

113 CURRIE, ARCHIBALD

Bookbinder

Richmond

Richmond bookbinder in partnership with Thomas Brend (051) in firm of Brend & Currie (1783-99); then with John Pumfrey (334) in firm of Currie & Pumfrey (1799-1801).

Currie appears to have been a son of Williamsburg as his family name pervades the records of that town. He emerges as a practicing tradesman in 1783 in Richmond as partner to the formerly Williamsburg-based binder, Thomas Brend. These associations suggest that Currie was a bookbinder in Williamsburg, junior to the better-known Brend (and perhaps trained by him), who arrived in Richmond with the 1780 government relocation with his employer, either Thomas Nicolson (315) or William Prentis (340), themselves sons of Williamsburg.

In that relocation, Brend remained in Williamsburg working in the office of John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis (119); Clarkson & Davis had claimed a financial inability to move to Richmond with the rest of the town's trade in 1780 and so continued in Williamsburg until 1783; their business was saved – despite the loss of its main customer base – by the arrival of French troops in late summer 1781, forces associated with the siege of nearby Yorktown; they remained encamped on the lower peninsula until 1783 with this Williamsburg press providing for their job-printing needs. Brend evidently also provided bindery services for them as well. When he finally arrived in Richmond, Brend immediately formed a working partnership with Archibald Currie, evidently as a way to enlarge both men's fortunes.

The Brend & Currie workshop was Richmond's first real step toward the modernized form of publishing then developing in Philadelphia. The two binders established a business that served all of the capital's printing establishments without being tied to any one of them; the publisher of any imprint could now assign each element of its production – from editorial, to press work, to binding – to a series of contract vendors, and not to an all-encompassing printing office, as had been the case in Williamsburg before the Revolution. Their services were frequently advertised in Richmond's newspapers and often contracted by the state government. Thus Currie's alliance with Brend continued uninterrupted until his partner's death in December 1799, a clear indication of their firm's success.

The reliance of Richmond's presses relied on bindery shops like Brend & Currie's from the mid-1780s on is evident in the records of the publication of a complete set of Virginia's laws in 1795; Augustine Davis owned one of three presses working on the project, though as public printer he directed the project; all of the presses printing the component sheets sent their finished work to Brend & Currie for binding. When Davis failed to provide a needed advance payment for necessary supplies, the binders petitioned Governor James Wood to intervene; he provided the advance, and took it out of Davis's compensation. Davis would eventually pay them for their services, minus the contested advance. Coincidentally, the pair only advertised their services thereafter in the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331), then both Davis's shop foreman and his journalistic competitor.

When Brend died in December 1799, Currie had no trouble finding a successor to him. John

Pumfrey was another rising tradesman, probably working in the Brend & Currie shop. His joining the bindery's ownership freed up time for Currie to now pursue other interests. In binding books for at least twenty years by then, Currie was thoroughly acquainted with the contemporaneous literature on natural philosophy, the field of study that is today termed "science." His particular interest was electricity, and in December 1800, he was advertising an "Electrical Machine complete for Medical purposes" – one of the earliest electrotherapy devices seen in the United States. No description of the machine survives, nor does one of its intended use and operation, but it was unmistakably tied to a generator of some kind, as Currie asked that his patrons "provide a person to keep the machine in motion." How successful he was in this endeavor is unknown, but he likely never recouped his monetary investment in the device; within four months of his first advertised notice of its readiness, Currie was dead. Cynics would no doubt suggest that he had used it too much on himself, but his death notices suggest no particular cause of death.

Pumfrey was immediately appointed administrator of his estate; the notices he published in Richmond's newspapers do not indicate that there were heirs to Currie's estate, only the mundane business of settling the company's accounts. A week after Currie's death, Pumfrey announced both the dissolution of their firm and his plan to continue the binding business in "the same house" as before. Settling the estate dragged on through at least July 1802, when Pumfrey published a notice seeking all outstanding debtors and creditors as he was "anxious to close the business of his administration." Yet that December, Currie's estate was still in limbo when Pumfrey advertised his late partner's "Philosophical Apparatus" for sale, including the electrotherapy device, a smaller version of that machine, two microscopes, and several heavily-illustrated scientific books. Thus did Currie's legacy end, with an auction of his curious inventions.

Personal Data

Died: Apr. 7 1801 Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia

No record of wife or children yet found.

Sources: Imprints; Samford & Hemphill, *Bookbinder in Williamsburg*; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*; notices and advertisements in *Virginia Argus* (1796-1802).