

## 100 COLLETT, ISAAC

Printer & Publisher

Winchester, Staunton

Printer in the office of the *Winchester Gazette* in 1808; then proprietor of the *Republican Farmer* (1808-1916) in Staunton from 1810 to 1823.

Collett was a native of the lower Shenandoah Valley who it appears trained as a printer in the press offices of Winchester. His life-long conservative political orientation indicates that he was groomed for the trade by Richard Bowen (045), that city's Federalist publisher. It is clear from surviving nineteenth-century accounts that Collet was working for Bowen when the aging proprietor died in June 1808; hence, he became the transitional figure in the transfer of Bowen's *Winchester Gazette* to William Heiskell (211), managing the office for both the old and new owners. Evidently, Collett hoped to remain in the area, having just married the daughter of another Winchester printer that spring; but the sale of Bowen's *Gazette* to another made it obvious that any chance the twenty-three year-old printer had for owning his own press and paper now lay beyond Winchester.

By the spring of 1810, Collett had moved on to Staunton, where he purchased the struggling *Republican Farmer* of William Gilman Lyford (272). Lyford had come to the Valley from New Hampshire in 1804 to print the *Virginia Telegraphe* for Samuel Walkup (426) in Lexington; but when that paper suspended publication that October, the New Englander relocated to Staunton to start another paper there in January 1805, the *Candid Review and Staunton Weekly Register*. He struggled with the *Review* for two years before suspending in the fall of 1807 to reorganize in the face of competition from the newly-founded *Staunton Eagle* of Jacob D. Dietrich (135); when Lyford started again in May 1808, his paper had become the *Staunton Political Censor*. By May 1810, he had renamed it again, as the *Republican Farmer*, but with little effect on its viability, even given the partisan setting of "Old Federal Augusta." Lyford sold his weekly to Collett and moved on to more profitable opportunities in Norfolk and Baltimore.

Collett immediately announced that his *Republican Farmer* would have "decidedly a Federal character." It was an apt declaration, as Collett understood his Virginia readers better than his New-England-born predecessor and prospered by that knowledge; so the Federalist paper with a Republican moniker was a conscious irony that he happily employed for the next thirteen years. The *Farmer* became the dominant journalistic voice in the central Valley. When Collett finally sold the paper to Kenton Harper (203) in 1823, he realized a profit that allowed his comfortable retirement as a gentleman farmer at just thirty-eight.

Yet, rather than withdrawing from Staunton's civic affairs, as many retired businessmen might, Collett remained an active community leader. By then, he had become an influential figure among Presbyterians in the region. From the start of his Staunton residence, Collett regularly published religious tracts approved by the Lexington Presbytery. Most notable among them were the series of pamphlets that he produced for Rev. Andrew B. Davidson (116) and Rev. George Bourne (043) in support of their evangelical publishing venture, the Virginia Religious Tract Society. Still, his most prominent role was probably that of master of the Staunton's Masonic Lodge, capping an involvement that ran from his first days in town;

indeed, the authoritative history of Masonry there reads as a history of Collett's activities rather than as a history of the organization. So it is no surprise that when Collett died in 1859, his funeral was attended by great Masonic ceremony and innumerable mourners.

***Personal Data***

Born: Aug. 28 1785 Jefferson (then Berkeley) County, Virginia.

Married: Apr. 14 1808 Julia Hass @ Winchester, Virginia.

Died: Oct. 27 1859 Staunton, Virginia.

Children: Daniel (b. 1809), Mildred (b. 1810), Mary (b. 1813), John (b. 1814), Elizabeth (b. 1818), Isaac (b. 1819), Joshua (b. 1822), Frederick (b. 1824), Moses (b. 1827), Jacob (b. 1833), Catharine (b. 1835).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; Brown, *Freemasonry in Staunton*; marriage notice, *Charlestown Farmers' Repository*, 6 May 1808; genealogical data from Collett family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).