

129 DAVISSON, ANANIAS

Printer & Publisher

Harrisonburg & Rockingham County

Compiler and publisher of religious songsters and hymnals in Rockingham County.

Davisson was a Rockingham County farmer who developed a life-long interest in promoting communal singing in churches west of the Blue Ridge by publishing hymn collections using the then-new notational system of shape-notes. Between 1816 and 1826 he published at least six editions of his *Kentucky Harmony, or a Choice Collection of Psalm Tunes, Hymns, and Anthems* – all in Rockingham County.

The earliest editions were printed at the Harrisonburg press of Laurentz Wartmann (431), a practical printer from the recently-dissolved office of Davidson & Bourne there. The first of the recorded editions of the *Kentucky Harmony* issued from his press, though there may have been earlier unrecorded editions printed by Wartmann as well. A more certain view of the publishing history of that work comes when Davisson filed for copyright with a second edition in 1817, and renewed that protection with each subsequent edition published. With that second edition, the credit for its printing shifted to Davisson himself, indicating that he acquired a press of his own at that time, so making his press the second in Rockingham. Yet it remains unclear whether that press operated in Harrisonburg; a biography of the Rev. Benjamin Abbot that Davisson published in 1820 reported Mount Vernon Forge, near the village of Grottoes, as the site of his press; Davisson maintained a home in that area from about 1810, and the remnants of a printing office were found on that site in 1895. So it seems he moved his press from the town to the country between 1816 and 1820, even while issuing new editions of the *Kentucky Harmony* with a Harrisonburg identification. His last imprint in early 1827 – a shorter, cheaper version of the *Kentucky Harmony* – explicitly noted that it had been printed at Mount Vernon.

In his print-trade career, Davisson never issued anything other than his shape-note hymnals, excepting the Abbot biography. Yet his *Kentucky Harmony* would prove to be a guide for subsequent hymn collections in the American South, as it remained available for many years after its printing; indeed one surviving copy of the 1821 edition has an inscription reporting its purchase from Davisson in 1848. So it is clear that the music was his focus, not his press, a view consistent with his lengthy record of lay preaching as an elder of the Presbyterian church at Cross Keys. He was buried in the yard of that church on his death in 1857.

NB: Among bibliographers and historians of this era, there has been a confusion of Davisson with Andrew B. Davidson (116), another minister and publisher in Rockingham County, evidently assuming misspellings of the men's names in the surviving imprints. In reality, Davisson published initially through Wartmann's press, shortly after George Bourne (043) left the area, ending the printing-partnership of Davidson & Bourne; Davisson 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 departure from Virginia in December 1815, a chronology overlooked in the confused identifications.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 2 1780 Shenandoah County, Virginia.

Died: Oct. 21 1857 Rockingham County, Virginia.

Wife Ann buried beside him; she died in 1872 at age seventy-five, suggesting a marriage in about 1820; no children noted.

Sources: Imprints; Wayland, *Men of Mark & Historic Harrisonburg*; Jackson, *White spirituals in the Southern Uplands*; Federal Decennial Census, 1820.