

107 COTTOM, PETER

Bookseller & Publisher Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond, Lynchburg

Bookselling entrepreneur and publisher, at first with John A. Stewart (401) in Alexandria and Fredericksburg, then alone in Richmond and Lynchburg; brother of Richard Cottom (108).

The name of Cottom was perhaps the single best known of those associated with the sale of books, almanacs, prints, and music in early Republic Virginia. Peter Cottom was the founder of what became a family business, embracing brothers Samuel and Richard as well.

Cottom arrived in Alexandria in the mid-1790s from Ireland, suggesting – though never explicitly stated in print – that he had fled the troubles in his homeland before the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798 broke out. By April 1797, Cottom had already opened a small store there selling the "latest plays, novels, stationery," and sheet music then available. The musical aspect of his businesses always set him apart from his competitors as Cottom was an accomplished musician in his own right. In December 1799, after George Washington died, Cottom was a key figure at his funeral; he wrote the funeral march that was played on that occasion, as he and his Masonic brethren from Alexandria's Lodge No. 22 carried the late president's body through the extended rites. Years later, that early experience was one he still spoke of with pride and reverence.

Alexandria

After about a year in business, Cottom formed a partnership with another Irish émigré, John A. Stewart, late of Fredericksburg. Their combined efforts and divergent tastes worked well together, providing the basis for a profitable association that lasted fifteen years. The new firm of Cottom & Stewart immediately offered items that were not previously available in Cottom's store; from 1798, they carried a wide variety of "patterns of plain and printed paper hangings;" by 1802, they regularly advertised "new music and musical instruments" for sale; and then "valuable medicines" in 1803, a standard non-imprint item in bookstores of that time. Moreover, they adopted modern advertising techniques to promote their goods; by 1808, they were inserting long-running advertisements in the daily *Alexandria Advertiser* of Samuel Snowden (393), ones that often ran for a month at a time.

Their growing business, however, was faced with a challenge from outside Virginia by 1803; that year the Philadelphia publishing firm headed by John Conrad (103) established retail stores in Washington, Baltimore, Petersburg and Norfolk. At the same time, Philadelphia's Mathew Carey was establishing consignment agents across Virginia through the auspices of Mason Locke Weems (435), among others. Cottom & Stewart needed to grow or else face a diminishing share of the book-trade market. They moved first to claim the Fredericksburg area as their own; Stewart moved there in 1803 to open and operate a second Cottom & Stewart bookstore. Then they took a page out of the Philadelphians' book by increasing the scale of their imprint production, providing their two stores with reprint editions of popular titles at a lesser cost than they could buy them from another publisher. The titles issued were often religious ones, seemingly reflecting Stewart's influence, but Cottom's literary inclinations led to publishing songsters and novels as well. In their fifteen years together,

they produced an average of about four such imprints each year.

In 1810, the relationship between Cottom and Stewart began to change; by then, Cottom's brother Richard was working in their Alexandria headquarters, and he was looking for a stake of his own; thus he convinced his elder brother to finance another new bookstore in Petersburg, but with his own funds, and not those of the Cottom & Stewart firm; by July, Richard had opened his store there. With now divided loyalties, it was only a matter of time before the bookselling partners decided that each could survive without the other. They closed their Fredericksburg store in late 1810, with Stewart returning to Alexandria. But the end game now began, in the face of growing disruptions to their normal supply networks caused by the war in the Atlantic, and then by each man's service in the War of 1812. A formal dissolution of their partnership came in April 1813; Stewart kept their store in Alexandria, while Cottom took his buy-out to Richmond, opening a new independent store there in June or July.

Richmond

Cottom's first Richmond advertisements look much like his first ones in Alexandria in 1797: they downplay books in favor of the other merchandise that he offered for sale at his "Book & Stationary Store." But once again, Cottom began to add new elements to the mix, ones that apparently were not a part of the old Alexandria business. By 1814, he was advertising a "trunk manufactory" as a part of his store, and by 1815, he was promoting the new circulating library there as well. Over time, he also began to advertise his business as a "Law and Miscellaneous Bookstore," a reflection of Richmond's place as a legislative and judicial center. Yet, Cottom still offered musical and literary works, even as he published a noted collection of patriotic songs, *The American Star*, once the War of 1812 had ended; it went through three editions in its first year. Thus, even with a change in venue and the loss of a partner, Cottom still maintained a publishing program that was popular and profitable.

The single largest element in Cottom's publishing business was his annual almanac. His were produced in large quantities every fall, as were most such imprints, but Cottom branded his with varying title pages for differing markets, even though each version contained identical content otherwise. His first edition to follow this pattern came in 1803, when the opening a branch store expanded their geographic reach. Then, the 1804 almanac printed for Cottom & Stewart by Mathias Bartgis (024) in Frederick, Maryland, had the alternating titles of *The Farmer's Almanac* and *The Town & Country Almanac*; for 1807, the *Town & Country* version became *The Virginia Almanack*, which continued through an 1814 edition; for 1808, the partners added a *Fredericksburg Almanac* version, and for 1809, a *Washington Almanac* as well. Cottom's approach changed with the War of 1812; the five title variants offered were consolidated into two: *Cottom's New Virginia Almanac* was issued for 1815, and *Cottom's New Virginia and North-Carolina Almanac* for 1817. But with the growth of competing titles after the war, Cottom settled on just a solitary title for 1820 – *Cottom's New Virginia and North-Carolina Almanac* – which he issued annually through at least 1840. That ending also seems concurrent with his retirement from the daily management of his business.

Throughout his residence in Richmond, Cottom grew wealthier and more willing to spend

that wealth. Sometime between 1820 and 1830 he moved his family to a farm on the city's western outskirts. There his household increased from eleven to seventeen individuals, the result of a doubling in the number of slaves that he owned. The core of that household was invariably three: Cottom, his wife, and an adult female contemporary of his younger wife; the others living there were enslaved African servants, seemingly two distinct families. But beyond the enumerations recorded in the federal census, no trace of names or relationships has been yet found. All that we know for certain is that Cottom married twice, to women younger than he was, with his first wife dying before reaching her thirtieth birthday.

Cottom's lived in or near Richmond for thirty-six years in all. Such a long duration meant that he was seen by contemporaries as a Richmonder, with his life in Alexandria forgotten or never known by most Virginians. Consequently, many in the state were surprised to discover otherwise in January 1848; a widely-disseminated report in Virginia papers about a speech Cottom gave at a celebratory dinner in Richmond proved a revelation; therein the aged bookseller spoke of his acquaintance with Washington and his role in the founder's funeral. It seems to have transformed public perceptions of him, for when he died the next year, Cottom was honored with a sizeable public funeral at Richmond's Monumental Church and was buried on the Shockoe Hill with full military honors and solemn Masonic rites, just as had been Washington fifty years before.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1778 Ireland.

Married [1]: Jan. 25 1808 Judith Robinson Grymes @ Orange County, Va.

Married [2]: May 15 1817 Martha Dandridge Fleming @ Richmond, Va.

Died: June 7 1849 Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia.

No record of offspring found.

Sources: Imprints; *Artisans & Merchants*; Brockett & Rock, *Concise History of Alexandria*. Brockett, *Lodge of Washington*; Quenzel, *Checklist for Fredericksburg*; Fisher, *Monumental Church*; notices in *Columbian Mirror*, later *Alexandria Advertiser*, 1797-1813, and *Richmond Enquirer*, 1813-44; obituaries in *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 June 1849 and *Alexandria Gazette* 14 June 1849.

Samuel Cottom has not been included in this index as his trade presence is just implied; his only recorded trade was dry-goods merchant in Richmond; he died at his brother's home there 30 June 1826, age 37.