

365 ROSS, JOSEPH

Bookbinder & Bookseller

Petersburg

Bookseller and bookbinder in Petersburg (1799-1804) as partner to George Douglas (144).

Ross was an Irish émigré who joined with a countryman to form Petersburg's first dedicated bookstore as the concern of Ross & Douglas. He came to America about 1790, settling in the North Carolina market-town of Tarboro, where he ran a mercantile exchange business both independently and in partnership with one Weeks Parker. From his arrival, Ross employed Petersburg as his trans-shipment point with the world beyond Virginia, even attempting to forge links with his homeland for North Carolina forest products in 1792. He also served as Tarboro's first postmaster between 1792 and 1794. By the latter part of that decade, the firm of Ross & Parker had become a loan-agency as well, taking substantial tracts of land as security for the loans they made to their neighbors. Those transactions indicate that by 1799, Ross had acquired sufficient wealth to invest in other business endeavors.

In late 1799, Ross relocated to Petersburg to open a bookstore there with George Douglas. His partner was a Dublin-trained printer and publisher who landed in Philadelphia in 1797, immediately joining the large expatriate community in the city; there he forged a business relationship with the Carey brothers, printer James (080) and publishing entrepreneur Mathew, selling Mathew's inventory while having his own books produced by James – an arrangement that mirrored his Irish practices. After just two years in Philadelphia, Douglas was convinced by Virginians in the national capital, supporters of Thomas Jefferson, to move to Petersburg to serve the growing Republican base there; he could also continue as Carey's agent and as an independent publisher in this new setting, so increasing the number of titles available on the Southside of the James. Moreover, his relocation was concurrent with those of controversial Jeffersonian writers and editors, many Irish, to this same Virginia neighborhood, so enhancing the potential market for his wares. All that Douglas required to effect the move was financing, which Ross provided; and as Petersburg was the main outlet for produce from his Edgecombe County home, the merchant brought connections to both the community and its commercial networks with him.

Their new Ross & Douglas store in Petersburg also housed a newly-outfitted job-printing office operated by Douglas – known locally as The Blandford Press; in a surviving handbill, we see Douglas promoting his press as "furnished with a complete Set of Types and the necessary Materials" which was "ready to undertake any Kind of Printing Work with which Merchants or Others, either in Town or Country, may be pleased to employ Him." Their association apparently continued for five years, but Douglas stayed in Petersburg for just three, leaving Ross to run the store alone. He moved on to Baltimore in the fall of 1802 to pursue a more active publishing career there. But the Ross & Douglas bookstore continued operating "at the Head of Bolling-brook Street" until at least the fall of 1804. The catalogues of their stocks that were published in those few years provide the most detailed view of the Virginia book trade – both as supply and demand – still available to modern researchers.

The closing of the Ross & Douglas store was likely tied both to Douglas's departure and to the introduction of determined completion from the bookselling Conrad (101-104) family of Philadelphia, who opened a Petersburg branch in 1803. Ross avoided any future problems that might arise from his lack of trade-training by simply returning to the exchange business in North Carolina, but in Raleigh, not Tarboro. This new venue may have been dictated by the fact that Ross had fathered an illegitimate son in Tarboro in 1796; before he left town in 1799, he deeded a residence over to his paramour, Mary Lloyd, for her use as a boarding house as a way to support mother and child in his absence – a structure that is today the sole remaining eighteenth-century building in Tarboro, now known as the Ross-Lloyd House. Lloyd eventually became the town's wealthiest woman despite an ill-considered marriage and acrimonious divorce that endowed her with the well-recognized North Carolina name of Mary Lloyd Gregory. Ross avoided further domestic complications by never marrying, although he actively supported his son for the rest of his life, providing him an education at the state university in nearby Chapel Hill. And when Ross finally died in 1831, he left the entirety of his substantial estate to that accidental offspring, Joseph Ross Lloyd.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1758 Ireland.

Died: Apr. 14 1831 Raleigh, North Carolina.

Never married; one illegitimate son, Joseph Ross Lloyd (1796-1841).

Sources: Imprints; MESDA No. 31478; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; Edgecombe County [NC] Deed and Order books; obituary in *Raleigh Register*, Apr. 21, 1831; familial data from entries for Mary Lloyd Gregory in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (1986) and other biographical directories.