

408 SWIFT, JONATHAN

Bookseller

Alexandria

Bookseller in Alexandria (1784-96) as a sideline in his dry-goods store there.

Swift was a major commission and exchange agent in Alexandria who, in his early days, sold books as a sideline in the dry-goods store that he conducted there. Thus Swift was not a trade-oriented bookseller, but an early example of non-print-trade retail outlets.

The Massachusetts native moved to Alexandria in 1784 and established a dry-goods store on Prince Street. Swift regularly advertised a variety of steady-selling books among his many wares between 1784 and 1796. But thereafter, his store focused ever more on wholesale exchanges and less on retail sales; in 1801, he moved his concern to the new "Merchant's Wharf" he had built south of King Street and concentrated on the commission and exchange business. From 1801 until his death in 1824, Swift used the profits from that core business to invest in a variety of domestic manufacturing concerns that supplied the maritime trade that was central to his commercial interests. In his later years, Swift also served as consul in Alexandria for several European maritime nations, including Sweden and Great Britain.

In his own time, Swift was noted for his associations with early American military heroes; he was a close friend of George Washington, as well as a peer in the president's Masonic lodge; he married the daughter of Daniel Roberdeau, the Pennsylvania general who had led efforts in Congress to supply Washington's army; and he was the uncle of Joseph G. Swift, the first graduate of the military academy at West Point and head of the Army's Corps of Engineers. In our time, Swift has become part of treasure-seeking mythology, having supposedly found and then lost a silver mine in modern-day West Virginia that remains an unsolved mystery.

Personal Data

Born: In 1764 Milton, Massachusetts.
Married: Sept. 24 1785 Ann Roberdeau @ Alexandria, Virginia.
Died: Aug. 23 1824 Alexandria, Virginia [then District of Columbia].
Children: William (b. 1787); Daniel (b. 1789); Jonathan (b. 1792); Ann S. (b. 1797); George W. (b. 1800); Ann F. (b. 1803); Mary (b. 1805); William (b. 1808); Foster (b. 1810); 2 sons (d. at birth).

Sources: *Artisans & Merchants*; notices in Alexandria newspapers (1783-1824); family data from the *Genealogy of the Roberdeau Family* (1876).