

034 BIRCH, THOMAS ERSKINE

Editor & Publisher

Evansham (now Wytheville)

Publisher of an oratorical collection in Richmond in 1808, and of the newspaper *Signi Argus* (1812) in Evansham, the seat of Wythe County.

Birch was primarily an educator, having regularly maintained some form of a school from his arrival in Virginia after the Revolutionary War. But his life before that was one of transience and warfare. Born in the Caribbean, he attended school in England until the death of his father in 1768; thereafter, he was a ward of his uncle, the Rev. John Neville Birch, who may have groomed the young man to the Anglican ministry. In 1778 or 1779, Birch fled Britain, purportedly to join the American cause, sailing for Tenerife in the Canary Islands, a neutral port, in search of a vessel bound for the United States. There he found the *South Carolina*, a frigate in that state's navy, and signed on. After about a year on board, the ship returned to Philadelphia for refitting; wanting to continue at sea and not ashore, Birch sought a commission in Maryland's navy; given a lieutenancy, he spent the rest of the war patrolling the Chesapeake Bay.

Birch remained in the country at war's end, and was living in central Virginia by 1792, when he married his first wife, Elizabeth Bohannon Murray, in Richmond. The couple removed to Prince Edward County, where he continued to teach; it also seems that he was exposed there to the potential of a clerical ministry in a land where the controls his uncle had faced no longer applied. Eventually, Birch became a Methodist minister, of uncertain orthodoxy, though it is unclear when, or if, he was formally ordained. What is clear is that by 1806, he was officiating at weddings in Virginia's southwestern reaches; it is also clear that by 1808, he was the preceptor of the Anchor & Hope Academy in Evansham, a school built by the Presbyterian church there. Birch had relocated to Wythe County about 1800 after the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1798; he settled there with his second wife, Mary Magdalene Miller, and continued to both teach and preach as before.

It was during this Wythe County period that Birch experimented with publishing. First was a collection of Fourth of July orations, entitled the *Virginian Orator*, issued in 1808 from the Richmond press of Samuel Pleasants (331). Birch sent a copy of his little book to Thomas Jefferson in 1812, apparently looking for his endorsement of the work via an exchange of letters. The timing of that exchange is intriguing. At that moment, Birch was attempting to publish a new literary weekly – called *Signi Argus*, roughly, "the sign of the guardian" – at this small cross-roads town. Why he would think such was a viable possibility may be tied to the availability of a printing press; one formerly used to publish *The Republican Luminary* of Robert Engledow (158) and William A. Dromgoole (149) was nearby, likely producing job-printing then, following that newspaper's demise in 1810. However, Birch would be twice disappointed that year; no endorsement was forthcoming from Monticello, and his novel newspaper lived but a short time.

Birch now returned to his work as teacher and preacher, but in a new venue. In late 1812, he moved his family to Kentucky. That year they traveled to Washington County (Abingdon Academy), then to Russell County in 1816 (Amity Hail Academy), and finally to Harrison

County in 1818 (Washington Academy). At each stop, his reputation seems to have been enhanced while his financial situation declined. These relocations impoverished him with the poor salaries paid to him; it was a condition only worsened by the increasing expense of his continually growing family – eventually numbering twelve children. From his new home at Cynthiana, Birch began a campaign to gain a federal pension for his service during the Revolution; he was denied because his service was in state forces, not continental ones. While still appealing that decision, Birch died in January 1821 – a result of wartime injuries his family claimed -- just ten days after the birth of his last daughter. This benefactor of the young had left his own in genteel poverty.

Personal Data

Born: Aug. 22 1763 Island of St. Christopher (today St. Kitts).
Married [1]: --- 1792 Elizabeth Murray @ Richmond, VA (d. 1798)
Married [2]: June 1 1803 Mary Miller @ Montgomery County, VA
Died: Jan. 31 1821 Cynthiana, Harrison County, KY
Children: By Elizabeth: Charles Clay (b. 1793), John Neville (b. 1795).
By Mary: James Hervey (b. 1804), Weston Favell (b. 1805),
Tryphosa (b. 1806), Olivia (b. 1807), Anna (b. 1809), Tryphena
Wellesley (b. 1810), Thomas Erskine Jr. (b. 1815), Margaret (b.
1817), Mary Magdalene (b. 1818), and Martha (b. 1821).

Sources: Imprint (S/S 14526a); O'Neil, *Birch Family History*; Kegley, *Wythe County*; his newspaper is not found in any standard bibliography.