

**165 FITZWHYLSONN, W. H. — [WILLIAM HENRY FITZWHYLSONN]**

**Bookseller & Bookbinder**

**Richmond**

Bookseller in Richmond from 1790s to 1830s, partially in partnerships with John Pumfrey (344) and Walter Potter (339).

Fitzwhylsonn was an immigrant to Virginia who became a towering figure in the civic and social life of its capital despite his reportedly short stature. Born in Wales, he served in the British navy during the Revolutionary-era siege of Gibraltar by Spain as a "powder monkey" it seems, given his then young age. Another account has him coming to Virginia in the band in Cornwallis's army and remaining after the surrender at Yorktown in 1781. While neither story can be verified, it is clear that Fitzwhylsonn was in Richmond by 1786 when he opened an "English" school (i.e. grammar school) for boys and girls alike; that was an enterprise he maintained until 1824, even as he engaged in a variety of other pursuits.

As with other schoolmasters, Fitzwhylsonn was drawn into the bookselling trade as a result of a need to provide books that fit his particular pedagogy. One of his more visible students was the Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai, who recounted a considerable number of anecdotes about his teacher in his *Richmond, in By Gone Days*. He describes Fitzwhylsonn as a short man with a bald head and a proclivity for music, being a founder of the city's Musical Society, playing a bass-violin in its orchestra. Yet he was also something of a reserved man who "in every situation preserved his dignity, whether at a festive board, the whist table, or the music stand." This social prominence allowed him to develop his store into Richmond's principal literary and musical outlet; indeed, his advertising does not evince any political or legal titles in his long-lived store; those notices concentrate on educational items: books, stationery, sheet music, musical instruments, and globes. By 1801, his store had grown to such a point that he now had to employ assistants; that year he brought in John Pumfrey, a bookbinder and former partner of the late Archibald Currie (113), into his store as Pumfrey struggled to settle Currie's estate; but Pumfrey's multiplying financial problems ended the alliance of Fitzwhylsonn & Pumfrey in 1805. That change proved fortuitous as Fitzwhylsonn now took on a partner fully vested in the bookbinding business in his place; Walter Potter became his right hand in business until just before Potter's death in 1817, so making the Fitzwhylsonn & Potter store on the corner of Main and Fourteenth Streets a familiar city landmark. Their firm became a key part of the subscription publishing networks centered in New York City and Philadelphia that issued scientific and literary magazines, as well as American reprints of European encyclopedias.

With Potter firmly in place, Fitzwhylsonn began to embrace non-business roles in the city. From his earliest days in Richmond, he had been an active member of the Randolph Lodge No. 19; indeed, his presence in that Masonic lodge in 1798 drew the attention of Federalist writer Joseph Dennie (of later fame as editor of *The Portfolio* in Philadelphia) who accused the presumed "United Irishman" (based on his Gaelic name) of turning the lodge away from its primarily social purpose. That heated commentary reflected Fitzwhylsonn's alignment with the Virginia's Republican leaders, an unsurprising affiliation for one originally from a conquered territory of the British empire. Now, he became a principal figure in the Grand

Lodge of Virginia, serving continuously from 1805 to 1830 as General Secretary. Following the Richmond Theater fire of December 1811, Fitzwhylson served on the relief committee and purchased a pew in the Monumental Church built on the site of the tragedy, even as he remained a member of the nearby St. John's Church. In June 1814, he became a founding member of Richmond's Benevolent Mechanics Society, a relief agency for destitute artisans, along with several other major merchants, including printer-publisher Samuel Pleasants (331). The respect he garnered in these activities eventually brought him to elective office, first to a seat on the Common Council, then to the post of City Recorder in about 1820, and finally his election as Mayor in 1824. In that role, Fitzwhylson was the official host to the Marquis de Lafayette on his visit to Richmond that spring, a subtly ironic turn of events.

After Potter's death in 1817, their store and bindery operated under Fitzwhylson's name alone, with the help of hired hands who were not brought into partnership as Potter had been. The store had simply become just one part of the Welshman's diverse ventures, public and private. But as he aged, he began a withdrawal from those myriad activities. He closed his grammar school in early 1824 when the press of his mayoral duties began to take a toll. In 1830, he resigned as General Secretary to the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and was immediately elected to two terms as the Grand Master of the Lodge, a largely symbolic office. At about that time, he also closed the bookstore that was the foundation of his life's pursuits. Fitzwhylson's death in June 1837 elicited literary effusions in the obituaries that were published in the city's papers. That in the *Richmond Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360) contained lengthy poem reflecting on his manifest Christian virtues; it was prefaced by a short comment reporting that he had "gained the esteem and affection of a large number of friends, of all ages and conditions." Such an inclination must certainly have been the case, as Fitzwhylson freed the one enslaved man he then owned in his will, the forty-something Philip Robertson – an act rarely seen among his Richmond peers.

**NB:** Surname spelled variously as Fitzwhyleson, Fitzwhyllson, and Fitzwhylson; style used here is that recorded in majority of his advertising and the official record while in office.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:	ca.	1766	Wales, United Kingdom of Great Britain.
Married	Jan. 21	1791	Sarah Ferguson @ Richmond, Virginia. (d. 1808)
Died:	June 20	1837	Richmond, Virginia.

No children documented in public records.

Sources: Imprints; MESDA Index nos. 11685, 11686; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; Tyler's *Quarterly*; *Annals of Henrico Parish*; Fisher, *Monumental Church*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; *Virginia Text-Book*; Federal Decennial Census, 1820 & 1830; numerous advertising notices in Richmond newspapers, 1798-1837; obituary in *Richmond Enquirer*, 27 June 1837.