

### 307 MULLIN, LANCELOT A. – [LANCELOT AYLETT MULLIN]

**Printer, Publisher, Bookseller**

**Fredericksburg**

Printer and publisher of *Republican Citizen, and Farmer and Planter's Chronicle* (1796-97) at Fredericksburg; agent there for booksellers Mathew Carey and Mason Locke Weems (435).

Mullin is a short-lived and ill-fated figure in Virginia's early print trade, having been involved with an unsuccessful Republican journal in Fredericksburg, then dying while in flight from both his friends and his creditors with monies and books that were not his to take.

Lancelot Mullin came to Fredericksburg in early 1796 to publish a Republican alternative to the *Virginia Herald*, the influential Federalist journal of Timothy Green (094). Then facing an election that pitted Thomas Jefferson against John Adams for the office still held by George Washington, Jefferson's supporters in the Rappahannock River Valley wanted to limit the damage that the Connecticut-born Green could wreak there in concert with the Federalist papers of the north, several of which were owned by Green's kinsmen. They found a young printer willing to take on the project in the Fayetteville, North Carolina, office of John Silbey, the publisher of the *Fayetteville Gazette*, a paper with suitable Republican credentials. But recognizing that a paper backed solely by such a small group of local political leaders lacked the financial base needed for long term success, they offered Mullin the opportunity to sell books there from the stocks of Philadelphia publishing entrepreneur Mathew Carey. Carey employed Mason Locke Weems, the fabled "bookselling parson," as his agent in Virginia; Weems well knew the locals behind this venture – essentially his neighbors, as he lived in nearby Dumfries – and so he vouched for Mullin as a worthy credit risk for consignments of Carey's wares, knowing that those backers could supply ample security. With the deal in place, Mullin acquired a press and types and moved to Fredericksburg. On June 1, 1796, his new *Republican Citizen, and Farmer and Planter's Chronicle* made its first appearance.

From the start, it is clear that Mullin did not have the business acumen needed to juggle the competing imperatives of his new office. While the election campaign proceeded, he found liberal financial support in the subsidies offered by his backers. But once Adams defeated Jefferson, Mullin's *Republican Citizen* could not find support like that which Fredericksburg's mercantile community provided for Green's *Herald*, so never realizing a profit. In mid-June 1797, just 54 weeks into its run, Mullin suspended publication of his paper. Dependent now on book and stationery sales, Mullin increased the size of his consignments from Carey; but that did little to help his situation. With the pressure from his creditors increasing over that summer, Mullin made the fateful decision to flee the situation. In September, he absconded with what little cash he had generated there and with the latest supply of books consigned to him by Carey, apparently one step ahead of a seizure by the county sheriff.

Weems was embarrassed by the turn of events, telling Carey that Mullin had

shewd himself a Villain of the first size -- The books which you left with him lockd & naild up [for Weems], he put, privily, on board of a boat bound for Norfolk, with the right honourable view no doubt of raising what money he cou'd by vendue.

One of the merchants who had sworn to secure Mullin's debts followed the fugitive printer to Norfolk and recovered Carey's books before they could be sold there. But the unboxed books left behind in Fredericksburg

"were seizd or attachd for house rent. You, felix tu will lose nothing, for a man of the law whom I consulted informs me that for all books unaccounted for by Mullen, they [his security] will be answerable..."

Also seized was the press office itself. Within days, it was offered for sale by the sheriff and purchased by Robert Mercer (301), Fredericksburg's Commonwealth Attorney, who was also likely one of Mullin's financiers. Mercer promptly formed a partnership with his wife's cousin, George Carter (082) to pick up where Mullin left off; thus less than a month after Mullin had fled town, the firm of Mercer & Carter issued the first number of its new *Genius of Liberty*. Their journal continued the contest with Green's *Herald* for another three years.

As for Mullin, he barely escaped arrest in Norfolk, boarding a coastal trader there bound for Charleston, expecting to escape the reach of Virginia's courts. Yet the voyage proved a brief one; Mullin died on board that vessel on September 29th, before it reached Charleston. Despite Weems's testimony, it is unclear just how much of this seriocomic misadventure can be directly attributed to Mullin, given the economic disruptions that visited Virginia in 1797 as a result of conflicts on the Atlantic, as well as the uncertainties of publishing in early Republic America. But it is clear that Mullin's death was probably timely, as he would never have been considered a reliable print-trade partner again after his Fredericksburg days.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: ca. 1773 North Carolina?

Died: Sept. 29 1797 On board ship bound for Charleston from Norfolk.

No record of marriage or offspring found.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Will & Order Books, Fredericksburg Hustings Court; Weems Letters.