

228 HUNTER, JAMES

Bookseller

Norfolk

Bookseller and stationer in Norfolk from 1793 to 1795.

Hunter conducted the first dedicated bookstore in Norfolk, coming to the port town from Jamaica sometime before 1790. Described in a contemporaneous account as being "affable and well educated," he was also reported as sickly; born in England, he had removed to India and Africa from his Jamaican refuge previously in hopes of regaining his "physical decay." This third medically-recommended change in residence would be his last.

Hunter's first appearance in the public record comes in 1790 when he signed a petition to the General Assembly objecting to attempts by the itinerant peddlers who passed through town to limit the authority of Norfolk's Common Council over them, which the Assembly rejected in December 1790. Thereafter, he is most frequently seen in the newspaper record as the clerk of Norfolk's Fire Company No. 1, publishing notices of its meetings from 1793 until 1795. He was also evidently a founder of the new Presbyterian church there in 1792.

In May 1793, Hunter opened a "circulating library" in Norfolk, its first; this was a business model that allowed customers to either buy or borrow any book in his stock for an annual subscription fee. That approach indicates that Hunter then had some knowledge of the book trade, perhaps from a prior association with the printing office that published the only paper in which Hunter ever advertised – the *Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk and Portsmouth General Advertiser* – and its proprietors Daniel Baxter (027) and Thomas Wilson (452). Yet his detailed advertising ceased within six months of the store's opening, suggesting that Hunter was successful enough by then to dispense with such publicity, lacking any real competition in Norfolk; indeed, it was reported that he made "a rather good living from his shop." However, his success in Norfolk did not guarantee him a long life; by mid-1795, Hunter was ill again, and that "lingering indisposition" took his life on September 23rd.

Norfolk was not long without its bookstore, as Hunter's "circulating library" was promptly purchased by Robert Hannah (199), who had possibly been employed there by Hunter; he continued the business until 1803, when energetic competitors forced him from the trade.

Personal Data

Born ca. 1760 in England.

Died: Sept. 23 1795 Norfolk, Virginia.

No record of spouse or offspring yet discovered.

Sources: "Account of Moreau de Saint-Mery," *VMHB*, 1940; advertising notices in Norfolk *Virginia Chronicle* (1793-95), obituary on Sept. 24, 1795; *Papers of the Common Hall of Norfolk*.