

## 284 MAYO, FREDERICK A.

### Bookbinder & Bookseller

### Staunton, Richmond

Bookbinder and bookseller in Staunton (1808-13) and Richmond (1813-38), briefly partner to John Frayser (174); principal bookbinder for Thomas Jefferson from 1818 to 1825.

Mayo was a European-trained and practicing bookbinder who fled the Napoleonic Wars to find a "safe harbor" in Virginia. Despite presumptions among nineteenth-century historians that he was a part of Richmond's prominent Mayo family, our binder was not; his surname was originally "Mejo" which he Anglicized in his adulthood. He was born Frederich Gotthilf Mejo in 1785, the eldest son of an apothecary in the Saxony village of Nossen, some thirty-five miles west of Dresden. Mayo reported in his late-in-life autobiography that he trained in Saxony and worked in various continental locales before relocating to England to practice his trade there; but he was impressed into the Royal Navy about 1803 and served on vessels that interdicted the French and Spanish slave trade along the Congolese coast; wounded in a naval action in about 1807, he escaped to the United States while recovering; for the next year or so Mayo was a journeyman in "different cities in America," ending his travels among the German settlers of Augusta County, Virginia.

By the summer of 1808, Mayo had opened a bindery and bookstore in Staunton, evidently providing binding services for the bilingual press of Jacob D. Dietrich (135) there. But with Dietrich's removal to Lancaster, Ohio, in early 1811, it seems Mayo's business dwindled, in part from his association with a series of short-lived Republican papers in what has often been called "Old Federal" Augusta, and in part by the economic disruption visited upon the Valley by the War of 1812. So in 1813, Mayo relocated his business to Richmond in search of more constant and compensated work, taking his young wife, Dorothy Yearout (Doratheia Jahraus), and his growing family with him.

Mayo did not begin advertising an independent bindery in Richmond until May 1815, so it is appears that he worked for others there in the interim. It seems most likely that he was associated with the extensive business of Samuel Pleasants (331), as that notice – placed in Pleasants's *Virginia Argus* – was for a partnership he had formed with Philip DuVal (155) in the dissolution of Pleasants's estate following the printer's death in October 1814. And as that breaking up involved many Pleasants associates, Mayo was probably one as well.

In the winter of 1814-15, John M. Burke (065), the foreman in Pleasants's office, crafted a plan to purchase the entirety of his master's business, making DuVal his financial partner. The promissory note the resultant firm of Philip DuVal & Co. gave the Pleasants estate was intended to be paid off by selling the office's printing plant and book store. In late March 1815, Burke joined with Pleasants journeyman Arthur G. Booker (041) to acquire the printing plant; shortly thereafter, DuVal formed a partnership with Mayo to acquire the bookstore, as they then advertised. Within a year, however, DuVal had recognized the tenuous financial standing of Burke's enterprise and withdrew from his parts of the plan in April 1816; first he sold his interest in the bookstore to John Frayser, a bookbinder from Petersburg, and then his interest in the printing office to David Burke (064), John's brother. As a result, Burke's empire barely lived out that year, with the brothers absconding from

Richmond in January 1817, debts unpaid.

Still, the demise of the old *Argus* office helped provide Mayo with a firm foundation for the immediate future. He was able to buy Frayser's interest in their joint concern in February 1817, just ten months later, and continue on in the business alone. He moved out of the building that had housed the *Argus* office sometime during that first year of independence, setting up a new production complex at "Port Mayo" in the Rocketts district on Richmond's eastern boundary. By 1818, the complex included seven structures: his bindery, a dwelling house, lodging room, kitchen, smoke house, stable, and coach house, valued at \$5250 in all. The business began to offer copperplate printing services, as well as the expected ancillary items of books and medicines, as his concern now expanded. Mayo also became involved in land speculations in western Virginia in 1817, ones wherein he hoped to draw displaced Germans, as he had been, to a new life in the Virginia hills, asking only a modest fee for his work. Still, it was a rapid diversification and burdening of his business that had onerous consequences when the Panic of 1819 set in. By December of that year, Mayo was forced to stage a public auction of much of his property, both real and retail, to pay his growing list of creditors. Nonetheless, he was able to continue in business, albeit in rented spaces, for another fifteen years, thanks to a series of regular customers. Indeed, less than a year after the auction, Mayo employed six hands older than 16 years-of-age in his bindery, as well as owning three male slaves older than twenty-five, indications of a considerable operation.

From the outset, Mayo gave emphasis in his Richmond advertising to his European training and craftsmanship. It was an accent that eventually drew the attention of Thomas Jefferson. In 1818, the retired president was considering a change in his favored binder, Joseph Milligan, having decided that the work of the Georgetown bookseller and binder had, by his standards, deteriorated. Quality craftsmanship was an essential concern for Jefferson then, as he was deeply engrossed in replacing the extensive library he had sold to the Library of Congress in 1816, with another he would eventually bequeath to the University of Virginia. (Jefferson's indebtedness, however, barred such a bequest, with his retirement library being sold to pay his estate's creditors.) Hence, the bindings had to be first-rate, and Milligan's star was fast fading. So he sent Mayo a single volume to bind in late 1819 as a test of his skills; the result led to a nearly seven-year-long relationship (November 1818 to at least February 1825) that produced dozens of finely-bound books for Jefferson's collection – items that remain highly-prized among book-collectors today.

Mayo found that individual patronage was not sufficient to sustain his business alone, as it once had been. Seeking new customers, Mayo asked Jefferson in 1822 to recommend him to the Monroe administration as a provider of blank-books for the government's many offices. The former president was surprised by his need, believing by that time that Mayo was the most-skilled bookbinder in the country, and that the example of his work should have been enough to draw customers; Jefferson wrote a reply that demurred in Mayo's request, but which gave him an endorsement that became central feature in Mayo's advertising that year; for an ample part of 1822, he published notices about his ability to produce blank books to any specification, citing testimonials from Jefferson and seven county-court clerks. How much of an effect the lengthy advertisements had on Mayo's office is unclear, but the addition of a "traveler's rest" – Springhill Garden – to the family's

property near Rocketts that year suggests that his business was essentially stagnant. By 1829, Mayo was again forced into another public auction of his real property to satisfy his creditors. In the wake of this second sale, Mayo reverted to his 1822 advertising tactics, offering testimonials about his blank-book manufactory from highly satisfied customers, including the recently-deceased Jefferson.

As his competition increased, Mayo's devotion to his craft waned, especially in light of his ongoing activities as an agent for land sales in southwest Virginia. In September 1834, he turned his business over to his eldest son, Charles A. Mayo – the first of three sons to enter the bookbinding business on their own – in order to focus exclusively on his agency work. Every summer from 1817 to 1840, Mayo travelled west to inspect and purchase tracts he thought suitable for German settlers, particularly for the poor from Saxony. From 1825, he directed the business in concert with Lewis Eisenmenger (1770-1833), who was reportedly "from mines in Saxony," and was interested in developing the state's mineral resources alongside Mayo's interest in spurring German settlement. When Eisenmenger died in 1833, Mayo found himself entangled in a range of legal complications that apparently made his decision to retire from bookbinding essential. He would return to his ancient craft two years later, after having settled most of Eisenmenger's affairs, though also continuing his "Land-Agentur und Intelligenz-Bureau" in Richmond. That office eventually became headquarters of the "Society of the Advice and Aid to Saxon Immigrants" drawn from German residents in the city, including the local agent for a major Bremen trading company, A. W. Nölting and emigrant pharmacist O. A. Strecker. While largely ineffective, the settlement project led to Mayo's ensuing association with German botanist Karl Andreas Geyer (1809-53), a native of Dresden who travelled widely in the American West from 1835 to 1844, and who provided Mayo contacts that he could employ in his sales of Virginia lands on Geyer's return home. Together, they promoted Saxon emigration to farms in Grayson, Monroe, Montgomery, Tazewell, and Wythe counties. Thus, for the rest of his life, Mayo evinces significantly more interest in aiding German refugees, especially during the Revolution of 1848 in Europe, than he did in his antecedent bindery business. One scholar has suggested that this turn of focus was tied to the expensive and extensive mechanization of the bookbinding trade after 1820, a suggestion based in his recurring financial woes. But his ongoing advocacy for emigration by his Saxon neighbors was a crucial factor as well.

In 1850, Mayo expanded his resettlement efforts, publishing in Saxony – with considerable assistance from Geyer – a German-language autobiography in which he argued the benefits of removing to Virginia, a work that is the basis for modern-day readings of the man. Yet it was his daily life that best demonstrated his unfeigned fidelity to his adopted country. His last appearance in life found in Richmond's newspapers is as a political figure, as part of a statewide committee advocating the election of Franklin Pierce as president in 1852. But Mayo would not live long past Pierce's inauguration; he developed pneumonia in April 1853 and died unexpectedly at his Richmond home. The *Richmond Enquirer* published a long and often inaccurate obituary of Mayo two days later. But most remarkable is that his will left the bulk of his overextended estate to a nephew named Rudolph, who had come to Virginia in about 1846 at his uncle's urging, becoming a prime example of Mayo's purposes.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Apr. 27 1785 Nossen, Electorate of Saxony (now Germany).  
Married [1]: May 29 1810 Dorothy Yearout @ Augusta County, VA (d. 1831)  
Married [2]: April 1 1834 Elizabeth Anderson @ Richmond, Virginia.  
Died: Apr. 20 1853 Richmond, Virginia.  
Children: Five known living in 1854: Charles A., Frederick F., William A., James E., and Dorothea C.; others unrecorded (4 sons, 3 daughters in all).

Sources: Imprints; MESDA entries; Hubbard on Richmond, French, *Bookbinding*; Mehrländer, *Germans of Charleston, Richmond and New Orleans*; Federal Decennial Census, 1820-50; newspaper notices in *Staunton Eagle* (1808-11), *Virginia Argus* (1815-16), *Richmond Enquirer* (1816-53), *Richmond Commercial Compiler* (1816-24), *Niles' Weekly Register* (1825), and *Richmond Whig* (1831-46); Geyer's account of Mayo in *Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette*, Mar. 9 1849.

Various sources report differing dates for Mayo's arrival in both Staunton and Richmond; dates used here, and so the timing of his undated trade associations mentioned, are drawn from the autobiographical information he provided in his *40 Jahre in Virginien; oder, Kommt nach West-Virginien, ein zuruf an deutsche und insbesondere sächsische auswanderer* [*40 Years in Virginia, or Come to West Virginia! A Call to German and especially Saxon Emigrants*] (1850), as quoted by French and Mehrländer.