

237 JOHNSON, JACOB

Bookseller

Richmond

Philadelphia publisher and bookseller who directed a branch store in Richmond (1805-16), primarily with Benjamin Warner (429) as the firm of Johnson & Warner.

Johnson was one of the early-Republic era's key publishing figures, founding a concern that grew into the nineteenth-century publishing house of J. B. Lippincott & Co. after his death.

Trained as a printer, Johnson was the scion of a Quaker merchant family in Philadelphia. In about 1790, he opened an independent bookselling and stationery "stall" on High Street (today Market) that served as his primary retail outlet for nearly thirty years. From the start, his business was intertwined with that of Benjamin Johnson, apparently his brother, a dry-goods merchant. For a time, the pair operated two distinct stores within two blocks of each other and advertised the availability of the same works in each locale. Benjamin, however, left the book trade in about 1806 when Benjamin Warner became Jacob's principal business associate in the firm of Johnson & Warner.

Early on, Johnson recognized the need for a specialization in his offerings in the competitive Philadelphia market, and settled on school-books and steady-selling literary titles as his line. That choice meant that when such imprints were not available from European or American suppliers, he published his own editions to supply his store. Johnson soon found that doing so gave him clout in the exchange network among American publishers and booksellers that then distributed domestically-produced books; the demand for his particular imprint genres in that network allowed him to stock his store with a variety of other genres without having to develop monetary relationships with other printer-publishers; rather, the network was a system of barter – so many of this title for so many of that title. As demand grew, the largest publishers formed an association to regulate and facilitate exchanges at an annual meeting – a literary Fair – that met annually from 1799 to 1806; these meetings essentially determined each member's annual production. As a result of the demand for his imprints, Johnson became a driving force in both forming and conducting this American Association of Booksellers.

Over time, however, Johnson discovered, as did other association members, that publishers in smaller settings away from the principal American publishing centers – Philadelphia, New York, and Boston – over-valued their imprints in the exchange negotiations, both in terms of size (usually shorter and smaller) and quality (in inferior paper and workmanship). So the meeting began offering prizes to boost craftsmanship and innovation in the American book trade. Johnson was thrice the recipient of these awards, earning gold medals in 1803 and 1805 for the best specimen of American-made printing-ink and in 1804 for the quality of an imprint's production for an edition of the Bible he had published in 1803-04. These awards enhanced both Johnson's reputation and business, particularly as he began manufacturing printing ink after receiving the 1803 prize. But the variation in quality seen among domestic publishers gradually pushed him away from the exchange system, as it did for most of the country's largest publishers. Instead, Johnson turned to a system of subscription publishing,

where distant booksellers raised the funds needed to finance an imprint's production in Philadelphia from committed buyers in exchange for a number of the finished work that was proportionate to the funds raised; then, as did other publishers, he supported this marketing process by opening branch bookstores in Richmond, Virginia, and in Lexington, Kentucky, to collect subscriptions and to sell the completed books in those state capitals.

Johnson opened his Richmond store in November 1805 "near the Market bridge," about a year before he formed his partnership with Warner. Still, contemporaneous advertising in Philadelphia indicates that Johnson did not actually move to Richmond; rather, it seems that he made frequent trips between the cities whenever new shipments of books were sent to Virginia; on such occasions, those newly-arrived goods were advertised weekly for a month in both of Richmond's principal newspapers, the Republican *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331) and the Federalist *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis (119), so maximizing their exposure while limiting the cost involved. Those notices also stressed that his store always stocked "the best Variety of Juvenile Publications ever offered for the improvement of American youth," so reinforcing his carefully crafted reputation as the county's premier schoolbook publisher. Richmond also seems to have been his base for trips to the Johnson & Warner store in Lexington, Kentucky – which had opened in 1809 – as he advertised the sale of a horse used in one such journey in 1811 in the *Virginia Argus*.

Johnson did not limit his stores to the juvenile literature line, however. His Richmond store served as a collection point for rags, which he bartered to paper manufacturers in acquiring paper for his publications; it also seems that the rags that he gathered in Richmond went to Virginia mills, rather than to Pennsylvania ones, as he advertised the immediate sale of a ten-ton lot of "clean rags" in 1810 after the Battersea paper mill in Petersburg went out of production as a result of a fire. That transaction suggests that Johnson did actually publish books through his Richmond shop, ones with a particularly local interest, using local job printers, while his Philadelphia business published and marketed titles with a more national interest printed by subcontractors there. An example of this is the 1805 edition of *The New Virginia Justice* by William Waller Hening (213), the essential handbook for all county-court justices in early-Republic Virginia; this imprint carried a Richmond colophon though some bibliographers have suggested that the work was actually produced in Philadelphia through Johnson's usual subcontractors; yet Henning was resident in Richmond then, and this new edition was "revised, corrected, and greatly enlarged" over its preceding one from 1799, published by Augustine Davis; Hening clearly had intimate contact with its production, so it likely was produced in Richmond and not just issued there. That association with this legal scholar also meant that Johnson's Richmond store stocked increasing numbers of legal titles over time, especially from distant suppliers now a part of his national network.

In March 1816, the partnership of Johnson & Warner was dissolved. Benjamin Warner became the titular proprietor of all three of their stores, though Johnson evidently retained an interest in the business. The change was apparently dictated by the fact that Johnson's focus was on producing books, not selling them, though he now kept a small stationery store adjacent to his press office. In the end, Johnson was responsible for publishing at least 200 titles, mostly American editions of European (largely English) literary works, ones with a ready-made market among schools and teachers. Thus by 1818, Johnson was also asked to

serve as a director of the public schools in Philadelphia's Second Ward, influencing their curriculum and so their textbooks.

This continuous activity, as well as the travel that his business still sometimes required, despite Warner's energetic presence, would certainly have pressed on Johnson's health. So it is unsurprising that he died far from his Philadelphia home at a relatively young age. On a trip to Lexington in September 1819, Johnson contracted a fever and expired in the course of a day. His business was sold off in parts, with his publishing business being sold to the antecedents of J. B. Lippincott & Co., while the small store he kept in Philadelphia alongside that press was sold to familial relations, who continued its stationery business until 1919.

Personal Data

Born: about 1771 Pennsylvania

Died: Sept. 7 1819 Lexington, Kentucky

No record of spouse or children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; *Publishers Weekly* (1896); *Public Schools in Philadelphia* (1897); *Forgotten Books of the American Nursery* (1911); *American Stationer* (1919); Reimer, *Printers and Men of Capital*; advertising notices in Philadelphia papers (1790-1819), Richmond papers (1805-16); Lexington papers (1808-12).