

386 SIMMONS, CHARLES H.

Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher of the first city directories issued in Norfolk (1801 & 1806) employing the press of Augustus C. Jordan (244).

Simmons was a business agent who came to Virginia from South Carolina about 1800 with an eye toward promoting maritime commerce in the Commonwealth's largest port-towns by publishing directories of those towns. In Alexandria, he suffered a rapid rejection, while in Norfolk he compiled directories that are now important snapshots of the port then.

Where Simmons was born and raised is uncertain, but his first appearance in the public record in 1784 suggests that he was a native South Carolinian with an extensive education and links to the new state's political elite. That presence came as clerk for the Commission for Forfeited Estates, the semi-judicial body established in 1782 to liquidate the property of Loyalists who had left the state; that body's application of the so-called Estate Confiscation Act was problematic, with the refusal of many South Carolinians to report the assets they had seized from their absent neighbors and the inability of the original clerk, James O'Hear, to collect usable records; the Legislature ordered a reorganization in 1784, with Simmons becoming clerk that August. For the ensuing two years, Simmons managed the accounting and sale of Loyalist assets, frequently advertising those sales in Charleston's newspapers.

In December 1785, Simmons opened a "Scrivener & Commission Business" on Charleston's waterfront, drawing on the skills he had honed with the commission. By the following April, he had fostered a sufficient clientele to enable him to resign from his clerkship and devote his entire energies to that business venture. He continued to advertise property sales through 1795, though with decreasing frequency, suggesting that this period was when he began to focus on the maritime transactions that were his focus later in Norfolk. However, by 1796, his fortunes were in decline; facing debt suits in local courts, Simmons opened an "evening school" as an adjunct to his business, offering day-time workers the opportunity to acquire the skills that were the foundation of his business. But such new efforts on his part did not stave off bankruptcy, as Simmons was imprisoned as an insolvent debtor in January 1797. Not surprisingly, he is no longer seen in Charleston papers thereafter.

Sometime in the next three years, Simmons was able to extricate himself from his financial troubles in South Carolina and relocate to Norfolk; in leaving the state's legal jurisdiction, he likely left his creditors unpaid, as was common practice then. Yet in Norfolk, his checkered past does not seem to have been a problem. In January 1801, he gained the consent of the city's Hustings Court to create a system of street names and house numbers in the port that would be the foundation of his planned city directory. Much of Norfolk's waterfront had been destroyed by a fire in February 1799, and the rebuilding effort had created numerous relocations and departures; the court determined (likely convinced by Simmons) that the situation required that a guide be compiled to inform the public of who remained and where they were now located. By summer, the completed directory – formally entitled *Simmons's Norfolk directory, containing the names, occupations, and places of abode of the*

inhabitants – issued from the press of bookseller and job-printer Augustus C. Jordan.

His Norfolk directory was apparently a quick success, as Simmons moved to Alexandria the following winter to compile and publish a similar directory for that Potomac River port. He followed a similar pattern in pursuing his project there; on April 2, 1802, he announced his intentions in the *Alexandria Times* of John Westcott (438); two weeks later, he received the authority from the mayor and Common Council to create a system of street names and house numbers as he had in Norfolk. But the project never found favor among Alexandria's for exactly one month after its announcement, Simmons abandoned the effort, reporting

"the little encouragement given in the early stage of the business, being quite inadequate to its completion, independent of any pecuniary compensation to the Editor, he is obliged to relinquish a continuation of the undertaking."

Remarkably, Alexandria was not finally a subject of such a directory until 1834, and then it was simply a part of a larger directory for the District of Columbia.

Simmons evidently returned to Norfolk and his commission and exchange business there. In 1805, he provided testimony in an international dispute over the seizure and looting of a Norfolk trading vessel by the French in the Caribbean as agent for the ship's owner. Yet he did not issue another directory for the city until 1806, despite having promised his patrons that his guide would be an annual publication. The impetus for that new edition was once again a fire; in February 1804, a fire larger than the 1799 one consumed approximately four times the number of structures in the port, disrupting commerce more significantly than had that previous conflagration. A reflection of the scale of that destruction can be seen in the directory itself – now entitled *The Norfolk Directory* – as it was only about two-thirds of the size of its predecessor; it did not even record Simmons himself or his business locale. A nineteenth-century chronicler of the city asserted that "the difficulties which attended the commercial affairs of the United States and Great Britain, having resulted unfavorably for the prospects of Norfolk" was the reason that Simmons published no further directories, making his 1806 edition the last directory issued for Norfolk until 1851.

It appears that Simmons remained in Norfolk for the rest of his life, though little evidence of his presence there can be found in the historical record. He opened another school in April 1809 offering a curriculum well "adapted to the usual transactions in business," as well as advanced courses in the belle-lettrés. But after publicizing that opening, Simmons did not advertise in Norfolk newspapers again. Indeed, the only mention of him found in American papers after 1809 is the brief mention of his passing in February 1818 in a New York City mercantile journal, likely a necessary notice to his business clients there.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1763 South Carolina?
Died: February 1818 Norfolk, Virginia.

No record of wife or children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints (S&S 11032, 1325); Forrest, *Norfolk, Artisans & Merchants*; notices in [Charleston] *South-Carolina Gazette* (1784-860, the [Charleston] *Columbian Herald* (1785-92), the *Charleston City Gazette* (1792-87); the *Alexandria Times* (1802), *Norfolk Gazette & Publick Ledger* (1801-09), and the [New York City] *Gazette & General Advertiser* (1818).