

135 DIETRICH, JACOB D.

Bookbinder, Bookseller, Printer, Publisher **Winchester, Staunton**

Publisher of *Staunton Eagle* (1807-10) and its ancillary *Deutsche Virginier Adler* (1807-09).

Jacob Dietrich was an entrepreneurial figure in the early-Republic printing trade. He was trained as a bookbinder and bookseller in Philadelphia in the 1790s, where he also seems to have picked up some printing skills. That grounding evidently instilled an understanding of the pitfalls faced in pursuing any of those trades. Hence, the various business ventures he pursued were all diversified undertakings where he was not dependent on any one trade or commodity for his success. Indeed, his first autonomous business was the dry-goods store that he established in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1800; there his book stocks shared space with paint, iron work, instruments, tools, hardware, cabinets, toys, pots, stationery, and other "fancy goods."

After about six months in Chambersburg, Dietrich moved his store to nearby Hagerstown, Maryland, seeing that town's proximity to the Potomac River as more advantageous to his business. The relocation proved fortuitous, putting him in contact with Johann Gruber, both the town's main German-language printer and the instructor of many other such printers in the American interior. Dietrich arranged with Gruber to distribute his imprints to German-speaking communities along the Great Wagon Road to the south in exchange for credit as their co-publisher. When this move proved profitable, he forged a similar agreement with an English-language printer there, one John P. Thompson. The growth of his business from these deals allowed Dietrich to open a branch store in Winchester in early 1804, again with more than just books as his wares. Yet that growth also brought about a rift with Gruber; by fall 1804, Dietrich had acquired his own press office and began publishing a competing almanac, using his Winchester store to obstruct distribution of Gruber's in the Shenandoah Valley. With the split, Dietrich also joined several Philadelphia-based subscription-publishing networks. But in expanding his range of commerce, he also took on new roles that impinged on his established ones. His 1805 appointment as Hagerstown's postmaster diverted him from publishing new works, limiting the efficient use of his expensive new press. In the face of dogged competition from Gruber, Mathias Bartgis (024), and others in town, Dietrich had to reassess the viability of his business there. When his term as postmaster expired in 1807, he chose to move on once again, closing both his Winchester and Hagerstown stores.

His distribution ventures had allowed Dietrich to forge new links with the German-speaking communities of the central Valley. One such group, knowing of his ongoing reassessment, invited him to come to Staunton to publish a Republican paper there, as well as reestablish his successful bookstore and library in a new market. While he had never published a paper previously, Dietrich clearly saw the offer as a potentially profitable opportunity. The existing Federalist journal, the *Candid Review and Staunton Weekly Register* of William G. Lyford (272), was foundering financially, and his new friends offered to back the publication of his new paper in both English and German editions. This would not be the first bilingual press office there, as that of John Wise (455), or Johann Weiss, had thrived in the 1790s. But that office's demise in late 1803 had left the town with just an English press. So encouraged,

Dietrich set up his new office in Staunton in the late spring of 1807 and began publishing the English-language *Staunton Eagle* in mid-July.

The move south had an immediate impact, as Lyford was forced to close his paper shortly after Dietrich started his. Lyford would reorganize and relaunch his Federalist weekly as the *Staunton Political Censor* in May 1808. But by then, he faced two competitors, as Dietrich had started publishing the promised German-language edition of his weekly, *Der Deutsche Virginier Adler*, (*The German Virginia Eagle*) in November 1807. Unfortunately for Dietrich, however, the German paper was unsuccessful from the start. Ethnic Germans in the central Valley were more willing to shed their native tongue than were those in the northern Valley or Pennsylvania; so they chose to read one of Staunton's two English-language journals instead of the *Adler*. Thus, for its two-year-long existence, the German paper drained off the hard-earned profits of Dietrich's English paper, thereby endangering the survival of both; in November 1809, he closed the *Adler* to save the *Eagle*.

Dietrich faced other difficulties as well, ones he had not faced before. In January 1810, he was forced to suspend publication for three months because of a shortage of paper; that event may have also sealed Lyford's fate, as he sold his newspaper to Isaac Collett (100) at about that same time and left the Valley forever. But more telling was Dietrich's problems with trained labor. The loss of his German-language journeyman in April 1808 caused a suspension of the *Adler* then, and because of his angry parting with Gruber in 1804, he found that securing a replacement was no easy feat. Moreover, Dietrich can be seen often advertising for English-language tradesmen as well. Once again, it seems, he had spread himself too thin in his expansive and diversified style of business.

In late 1810, Dietrich was offered a new situation like that which had drawn him to Staunton in 1807. A group of German-speakers from Augusta County, who had settled in Fairfield County, Ohio, asked Dietrich to move there with his bilingual press office. Their Republican paper, the *Ohio Eagle*, was in economic disarray, having spent much of that year in suspension. It was a business in need of experienced management, and Dietrich was a sensible choice. Moreover, the dearth of cash in the Valley of Virginia meant that his debts were mounting there from his subscribers' increasingly delinquent payments. After a winter of negotiations, he left Staunton to begin again in Lancaster, Ohio. It seems that he had hoped to continue the *Staunton Eagle* with newly hired hands, but apparently he found no one suitable for the task and so it expired about April 1811. Shortly thereafter, the *Ohio Eagle* appeared with his name on its masthead.

Lancaster proved to be Dietrich's permanent residence, living there almost three decades. He realized the promised financial reward from the newspaper in relatively short order. He held the *Eagle* for just four years before selling it to his journeymen to become that town's postmaster in 1814, while still retaining his bookstore and library. Yet he did not publish again, turning now to a life of public service. In 1818, he was elected as the clerk of Hocking Township, where he owned a farm, and in 1819 as a justice of the peace for Fairfield County; by 1827, he was serving as President of the Lancaster town corporation. These local positions were followed by an appointment to the regional Court of Common Pleas as an associate justice, a post he held for fourteen years. In that role, Dietrich was the arrainging

judge for one defendant in a widely-reported case of counterfeit Ohio bank notes. He also embraced non-elective positions in these years. He and his wife were founding members of the local Methodist Episcopal Church in 1812 and, as a devoted Freemason, Dietrich helped found Lancaster's Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons (Lodge #63) in December 1820.

All of these roles made Dietrich a formidable and respected figure in the community in his latter years. Yet he has been overshadowed by contemporaries who served in the Civil War in the late-nineteenth-century histories that depict Fairfield County's early days. Dietrich did not live to experience that event, having passed on at his home in December 1838.

NB: The proper pronunciation of his surname (*ie* as long *e* & *ch* as a hard *k*) has resulted in various spellings (Dietrick, Deitrick, Detrick, Deitrich, and Detrich). The form recorded here is that seen in the imprints he produced while in Virginia, rather than the Anglicized form reported in public records and many county histories.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 1778 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Married: May 1800 Elizabeth Geyer @ Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Died: Dec. 1838 Lancaster, Fairfield County, Ohio
Children: Federal census records suggest four children: 2 boys born between 1800 & 1810, 2 girls born between 1810 & 1820; all unnamed.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; MEDSA Index; Dolmetsch, *German Press of Shenandoah Valley*; Cazden, *German Booktrade*; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; Scott, *Fairfield County*; Federal Decennial Census, 1810-30; notice in *Elizabeth-town Advertiser*, 13 Nov 1800.