

271 LOWNES, WILLIAM

Bookbinder & Publisher

Richmond, Petersburg

Bookbinder and almanac publisher in Petersburg (1809-24), partly with John Frayser (174) there, and in Richmond (1807-09); brother of Deborah Whitehead Lownes Pleasants (328), so brother-in-law of Samuel Pleasants (331) and uncle of Samuel Madison Pleasants (332).

Lownes was the youngest of ten children from a well-to-do Quaker family in Philadelphia. It seems that his father James (1740-1830) moved the family to Richmond in the early 1790s, where he became a real-estate speculator and developer; his most notable creation was the Falling Gardens property along the west bank of the Shockoe Creek above Franklin Street. Those activities and the family's distinctive faith brought an acquaintance with Richmond's Quaker-born printer Samuel Pleasants; that relationship, in turn, led to a marriage between Pleasants and Lownes's older sister Deborah in 1795.

Lownes was apprenticed as a bookbinder at a young age, but where that training occurred is unclear. Most histories of Richmond report that he learned the trade in the *Virginia Argus* office of his new brother-in-law, as he began an independent bindery business in the capital in August 1807 when just twenty-two. However, there was a like-named binder working in the Alexandria bookstore of John (189) and Robert (190) Gray in 1803 and that Lownes advertised imprints for sale there recently published in Richmond by Pleasants. As his family chose to spell their surname "Lownes," rather than the customary "Lowndes," that "William Lownes" was probably our subject here, and that he had trained in a bindery in Alexandria and not in a Richmond one; however, a definitive linking of the two is elusive.

By early 1807, Lownes had a clear presence in Richmond, working in Pleasants's office while taking on jobs independent of his brother-in-law's business. The cyclical nature of his work fits nicely with the known cycle in the *Argus* office once Pleasants was named the Virginia's public printer in 1804: the bulk of the public work was produced in winter and early spring, while summer and fall were sluggish. At the end of August 1807, Lownes moved his bindery to a building opposite the celebrated Bell Tavern on the lower end of Main Street, three or four blocks east of Pleasants's office, in order to expand his business.

Yet despite his connections in Richmond, Lownes evidently found business there difficult, given the numerous competing bindery shops. So sometime in 1809, probably during the summer, Lownes moved to Petersburg, where competition was far less problematic, setting up a shop on Bolling-Brook Street. The move was evidently a successful one; business grew sufficiently for Lownes to need to take on John Frayser as his partner in December 1811; it was Frayser's initial appearance in the trade, suggesting that he had been trained by Lownes over the preceding two years. Lownes also began publishing an annual almanac at about that same time. The partnership continued until 1813, when Frayser apparently became a part-time binder as a result of military service during the War of 1812. At war's end, Frayser returned to Petersburg from his unit's stationing in Norfolk only briefly, before moving on to Richmond to form a new partnership with Frederick Mayo (284) there. Thereafter, Lownes never took on a partner for his Petersburg business again, relying on hired hands and his

new family when necessary.

Even while based in Petersburg, Lownes remained tied to Richmond through the real estate dealings of his extended family. He is seen occasionally in advertisements soliciting tenants for houses on the Falling Gardens property built by his father, who had apparently returned to Philadelphia; after Samuel Pleasants's death in 1814, he served as an agent for his sister Deborah in selling land adjacent to Falling Gardens that she brought into their marriage as a dowry in order to pay the estate's debts; in 1818 and 1819, Lownes was involved in selling adjacent lots held by his brothers James (who was dying) and Caleb (who was insolvent). Yet he sold his own share of the Falling Gardens property in June 1818, so severing those ties when plans for constructing a new Public Market next door were announced, recognizing the lots best speculative value. Lownes evidently invested those proceeds in a home near Hopewell, outside Petersburg.

Lownes may have retired from the bindery business at about that time as well, as the latest surviving bookplate from his business dates to 1819; but with a large family of eight minor children, such a turn is unlikely. Rather, it seems that he continued as a bookbinder until his death in 1824. It appears that he died of one of the epidemic fevers that visited Virginia's port towns with unfortunate frequency in the nineteenth century, as his nineteen-year-old son Charles died the following day as well. Both were buried in the Bolling family cemetery at nearby Cobbs Plantation; in 1854, his children had their parents and brother reburied under a common monument in the well-known Blandford Cemetery.

Personal Data

Born: Mar. 23 1785 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: Apr. 14 1808 Arianna Wormley Glynn @ Richmond, Virginia.
Died: Aug. 30 1824 Cobbs (near Hopewell), Chesterfield County, VA.
Children: Josiah Hewes Davis; Mary Glenn; Charles Chapman; Virginia Radcliffe;
Jane Dade; John Henry Augustus; Margaret Ann; Willianna.

Sources: Imprints; MESDA nos. 22154, 22156, 22585; Hubbard on Richmond; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; report on *Mitchell et al v. Baratta et al* and *Mitchell et al v. Riviera et al*, in *Virginia Reports*, 17 Grattan (1867); notices in *Alexandria Advertiser* (1803), Richmond's *Virginia Argus* (1807-09), and *Petersburg Republican* (1809-19); WPA Survey Report, Blandford Cemetery (1937); Lownes Family History (1823), transcribed from manuscript and posted on Ancestry.com (December 2012).