

## 172 FOWLER, JOHN

**Author & Publisher**

**Alexandria**

Publisher of two religious imprints (1797 & 1798) in Alexandria from the press of Henry Gird Jr. (181) and Ellis Price (342); later collector of debts owed to Gird and Price individually.

Fowler is a difficult person to trace given a relatively common name; Virginia at the start of the nineteenth century evinces several men with that name, the result of Fowler ancestors arriving in the 1630s. Circumstances here suggest that this John Fowler was a close relative to the William Fowler (173) who was associated with Ellis Price as well. It also appears that he lived outside the city itself, in surrounding Fairfax County.

His first appearance in the bibliographic record comes with the publication of two works of religious theology, known as apologetics. In his first title, *Strictures upon Strictures* (1797), Fowler took on deistic thinking generally, and Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* specifically, for their dismissal of "biblical facts" as superstition. In the second, *The Truth of the Bible fairly put to the test* (1798), he refined his critique by developing his own argument rather than reacting to others. The publication of this second work so close on the heels of the first suggests that the first was both popular and profitable; yet, neither title was advertised for sale outside of the capital district, indicating a limited distribution and a short print run.

In publishing these two books, Fowler evidently developed a solid working relationship with printer Henry Gird. He was the son of a like-named Alexandria soap manufacturer, so he likely trained in the District of Columbia in the late 1780s and early 1790s. His age (b. 1774) suggests that at the end of his apprenticeship he joined the office of the *Columbian Mirror* in Alexandria when Ellis Price began its publication in late 1792 with John Smith (389). As Price was then a merchant, Smith was his tradesman partner, the same function that Gird would later fill. Between 1796 and 1799, Gird and Price traded ownership of the office with a joint arrangement in 1797, the year Fowler published his first book. So it appears that the two worked together continuously from 1793 to 1799 when Gird sold out and moved on to New York City to work as a journeyman printer there.

On his departure, Gird published a notice in the *Mirror* that he had assigned the collection of all monies owed him to Fowler; in the same notice, Fowler authorized Price to collect payments and issue receipts in his name. But in January 1800, Fowler placed the books of Gird's tenure in that press office into the hands of a lawyer specializing in "ill conducted" businesses such as Gird's for reconciliation, asking that anyone who had paid their debt provide him with proof. He was likely distracted at the time, as his wife died of a lingering disease shortly thereafter. In September 1800, Price too retired from the *Mirror*, selling the establishment to William Fowler, hence the suggestion of a link between the two Fowlers. Yet Price also named John Fowler as his collection agent, just as Gird had, indicating that William Fowler had bought the office and subscriber list, but had declined to assume the business's financial state. Remarkably, John Fowler does not again appear in Alexandria newspapers in his role of agent for each of the former partners.

Fowler died at his Fairfax County farm "near Pohick Church" in February 1806, after having outlived his wife by just six years. That locale suggests that he may also have been related to George Fowler (171), an Alexandria publisher of similar religious imprints; his estate was reported as on Pohick Creek, from which the nearby church took its name.

***Personal Data***

Married                      ???      Wife Ann died March 20, 1800 in Fairfax County.

Died: February 1806      Fairfax County, Virginia

Children:      Wife's obituary reported "numerous family of children" survived her.

Sources: Imprints; notices in *Columbian Mirror* (1797-1800) and *Alexandria Advertiser* (1801-07).