

### 306 MUIR, JAMES – [REV. JAMES MUIR, D.D.]

**Publisher**

**Alexandria**

Publisher of his own religious works (1793-1818) from presses in Alexandria and elsewhere.

Muir was a Presbyterian minister whose long ministry evinced the sophisticated knowledge of evangelicals who employed self-published imprints to advance their theological message. He came to his calling as a child in Scotland, where his father, Rev. George Muir (1723-71), was part of a group of Scottish evangelicals that included Rev. John Witherspoon (1723-94), later president of the College of New Jersey (today Princeton University) and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Muir benefitted from that association in the early years of his ministerial career; after graduating from the University of Glasgow in 1776, he was assigned to pulpits in Scotland and England until sent to Bermuda in 1781 to fill the vacant pulpit at Christ Church in Warwick; his devoted service there convinced Witherspoon to publicize the work of his late friend's son by publishing Muir's first printed sermon at Princeton in 1787.

In 1788, Muir sailed for Britain with his new wife and family, but his vessel was diverted to New York City, where Witherspoon promptly changed the course of his life. Attending the annual meeting of Presbyterian ministers at Philadelphia, Muir was named a supply minister for the neighborhood of Norfolk; within months, he had accepted a call to the vacant pulpit of the Presbyterian church in Alexandria; he would remain in that post for thirty-one years. Once settled there, Muir became a leading figure in the supervising Presbytery of Baltimore. so earning the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) from Yale College in 1791.

Muir used his position from the start to advance both civic and religious causes. He opened a school for young women in 1789, reiterating his activities in Bermuda where he had been headmaster of the Warwick Academy; that bent led to his involvement with the Alexandria Academy, founded in 1785 with an endowment from George Washington, later serving as president of its governing board. Muir also helped found and direct the Alexandria Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge in 1790, as well as the influential Library Company of Alexandria and the Alexandria Relief Society, both in 1794.

These endeavors raised Muir's visibility in the community, bringing requests for published versions of his extemporaneous public sermons by 1793. Initially, he forged a relationship with the concern of Samuel Hanson (200) and Thomas Bond (039), publishers of the *Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser*, issuing at least two sermons from their press that year. But with the dissolution of that firm, Muir shifted to printers in Baltimore, where he often visited while on assignment from the Presbytery of Baltimore; in the winter of 1794-95, he engaged the job-printing concern of S. & J. Adams there to print a scripturally-based critique of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794-95), possibly the first such denunciation published in America. That monograph drew the attention William Cobbett, the arch Federalist editor and publisher of Philadelphia; when John Adams proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer in May 1798 – attempting to moderate the political disputes attending the ongoing Quasi-War with France – Cobbett offered to publish Muir's contribution to the occasion, and Muir accepted. Unfortunately for Muir, that publication linked him to the most strident elements of the Federalist party then, as embodied in Cobbett, and so apparently led to a decision to

abstain from any publishing activity for the next few years.

When Muir returned to publishing in 1802, he did so prolifically but with political restraint. The death of Washington in December 1799 evidently did much to repair his reputation, as he was one of the four ministers who officiated at the former president's public funeral – an invitation rooted in his service as chaplain of Alexandria's Masonic Lodge No. 22, the lodge in which Washington had been a founding member. He also became a founding director of the Washington Society of Alexandria, a philanthropic group dedicated to the charitable causes dearest to the late president. Coincidentally, the majority of Muir's published sermons now embraced similar memorialist perspectives, focusing on death as a simple transition to an everlasting life – the most famous of them being his sermon of the occasion of the Richmond Theater fire of 1811. In these works, he employed the largest printing firms then in Alexandria, evidently without considering their political affiliation, engaging Republican printers like John & James D. Westcott (438/437), Peter Cottom (108), and John A. Stewart (402), alongside the noted Federalist publisher Samuel Snowden (393).

Yet Muir again encountered political controversy during the War of 1812. He was a member of a delegation formed by Alexandria's mercantile community, which included Snowden, who negotiated with the British forces that burned Washington in August 1814; those talks led to the seizure of all commercial goods in the port's warehouses, but spared the town from the torch. The men in that delegation, as well as Alexandria's largest merchants, were subsequently accused of giving aid and comfort to the enemy in a time of war. Thereafter, Muir apparently limited his non-pastoral activities to religiously focused endeavors. He helped found and then led the Bible Society of the District of Columbia as part of a national movement then emerging to provide a Bible to every household in the country. In 1816, he also helped found a Sabbath-Day/Sunday School in Alexandria, one employing a library common to all such schools, and an Onesimus Society, an evangelical group who sought to "Christianize" and support destitute freed slaves in the District, just as Puritan divine Cotton Mather had in Boston a century before with an escaped slave of that same name.

Muir continued publication of his sermons as well, issuing them singly as pamphlets, before offering collections of them, as he did through the auspices of Cottom & Stewart in 1812. Indirect evidence points to at least forty such productions from 1802 onward, although the number found in library catalogs today is less than half that. The variance is no doubt the case now seen with all such ephemeral items: they were read into oblivion. Yet among his imprints was a more substantial effort undertaken in 1816, a monthly magazine he called *The Monthly Visitant or Something Old*, issued from Snowden's press. The project lasted just six months, over the latter half of 1816, before Muir was compelled to give up the effort.

It seems that the *Visitant's* ending was a result of both insufficient financial support and its editor's growing infirmity. Shortly after the magazine ceased publication, the presbyters in his Alexandria church began a search for an assistant pastor to aid him, anticipating that the person they selected would succeed to Muir's post upon the minister's retirement or death. The search created a schism in the congregation between the two styles of ministry then rending the larger national church as well; on one side were the devotees of the intellectual preaching style embodied by Muir and his ministerial generation; on the other, those who

desired a more emotional style of preaching, as seen in the new generation of Presbyterian ministers then in a disputatious competition with the "enthusiastic" methods of Baptist and Methodist ministers. A second Presbyterian church in Alexandria resulted from the schism, with the new one embracing the newer style and the old church the older style. While the now sixty-year-old Muir remained the titular head of his older church, as he had been since 1789, he had an ever-smaller role in it. At the same time, his publishing efforts diminished, with his writings appearing in print only as part of the work of other authors, usually as an endorsement of that work, and not as productions supporting his ministry.

Muir died in August 1820 at the residence of his friend and parishioner Jonathan Swift, the consul for the Swiss government in Alexandria. His funeral brought an outpouring of the town's residents. Muir was buried under the pulpit of his church, memorialized there with a plaque noting that he was "amiable and unobtrusive in his manners, kind and benevolent in his disposition, diligent and unwearied in the discharge of his pastoral duties." Those attributes were embodied in his surviving children as well; his only son, Samuel, became a physician who removed to Illinois, where he died in 1832 treating a cholera outbreak among the troops then fighting the Black Hawk War; his three daughters renounced marriage and conducted a school for young women in a boarding house they owned in central Alexandria, as well as teaching in the Sabbath-Day School their father had founded long before.

**NB:** The most inclusive biography of Muir is that published by William Buell Sprague in his monumental *Annals of the American Pulpit* (nine volumes, 1857-69). Sprague was a protégé of Muir as a Presbyterian minister in Virginia and so had a detailed knowledge of his life.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:	Apr. 12	1757	Cumnock, Ayrshire, Scotland.
Married	Feb. 29	1783	Elizabeth Welman @ Warwick, Bermuda.
Died:	Aug. 8	1820	Colross, Fairfax County, Virginia.
Children:	Seven in all, four survived to adulthood: one son, Samuel, and three unmarried daughters, Jane, Mary, and Elizabeth.		

Sources: Imprints; *Artisans & Merchants*; Sprague, *Annals* (Presbyterian); Powell, *Old Alexandria*; *Lodge of Washington*; notices in Alexandria newspapers (1789-1820).