

145 DOUGLASS, ARCHIBALD

146 DOUGLASS, JAMES

Bookbinders & Booksellers Richmond, Alexandria

Stationers, blank-book manufacturers, and booksellers in Richmond (1818) and Alexandria (1818-28).

The print-trade lives of James and Archibald Douglass are inseparably intertwined, though discerning whether they were related is problematic. The Douglass name is common in the region between Baltimore and Alexandria, so without unambiguous genealogical evidence, any specific identification is tentative. However the timing of their affiliation suggests that they were brothers. James was identified as "Jr." at his death, indicating that he was likely the son of the Alexandria merchant James Douglass. That Douglass was an Irish émigré who appeared on the business scene there about 1800 as a grocer who owned a grist-and-flour mill on nearby Difficult Run; that mill was demolished in a flash flood in 1804, leading to a years-long juggling of his extensive debts that ended with his bankruptcy in 1810; after that he went into business with one Jacob Douglass, probably his oldest son. That moment is also about the time that Archibald Douglass began his apprenticeship in Baltimore in the bookbinding trade, suggesting that he was a second son who was sent off to forge his own course in life after his father's bankruptcy. So James could have been an even younger son who went into business with an older brother when he finally came of age. However, this suggested lineage is far from proven fact.

Whatever familial their origins, James and Archibald Douglass opened a bindery office and stationery store in Alexandria in December 1818. The firm of J. & A. Douglass also appears in the 1819 Richmond city directory, indicating that they had moved an established business from there just as that directory went to press. From the start, their infrequent newspaper advertising stressed blank books and their ability to manufacture such to any specification for the merchant community there. Over time, their advertisements became more frequent and included descriptions of the published books they also carried, largely school books and devotional literature. That choice reflected James' life-long devotion to his faith. During that 1820s, he helped found and manage the Sunday School and Bible societies in Alexandria, while serving as an Elder in the city's Second Presbyterian Church, becoming so involved in each that he probably left Archibald to essentially run the business alone. In August 1820, he made their office into a repository for the New England Tract Society, offering 107 distinct titles; in 1827, it became a depository for the American Sunday School Union's library program as well. They were also active in subscription-publishing efforts for works with openly moral or charitable purposes, such as *The Appeal for Suffering Genius* by Daniel Bryan (059), the city's poetical postmaster, published in 1826. Yet they did add new, non-devotional merchandise to their stock in those same years that were staples of the era's bookstores: wall-paper, sheet music, and pocket-books. Evidently, each step made their business more successful and visible. But James developed a chronic wasting disease in 1826, so becoming ever less of a factor in the business. When he finally died in the fall of 1828, he was reportedly buried in the presence of "hundreds of our most respectable

citizens" – a clear mark of respect.

Archibald continued the business alone from that point, retaining the J. & A. Douglass name until James's estate was settled a year later. But he apparently had lost any interest in bookselling and stationary sales with the loss of his partner, if indeed he had ever had one. In July 1830, Archibald announced the removal of his business to a loft in Alexandria where he would henceforth operate a bindery and blank-book manufactory only under the simple name of A. O. Douglass. His decision was evidently a profitable one, as he was still engaged in that business in 1849 when he signed a published petition asking for the gradual abolition of chattel slavery in the District of Columbia. By then, however, his business advertisements had long since ceased. The last glimpse we have of Archibald in the public record is in May 1859, when his daughter Margaret Ann was married in his Washington home. So it seems that he had retired from the binding trade by then and departed Alexandria to enjoy a retirement in the capital. Still, for all his prior visibility, the date he died is yet unknown.

Personal Data

James: b. 1795; d. 18 Oct. 1828 in Alexandria; wife was Martha Fleming, who was administrator of his estate; no recorded offspring yet found.

Archibald: b. ca. 1793; d. after 1859; married and had children, though daughter Margaret (m. 1859) is only name found in surviving records.

Sources: *Artisans & Merchants*; MESDA nos. 53337, 34240, 9585; notices in *Alexandria Advertiser* (later the *Alexandria Gazette*), 1800-59; obituary for James, *Alexandria Gazette*, 8 Nov 1828; slavery petition, *The National Era* (Washington) 29 March 1849.