

116 DAVIDSON, A. B. – [REV. ANDREW BAKER DAVIDSON]

Publisher & Proprietor

New Market, Harrisonburg

Publisher of religious tracts at New Market (1811-12) from press of Ambrose Henkel (214) and proprietor of Theological Printing Office in Harrisonburg (1813-15) with George Bourne (043), employing Lawrence Wartmann (431).

.Davidson was a Presbyterian minister trained at the Washington Academy (Washington & Lee University today) in Lexington under Rev. George Addison Baxter. Licensed in 1807, he became pastor of the Cook's Creek church in Rockingham County, later adding the churches at Mossy Creek in Augusta County and at Harrisonburg to his circuit. In December 1812, he was among the ministers present at the ordination sermon of George Bourne, founder of the new South River church at Port Republic. The two men shared an evangelical sense of mission and soon forged a plan to advance that mission by publishing religious tracts.

Davidson had already printed sermons through the auspices of the Henkel family's press in New Market, as Bourne had with a tract at the Staunton press of Isaac Collett (100). But intent on increasing the pace of producing such imprints, and coordinating their content, they created the firm of Davidson & Bourne to conduct their own press in Harrisonburg. Their new "Theological Printing Office" employed Lawrence Wartmann, then foreman of the Henkel press, on a part-time basis. They evidently expected to employ the printer full-time when his contract with the Henkels expired in early 1814, as the ministers now launched a Virginia Religious Tract Society as a way of distributing, with the approval of the Lexington Presbytery; to meet that organization's goals, significant numbers of imprints would be required from their new office. In 1813, the pair issued their first batch of such works, aided by Collett, as *The Publications of the Virginia Religious Tract Society*; it was a collection of six tracts headed by a Davidson sermon, with each element available individually and in bulk. Davidson & Bourne also issued five other tracts that year including two more sermons from Davidson, as well as a literary imprint, *The Mountain Muse* by local poet Daniel Bryan (059).

The effect of their work was quickly evident, but also very short-lived. Davidson and Bourne were invited to assist in forming the Virginia Bible Society that fall, an effort to distribute free Bibles to the needful, as was the point of their tract society. But as 1814 dawned, paper supplies became an issue for them, as most American suppliers were pressed by war-time shortages. Yet that paled in comparison to the mid-summer problem that sundered their partnership. Bourne had begun preaching an antislavery message, calling slaveholders "man stealers," and demanding that Virginia's Presbyterians divest themselves of any slaves they may own. Davidson owned at least four and refused Bourne's dictates; their promising joint venture collapsed in mutual hostility. By year's end, Bourne had been suspended from his pulpit by the Lexington Presbytery; now without an income, he left Virginia for Philadelphia and a lengthy career as an antislavery writer.

Following the dissolution of their firm, Davidson also left the Harrisonburg area, taking on churches in northwestern Rockbridge County and overseeing an academy. He eventually served at least seven congregations in the south-central Valley, founding two of them, while occasionally riding circuit, and officiating at hundreds of marriages in those locales. Such

visibility and influence brought him a growing reputation among Presbyterians throughout the country. Davidson became a life member of the American Tract Society and a founder of the Lexington Presbytery's own Bible society; he would also serve for more than forty years as a trustee of his alma mater, now called Washington College. But his mobility became increasingly limited over the 1850s by an arthritic condition which confined him to the neighborhood of his Rockbridge farm; the result was a steady stream of visitors who sought his counsel and the use of his extensive library. In this setting, "his last days were happily serene," as one memorialist wrote later, even as he withdrew from the ministerial work he so loved. He died on his farm in the summer of 1861, at the advanced age of eighty-two.

NB: Among bibliographers and historians of this era, there has been a confusion of Davidson with Ananias Davisson (129), another Rockingham County minister and publisher, evidently assuming misspellings of the men's names in the surviving imprints. In reality, Davisson published initially through Wartmann's Harrisonburg press, shortly after Bourne's exit from the area and the end of his partnership with Davidson; he later acquired his own press and began issuing his own Harrisonburg imprints in 1817. That date precedes Bourne's formal removal from his South River pulpit in 1818, but follows his actual departure in December 1815, a chronology overlooked in the confused identifications.

Personal Data

Born:	In	1779	Botetourt County, Virginia
Married:	Nov. 26	1807	Susan Dorman @ Rockbridge County, Virginia
Died:	Aug. 7	1861	Spring Farm, Rockbridge County, Virginia
Children:	James (b. 1808), Martha (b. 1809), Alexander, Charles, Edmonia (b. 1818), Henry (b. 1824), Anne (b. 1825), Lewis (b. 1827), Edward (b. 1831).		

Sources: Imprints; *Historical Paper of Washington & Lee*, 1898; Christie & Dumond, *George Bourne*; *Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery*; Federal Decennial Census 1820-50; genealogical data from Davidson family charts posted on Ancestry.com (September 2012)