentis (340) & Daniel Baxter (027) in 1790. This was the first of several such pamphlets he published over the next few years, though normally using New England presses instead.

That change in presses was tied, it seems, to problems that surfaced with his larger project, the detailed register of Baptist churches and congregations. In early 1791, he engaged Richmond's largest printers – John Dixon (140), Thomas Nicolson (315), and Augustine Davis (119) – to produce the component parts of his *Annual Register of the Baptist denomination in North-America*. But it would take a full year for the three to complete the work, and then significant parts of it were reprinted in a second edition issued that same year from the press of Thomas Dobson in Philadelphia. Evidently, the finished Virginia work was not up to Pennsylvania standards, and so it was promptly replaced. When Asplund updated and expanded his *Register* in 1794, only Dixon was employed in its production; and even then, he engaged a Boston press to print a more-polished second edition once again. By the time of the *Register's* third iteration in 1796, Asplund had abandoned the Richmond presses

completely, so ending his relationship with the Virginia printing trade.

These subsequent revisions of Asplund's *Register* added to the miles he travelled and the people he came to know; they also added to the demand for his preaching among Baptist congregations throughout the upper South. This meant that further updates to the Register were dispensed with after 1796, despite the denomination's continued growth. In 1797, he published his last imprint, an imaginary travelogue promoting his Baptist perspective, from a New Hampshire press. But thereafter, Asplund concentrated exclusively on his itinerant ministry, leaving literary efforts to others, working out of a base in western Maryland.

Fittingly, Asplund died while so engaged in 1807, drowning after falling out of a canoe trying to cross Fishing Creek in Ohio County, Virginia, a site near today's New Martinsville, West Virginia. While all of his biographers have sung his praises, none recorded his age.

Personal Data

Born: Before 1755 In Sweden.

Died: In 1807 Fishing Creek, VA (today Wetzel County, WV).

No personal data yet discovered; likely died unmarried.

Sources: Imprints; Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*; Semple, *History & Progress*; Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*; Sprague, *Annals* (Baptists).

Modern bibliographers have long noted the inferior work of Nicolson's press; such is evinced by a small pamphlet he produced for Asplund in 1793, whose craft appears ancient compared to his contemporaries, suggesting the reasons why he was by-passed in 1794. Davis had become the state's public printer, so was likely too busy to help in 1794.