

417 TREMPER, LAWRENCE

Bookseller

Staunton

Bookseller in Staunton (1798-1841) while also the Federal Postmaster there.

Tremper was the long-serving Staunton postmaster who also collected subscriptions for published works and sold finished books at his post office. In that role, he was an eccentric, though respected figure in that town.

A native of the Hudson River Valley, Tremper descended from the earliest Dutch settlers of New York who populated Orange and Dutchess Counties. He is reported to have been a soldier in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, though the only record of Tremper in Continental service dates to 1783-84, after the Treaty of Paris. Yet that service was as the Quartermaster of a regiment dispatched to the Mohawk Valley to quell native resistance to the new American government; that position of responsibility required some experience, suggesting Tremper had served previously in a New York militia unit; such units had little role in the war after the Battle of Saratoga in the fall of 1777, and so were largely disbanded, leaving a pool of experienced men in the area to draw from in mustering the 1783 expedition. During that deployment, Tremper kept a journal that has now become a key primary source for historians of that region for the years immediately after the war.

Still, Tremper did not long remain in New York after his military service. By 1793, he resided in Staunton, evidently conducting a retail store there. As his store served as an unofficial post office as well, Tremper was a logical choice for appointment as the town's postmaster in 1798, following the 1797 congressional reorganization of the country's postal system. He held the post until his death in 1841, some forty-three years. That he survived the purges of postmasters in 1801-02 (displacing Federalists) and 1829-30 (rewarding loyal Jacksonians) is remarkable; one nineteenth-century historian attributed his longevity to a long association with Washington – who had dispatched the Mohawk expedition and who many assumed had granted Tremper his post – was a circumstance that "gave sort of a sanctity to his right of possession, and the post office was conceded to him as his private property, to do as he pleased with it."

Tremper's pleasure was to give his post office the trappings of a small-town bookstore of that era, much like what his contemporary, John Grammar (184), assembled in Petersburg. Newspaper editors employed him as the subscription agent there, as did book publishers far from Staunton. Those contacts provided him with access to recently published books that he sold largely on commission; in the role, Tremper was a key distributor of the German-language imprints produced by the Henkel Press in New Market. And like other Virginia bookstores, he sold lottery tickets, patent medicines, and candy. The office may also have served as a local reading room, as Staunton did not then have one, where residents could read many of the newspapers that passed through Tremper's hands.

In his later years, Tremper conducted the office with the only help of an enslaved mulatto man named Remus. His wife apparently died shortly after their relocation from New York and his two children had departed his household by 1820. Hence, Tremper was considered

an eccentric by his contemporaries, a "childless widower" who felt

"no pride in the fact that he had been a Revolutionary soldier. He never took part in the Fourth of July celebrations, and was unknown in street processions, except of the Masonic fraternity."

Among those Masonic brethren was James Patterson (1805-82). He had married the widow of Tremper's son Jacob in 1828, and served as the clerk of the Hustings Court in Staunton at the time of Tremper's passing in 1841. The clerk served as administrator of the postmaster's estate and, in that role, filed the claims now in the archives of the Federal Pension Office that trace Tremper's military service.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1753 near Albany, New York.
Married: ca. 1787 Catalina van Ness in New York.
Died: Jan. 15 1841 Staunton, Virginia.
Children: At least two: a son Jacob (d. 1824); a daughter Catherine (m. 1820).

Sources: "Papers of Solomon Henkel, 1801-1846," Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia; *Annals of Augusta County*; Johnson, *Bloodied Mohawk*; Revolutionary War Pension Application no. S7754; genealogical material from online records of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society.