

329 PLEASANTS, J. J. – [also called JAMES JAY PLEASANTS, JAMES J. PLEASANTS]

Printer

Richmond

Printer and clerk in the Richmond office of his uncle Samuel Pleasants (331) in the 1810s.

Pleasants was a secondary figure in the largest printing establishment operating in Virginia during his adolescence; but in adulthood he turned to mercantile pursuits in Alabama.

Born in Hanover County in 1797, Pleasants was the eldest son of Tarleton Pleasants (1765-1835), brother of the noted Richmond printer and publisher Samuel Pleasants; young James was sent to Richmond to train in the printing trade with his uncle, probably about 1811, when he was fourteen – the traditional age for apprenticeships. He was still in Samuel's employ when the printer died in October 1814, and so was a part of the dissolution of his Argus Office in the following months. He may have remained a part of the business until its closing in January 1817, but he most likely withdrew from that situation when he attained his majority in 1815.

Following the War of 1812, there was a large migration of Virginians to the northern regions of modern-day Georgia and Alabama, a secondary influx that followed a similar migration in the late 1780s. New territory was opened to white settlement by the Creek cessions of 1816 leading to major land sales in 1817 and 1818, as well as the appearance of merchants who dealt with the ensuing flood of immigrants. The young, unmarried Pleasants was a part of this migration, settling in northern Alabama, establishing himself as an exchange merchant who dealt in both land and foodstuffs, at Huntsville, where the two main migration routes crossed. He remained there for the rest of his life.

By 1820, Pleasants had become a part of the so-called "Broad River Group," politically well-connected Virginians who had relocated to northern Alabama from their initial settlements in northern Georgia. These settlers dominated the early history of the state, gaining control of the new state government once Alabama was admitted into the union in 1819, largely by an association with the U.S. secretary of treasury, William H. Crawford, another Virginian who had relocated to Georgia and who now controlled the Alabama land sales. Crawford appointed William Wyatt Bibb (1781-1820), a leader of the Broad River Group, as territorial governor in 1817, who was then elected as governor of the new state after its admission. When Bibb died unexpectedly in 1820, his brother Thomas (1783-1839) was elected as his successor; in 1821, Bibb appointed the twenty-three year-old Pleasants as his secretary of state – then a non-elective office. From surviving documents, it appears that the choice was a fitting one, as Pleasants evinces a firm grasp on his role, expertise he probably learned in his days in the Richmond office of then public printer, Samuel Pleasants. He held the post until his political faction lost control of the state government in 1824.

Thereafter, Pleasants became a major commission agent in Huntsville, sustained by Thomas Bibb, now also his father in law. He joined with James Bradley, another Bibb son-in-law, in conducting the firm of Martin, Pleasants & Co., which owned large tracts of land throughout the Old Southeast, acquired in the Indian cessions of the 1820s and 1830s. But Pleasants would eventually be undone by the Panic of 1837. When Bibb died in 1839, settling his

estate required the payment of outstanding notes; Pleasants was unable to pay the estate, as a result of his debtors being unable to pay him as well. So the firm collapsed in 1842. Still, he remained a respected business figure in the region, with his detailed reports on Southern commerce finding space in publications like Freeman Hunt's *Merchants' Magazine* in New York. Pleasants died in Huntsville in the summer of 1849, a casualty of a gastrointestinal disorder termed "depepsia" (dyspepsia), not quite fifty-two years-of-age – and more than thirty years removed from the printing trade.

NB: His official biography, as reported by the office of Alabama's Secretary of State, states that Pleasants was trained as a printer in Charlottesville, evidently drawing on a nineteenth century account; there was no printing office there prior to his move to Alabama (ca. 1816).

Personal Data

Born: Sept. 2 1797 Mahogany Grove, Hanover County, Virginia.
Married in 1824 Emily Julia Bibb @ Madison County, Alabama.
Died: Aug. 20 1849 Huntsville, Madison County, Alabama.
Children: Julia (b. 1827); Adeline (b. ca. 1830); James Jay Jr. (b. 1831); Thomas Bibb (b. ca. 1832); Emily (b. ca. 1834); Samuel Tarleton (b. ca. 1842); Florence Mitchell (b. 1847); Robert St. George (b. 1849).

Sources: Hubbard on Richmond; Papers of Thomas Jefferson; Abernathy, *Formative Period of Alabama*; *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* (1985); Federal Census Mortality Schedule (1850); genealogical data from Miller, *Pleasants and Allied Families* (1980).