

190 GRAY, ROBERT

Bookseller & Bookbinder

Alexandria

Proprietor of Alexandria bookstore and bindery (1800-12) with brother John Gray (189).

Gray was one of three brothers engaged in the book-binding and -selling trade in northern Virginia in the early years of the nineteenth century. They were all sons of a Scots-Irish immigrant named William Gray; he had emigrated to Westmoreland County in 1765 before moving on to a farm in Fairfax County near Mount Vernon in 1784; after his 1796 death, his widow, Catherine Dick Gray, removed to Alexandria to live with eldest son Robert, bringing his younger siblings with her. He was evidently then already engaged in the bindery trade there, having learned his trade in Philadelphia in the early 1790s.

With the family's relocation, Robert and John jointly opened a store and bindery in 1799 at the corner of Duke and Fairfax Streets in Alexandria's vibrant business district. For the next twelve years, their store was one of the largest book-trade businesses in Virginia, producing vast quantities of blank books alongside the imprints they sold and bound. The bulk of that stock came from associations with the publishing houses in Philadelphia, as well as from connections to Scottish and Irish suppliers. The end of this successful partnership came as a result of John's withdrawal from the business in June 1808 for reasons unknown. As John died four years later, health issues may have been the cause; it may also be that the family had offered Robert a new assistant in his youngest brother, William Fairfax Gray (192), who was of an appropriate age then for an apprenticeship in the trade, even though he does not appear as an independent entity until 1815.

From the end of the firm of Robert & John Gray in 1808 until 1814, Gray's prominence in the port town continued to grow; contemporary newspaper notices show him as being engaged in a range of civic roles, particularly as a director of the Domestic Manufacturing Company and the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria. But once the War of 1812 erupted, he was seen as a merchant of dubious loyalty because of his Scottish roots; indeed, Gray was widely believed to have aided the British forces that invaded the capital district in August 1814. Those accusations, on top of the earlier suspicions, finally impelled his removal from Alexandria; he bought the "Traveller's Rest" plantation in Spotsylvania County outside of Fredericksburg (purportedly the birthplace of George Washington) and moved his family there in late 1814. He apparently took William with him, as he emerges shortly thereafter as a bookseller and binder in Fredericksburg. But Robert left his aging mother in Alexandria with a sister and her husband, so breaking up the formerly tight-knit family base.

For the rest of his long life, Robert was a gentleman farmer, becoming a respected figure in Fredericksburg, eventually earning the designation "Esq." in newspaper notices despite not being of elite birth or a practicing attorney. Gray died at his plantation at age eighty-seven in October 1861, just before the Battles of Fredericksburg during the Civil War devastated his rural neighborhood.

Personal Data

Born: May 11 1774 Westmoreland County, Virginia.
Married: ca. 1800 Polly K. Nelson of Norfolk, Virginia.
Died: Oct. 6 1861 Fredericksburg, Virginia.
Children: One child died in infancy.

Sources: Imprints; *Artisans & Merchants*; Raymond, *Gray Genealogy*; Quinn, *Fredericksburg*, Quenzel, *St. George's Church*; newspaper notices in Alexandria (1800-18) and Fredericksburg (1855-61). .