

074 CALDWELL, SAMUEL B.T. – [SAMUEL BROOKS TOBIE CALDWELL]

Publisher & Bookseller

Leesburg

Founder of Leesburg's *Genius of Liberty* (1817-19) and the foremost bookseller there from 1819 until the Civil War.

S. B. T. Caldwell was a New Englander who fate brought to Virginia "and kept me there and gave entirely a new direction to my business pursuits." Born in Weare, New Hampshire, just southwest of Concord, he was educated in Newburyport, Massachusetts, by the prominent educator Joshua Coffin and lawyer William B. Banister. Recognizing that the wars between Britain, France, and America had left that old port city economically prostrate, he relocated to Loudoun County early in 1816, intending to conduct a mercantile concern there. But once in Virginia, Caldwell was politicized by the immediate loss of his accustomed political rights, particularly that of his suffrage, ensuing from his non-property-holding status. As a result, he became a voice for universal suffrage and equal rights for the rest of his life.

His first public comment on Virginia's inequality was as a correspondent for the *Republican Constellation* of Jonathan Foster (168) in Winchester. But he soon found support closer to home and began his own newspaper in Leesburg in January 1817; the *Genius of Liberty* was a project backed by Loudoun Republicans, and immediately supported the candidacy of Armistead Thompson Mason (1787-1819), the young militia general who most recently had served as one of Virginia's U.S. Senators, for the Congressional seat held by local Federalist Charles Fenton Mercer (1778-1858); the bitter campaign ended with Mercer's reelection in April 1817, only to be followed by a challenge to those results in the pages of the *Genius of Liberty* in which Mason charged Mercer with rigging the vote in Leesburg by drawing on illegal voters. When Caldwell began publishing the paper, he vowed that his journal would be a Republican one, but he also promised that it would not be one "in name only; but in principle and practice" – holding to that course even as he challenged Virginia's aristocracy of whatever partisan stripe; the Mason/Mercer dispute was a perfect vehicle for doing so, as the contested votes were ones based on property-ownership in the district, and not on residence, as was becoming a national norm. As a result, after the House of Representatives had certified Mercer's election in November 1817, Mason shifted his focus to non-resident voters, including his Federalist cousin, John Mason McCarty (1795-1852), who had voted in Leesburg while living in Washington. The ensuing exchange between the kinsmen was even more intense than Mason's prior ones with Mercer, with McCarty repeatedly defending his actions in *The Washingtonian* of Patrick McIntyre (280), Caldwell's Federalist competitor, which was supported by Mercer and his friends. The interest that this dispute generated led each Leesburg publisher to reprint the exchange in carefully-edited pamphlets in the latter part of 1818, both increasing sales and keeping the enmity alive; hence, this personal and political conflict eventually drew challenges to a duel, with Mason's dying at McCarty's hand on the infamous Bladensburg dueling ground on February 6, 1819.

Throughout this period, Caldwell evidently found the physical demands of his new business challenging; he was not a printer, only an editor; so the actual production of his weekly was a burden that limited his ability to provide the other services expected of a press office, job-

printing and bookselling in particular. Moreover, the potentially fatal results of publishing political controversies in Virginia seem to have surprised the New-England-bred Caldwell. Shortly after Mason's death, he advertised his intentions to sell his Leesburg office in order to move to the west, a notice that gave him an opportunity to reorganize that summer. In September 1819, Caldwell sold his *Genius of Liberty* to a practical printer he found to be of "sound Republican principles," Brook Watson Sower (396), grandson of Christopher Sauer, the first German-language printer in America; Caldwell then rebuilt his residual bookselling business into a larger stationary, bookselling, and job-printing one – without actually having to leave the locality into which he had vested so much energy and interest.

Once so reorganized, Caldwell began to speak publically about political issues on his own behalf, eventually running for elective office after the existing property qualifications for suffrage and election had been modified by the constitutional convention of 1829-30. By then he was drifting into the realm of Henry Clay; Caldwell spoke for the elements of Clay's American System before the Kentuckian had himself articulated them. In 1817 and 1818, he had editorialized in favor of establishing a branch of the new Bank of the Valley in Leesburg when such a view was unpopular in the countryside and he pressed for federal legislation to improve navigation of the Potomac, Leesburg's commercial artery. At the same time, he continued to speak out for individual rights, going so far as to support women's suffrage in 1829 in advance of that winter's convention. But once serving in the Assembly, Caldwell's vocal opposition to the nullification movement of John C. Calhoun led to his defeat at the polls in 1832. His views were a unique mix of Whig economics and Jeffersonian principles, reflecting his sense that government should help and protect all of its citizens, not just the well connected.

While not a Quaker, these activities demonstrate that he had a sensibility consistent with Quaker values; so it is unsurprising to discover that he wed Mary Elizabeth Hough, a Quaker from adjacent Montgomery County, Maryland in 1824; her mother was the sister of the Quaker minister Edward Stabler of Alexandria. The Stabler men of northern Virginia were shrewd businessmen and determined emancipationists; Caldwell seems to have fit into that mold nicely as well. In the 1830s and 1840s, he built a series of grist mills on creeks west of Leesburg and so became a flour merchant; but he was also voicing opposition to slavery, as his Quaker relations did, apparently becoming involved in a new Leesburg paper intended to support gradual abolition in 1849, a journal that never reached fruition. The following year, he campaigned for further constitutional revisions that would shift substantial political power to Virginia's western counties where, he said, citizen literacy, merchant commerce, agricultural productivity, and industrial output dwarfed that of the over-represented east; he also advocated reforms to the tax system, suggesting a basis on property ownership, not on an enumeration of heads of households – the colonial-era titheable form.

Throughout all this activity, Caldwell remained a vital presence in print, even though not publishing much on his own; only twice, in political broadsides, did he take the lead in producing an imprint; rather, he was quoted in newspapers and had his speeches printed. His last appearance in print was just such an effort, issuing from Newburyport. He had been invited to a reunion of that town's "sons" who had moved on to other places and pursuits. Caldwell was explicit in his praise for what Newburyport had provided to him in his youth,

suggesting that such education "without money and without price" as he had received was something every state in the Union should provide their citizens, especially Virginia.

Still, he said his heart was now rooted in the Old Dominion; his mother, his wife, and three of their infant children were buried in its "consecrated soil" and he expected to join them there. And that was the case when a seventy-seven year-old Caldwell died at his farm at Wheatland, outside Leesburg, in early 1866.

Personal Data

Born: Jan. 8 1789 Weare, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire
Married: Jan. 31 1824 Mary Eliza. Hough @ Montgomery Cty., Md.
Died: Mar. 29 1866 Waterford, Loudoun County, Virginia
Children: Maria E. (b. 1824), Sallie Ann (b. 1826), Eliza (b. 1828), Cornelia L (b. 1833), George William (b. 1834), Chas. Edward (b. 1835), Augusta (b. 1838), Ella (b. 1842), Arthur Brooks (b. 1847).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Guide to Caldwell's papers at Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg; Poland, *Frontier to Suburbia; Reception of the Sons of Newburyport Resident Abroad* (1854); genealogical data from Caldwell and Stabler family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).