

343 PRICHARD, WILLIAM

Bookseller

Richmond

Bookseller and publisher in Richmond (1792-1815), largely as an independent, but also in short partnerships with John Davidson (117) and Lewis Adams (002).

Prichard was a long-lived and respected figure in the American book trade who practiced his vocation in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Richmond over a forty-year-long career.

Reportedly born in Philadelphia, Prichard's first trade concern appeared in Baltimore in late 1777, indicating that he had been part of the exodus from Philadelphia that year spawned by the British occupation. At that time, he was a partner in Prichard & Lester, a dry-goods store that also traded in books, both new and used, as well as auctioning off the personal libraries of deceased or distressed gentlemen. These activities were a hallmark of all of his subsequent concerns; indeed, his last published advertisement was for the sale of a library left by a Richmond judge in early 1815. By March 1780, Prichard had parted from Lester and opened a dedicated bookstore and stationery shop near "the old coffee house" there. He was evidently encouraged by its reception as he added a circulating library that November, fundamentally a rental service for subscribing patrons; the collection comprised more than 1000 volumes, this despite the limits of war-time commerce with Europe.

Philadelphia

Still, Prichard relocated his new business to Philadelphia in the summer of 1781; he began the move in April by selling off as much of his store stock as possible, rather than cart those books north; by August, he had reinstalled his now 2000-volume library in quarters opposite the Baptist Meeting House on Second Street; he termed the gathering "Prichard's Mental Repast," as he had in Baltimore. With the war's end that fall, Prichard established new supply sources in Europe, enlarging both his library and store stocks, so obliging a move to larger quarters on Market Street a year later; there the now renamed "Philobiblian Library" would remain until its dissolution in early 1790.

The success of his library drew Prichard into other aspects of the book trade there. His ongoing sales of estate libraries evolved into a larger, separate book-auction business in 1784, and that led to occasional book auctions in New York City starting in 1785. His bookstore thrived as he became part of the growing network of outlets for imprints produced through subscription publishing, particularly for non-political titles. He also became his own supplier in 1786 when he formed a publishing house with Parry Hall (1755-93), a practical printer, to produce literary titles and school books; it was a profitable association that continued until Hall's death in early 1793. Yet their alliance was not without its own new problems; twice in 1788, the firm was embroiled in bogus publishing schemes, wherein a purported author collected subscription monies for a publication that he claimed was "in press" with Prichard & Hall in Philadelphia; and twice that year, the pair was forced to take out advertisements warning potential subscribers of the fraudulence of the claims. It was not the first time that Prichard had been faced with a swindle; in 1786, he had been taken by an Irish-émigré schoolmaster in one of his New York auction sales when the "swindling

scoundrel" named O'Neal exchanged his bad paper for Prichard's good books.

Yet the tide now began to turn on Prichard in Philadelphia. The subscription-publishing networks he depended upon began to disappear, as the country's larger publishing firms turned to using credit to fund imprints rather than collecting subscriptions; the shift allowed them to also better control production costs and so increase their profits, to the detriment of smaller publishing houses like Prichard & Hall. In an apparent effort to raise funds for his house, Prichard sold off the contents of his now 5000-volume library on May 1, 1790. Then in the summer of 1791, Prichard helped form a cartel among the city's various book-sellers and publishers as a way to lessen the ruinous competition developing among them. But the new approach ended up favoring the best capitalized publishers then in the town – men like Mathew Carey, Thomas Dobson, William Young, and Joseph Crukshank – so deepening the divide in the trade further.

Richmond

Faced with this dispute, Prichard decided to leave Philadelphia for a less arduous situation in Richmond in 1792. With book-publishing and book-selling just sidelines for printers there at that time, Prichard realized that someone with his contacts on both sides of the Atlantic could build a business that would easily broaden the scope of the titles offered in the city. Between February and April 1792, Prichard closed out his bookstore and auction house before departing for Richmond; by June he was established in a store front "at the foot of Shockoe Hill, opposite Mr. Dixon's Printing Office." Over the next three years, Prichard built a solid business and a sterling reputation, allowing him to consider expansion. In mid-1795, he left the capital for New York City to establish a second store in what was then the most convenient port of entry for his imported European wares; he left his Richmond store in the care of John Davidson, with whom he formed a partnership to facilitate that expansion.

Prichard's northern sojourn, however, lasted less than a year; he returned to Richmond in financial distress in early 1796. It would take him three years to accrue the funds needed to repay his New York debts and then purchase Davidson's interest in his struggling business. In those years, Prichard added more popular titles to his stocks, deemphasizing classics and poetry, while increasing his offerings of monthly and quarterly magazines published in both Europe and America. The slow process came to an end on April 15, 1799, when the firm of Prichard & Davidson was finally dissolved. Chastened, Prichard seems to have limited his ambitions thereafter, shaping his store's stocks more to fit the tastes of Virginians – now stressing music and law titles – rather than his own, and advertising less frequently than he had before.

This course proved to be the road to renewed profitability for Prichard, and his Richmond bookstore remained so until his death, except for a period coincident with the Embargo of 1807, when his European suppliers were prevented from trading with him. In this interval, Prichard first reduced his stocks (as he had once done in Philadelphia) then added another partner to his business, Lewis Adams, in 1808, all while offering discounted prices for cash payments. It also seems that Prichard resumed regular auctions of books in these years, after having only conducted such irregularly after his return from New York. With the end of

the Embargo, Prichard's alliance with Adams ended as well, though unlike Davidson before him, Adams remained in Richmond operating a bookstore that specialized in legal titles until after the War of 1812.

Prichard, however, was soon suffering a physical decline the oft-recorded "lingering illness" that he endured "with Christian fortitude" before dying on Monday evening April 27, 1815 at the age of sixty-five. But Richmond publisher Augustine Davis (119), employed more than such stale platitudes in his reporting of the passing:

"To all who knew the deceased; the strictest honesty, and a benevolence which was quickened by the nicest sensibility to acts which most adorn the Christian, were the most conspicuous traits in his character. He was a philanthropy, which has resisted all such temporal trials, as prove its severest test. A better husband; a better master; or a more sincere friend, never died."

Prichard's body was interred in the Shockoe Cemetery alongside that of his first wife, who had died in Richmond in the bookseller's earliest days there.

NB: In some Philadelphia accounts, his name was spelled "Pritchard;" but advertising notices that he published consistently spell his name as "Prichard;" that usage is employed here.

Personal Data

Born:	ca. 1750	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [?]
Married [1]:	ca. 1785	Catherine Kintzing @ Philadelphia, Penn. (d. 1794)
Married [2]:	Nov. 22 1804	Ann Wilkinson @ Hanover County, Virginia.
Died:	Apr. 27 1815	Richmond, Virginia.
Children:	One daughter by Catherine: Susan (m. 1804).	

Sources: Imprints; Brown, *Philadelphia Book Trade*; advertising notices in Baltimore papers (1778-88), Philadelphia papers (1781-92), New York papers (1785-97), Richmond papers (1792-1815), obituary in *Virginia Patriot* (Richmond), May 1, 1815.