

## 159 FABRE, PETER

**Bookseller**

**Norfolk**

Bookseller and stationer in Norfolk from about 1805 until 1819.

Peter Fabre was a European immigrant who arrived in North America before the Revolution; whether he came from France or from the French-speaking parts of modern-day Germany is unknown, but his French roots are evident in his name. All accounts of his early life report that he "bore arms" on the American side of the Revolutionary War, suggesting he came from France rather than elsewhere. However, Fabre does not appear on extant muster rolls or among pension records, suggesting service in a poorly-documented state-based unit.

Before the war's end, Fabre was settled as a retail merchant in Boston; in 1780, he was admitted to the city's first Masonic Lodge and received a retailing license for a new store adjoining Long Wharf in 1782. In early 1784, Fabre advertised the auction sale of his house on Jamaica Plain that April; that home was "an elegant seat" consisting of a brick house and several out-buildings seized from a fugitive Loyalist; Fabre asked for payment in South Carolina bills of exchange, suggesting that he had existing business relationships there. Yet that sale evidently did not proceed as he announced its sale by auction again in April 1785.

By September of 1787, Fabre was living in Portland, but the move there was anything but smooth; at that time, he offered a twenty-dollar reward for apprehending the "evil minded people" who had vandalized his house, twice, while he was away on business. That act was just the beginning of his travails in the District of Maine. A year later, Fabre was jailed for refusing to testify in a probate case, asserting his right, under the then new Massachusetts Constitution, against self-incrimination. Another town resident had accused him, without evidence, of withholding from him assets from an estate that Fabre had administered; when he refused to provide the expected testimony against himself, the presiding judge jailed him for contempt. His incarceration did not last long, as just three months later Fabre offered a generous, though unspecified, reward for apprehending the thieves who had looted his house five days earlier and for the return of his stolen property.

That event seems to have impelled his departure from Maine sometime in 1789. Fabre does not appear in public records again until May 1805 when advertisements for his business in Norfolk appear in that city's papers. From the many repetitions of his later obituary in New York City newspapers, it seems likely that he conducted some form of business there in the interim; a subsequent move to Norfolk from New York also makes sense considering the rapid growth of commercial links between those two East Coast ports in the 1790s.

What is self-evident is that from at least 1805 until 1819, Fabre conducted a retail general-merchandise store in Norfolk. The store's location varied over the years, but Fabre never strayed far from the Market Square. Beside a wide variety of books and stationery, he offered "ready-made clothes," jewelry, cutlery, feather beds, hardware, and "English & West Indian Goods," though he clearly did not offer bindery work as did other bookstores there. In 1806, Fabre added a circulating library to his business in a location separate from his main store; whether that separation was a response to increasing sales or an attempt to

boost lagging ones is unknown. However, that venture did not long survive, especially in the face of resolute competition from the likes of Caleb Bonsal (040) and Christopher Hall (198). Moreover, he was now nearing seventy and in need of slowing down.

At about this time, Fabre married a much younger woman, likely as a potential caretaker; it appears he had already been widowed at least once, as he had an adult daughter then as well. But his new wife died in 1818, a year before he did, at just twenty-eight. Fabre's end was thus solitary, coming after the close of business on a Thursday; upon retiring for a nap after dinner, he evidently had a stroke and collapsed on the floor of his bed-chamber in his spare lodgings above his store. The writer of his obituary in Norfolk's *American Beacon* described the eighty-year-old merchant as being "strongly attached to the government of his adopted country." Such a testimonial is truly remarkable given the incredible troubles that Fabre experienced in his New England days.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:	ca. 1739	In Europe.
Married	ca. 1805	Martha (2nd wife? d. 1818 @ 28 yrs. in Norfolk)
Died:	Mar. 11 1819	Norfolk, Virginia.
Children:	Daughter Maria married in Norfolk 1812; son Peter Jr. was divorced in No. Carolina in 1817; ages unknown; any others unrecorded.	

Sources: *French Blood in America* (1911); *Records relating to the Early History of Boston* (1876); notices in Boston's *Independent Chronicle* (1784-85), Portland's *Cumberland Gazette* (1787-89), and Portsmouth's *New Hampshire Spy* (1788); advertising notices in *Norfolk Gazette* and *American Beacon* (1805-19); obituaries for Fabre and wife in *American Beacon* (1818-19); Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*.