

144 DOUGLAS, GEORGE

Printer & Bookseller

Petersburg

Bookseller and bookbinder in Petersburg (1799-1804) in partnership with Joseph Ross (365).

Douglas was an Irish émigré who came to America just before the outbreak of the United Irishmen rebellion. He was evidently trained in Dublin in the 1760s and was a partner in the publishing firm of Stewart, Douglas & Spotswood there in 1770-71. In early 1772, Douglas moved to Londonderry where he began publishing a weekly paper; his *Londonderry Journal* has continued to the present day, essentially uninterrupted from its June 1772 start. Yet Douglas sold his interest in that successful paper in late 1796, probably under legal pressure as a result of his Irish nationalist perspective, and emigrated to America.

Douglas landed in Philadelphia and immediately fell in with the city's Irish exile community. He formed a business relationship there with the Carey brothers, job-printer James (080) and publishing entrepreneur Mathew, selling Mathew's inventory and having his own books produced by James. From his arrival, Douglas evinces an inclination to tie political events in his homeland to those here by his publishing works about the personalities who led the Irish resistance. That inclination, as well as his Carey-centered business, brought Douglas into Jeffersonian circles in Philadelphia. After just two years in the city, he was convinced by Virginians in those circles to relocate to Petersburg; there he could continue as a Carey agent and as an independent publisher, while serving the growing Jeffersonian base there. It was a move that was concurrent with the relocations of controversial Jeffersonian writers and editors to that same Virginia neighborhood.

In Petersburg, Douglas formed a bookselling partnership with Joseph Ross, another Irish émigré who had conducted a mercantile exchange firm in Tarboro, North Carolina, for much of the 1790s; as Petersburg was then the primary outlet for produce from that Edgecombe County seat, Ross brought connections to both the community and its commercial networks with him. Their store also housed a newly-outfitted job-printing office operated by Douglas alone, known locally as The Blandford Press. In a surviving handbill, we see him promoting his press as "furnished with a complete Set of Types and the necessary Materials" which was "ready to undertake any Kind of Printing Work with which Merchants or Others, either in Town or Country, may be pleased to employ Him." The association apparently continued for five years, but Douglas stayed in Petersburg for just three, leaving Ross to run the store alone. Douglas moved on to Baltimore, likely in the fall of 1802, to pursue a more active publishing career there. But the Ross & Douglas bookstore continued operating "at the Head of Bollingbrook Street" until at least the fall of 1804.

In Baltimore, Douglas found another Irish exile community, one in which he now became a leader. He helped establish the Hibernian Society of Baltimore in early 1803, serving as that social and benevolent society's secretary until about 1810. This was a role that put Douglas at the center of the port's merchant fraternity, enhancing his own business by extending his bookselling contacts beyond the Carey network, evidently mostly to New York presses. In the next three years, he published eight titles in history and literature there with clear Irish connections. This period was apparently a successful one for Douglas, yet in late 1811 he

was induced to sell his Baltimore store and move to New York City to publish a weekly non-partisan paper to serve the Irish immigrant community there. After fifteen years away from the editorial desk, Douglas reestablished his *bona fides* by first publishing there a collection of the speeches of John Philpot Curran, the Irish Protestant lawyer who defended many of the Irish Catholic leaders of the United Irishman rebellion. The new *Western Star and Harp of Erin* followed in May 1812, complete with a distribution that reached to Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Petersburg. the venture proved to be one beset by financial problems brought about by non-paying subscribers however; in May 1813, after pleading for payment of all arrearages, Douglas reluctantly closed the paper and returned to bookselling.

Douglas also returned to Baltimore in late 1814 where he became a part of both the city's and the Hibernian Society's relief efforts in the wake of that summer's British invasion. That service gained him a City Council seat in the early 1820s. Yet his business turned from retailing to wholesaling while abandoning publishing altogether. Apparently the now aging Douglas was seeking less-strenuous employment to sustain him; but his personal financial situation soon deteriorated. By 1826, he had lost a debt suit to a major creditor, resulting in the seizure and sale of his personal and business property by the Baltimore County sheriff. Douglas left the city shortly thereafter, returning to New York to find refuge among friends. There, in August 1828, the eighty-four year-old Douglas passed away, apparently destitute and unemployed.

Personal Data

Born:	ca.	1744	near or in Dublin, Ireland
Married:	before	1796	widow Stevenson @ Londonderry, Ireland
Died:	Aug.18	1828	New York City, New York

No record of children yet found.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Pollard, *Dictionary of Dublin Book Trade: Wyatt, Petersburg, Seagrave, Petersburg Artisans & Merchants*; Silver, *Baltimore Book Trade*; notices in *The Western Star and Harp of Erin* [NYC], 1812-13, and *Baltimore Gazette And Daily Advertiser*, 1814-26,