

251 KENNEDY, JAMES – [JAMES KENNEDY, SR.]

Librarian, Bookseller, Publisher

Alexandria

Bookseller and publisher in Alexandria (1798-1819), in partnership with son and successor, Alexander T. Kennedy (250) after 1810.

Kennedy was an immigrant apothecary who became a major book-trade figure in Alexandria in the 1790s. He was a son of a like-named Scots-Irish physician who had studied in Glasgow and Leyden, accumulating both a considerable reputation and a library; family lore claims that he was one of George III's doctors, but a nineteenth-century Irish history reports that his primary practice was in Ireland, not England, in County Down, the easternmost of the six counties comprising Northern Ireland today. With an estate of entailed property, third son James inherited his father's library in 1770, which he evidently brought with him to Virginia.

By 1780, Kennedy had been prepared for the apothecary trade and was running a pharmacy in Dublin. That same year, he married a Dubliner shortly before he emigrated. His first appearance in the American imprint record is in October 1787 announcing the opening of an apothecary store in Alexandria. For the remainder of his life, Kennedy offered a variety of medicinal items in his retail store, but they gradually became a sideline to his bookselling business, largely as a result of his involvement with the Alexandria Library Company. This social library was chartered by the Virginia General Assembly in 1794, at which time Kennedy offered to sell his substantial personal library to the company; by 1797, he had replaced Edward Stabler as the institution's librarian, a position he held until 1818. In that role, Kennedy was expected to secure books for the library, which brought him into contact with the American book-trade. Starting in 1798, books began appearing in advertisements for his apothecary store, with stationery items showing up in those notices the following year. Yet it was not until mid-1808 that he began billing himself as "James Kennedy, senr. Bookseller" in print, even though he had actively solicited subscriptions in newspaper notices from 1803 onward, usually for new titles issuing from the Philadelphia press of Birch & Small.

From its start, Kennedy's bookselling business paled in comparison to that of contemporary competitors, like those of Peter Cottom (107) & John A. Stewart (402) or of John (189) & Robert (190) Gray; indeed those two firms began about the time Kennedy began advertising books at his apothecary and quickly outpaced him by focusing on a broader market than the patrons of the library and their peers. Moreover, Kennedy was well into his forties before he became a part of the book trade, unlike his younger contemporaries. So as the disparity grew, he found it necessary to bring in a younger, more energetic partner to keep the store afloat. In January 1813, the sixty-one-year-old Kennedy split his existing business into two parts, adding his twenty-five-year-old son, Andrew Thomas Kennedy, as his partner in the bookselling and stationery concern of James Kennedy & Son, while retaining a down-sized apothecary business to himself alone. The younger Kennedy had apparently been the elder Kennedy's store manager during the two-dozen hours each week that the Alexandria Library Company was open; now he spent most of his time there, leaving the store to his son's care. With this focusing of responsibilities, the scale of advertising undertaken by Kennedy & Son also changed markedly, evincing his son's marketing sense; small, frequent advertisements

that touted specific imprints replaced the longer lists of available titles published seasonally previously; throughout the late 1810s, the *Alexandria Gazette* often carried three different notices from Kennedy & Son simultaneously in its pages.

By 1818, however, Kennedy found that he was increasingly out of step with the times; a request from the library's board of directors to expand the hours the library was open led to a parting of the ways in favor of a new librarian without divided loyalties. At about that same time, advertising notices for his apothecary business ceased as well. Both incidents suggest that his health was in decline, as he died in mid-October 1820, less than a year after being removed as librarian. Within a week, son Andrew advertised his continuation of their business as the surviving partner, but he did not file in the county court for executor status on his father's estate until the following April; his administration of that estate was similarly leisurely, not seeing a final settlement until late 1823.

NB: In 1796, Kennedy adopted the appellation "Senior" to distinguish himself from Scotland-born Dr. James Kennedy, another apothecary, who opened a competing Alexandria store that year, and who used the "Junior" form until his January 1816 death, though he was only three years younger than the bookselling librarian from Ireland and not a relative to him.

Personal Data

Born:	ca. 1752	Downpatrick, County Down, Ireland.
Married:	ca. 1780	Susannah Pepper @ Dublin, Ireland.
Died:	Oct. 15 1820	Alexandria, Virginia.
Children:	Elizabeth; Susannah; Sarah (b. 1782); Andrew T. (b. 1788).	

Sources: Imprints; *Artisans & Merchants*; Moore, *Seaport in Virginia*; Seale, *Alexandria Library Company*; notices in [Alexandria] *Virginia Journal* (1787), *Alexandria Gazette* (1790-1821), and *Alexandria Herald* (1820-21); genealogical data from Kennedy family charts posted on Ancestry.com (November 2012), including transcription of his will, corrected by family history in *Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland Journal* (1886).