

410 THOMAS, JOHN V.

Bookseller, Publisher

Alexandria

Bookseller in Alexandria (1794-1806) and publisher of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* (1797-99) with James D. Westcott (437).

Thomas was a native of northern Virginia who played an important role in the commercial expansion of Alexandria after the Revolutionary War by publishing the first daily newspaper issued there. Yet his Jeffersonian perspective in this heavily Federalist port led to financial problems that eventually compelled his removal from the town.

Bookselling was the foundation of the business that Thomas built in Alexandria between 1794 and 1800. About 1794, he opened a store selling sheet music and musical instruments; that shop evolved into a bookstore by mid-1795, with his book-stocks becoming the primary focus of his advertisements in early 1796. By then Thomas had added a bindery shop to his growing business on Royal Street, advertising blank books, both custom and standard. In pursuing these new ventures, he styled himself "John V. Thomas" in an apparent effort to distinguish himself from another Alexandria merchant of that name, as well as a like-named merchant-planter residing in adjacent Fairfax County.

In the winter of 1796-97, Thomas was considering new print-trade opportunities at just the moment that a New-Jersey-trained printer named James D. Westcott arrived in town. He had just ended his affiliation with *The Argus and New-Jersey Centinel* in his hometown of Bridgton, seeking a more viable publishing venue; deciding on Alexandria, Westcott found a willing partner there in Thomas who aspired to publishing a daily mercantile advertiser, so providing a needed and potentially profitable service in the port town. The thrice-weekly *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* of Ellis Price (342) and Henry Gird Jr. (181) was then the only paper issued there; that four-year-old journal was evidently failing to meet demand from local merchants for advertising space, despite the owners' overt commitment to such in their paper's title. Thomas and Westcott now set out to rectify that problem with a newspaper of their own.

By March 1797, the pair had set up a printing office adjacent to Thomas's bookstore and bindery, and advertised their intention to publish *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* as soon as a sufficient number of subscribers could be obtained. That their new daily appeared just five weeks later, on April 10th, indicates how readily they found such support, as well as the extent of pent-up demand for advertising among merchants there. In their introductory address, the firm of Thomas & Westcott suggested that it was "unnecessary" to explain the utility of a daily paper in such a mercantile locale, as the "peculiar advantages" that such a journal possessed were "sufficiently obvious." Rather, they wanted their readers to know of their commitment to the "early circulation of news, particularly commercial information" that the *Columbian Mirror* was unable to provide. In anticipation of modern journalistic practices, they promised that *The Times* would, in summer, "be served to the subscribers at an early hour in the morning, and contain the matter brought by the Northern and Southern posts of the preceding evening."

The new daily of Thomas & Westcott evidently achieved quick success, as the competing *Columbian Mirror* soon experienced financial difficulties. In February 1798, the Federalist Price sold his interest to his partner Gird, a Dublin-trained printer, in order to reorganize his finances; Gird further undermined the paper's stability by opening the *Mirror's* pages to an intensifying antislavery campaign pressed by local Quakers, such as Samuel Janney; Price was pressed by his friends to reacquire the *Mirror* from Gird in December 1799 to quiet the uproar. But Price still was not financially solvent and taking on the *Mirror's* indebtedness again forced that issue; he sold the newspaper once more in September 1800 in an effort to satisfy his creditors. The new owner, William Fowler (173), quickly discovered how poor the fiscal health of the *Mirror* was and so closed the paper at the end of 1800, selling its assets to the Federalist-oriented firm of Samuel Snowden (393) and Matthew Brown (057), who were about to issue their new daily, the *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, in a challenge to the Jeffersonian-influenced *Times*.

By January 1801, however, *The Times* was published by the Westcott family alone. Thomas had apparently committed to a two-year partnership with Westcott in April 1797, and so in April 1799, as the political uproar over the Alien & Sedition Acts increased, he withdrew from the journalism entirely, selling his interest to Westcott's father John (438), who seems to have moved from New Jersey in anticipation of the dissolution of Thomas & Westcott. Once in the family's hands, the daily became a more controversial journal, leading to a knife attack on the younger Westcott in the streets of Alexandria in May 1799 by a Federalist sympathizer; that fall, the Westcotts joined the effort organized by the leaders of Virginia's Republican party to create a network of papers in the state in support of the presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson in 1800; that joining led to James D. Westcott's subsequent connections with the Jeffersonian publishers James Lyon (274) and Richard Dinmore (139) in nearby Washington and Georgetown.

Thomas remained detached from the ensuing political controversies by simply returning to his bookselling and bindery business. He also took on more civic responsibilities in the town, serving as the secretary to the Mechanical Relief Society of Alexandria from 1795 to 1804, as well as sergeant of a local militia company (Capt. McKnight's) and superintendent of the butcher's stalls in the public market-house in that same period. He was elected warden of the city's Second Ward from 1797 to 1800, before serving one year-long term on the city's Common Council representing that district. But when that term ended in 1801, Thomas was beginning to feel an economic pinch; in January, he offered a press and types from his job-printing office in an auction sale; then he sold off a large part of his stationary business and moved to smaller quarters opposite the Market Square later that summer. Remarkably, the advertisements for his store cease in 1802, suggesting that he was increasingly marginalized in that fundamental business by larger competitors in Alexandria, such as the concerns of Peter Cottom (107) & John A. Stewart (402), and of Robert (190) & John (189) Gray, long-time advertisers in the *Times*, both during and after Thomas's involvement.

In 1806, Thomas left Alexandria for Washington City across the river. That October, several undeveloped town lots that he owned in Alexandria were seized and sold in a marshal's sale for payment of at least one debt-default judgment against him. Now ensconced on Eighth Street near the gate of the Navy Yard, Thomas conducted a small, unadvertised bookstore

and bindery, apparently drawing its patronage from the adjacent naval facility. He tried at least once to commence a publishing concern, issuing a transcription of the treason trial of Aaron Burr in late 1807; but Thomas immediately fell into a legal controversy over his right to publish the transcribed testimony of a public trial with the stenographer appointed by the court itself, who claimed exclusive rights to publication. It proved to be the last imprint that Thomas published, outside of blank forms and handbills.

Thomas came to the end of his life in this situation in May 1823. The concise notices of his death published in the capital's *National Intelligencer* and Snowden's *Alexandria Gazette* suggest that his demise, both physical and mercantile, had been long in coming, and so was not at all unexpected. Still, there was a modicum of honor attached to his funeral, as he was buried in the nearby Congressional Cemetery. His family had Thomas reburied in 1858 in a family plot in Washington's Oak Hill Cemetery alongside his then-recently-deceased widow.

Personal Data

Born:	before	1775	In neighborhood of Alexandria, Virginia.
Married:	ca.	1795	Woman named Deborah, likely @ Alexandria, VA
Died:	May 13	1823	Washington, District of Columbia
Children:	At least three: William (b. 1796); Harriett (b. 1819); Lucy (b. 1812).		

Sources: Imprints; MESDA Index nos. 39649, 39650; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; Croggon, *History of Southeast*; notices in [Alexandria] *Columbian Mirror* (1794-99), the *Times and Alexandria Advertiser* (1797-1802); the *Alexandria Gazette* (1800-23), and *National Intelligencer* (1807-23); genealogical data from grave markers posted on Findagrave.com (March 2013).