

411 THOMAS, JOSEPH

Publisher

Winchester

Author and publisher of several religious imprints in Winchester (1813-19) issued from the press office of Jonathan Foster (168) there.

Thomas was an itinerant preacher who employed a printing office in Winchester to publish at least seven of the books he wrote during a ministerial career spanning three decades.

Born in North Carolina in 1791, Thomas was the son of a family that had been economically devastated by the Revolutionary War; immigrants from Pennsylvania, his parent's Orange County farm was pillaged and burned in early 1781 by British forces in the command of Lord Cornwallis; by 1791, his father had not fully recovered from that loss, laden by the expense of nine children, of whom Thomas was the youngest. In 1798, he was sent away to school, so beginning a life of wandering, first in search of purpose, then in search of souls to save.

By 1807, Thomas had attended school in three different locales, interspersed with periods of forced farm labor, and kept a small school in Grayson County, before joining his brother in blacksmithing there. That summer, after a lengthy period of reflection and prayer, he came to the belief that he had been called to preach the Gospel as his life's work; he had attended several camp meetings in the preceding four years and had read, with great effect, *The Chain of Reason and Reflections* (1800) by Methodist evangelical Lorenzo Dow (148), so initiating the process of self-examination that yielded that belief. However, Thomas found his emerging religiosity, while still immature, varied from the doctrines of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Freewill Baptist churches he tried to join over the ensuing two years. But in 1809, he came under the sway of James O'Kelly (1736-1826), the schismatic Methodist evangelical who founded the "Christian Church of the South" in 1794, and discovered that spreading his eccentric message was more important spiritually than was conforming to any particular denominational creed. So for the rest of his life, Thomas simply described his view as "Christian," preaching to any congregation or community that would hear him, and drawing continual criticism from the country's established clergy. He brushed off their reproaches with the rejoinder that he was just a pilgrim seeking truth, leading to a popular designation of the young preacher as "The Pilgrim."

His itinerancy took him from North Carolina to Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and – most importantly – Virginia, and to the Shenandoah Valley in particular. Thomas's first tour of the Valley in the fall of 1811 led to his taking up winter residence at the farm of Michael Rittenour in Frederick County. There he met the woman who became his wife in April 1812, his host's daughter Christiana. As a result, Thomas made Frederick County his home base after 1812, either by residing on his father-in-law's large farm or by purchasing homes, in turn, at Kernstown, Middletown, and Winchester. After 1820, notices of his itinerary in papers published near those meetings reported he was "of Winchester."

Thomas's initial residence in Frederick also led to a relationship with the Winchester printer-publisher, Jonathan Foster; an "elder" in the town's Presbyterian church, he had arranged for Thomas to use his church's meeting house in November 1811 and often placed notices

in his *Republican Constellation* for the meetings that Thomas staged in the northern valley thereafter; Foster also officiated at the preacher's wedding in 1812. So it is no surprise that Thomas considered Foster his personal printer over the next few years. And from the printer's perspective, Thomas represented the opportunity to finally expand his business beyond a simple newspaper and job-printing concern into a book-publishing one. Indeed, he spent considerable monies outfitting his office with the tools needed for such work at just the time that Thomas came to him with his first Virginia project: a small pamphlet that addressed recent clerical criticisms of his ministry, now lost and so unrecorded (he had published a similar tract in Philadelphia before coming to Frederick). That 1813 Winchester imprint was the first of at least seven works Foster produced for Thomas, each appearing to have been contracted on the evangelical's return to Frederick County from a preaching tour during which that book was penned, to wit: *A Poetical Descant on the Primeval and Present State of Mankind* (1816); *Pilgrim's Hymn Book* (two eds.: 1816 & 1817); an autobiographical *Life of the Pilgrim Joseph Thomas* (1817-18); *A Discourse on ... Sunday Schools* (1818); and *The Trump of Christian Union* (1819). Foster's publications have proven to be the bulk of Thomas's surviving corpus, though other smaller ephemeral imprints were likely produced as well, there and elsewhere, ones like his 1813 apologetical tract.

Thomas provided a detailed account of his life up to January 1818 in the autobiography Foster printed, but thereafter details of his life and work are few. In 1829, he issued a new edition of his poetry collection in Lebanon, Ohio, with a reprint of his autobiography at its head; therein he added an account of attempts to "excommunicate" him from a Southside Virginia "Christian Church" with which he had no affiliation – except in the use of a common name – and the subsequent publication of "charges" against him that led to the action, which resulted in clerical denunciations of him for at least four years; that twelve-page defense gives the only indication of his later travels, and then just to 1824. Moreover, most nineteenth-century biographies of Thomas simply summarize the Winchester narrative of 1818 before adding an account of his death in 1835 – as seen in the posthumous memorial *The Life, Travels, and Gospel Labors of Eld. Joseph Thomas* (New York, 1861) – leaving those controversies unreported. That Thomas became an "elder" in his later days, as evinced by that title, represents a dramatic change in perceptions of him, progressing from the "child preacher" of his North Carolina youth, to the "Crazy Thomas" who "abandoned" his family in Virginia to preach heresy in the trans-Appalachian west, to the "White Pilgrim" who emerged from Frederick County in 1815 when he adopted the practice of wearing white clothing alone, "agreeably to the impression of his mind in white."

That physical appearance was recorded on his grave-stone as well. In the winter 1834-35, Thomas embarked on a preaching tour of New York and New Jersey, leaving his wife and family behind in Frederick once again. After visiting New York City, he contracted small pox, which his memorialists supposed he was exposed to "while walking through the streets" of that metropolis. He was finally incapacitated by the disease in Warren County, New Jersey, bordering Pennsylvania along the Delaware Water Gap. He died there in the small village of Johnsonburg in April 1835 after "the skill of physicians and the aid of friends was baffled." The villagers buried him in the yard of their small meeting house, noting that he was still a "Minister of the Gospel of the Christian Church" at his death.

Personal Data

Born: Mar. 7 1791 Haw River, Orange County, North Carolina.
Married: Apr. 5 1812 Christina Rittenour @ Frederick County, VA.
Died: Apr. 9 1835 Johnsonburg, Warren County, New Jersey.
Children: At least five: Sophronia (b. 1813); Philomena (b. 1815); Lorenzo (b. 1817); Plato (b. 1825); and an unnamed male b. by 1820.

Sources: Imprints, esp. *The Life of the Pilgrim Joseph Thomas* (1817-18); Thomas biography in Barrett, *A Centennial of Religious Journalism* (Dayton, 1908); Federal Decennial Census, 1820.