043   BOURNE, GEORGE – [REV. GEORGE BOURNE]

Proprietor & Publisher   **Staunton, Harrisonburg**

Publisher of religious tracts in the Shenandoah Valley (1813-15); proprietor of Theological Printing Office in Harrisonburg (1813-15) with Rev. Andrew B. Davidson (116) and employer there of Lawrence Wartmann (431).

Bourne was an English immigrant who came to America in 1805 in search of a ministerial situation. He initially settled in Baltimore, taking up editorial duties at the new Baltimore *Evening Post* of John L. Cook (105), while continuing his job search. After a year, financial difficulties turned him to book and pamphlet publishing. As a result of that work, he connected with the world of Presbyterian evangelicism, particularly with such adherents then living in Rockbridge County, Virginia. He moved to New Glasgow, east of Lexington, to start a school and begin an itinerant ministry in the central Valley. In late 1811, Bourne was admitted into the Lexington Presbytery and assigned to a circuit in Rockingham and Augusta counties. A year later, he helped form a new parish along the South River in Rockingham, opening the doors to a newly-built church in Port Republic on Christmas Day 1812.

That event became the foundation of Bourne's Virginia publishing career. He had already published a treatise on education through the Staunton press of Isaac Collett (100) in 1810; Bourne now employed Collett to publish his ordination sermon at the recommendation of Rev. Andrew B. Davidson, minister at Rockingham County's Cook's Creek parish. Davidson had been using the New Market press of Ambrose Henkel (214) to produce such works for him. Each minister now recognized the other as a potential partner for a broader imprint-based evangelical effort; they chose Harrisonburg – a market town equidistant from their rural parishes – as the headquarters for that effort. The new firm of Davidson & Bourne began publishing in early 1813 at their new Theological Printing Office. They employed Henkel's foreman, Lawrence [Laurentz] Wartmann, as their printer, on a part-time basis at first, but full time in 1814. With a press now at hand, Bourne and Davidson ramped up production of religious imprints, creating the Virginia Religious Tract Society to help to distribute their "cheap pious books" as a "very useful method of spreading the knowledge of religion" with the approval of the Lexington Presbytery.

Yet in the summer of 1814, the project came to an abrupt end, with Davidson disavowing Bourne and his ministry. Their bitter parting was the result of the antislavery message that had come to dominate Bourne's preaching. His increasingly strident words began to limit both his audience and effectiveness. All of the Davidson & Bourne imprints focused on the credo of living a scripturally-based life and calling out those that did not follow that course. Bourne now included the slave-owning Davidson among the sinful. From the beginning of his South River church, complaints were made about him to the Lexington Presbytery itself. Bourne family lore speaks of his house being trashed in early 1812 by angry neighbors who objected to his antislavery preaching. Now the increasing stridency of his ministry put him fast on the path to ruin.

Unlike his antislavery contemporaries, Bourne's objections were not rights-based; they were rooted in scripture, like the rest of his ministry. For him slavery violated the Eighth Commandment: "Thou shalt not Steal;" slavery was "man-stealing" – a term he used to describe the practice throughout his life. Hence slaves were not the issue, per se; rather the issue was the ongoing sin of slaveholders in the owning of slaves, and anyone who did not immediately relinquish their slaves could not be a true Christian. In voicing that message, he evinced open disrespect for slaveholders in Rockingham County. His refusal to accept them into his church was both overt and common knowledge, as well as uncivil. Eventually, the Lexington Presbytery intervened. He was sent to the annual General Assembly in 1815 to seek an answer to his question: was slavery theft? The divide in that Assembly that resulted induced church leaders to defer a decision and leave Bourne's fate to Lexington alone. By years' end, they had determined that his service at South River was inimical to that parish's survival; he was suspended pending hearings concerning his orthodoxy. Disgusted, Bourne left Harrisonburg for Philadelphia on December 27th, never to return to Virginia again.

While in the Valley, Bourne had published about a dozen small imprints; he now moved on to larger works for national distribution. The first was his influential *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, published in Philadelphia in 1816. Its perspective made his break with the Presbyterian Church permanent. He moved on to New York and into the orbit of the likes of the Tappan brothers and William Lloyd Garrison. There Bourne published many anti-slavery works for an increasingly receptive audience, as did the series of anti-Catholic imprints he produced following a ministerial stint in Quebec in the 1820s. Garrison, for one, always declared that his understanding of the inherent evil of slavery, and so his calls for its immediate abolition, came from Bourne and from his assertion that slaveholding simply corrupted people and institutions, rather than disputing egalitarian principles as other abolitionists did. However, Bourne died in 1845, before the slavery crisis reached its peak and before most abolitionist voices became known, so sending this anti-slavery advocate, and his Virginia beginnings, into the shadows of the past, forgotten.

NB: Among bibliographers and historians of this era, there has been a confusion of Davidson with Ananias Davisson (129), another Rockingham County minister and publisher, evidently assuming misspellings of the men's names in the surviving imprints. In reality, Davisson published initially through Wartmann's Harrisonburg press, shortly after Bourne's exit from the area and the end of his partnership with Davidson; he later acquired his own press and began issuing his own Harrisonburg imprints in 1817. That date precedes Bourne's formal removal from his South River pulpit in 1818, but follows his actual departure in December 1815, a chronology overlooked in the confused identifications.

Personal Data

Born:	June 13	1780	Westbury, Wiltshire, England.
Married:	Sept. 6	1804	Mary Stibbs @ Bristol, Somerset, England.
Died:	Nov. 20	1845	New York City, New York.

Children: Samuel (b 1805), George (b. 1806), Mary (b. 1809), Christopher
(b. 1812), Rowland (b. 1812), Sarah (b. 1814), Francis (b. 1816),
Ulercy (b. 1819), William (b. 1819), Mercy (b. 1819), Theodore
(b. 1822).

Sources: Imprints, esp. *Publications, of the Virginia Religious Tract Society*; Christie and Dumond. *George Bourne*; Bourne. "Rev. George Bourne;" genealogical data from Bourne family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).