

## 402 STEWART, JOHN A. – [JOHN AINSWORTH STEWART]

**Bookseller, Bookbinder**

**Alexandria, Fredericksburg**

Bookseller and bookbinder in Alexandria (1798-1813) and Fredericksburg (1803-11) with Peter Cottom (107), then independently in Alexandria (1813-37).

The name of the firm of Cottom & Stewart is among the best known of those businesses selling books, almanacs, prints, and music in early Republic Virginia. Yet Stewart's alliance with Peter Cottom was but the initial phase of a bookselling career that lasted nearly forty years and made him a socially prominent figure in the port city of Alexandria.

Stewart was a native of Northern Ireland who came to Virginia in the mid-1790s, indicating that he had fled the troubles in his homeland before the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798 broke out – a common impetus for the emigration of men then in their late teenage years, as was Stewart. It seems that he landed in either Hampton or Fredericksburg, as by 1797 he was employed in Fredericksburg by Jacob Wray, an Elizabeth County commission/exchange merchant with a store at the falls of the Rappahannock. Wray sold that property in February 1798 in conjunction with Stewart who garnered the proceeds of that sale, evidently as compensation for his labors while in Wray's employ.

That sale came within a week of Stewart beginning his long partnership with Peter Cottom, so suggesting that those proceeds constituted his investment in the concern of Cottom & Stewart. His new partner was also an Irish émigré who fled that troubled isle about the same time that Stewart had; by April 1797, Cottom was conducting a small Alexandria store selling the "latest plays, novels, stationery," and sheet music then available. On January 24, 1798, Cottom announced that he has taken Stewart in partnership with him; their combined efforts and divergent tastes worked well together, providing the basis for a profitable association that lasted fifteen years. The new firm of Cottom & Stewart immediately began to sell items that were not previously available in Cottom's store; from 1798, they carried a wide variety of "patterns of plain and printed paper hangings;" by 1802, they regularly advertised "new music and musical instruments" for sale; and then "valuable medicines" in 1803, a standard non-imprint item in bookstores of that time. Moreover, the pair adopted modern advertising techniques to promote their goods; by 1808, they were inserting long-running advertisements in the daily *Alexandria Advertiser* (later *Alexandria Gazette*) of Samuel Snowden (393), ones that often ran for a month at a time.

Their growing business, however, was faced with a challenge from outside Virginia by 1803; that year the Philadelphia publishing firm headed by John Conrad (103) established retail stores in Washington, Baltimore, Petersburg and Norfolk. At the same time, Philadelphia's Mathew Carey was establishing consignment agents across Virginia through the auspices of Mason Locke Weems (135), among others. Cottom & Stewart needed to grow or else face a diminishing share of the book-trade market. They moved first to claim the Fredericksburg area as their own; Stewart returned there in 1803 to open and operate a second Cottom & Stewart bookstore. Then they took a page out of the Philadelphians' book by increasing the scale of their imprint production, providing their two stores with reprint editions of popular titles at a lesser cost than they could acquire them from another publisher. The titles issued

were often religious ones, seemingly reflecting Stewart's influence, but Cottom's literary inclinations led to publishing songsters and novels as well. In their fifteen years together, they produced an average of about four such imprints each year.

In 1810, the relationship between Cottom and Stewart began to change; by then, Cottom's brother Richard (108) was working in their Alexandria headquarters, and he was looking for a stake of his own; he convinced his elder brother to finance another store in Petersburg, but with his personal funds, and not those of the Cottom & Stewart firm; by July, Richard had opened his new store there. With now divided loyalties, it was only a matter of time before the bookselling partners decided that each could survive without the other. They closed their Fredericksburg store in late 1811, with Stewart returning to Alexandria. But the end game now began, in the face of growing disruptions to their normal supply networks caused by the War of 1812, and each man's service during the conflict. A formal dissolution of their partnership came in April 1813; Stewart kept the Alexandria store while Cottom took his buy-out to Richmond, opening a new independent store there in June or July.

Now on his own, Stewart conducted a profitable bookstore and bindery in Alexandria until shortly before his death in 1837. The inventory of his store does not seem to have varied from that of its forerunner, but it did become an outlet for lottery tickets and hosted many itinerant teachers and musicians in those years. Still, he did try to expand the business in 1815 by assisting the launch of an "Alexandria Coffee House," a social setting where reading materials were used to fuel commerce; whether that venture succeeded is unclear.

Yet Stewart's business continued to thrive, as is manifest in the investments he made in the businesses of others. In July 1823, he became a silent, financial partner in a Valley weekly, the *Woodstock Herald & Shenandoah Advertiser*; its founder, Benjamin Lewis Bogan (037), had been a job-printer in Alexandria after the War of 1812, relocating to Shenandoah County in 1817 to produce that paper in partnership with Philip Williams (446), the county-court clerk there; Williams sold his interest in the *Herald* to Bogan in 1822, and now Bogan sought to sell the entirety. Stewart financed the transition of the *Herald* to Francis Smoot, Bogan's foreman, in 1823, then back to Bogan in 1825, before selling his claim to the *Herald* in 1831 to Winchester's Samuel H. Davis (126), himself a one-time Alexandria job-printer who was briefly proprietor of Snowden's *Gazette* in late 1819. Also sometime in the 1820s, Stewart acquired a blacksmith-and-wheelwright complex on Prince Street in Alexandria, a few blocks from his store, as well as a few tenement properties in town.

Through these ventures, Stewart built a reputation as a solid, prudent businessman. That repute brought invitations for him to serve on the boards of directors for two sizable Alexandria institutions; the first was as a director of the Columbian Insurance Co., beginning with its antecedent Fire Insurance Co. in 1818, and serving until 1835, when he became the company's secretary; the second was as a director of the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria, elected initially when the bankrupt concern was reorganized in 1819, serving until 1830. He was also often named by the county's Orphans Court to administer the estates of deceased friends and associates; most notable among these was John Longden, the major Alexandria merchant who died in 1830; he had served with Stewart for many years on the board of the Columbian Insurance Co., so indicating a long personal relationship; but he was also the

father-in-law of Samuel Snowden, the primary beneficiary of Stewart's advertising largess; indeed, Stewart ran one particularly long notice in the *Alexandria Gazette* for a full year in 1818 and 1819 when Snowden experienced a financial crisis finally resolved by Longden.

Not surprisingly, these visible private positions drew Stewart into the public realm as well. In August 1819, at the onset of one of the port's many yellow-fever epidemics, the Common Council appointed him to a "Board of Health," an *ad hoc* committee charged with managing the city's response to that "malignant fever." That service led the Council to appoint him an election commissioner from 1820 to 1824, supervising voting in the ward where his store lay; in March 1825, Stewart was elected to the first of three year-long terms as a member of that Council, serving in 1827 as one of the city's representatives on the board of the Middle Turnpike Company, then essentially a public utility; retiring from the Council in 1828, he was then named annually as an election commissioner through 1836, when ill health began to limit his activities. Alongside these governmental roles, Stewart was a key figure in several voluntary associations. Before his elective service, he was a "regulator" in the Relief Fire Company, a volunteer fire company from 1816 to 1820; he was a life member of the town's Presbyterian Church, serving on its administrative committee in 1817 when the church building burned, and so supervised its reconstruction; in 1824, Stewart helped found and manage Alexandria's Hibernian Society, a social organization devoted to Irish culture and to aiding the destitute among his fellow émigrés, where he remained an active presence for the rest of his life. He was also a founding member of the Washington Society of Alexandria after the former president's death and so was a logical choice to chair the committee that organized the celebration of the centennial of Washington's birth in 1832.

However, the end of Stewart's life was one marked by a decline in his personal fortune. It appears that his health began to fail in 1835, leading to his withdrawal from his directorial and governmental roles. In early 1836, his smithing complex on Prince Street was seized in advance of a marshal's sale as the collateral in an unpaid debt; that sale was circumvented for a time by new financing, but it was seized again and sold in September 1836. A month later, Stewart lost his bindery shop for similar reasons, leaving the declining Irishman with just his bookstore and residence, both also evidently mortgaged.

Stewart married relatively late in life, taking the daughter of William Dunlap, also an émigré and manager of the Hibernian Society, as his wife in 1824 when he was forty-six. So when he died in March 1837 – not yet sixty and three days short of his prized annual St. Patrick's Day celebration – he had two children younger than ten years of age; he left the two all of his remaining properties as their patrimony. Yet within days of his death, his residence was offered for long-term lease, indicating his family's immediate displacement. Then in October 1838, the children, as his heirs, were sued to recover monies that he still owed creditors.

Stewart's obituary in the *Alexandria Gazette*, now conducted by Snowden's son Edgar, reported that he was still a bookseller then; but his combined investment income and store revenues were obviously not sufficient to sustain the estate he built in the preceding forty years. A "painful and protracted" illness was more than enough to undo that legacy.

***Personal Data***

Born: ca. 1778 Belfast, Ireland.  
Married: Nov. 6 1824 Eliza Dunlap @ Alexandria, Virginia.  
Died: Mar. 14 1837 Alexandria, Virginia.  
Children: Two children in his will: William and Mary Jane.

Sources: Imprints; MESDA Index nos. 37970, 37971, 37972; *Artisans & Merchants*; Spotsylvania County Land Books; Quenzel, *Fredericksburg*; Brockett, *Lodge of Washington; Town of Woodstock* (2002); notices in the *Alexandria Advertiser/Gazette* (1798-1838).