

403 STITH, CINCINNATUS

Publisher

Petersburg

Briefly publisher of the *Virginia Mercury* (1807) at Petersburg in a partnership with James L. Edwards (156).

Stith was for most of his life the owner of a sizable plantation in Dinwiddie County. Yet he became a part of the Virginia print trade in early adulthood by backing, albeit briefly, the struggling journal of a Petersburg contemporary. That one-month alliance was Stith's only turn as a journalist during his lifetime.

Born in Dinwiddie County, Stith was the son of a major planter, Col. John Stith (1755-1808), and his wife Ann Washington (d. 1824), and a grandson of the Revolutionary-era political figure Buckner Stith (1722-91) of Brunswick County. His pedigree placed him in the elite social circles that centered on Petersburg and so engendered familial ties to the prominent Pegram and Scott families there. He married Harriet Bolling Pegram, the youngest daughter of Col. Edward Pegram (1746-1816), a key, early Republican leader in the area and a long-time mayor of Petersburg; her older sister Martha married Col. John Scott, a brother of Winfield Scott, the future U.S. Army general, and commander of the 83rd Regiment of Virginia Militia during the War of 1812, in which Stith served. Eventually, he too would rise to command in the local militia, being referred to as "Capt. Stith" after 1820. By then he owned a Dinwiddie plantation employing about twenty enslaved workers, and by 1840 that number had grown to nearly thirty. That social standing led to his service as a justice on the Dinwiddie County Court between 1819 and 1828.

A life-long Democratic-Republican, Stith became a part of a new party paper in Petersburg in the spring of 1807, the season of the Aaron Burr trial in Richmond and the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair off Norfolk. That spring, Petersburg native James L. Edwards returned to his hometown from Georgia, where he had printed the *Savannah Republican* for John F. Everett and Norman McLean, to produce a more energetic alternative to the established journal of Edward Pescud (324), the *Petersburg Republican*.; that new *Virginia Mercury* first issued in April 1807. In its first months, Stith had a financial interest in the paper, as evinced by the name of the company producing the paper: Edwards & Stith; their partnership implies that Stith was assisting a childhood friend (both were born about 1786) in this venture; but that association was short-lived, probably a six-month arrangement, as Edwards was conducting the weekly alone by that December. Still, competing with the *Republican* proved an ill-fated choice. Edwards was obliged to cease publishing the *Virginia Mercury* in about March 1808, his accounts considerably in arrears; he then set out for the printing centers in the North where work as a journeyman printer would help to pay off those debts, never to return.

Stith, in contrast, continued to accumulate wealth, land, and slaves. Sometime before 1849, he used his capital to relocate to the Cotton Belt, acquiring a succession of plantations near the Tombigbee River in southwest Alabama, as did other members of the extended Stith-Pegram-Scott family. By 1850, he owned a Marengo County plantation that employed about twenty-five enslaved workers; and by 1860, he had relocated his agricultural efforts further south to Washington County, where he provided shelter to the large family of his widowed

niece, Martha Harriet (Scott) Fletcher, daughter of recently deceased Martha Pegram Scott. Stith and his wife both died there in 1863 – he in March and she in November – leaving their niece's eldest son, Richard J. Fletcher, to administer their considerable estate.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1786 Dinwiddie County, Virginia
Married: ca. 1810 Harriet Pegram @ Dinwiddie County, Virginia
Died: March 1863 Washington County, Alabama.
Children: Apparently died without issue.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; WPA *Guide to Dinwiddie County*; Federal Decennial Census, 1820-60; Washington County, Alabama, Will Book #203; genealogical data from *The Pegrams of Virginia* (1984).