

429 WARNER, BENJAMIN

Bookseller

Richmond

Philadelphia publisher and bookseller who directed a branch store in Richmond (1806-21), initially with Jacob Johnson (237) as the firm of Johnson & Warner (1806-16).

Warner was one of the early-Republic era's key publishing figures, part of a concern that grew into the nineteenth-century publishing house of J. B. Lippincott & Co. after his death.

The bookseller was evidently a native of Philadelphia, where his father, John Warner (1734-98), had come from Switzerland as a young man; employed as a "whale-bone cutter" there (i.e. making the corset stays), he married Sarah Topliff in 1781; the couple raised at least two sons in the community of manufacturing tradesmen there. Some sources report that young Benjamin was not trained as a printer, but had an early association with the vibrant trade in books in Philadelphia circa 1800; given his subsequent partnership with printer and publisher Jacob Johnson, he may have begun his trade career as a clerk in the bookstore of Benjamin & Jacob Johnson prior to 1806 – just as his successor had started in his store.

In 1806, the firm of Benjamin & Jacob Johnson was dissolved, apparently out of Benjamin's interest in leaving the trade; Warner quickly became Jacob's principal business associate in the firm of Johnson & Warner. The partnership was essential as Johnson, the printer, was tied to his Philadelphia press office; yet the firm owned a branch bookstore in Richmond, Virginia, opened in 1805, and so needed a mobile partner to supervise the retail sales part of the business; the unmarried Warner, then twenty, was an appropriate choice. Adding Warner now meant that Johnson did not have to travel to Richmond to arrange marketing and collections whenever new shipments of books were sent south; that became Warner's function. As before their alliance, those newly-arrived goods were advertised weekly for a month in both of Richmond's principal newspapers, the Republican *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331) and the Federalist *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis (119), so maximizing their exposure while limiting the cost involved. Those notices also stressed that their store always stocked "the best Variety of Juvenile Publications ever offered for the improvement of American youth," so reinforcing a carefully crafted reputation as the county's premier school-book publisher. Their plan worked well enough for the pair to open a second branch store in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1809. It also allowed Warner to marry and start a family of his own in 1814.

In March 1816, the partnership of Johnson & Warner was dissolved. Warner became the titular proprietor of all three of their stores, though Johnson evidently retained an interest in the business, as he died while on a visit to the Lexington store in 1819. The change was apparently dictated by the fact that Johnson's focus was on producing books, not selling them, though he did keep a small stationery store adjacent to his press. Warner found capable hands to manage each of the stores, and began riding circuit between them. Who his proxies were in Lexington and Richmond is unclear, but in Philadelphia he elevated the old firm's principal clerk, John Grigg (1792-1864), to the store's manager; for Grigg, it was the beginning of a career that made him into one of the largest medical publishers in the

1830s and 1840s.

In the short term, the reorganization freed Warner up from day-to-day concerns, and so to new publishing ventures and business investments. He acquired several properties in the Philadelphia area, and then used those assets as collateral for loans that financed the production of specific imprints; he built a large estate in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, across the Delaware from Philadelphia; he also built and operated a brewery in Cincinnati, Ohio, a stop it seems on his water-route to and from Lexington.

Unfortunately, his wide-spread empire required near constant travel to manage effectively, and after the death of Jacob Johnson in 1819, he could no longer delegate any of that travel to a trusted agent. Thus, like Johnson, he died far from home on one of those tours. While visiting Richmond in September 1821, Warner contracted a "bilious fever" – an illness with an excess of bile – and died, a passing identical to that of his former partner. One obituary noted that "though a merchant, he was a patriot." Such an assessment was based on a long acquaintance with Warner himself:

"It is true that he was never found fighting his country's battles; for he was a believer in the doctrines of peace. He was never found guiding the helm of state; for he had no political ambition. Nor was his name ever emblazoned on the scroll of literary fame; for he was a man of business ... with almost unexampled propriety; introducing and sustaining the most perfect system throughout the minutest ramifications of his widely extended and complicated concerns; and combining in his whole conduct, the greatest promptitude, with the most determined perseverance – the greatest suavity of manner with the most inflexible integrity."

His memorialist closed with the remarkable comment that "*His very debtors loved him!*"

Following Warner's death, the parts of his "widely extended and complicated concerns" became the way for a new generation of booksellers and publishers to establish themselves in Philadelphia. His estate's executors – brother Joseph Warner (1783-1853) and brother-in-law Redwood Fisher (1782-1856) – sold off his assets in order to construct a monetary trust for his four infant children. The stores in Lexington and Richmond were closed, and his book inventories sold; the stocks in Philadelphia were purchased by the firm of McCarty & Davis, making them the principal bookseller in the city in the in the 1820s. As that sale ended the employment of John Grigg, he took the proceeds from his connection with Warner and started his own publishing business using Warner's long-standing print-trade contacts; he later sold that profitable enterprise to Joshua Ballinger Lippincott (1813-86), who had begun his publishing career by acquiring the remnants of Jacob Johnson's business, thus bringing the two halves of the old Johnson & Warner concern together under the umbrella of J. B. Lippincott & Company – a publishing house that survived well past World War II.

Despite the well-organized transition, there was intense litigation over Warner's debts, the many promissory notes he issued secured by his real estate holdings and store inventory. In his will, he gave his executors the option of continuing his business in trust for his children, or to liquidate his assets in order to construct a monetary trust for them. It appears that Warner and Fisher chose to sell everything as quickly as possible, rather than administer his many assets in an ongoing trust arrangement over the many years before his children would

reach their majorities. In Virginia, their choice led to a chancery suit where one creditor, Edward Parker, wanted to take possession of the collateral security – here all copies of a new edition of the *New Edinburgh Encyclopedia* – rather than wait for a payment from the executors once they settled the estate (i.e. 1823 vs. 1828); they apparently were compelled to relinquish the disputed books under court order. But back in Philadelphia, the executors fared better. A series of notes issued in the last months of Warner's life were not redeemed during time that the law allowed (six years); rather, the holder of those notes, ones signed over to him as a third-party assignment, presented them for payment after that period had expired, but before the estate was settled; when the court found that the estate was not required to honor such "stale claims," the holder appealed to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania; the justices upheld the lower court, noting that the holder was essentially raiding the trust fund established for Warner's children from the estate's residue, rather than collecting from his business, the purpose of the notes, so depriving him of \$3600.

Personal Data

Born: May 18 1786 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: Sept. 22 1814 Lydia Fisher @ Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Died: Sept. 24 1821 Richmond, Virginia.
Children: Miers Fisher (b. 1815); John (b. 1817); Redwood Fisher (b. 1818);
Lydia (d. by 1821); Sarah (b. 1821).

Sources: Imprints; Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*; Jackson, *Market Street, Philadelphia*; advertising notices in Philadelphia papers (1806-23), Richmond papers (1805-23); Lexington papers (1808-23); *Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, 1836-39*; Jones, *Genealogy of the Rodman Family* (1886); *Genealogy of the Fisher Family* (1896).