

## 192 GRAY, WILLIAM F. – [COL. WILLIAM FAIRFAX GRAY]

### Bookseller & Bookbinder

### Fredericksburg

Bookseller in Fredericksburg (1810-34), first as manager (1810-14) for Timothy Green (194), then as partner (1815-19) to Ebenezer P. Cady (070), then independently; also brother of booksellers John (189) and Robert (190) Gray of Alexandria.

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 migrant named William Gray; he migrated to Westmoreland County in 1765 before moving on in 1784 to a farm in Fairfax County near Mount Vernon; William's birth there accounts for his middle name. After his father's death in 1796, his mother, Catherine Dick Gray, removed to Alexandria to live with her eldest son Robert, evidently then already engaged in the bindery trade there, bringing young William with her.

With the family's relocation, his brothers Robert and John jointly opened a bookstore and bindery in Alexandria's vibrant business district in 1799. For the next twelve years, their store was one of the largest book-trade businesses in Virginia. It appears that the pair trained William, their youngest brother, in the business in these years. However, after the dissolution of their partnership in 1808, William's whereabouts are uncertain. One source suggests that he moved to Fredericksburg at that time to take on management of publisher Timothy Green's bookstore, while others suggest he remained in Alexandria in Robert's solo store until 1810. In either case, William was living and working in Fredericksburg in March 1811 when Gov. James Monroe commissioned him as a captain in the 16th Regiment of Virginia Militia. Gray's service in the ensuing War of 1812 brought him a promotion to the rank of major in 1819 and to lieutenant colonel in 1821. William's presence and success in the Fredericksburg area may have induced his brother Robert to relocate there in late 1814 after his loyalty was questioned during the invasion of British forces that August.

In July 1815, Gray ended his subordinate relationship with Green to become the partner of Ebenezer P. Cady, a New England bookseller of both skill and energy who had been Green's partner in both the bookstore and his *Virginia Herald*. Gray & Cady lasted four years before new ventures diverted both partners. In January 1819, Gray took a majority interest in the *Virginia Herald* as part of a plan to transfer the paper to James D. Harrow (204), Green's shop foreman; he relinquished that interest a year later when Harrow bought out both Gray and his mentor Green. Meanwhile, Cady broadened his bookstore into a mercantile affair, bringing his cousin, L. L. Sturges, to Fredericksburg to assist him; the firm of Sturges, Cady & Co. continued successfully there until 1822 when both men determined to take their profits from the venture and return north.

Gray continued to sell books, sheet music, instruments, and stationery after his parting with Green and Harrow in 1820, just as his family had done since 1799. He became a major civic figure in Fredericksburg as a result, serving as a vestryman at St. George's Church and Master of the local Masonic lodge, as well as becoming the town's postmaster. But Gray's business life was dealt a fateful blow in early 1834 when he lost his postmastership as a result of his opposition to Andrew Jackson's infamous Bank War. Bankruptcy soon followed,

with an auction sale of his family's household property staged to pay off creditors, forced by the disruption of credit following Jackson's redistribution of government deposits. When that sale did not stem the bleeding, he sold off his bookstore stocks, and engaged in a quick study of the law, so beginning a legal practice there in May 1835.

That change in profession brought Gray to the center of then-current events. In mid-1835, he was engaged by two Washington investors interested in land speculation to travel south to Texas to secure title on land suitable for resale. Gray also determined to use the journey to find a new locale for his family. When he arrived in Texas, he found himself in the middle of a revolution, without any legitimate authorities capable of granting the secure land titles that he was sent to acquire. The diaries that Gray kept on this trip have become one of the key primary sources recording the political events of early 1836 that led to a declaration of independence from Mexico. Gray joined the flight of many Texians shortly thereafter as the Mexican army entered Texas to suppress the rebellion. But after Santa Anna's defeat in April, he decided to move his family to Texas. However, it took another year and a half to accomplish the move, with Gray returning to Texas in early 1837 to establish both political and economic foundations for their future. While unsuccessful politically, he did establish a law and land office in Houston, which led to his involvement in developing Galveston as the newly-independent country's principal port. Once settled fiscally, Gray returned to Virginia for his family, bringing them by sea from Baltimore in December 1838. Once in Houston, the Grays became one of the town's most respectable families, bringing an unusually refined cultural ethos to the frontier town, helping found of Houston's first Episcopal church.

Gray continued to seek political advantage, serving briefly as clerk to both houses of the Texas legislature. Eventually he was named district attorney for Harris County, the larger setting for Houston, which led to his appointment as clerk to the Texas Supreme Court. It was while he was attending the court the spring of 1841 that Gray developed pneumonia and died unexpectedly. His Texas empire was still fragile financially, but he left his wife and children sufficient resources that they became some of the more noteworthy citizens there, before and after the Civil War, and so making them hallmarks in that state's early history.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Nov. 3 1787 Fairfax County, Virginia.  
Married: Sept. 24 1817 Millie Richards Stone @ Fredericksburg, Virginia.  
Died: April 16, 1841 Houston, Texas  
Children: Peter W. (b. 1819); Evalina Stone (b. 1822); Edwin Fairfax (b. 1829); Allan Charles (b. 1830.); Catharine Dick (b. 1832); Susan Alice (b. 1835); six others died in infancy.

Sources: *Imprints; Artisans & Merchants; Raymond, Gray Genealogy; Quenzel, Fredericksburg; Diary of William Fairfax Gray (1887).*