

### **305 MOUNTFORD, TIMOTHY, JR.**

**Publisher, Librarian**

**Alexandria**

Prospective publisher (1819) and reading-room manager (1816-19) in Alexandria.

Mountford was a peripheral figure in Alexandria's print trade, brought into Virginia by his cousin Tobias Lear (1762-1816), the personal secretary to George Washington from 1784. Born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1772, Mountford was the son of a ship captain, Timothy Sr. (1731-99), who commanded privateers there during the Revolutionary War. His mother, Martha Stillson (1745-91), was a younger sister of Mary Stillson (1739-1828), who also married a Portsmouth ship captain, Tobias Lear III (1736-81); the two families lived next to each other on Pickering's Neck, south of the town's center, creating a life-long closeness between the two cousins. Tobias Lear IV joined the Washington family as a tutor at Mount Vernon after his graduation from Harvard College in 1783, with the general employing him as his personal secretary in 1784. Lear remained in that role until Washington's death in late 1799, twice marrying into the Washington family, as well as handling the flood of letters that widow Martha received after her husband's passing.

During the president's retirement years, Lear travelled to Europe on business and brought his cousin Mountford to Mount Vernon to act in his stead during his extended absence, leading to reports after Mountford's death that he was Washington's last secretary. As a result of that employment, Mountford developed his own intimate relationship with the family, which became an ongoing devotion to Washington's memory after December 1799.

Lear was awarded the rank of colonel in the army in 1798 – ostensibly to provide him a pensioned retirement for his long service to Washington – but that commission eventually brought him into the diplomatic service in Jefferson's administration, first as the American consul in Santo Domingo (1802), and then in Algeria (1803); Mountford accompanied Lear as his aide and secretary on these postings. The pair arrived in Algiers in November 1803, becoming central figures in concluding the first Barbary War (or Tripolitan War) in 1805.

Mountford returned to Alexandria before 1810, even as Lear stayed in North Africa until the start of the War of 1812. The links he had forged previously brought him employment there, apparently as a clerk-secretary as with Washington and Lear before. By 1811, Mountford was a leading figure in the town's Masonic Lodge, styled as the "Alexandria-Washington Lodge" now in honor of its most illustrious member. That group had been accumulating Washington memorabilia since 1799, both voluntarily and involuntarily. In December 1811, Mountford made a speech to his peers suggesting that they create a museum to preserve and display those artifacts; in March 1812, the Lodge adopted a set of regulations for the project and elected Mountford to manage the "Alexandria-Washington Lodge Museum," a post he held until his death in 1846. Initially, the museum was kept in their regular meeting rooms, but it quickly outgrew that space; so in 1817, the Lodge convinced the city fathers to accommodate the museum in the new public-market building then under construction, relocating it there in June 1818. With room to grow, Mountford added non-Washington objects to the collections, making his museum into a true nineteenth-century "cabinet of

curiosities." And such it still was when it was consumed in a fire in May 1871.

Mountford was best known for this thirty-five-year-long association with the museum, but the institution was not his only employment, particularly in its early years. His knowledge of foreign affairs and the merchant trade put him in a position in 1816 to oversee a newly-established "Exchange Coffee-House and Reading Room" in Alexandria, making Mountford a gleaner of distant newspapers as well as a collector of memorabilia, providing commercial intelligence for Alexandria's mercantile advertisers. The utility and the potential profitability of such information led Mountford to consider publishing a weekly vehicle for that material. In January 1819, he advertised for subscribers to a new "Weekly Price Current, and Marine Journal, on the plan of those of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, &c." in conjunction with Samuel H. Davis (126), then managing partner of the *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser* with the old Federalist publisher Samuel Snowden (393). However, that proposed paper was never issued apparently because of too-few paying subscribers and the demands of each man's other ventures. Yet Mountford remained a visible and popular presence in the port's journals, providing monthly commentaries to Snowden's successive newspapers on the local weather and its meteorological causes until 1841.

Mountford's health evidently took a downward turn in 1841. In January, the Lodge formed a committee to investigate ways to assist their aging curator, especially in hosting the public galas that had become a staple of the museum's offerings. Yet the museum would always be clearly identified with Mountford, and his contributions to the city's life were renowned. Of particular note among contemporaries was that he made to Lafayette's triumphal visit in 1824; the organizers of the celebration constructed an arch across Washington Street to greet the Revolutionary hero; Mountford provided a live bald eagle from his museum to cap the arch; as Lafayette passed through the arch, the eagle spread its wings, as if on cue – "a crowning touch of realism" that Alexandria's residents attributed to Mountford. That repute is clear in his obituary, which described him as "a patriotic citizen, always ready, as far as his means would permit, to advance the interests of the town." Fittingly, Mountford breathed his last in his chambers at the museum on March 2, 1846.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Apr. 26 1772 Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Died: Mar. 2 1846 Alexandria, Virginia.

Neither married nor fathered any children.

Sources: *Artisans & Merchants*; notices in Alexandria newspaper (1811-46); Naval Records of the American Revolution; *The Lodge of Washington*; *Souvenir of the Centennial of the Death of Washington*; Stillson family notes in *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (1921); *Checkered Career of Tobias Lear* (1985).