

327 PITTMAN, HENRY

Printer & Publisher

Alexandria

Publisher of the *Alexandria Herald* (1820-26), initially as a partner to Nathaniel Rounsavell (367), and of *The Alexandrian* (1820-21) in partnership with Douglas Thomson (413).

Pittman was a practical printer with entrepreneurial ambitions but who lacked the business acumen and financial wherewithal to make them a reality. That failure eventually led him to attempt to kill his primary creditor, an episode that ended with his exile from Virginia.

Where Pittman originated and where he was trained remains a mystery, though his alliance with Nathaniel Rounsavell suggests that he may have come from New Jersey as did several other Alexandria print tradesmen during this era, including Rounsavell. He may also have been the Pittman (326) who joined with Robert Mercer (301) to publish his *Genius of Liberty* at Fredericksburg in 1799, but such an identification is more conjecture than fact.

Henry Pittman first appears as an independent craftsman in Alexandria in September 1820. At that time he formed a partnership with another journeyman, Douglas Thomson (413), in proposing publication of a thrice-weekly mercantile paper using the old press of Samuel H. Davis (126), an Alexandria-based job-printer who had relocated to Winchester that spring to buy and conduct the *Winchester Republican*. That sheet, however, did not come to fruition, likely a result of a lack of interest in a port city that supported two daily papers, whose content was regularly one-half advertisements. The partners were not deterred, turning instead to a plan to resurrect the literary weekly that Davis had published with that press between June 1819 and May 1820 – the *Columbian Telescope* – but as a thrice-weekly one with advertising not seen in the preceding journal. An unexpected inability to procure paper for the project delayed their planned November 1st start by two weeks; but once properly supplied, the new firm of Pittman & Thomson began issuing *The Alexandrian: A Commercial, Agricultural, and Literary Journal* on November 16th.

Yet at that same time, Pittman was presented with a second opportunity, this as proprietor of one of the two established daily papers in the town: the *Alexandria Herald*. That journal began its run in early 1811 when Nathaniel Rounsavell (367) joined with John Corse (106), an Alexandria merchant, to produce a new Democratic-Republican newspaper there. Their alliance worked successfully until the effects of the Panic of 1819 compelled Corse to reorganize his affairs in late 1820. He began negotiating with Rounsavell for his withdrawal from their concern then and so in February 1821, he sold his interest in business to a new firm led by Rounsavell in combination with Pittman. Hence Pittman was now simultaneously publishing two Alexandria papers, one through Rounsavell & Pittman, and another through Pittman & Thomson. This meant that Pittman essentially in competition with himself, and with the *Alexandria Gazette* of Samuel Snowden (393), so potentially damaging the finances of each of the two partnerships. In this new mix, *The Alexandrian* was quickly abandoned, closing after just nineteen weeks on March 31, 1821, with the assets of Pittman & Thomson being sold to the new firm of Rounsavell & Pittman. While benefitting Pittman, the closure apparently devastated Thomson financially, as he was declared an insolvent debtor in April

1823, just two years later.

Pittman continued his alliance with Rounsavell in publishing the daily *Alexandria Herald* for just fifteen months, however; Rounsavell retired from the printing trade in ill health in May 1822, leaving Pittman to carry on the business alone. He was able to effect these successive changes in course with the aid of John Corse; he financed the ownership shifts by taking promissory notes from both Rounsavell and Pittman – first in selling his share to Pittman in 1821 and then financed Pittman's acquisition of Rounsavell's share in 1822. But over the ensuing four years, Pittman found it ever more difficult to balance the ongoing expenses of his paper with his indebtedness to Corse in the face of both ever-growing newspaper competition in the District and lagging payments from his advertisers and subscribers. Those financial difficulties compelled him to reduce publication of the *Herald* from its customary thrice-weekly mode to a twice-weekly edition on July 24, 1826. Yet the reduction in expenses attending in the July restructuring meant a concomitant reduction in Pittman's revenues, and so his ability to pay off Corse. In the end, he was compelled to cease publication of the *Herald* after its November 15, 1826, issue, and sold his subscriber list to John S. Meehan, the publisher of the *United States' Telegraph* in Washington. Turning to collections of monies owed to him, he was using Meehan's newspaper within a week to beg for payments from former advertisers and subscribers alike; a month later, Pittman offered to sell two of his three presses and most of his type and supplies in an attempt to satisfy his creditors, Corse among them. By doing so, he guaranteed a finish to the *Herald*.

Two months later, on January 18, 1827, a fire swept through Alexandria's central business district, taking Corse's business with it. The financier now pressed his debtors for payment of their notes, as a way to acquire the means he needed to rebuild. Evidently, Pittman was unable to make any payment on his debt; not surprisingly, relations between the two men quickly became bitter, with Corse frequently demanding payment and Pittman repeatedly rejecting his entreaties. The destitute printer even moved across the Potomac into Washington proper to avoid contact with Corse, as well as to find work as a journeyman; but that did not deter his litigious creditor, who filed suit against Pittman.

This sordid affair came to a head on December 27, 1827 when Pittman tried to kill Corse. The printer shot his financier in the darkened entry of his Alexandria home in the midst of a fierce rainstorm. Corse survived the attack, promptly identifying his assailant as Pittman, who was arrested and held without bail in the District of Columbia's jail in Washington. Over the next few days, the two provided conflicting stories to local newspapers that turned the scandalous event into one of claim and counter-claim: Corse said Pittman shot him, while Pittman proclaimed his innocence, saying that Corse blamed him for the shooting out of a personal animus. Corroborating witnesses would be needed to verify either man's story, and Pittman benefitted from that necessity. When he was finally tried in December 1828, it turned out the only witnesses to that evening's events found by the prosecuting attorneys were Africans, one enslaved and one free; under the rules of evidence of the day, no black person could give testimony against a white person in the District's courts, as they were "secluded by color." Absent eyewitness testimony, Pittman could not be convicted.

Still, Pittman's debt to Corse remained unpaid. So at trial's end he promptly absconded – as many indebted people then did. The sole remaining trace of Pittman came with a death notice in 1833. In the intervening years, Pittman had evidently continued to ply his trade in the old American southeast, eventually landing in New Orleans; he died there that October in one of the port's many yellow-fever epidemics.

Personal Data

Born: before 1800 Alexandria, Virginia

Died: Oct. 3 1833 New Orleans, Louisiana.

No other personal data yet discovered

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; Henry E. Davis, "A Celebrated Case of an Early District Day: United States vs. Henry Pittman," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1918); death notice in *Alexandria Gazette* (Oct. 21, 1833).