

108 COTTOM, RICHARD

Bookseller

Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Petersburg

Bookseller in Alexandria and Fredericksburg with the firm of his brother Peter Cottom (107) and John A. Stewart (401); then independently in Petersburg from 1810 to 1823.

Cottom was, like his brother before him, an Irish émigré who landed in Alexandria. In his case, it appears that he arrived there after his older brother had established his bookselling business in 1797. It is clear that he was working for the Cottom & Stewart firm by 1803, when the firm opened a branch store in Fredericksburg. Richard was a resident proprietor of the original store in 1810 when he was recorded in the census for that year.

That same year, Richard convinced his brother to back his opening of a new, independent bookstore in the Appomattox River port town of Petersburg. By July, he was advertising the store's available stock in newspapers there. From numbers recorded in the 1810 census, his store was a small outfit, just himself, a white male adult contemporary – possibly younger brother, Samuel Cottom – and an enslaved domestic servant. And it likely remained that way, as he was not recorded in the subsequent census, indicating that he (and his wife after 1815) later resided in either a boarding house or with another family.

Remarkably, Cottom did not become actively involved in publishing; rather, his store was an outlet for the subscription-publishing networks established by others, his brother's among them. He sold multiple-volume works and recurring-edition magazines issued either in Philadelphia or New York, as well as Cottom & Stewart's almanacs. Once Peter Cottom had split from Stewart, he was also an outlet for his brother's Richmond imprints. This evidently provided him a reasonable living, but it did not enrich him to the extent that his brother Peter would be.

His life was cut short in 1823, apparently not yet forty, by an illness of less than a day's duration. His passing was noted only briefly, and in just the papers of the three Virginia fall-line towns where he had lived. Hence, Cottom is seen frequently in the era's bibliographic record, but is a largely unknown figure in the historical one.

Personal Data

Born: about 1785 in Ireland.

Married: May 29 1815 Charlotte Maillard Cochran @ Baltimore, Md.

Died: July 31 1823 Petersburg, Virginia.

No children recorded; no household found in 1820 census.

Imprints; *Artisans & Merchants*; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; advertisements in *Petersburg Intelligencer*, 1810-23; obituary, *Alexandria Gazette*, 9 Aug 1823.

Samuel Cottom is not included in this index as his trade presence is implied; his only documented trade is that as a Richmond dry-goods merchant; he died at his brother Peter's home on 30 June 1826, age 37.