

304 MINTER, JEREMIAH

Publisher

Richmond, Alexandria

Publisher of his own religious works (1800-29) from presses in Richmond and Alexandria.

Minter was an evangelical minister who engaged the early American print trade to advance his unique variety of Methodism, as well as to denounce the hierarchical bent of the faith's leaders, particularly Bishop Francis Asbury. His many publications also evince the ephemeral nature of such imprints in the low number of his known imprints that are extant today.

Born in Powhatan County in 1766, Minter was the son of conventionally-religious Anglican parents who apparently never understood his evangelicism, one he based on the precept of self-denial and self-control as the way to salvation. He turned to his evangelical calling in 1787 while employed as a clerk at a Manchester mercantile firm; an impulsive duel there over trivial matters convinced him to lead a religious life; that decision then led him to the writings of John Wesley as the interpretive frame work for his Biblical studies. Ordained as a deacon in 1789, and elevated to Elder in 1790, brought him extensive exposure as a circuit rider in Virginia and North Carolina. In 1791, however, Minter faced a personal crisis when he found his pastoral relationship with a married female follower – one Sarah Jones – was becoming a physical fixation that deflected him from his proper ministerial duties; he found a radical solution in scripture, specifically Matthew 19:12:

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, *which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake.*

Finding a willing surgeon, Minter had himself castrated, becoming a eunuch for "heaven's sake," so taking his central belief in self-denial to an unmatched extreme. It was a decision that reshaped his life and his ministry, as a contemporary reported, making him a figure "viewed with mingled emotions of contempt and amazement." His was also a decision that is found at the center of several recent studies of the interconnection of faith, sexuality, and gender roles in early Republic America, studies that disagree on whether his emasculation was motivated by his overt heterosexuality or covert homosexuality.

In short order, the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church – the body that governed its diverse clerics in America – removed Minter from his accustomed circuits and assigned him to the West Indies, expecting he would refuse and resign from the church. But Minter made the trip and returned to Baltimore for the conference's next annual meeting in 1792, hoping for a reconciliation with its leadership; met with the offer of another exile posting in Nova Scotia, Minter balked; he challenged the "popery" of the church's leaders, arguing that they ignored those parts of scripture that did not buttress their personal power. Although initially convincing many of his peers, the assembly was turned against Minter by the ever-persuasive Bishop Asbury; thus he was "officially" excommunicated, But Minter rejected the idea that such a self-selecting body had the authority to determine who could or could not preach God's word. So from then on, he assumed the guise of an "Independent Methodist," someone who adhered to John Wesley's vision unlike the self-interested Asbury. The enmity

resulting between the two men continued even after Asbury's death in 1816. Minter would develop a similar animosity later on with Methodist enthusiast Lorenzo Dow (148), largely as a result of crossing paths during the heated revivals in southwest Virginia in 1804.

For the rest of his life, Minter was engaged in a nearly-continuous itinerant ministry, using Richmond as a base while roaming widely for 10 or 11 months each year. His travels took him as far south as Georgia, as far west as the Mississippi, as far north as Canada, and as far east as New Hampshire, with his notoriety preceding him via the wide-spread networks of Methodism. Thus when passing through Powhatan County in 1799, his unhappy father had him incarcerated as insane and attempted to break him of his unorthodox and embarrassing behavior through torture. Minter would claim that the ordeal had weakened him bodily, as evinced in frequent illness thereafter, even as it had strengthened him spiritually.

That strengthened faith now led Minter into a publishing career that supported his ministry. Returning to Richmond, Minter began to publish his sermons and writings, having decided that the only way to counter the ever-present influence of Asbury and his minions – who he termed sorcerers – was to dispense "good books" during his travels. His first two published sermons issued from Richmond presses in 1800, though the printers are unrecorded, as are the imprints themselves. Over the next seventeen years, he published at least eighteen titles, though only three are known to be extant now; we only know of the others from a list of what Minter published in the autobiography that he issued in 1817. Most were very small pamphlets, copies of sermons he had delivered. But from that published account, it is clear that Minter understood how the print trade worked and how it could be impeded by any Methodists opposed to his ministry who lived in the locales where he published. The initial Richmond titles were followed by ones in Philadelphia and Trenton the following year, with Philadelphia then serving as his preferred place of production until 1804; interference there compelled him to relocate his printing to Baltimore, after a brief association in 1804 with Samuel Snowden (393) in Alexandria; he printed Minter's best-known work: *Devout Letters*, his collected correspondence with Mrs. Sarah Jones, the source of his 1791 crisis, who had died in 1794. In the next six years, Minter used Baltimore printers to publish his "Psalms," collections of hymns that he deemed suitable for worship, three versions in all; but after the first edition issued from the press of Warner & Hanna in 1806, he encountered increasing problems there, finally severing his ties to the port town in 1810 when an unnamed printer botched production of a hymn collection for which he refused delivery, believing that the Methodist faith of the printer's wife was the real source of his problem.

Thereafter, Minter relied on Richmond printers, employing them most often in early spring before embarking on journeys that usually lasted well into the ensuing fall. The only press that he employed there before 1817 that has been identified is that of Thomas Ritchie (360) and Daniel Trueheart (420) in 1814. The only other certain attribution is that for a religious treatise he published in 1820, three years after the autobiography, issuing from the press of J. & G. Cochran (096 & 097) and sold through the store of William A. Bartow (026). That imprint is just one of two extant Minter titles issued after his autobiography, the other being a fourth collection of hymns issued from an unnamed press in Washington in 1818, and so the only known exception to his ongoing use of Richmond printers after 1810. He almost certainly issued other imprints beside these two titles after 1817, as he continued

his frenetic, book-distributing itinerancy until just before his death in 1829, but such have not been found in the bibliographic record.

Given his notoriety after 1792, as well as the many well-known physical assaults he suffered during his years of travel, Minter's death in late 1829 was barely mentioned in the nation's newspapers. Typical was the one line notice in the *National Intelligencer* that reported, with considerable understatement, that he was "remarkable for eccentricity of character." In his life, he had been called insane, "a stroller" (a minister without license), and "a pedlar" (only interested in selling books). But Minter had made it clear in his autobiography years before that his "motive in writing, preaching, &c. is not earthly gain, but heavenly, to my own soul and the souls of others." His success or failure, he said, would only be known in eternity.

Personal Data

Born: Oct. 23 1766 Powhatan County, Virginia.

Died: Nov. 29 1829 Chesterfield County, Virginia.

Neither married nor fathered any children.

Sources: Imprints, especially his autobiography (Shoemaker 41451); Jeter, *Recollections*; death notice in *National Intelligencer*, Dec.13, 1829; Biblical text here from the King James Version.