

184 GRAMMER, JOHN

Bookseller

Petersburg

Bookseller in Petersburg from the 1780s to 1816, and postmaster there 1790 to 1804.

Grammer was born into a family with Huguenot origins once known as Grammière. As with most Huguenots landing in Virginia, his forebears settled on the Southside a half-century before his birth in Prince George County. At age twenty-two, when the Revolutionary War began, Grammer received a commission from Gov. Patrick Henry as a lieutenant in a militia company raised in adjacent Dinwiddie County, suggesting that by then he already resided in Petersburg, the market town astride the two counties' border. His service in the Virginia Line ran the duration of the war and placed him at Yorktown in October 1781. The prestige accompanying that service brought Grammer an appointment to the Petersburg Common Council when the city was incorporated in 1784; but he quickly gave up that seat to take on the role of Clerk to the new city's Hustings Court, a post he held for fifty-one years.

While still known as "the old clerk," Grammer was also a merchant in Petersburg, evidently starting out with a dry-goods store that became a book and stationery store by about 1790, seemingly the first dedicated bookstore in town. He did not engage in job printing as other such operations did, but he did maintain a bindery shop as part of his business. Grammer's store thus became an important focal point in the growing city; the store likely also served as a post office in the 1780s in the state-wide system established by the General Assembly, particularly because of its central location. Once the new Congress established a national postal system in 1789, Grammer was commissioned as Petersburg's postmaster, a job often assigned to Revolutionary War veterans. As such, Grammer has become a lasting historical footnote, as he used his position to spread the word among other Virginia postmasters in the summer of 1800 of an impending slave revolt soon known as Gabriel's Rebellion.

These commercial activities drew Grammer into the Federalist camp as the partisan divides of the 1790s developed. Yet the foundation of his bookselling business was the association he built in the latter 1790s with the Philadelphia publishing entrepreneur Mathew Carey, a noted Jeffersonian. Moreover, that vital link was forged at first by the itinerant Republican bookseller, Mason Locke Weems (435); Parson Weems was not only Carey's agent then, he was an Episcopal minister as well who took a liking to Grammer for his active support of the local parish church as it recovered from its prior subordination to the Church of England and the loss of its glebe lands and tithe revenue after passage of Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom. So it is not surprising that Rev. William Meade, Virginia's first Episcopal bishop, would later say that Grammer "was a federalist. With the views of Mr. Jefferson he had no sympathy." Still, Grammer's trade with Carey flourished until he began to reduce his business activities after the War of 1812, to the point of acting as the collector of Carey's accounts in southern Virginia.

Unlike other Federalist postmasters, Grammer did not use the perks of his office to publish and distribute a newspaper, so he avoided the burst of removals from office of such political postmasters that accompanied Jefferson's inauguration. But in early 1804, Joseph Jones, one of Petersburg's Republican leaders, asked for Grammer's commission and was granted

it, much to the chagrin of many townsmen, as newspaper accounts evinced. But Grammer does not seem to have been much inconvenienced by the dismissal. His bookstore business continued apace, with his income supplemented by the renting out the slaves he owned, even as his clerical duties took up ever more of his time. The real reduction in his business activity came with the War of 1812 which restricted the port's commerce generally. At war's end, the aging Grammer apparently abandoned the bindery side of the business in reaction to the arrival of new tradesmen in the town. And soon thereafter, he also disappears from Mathew Carey's business records, suggesting the closing of his book and stationery store. It may have been that Grammer chose not to rebuild his store after its destruction in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815, even as his competitors rebuilt their stores. Indeed, the 1820 census does not record any member of his household as being engaged in either commerce or manufacturing, indicating that he had retired from business by then.

Yet, Grammer became an ever larger civic presence in Petersburg in the post-war years. As the leading vestryman in Bristol Parish, Grammer used his wealth to save the parish church itself; the city fathers wanted to buy the adjacent cemetery in 1818 and demolish the aging though historic Blandford Church in the process; Grammer took control of the situation by acquiring the entire property from the parish with land warrants due him from his military service, and then deeding the whole to the city of Petersburg *gratis* provided that they maintain the church and grounds. Hence, the Old Blandford Church still stands there today, despite its subsequent involvement in the siege of the city during the Civil War.

This transaction and his antecedent disappearance from business records suggest that this was the point in time that Grammer retired from business and invested in his posterity instead. Thereafter, he confined himself to his duties as Clerk of the Hustings Court. As he lived for yet another sixteen years, and had been reducing his business presence over the preceding fifteen, it seems that those towns-people who survived Grammer were unaware of his early life when "the old clerk" died in the fall of 1835; his obituaries stressed his long service to both city and church, but did not note his business or military lives. In large part, his legacy came from his name being carried forward by his son, the Rev. John Grammer, who had a lengthy and respectable career as an Episcopal minister, and by his daughters' sons, such as North Carolina physician and politician John Grammer Broadnax, a key figure in that state's Civil War history.

Personal Data

Born:	Aug. 24	1754	Blackwater, Prince George County, Virginia.
Married [1]:	Mar. 26	1784	Mary Timberlake @ Petersburg, Virginia.
Married [2]:	in	1787	Priscilla Withers @ Dinwiddie County, Virginia.
Died:	Oct. 9	1835	Petersburg, Virginia.
Children:	by Mary: Sarah (b. 1785). by Priscilla: Elizabeth (b. 1788); Priscilla (b. 1789); Mary Wright (b. 1792); Dortehea Withers (b. 1793); William (b. 1795); Rev. John (b. 1796); Ann Cate (b. 1799); Robert W. (b. 1801).		

Sources: Imprints; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 7; Johnston, *Old Virginia Clerks*; Slaughter, *Bristol Parish*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg*; Meade, *Old Churches*: genealogical data from Grammer family charts posted on USGenWeb and Ancestry.com (October 2012),