

199 HANNAH, ROBERT

Bookseller & Bookbinder

Norfolk

Bookseller and bookbinder in Norfolk (1795-1803), initially with Thomas Rainbow (347).

Hannah conducted Norfolk's first dedicated bookstore, apparently acquiring the "circulating library" of James Hunter (228) on that merchant's death in September 1795. His store was a type of urban-centered business that inhabited the era's major mercantile hubs; its success also marked the port town's recovery from its destruction during the Revolutionary War. His origins are unknown, but the timing of his appearance in Norfolk and the business model that he used, as well as his surname, suggest that Hannah was from Ireland, possibly Dublin, a refugee from the United Irishman conflict of the 1790s.

Hannah's "Norfolk Circulating Library" was a business that both rented and sold books, a model found in most cities in the British Isles then; a patron who failed to return a loaned book was simply charged for its replacement. His store also offered bindery services and stationery, as was expected from all booksellers in America then, but it did not evidently produce many blank books, relying on other manufacturers for its stocks. By 1796, Hannah had taken on Thomas Rainbow as a partner, apparently to expand the business, turning it into the firm of Rainbow & Hannah.

Over time, however, Hannah was at a disadvantage with this tried-and-true model; he and his bookstore were not a part of the emerging national distribution system that centered on Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, depending instead on European suppliers for his wares. So when competitors with such domestic ties began stores in Norfolk, such as Caleb Bonsal (040), his store declined quickly. After 1798, Rainbow was no longer a partner in the shop, the result of his losing a leg after being shot accidentally by a customer, so limiting Hannah's financial options. Then in late 1802, he added a large number of novels to his offerings, in an apparent attempt to expand his sales; but by early 1803, the business was no longer advertised in Norfolk's papers and Hannah no longer appears in the city's historical record. His ensuing ventures and fate are unknown absent other evidence.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints (bookplates); MESDA no. 72780; advertisements in Norfolk newspapers, 1796-1803.