

### **435 WEEMS, MASON L. – [REV. MASON LOCKE WEEMS, M.D.]**

#### **Bookseller, Publisher**

#### **Dumfries**

Itinerant bookseller and publisher (1791-1825) operating out of his home in Dumfries; father of Jesse E. Weems (434).

Weems was a unique figure in the book trade of the early-Republic era. He used the usually anonymous functions of travelling sales agent and colporteur as the foundation for a career as an itinerant minister, acclaimed author, and populist publisher, who traversed the South for more than thirty years promoting the ideals of the Revolutionary generation.

#### **Ministerial Calling**

Known familiarly as "Parson Weems" for most of his life, Weems was born in 1759 in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, near the colonial capital of Annapolis. His father, David Hamilton Wemyss (1706-79), was one of three siblings who came to Maryland from Scotland by 1725 to reside with a maternal uncle, Dr. William Locke (or Loch, d. 1732), who Anglicized their surnames to Weems; David married an Esther Hill of Anne Arundel (d. 1776) about 1738, giving rise to a family of nineteen children; Mason Locke was ostensibly twelfth in that line. This younger son was dispatched to England in about 1773 to study medicine and was a practicing physician when he returned to America in 1776, reportedly leaving a post in the Royal Navy to avoid having to engage in combat with his countrymen; it seems that Weems practiced in Maryland during the war years, and so was called "Dr. Weems" throughout his life, despite his subsequent ordination as an Episcopal minister.

That turn in his life also came during the Revolutionary War; Weems felt himself called to the ministry in those years and so journeyed to England again when hostilities ceased in 1782 to seek ordination as an Anglican minister; but he quickly found that he would need to swear loyalty to the British crown before such could be granted. For the ensuing two years, Weems pursued alternative paths to ordination in Holland and Denmark – with the aid of John Adams, then the U.S. minister in Amsterdam – before finally realizing his original plan in September 1784, following Parliament's repeal of the loyalty requirement. On his return to Maryland, he was assigned to All Hallows Parish in Anne Arundel; there he became part of the post-Revolutionary alteration of a British-centered Anglican church to an American-bred Episcopal one; however, Bishop William Meade (1789-1862), the well-known church historian, later reported that Weems was not a strict adherent to Episcopal theology, and so unsuited to his role, despite his charitable nature. That divergence led to his departure from All Hallows in 1789, and an ensuing set of temporary assignments that eventually drew him to the long-vacant pulpit of the Pohick Church in Fairfax County, Virginia in about 1794. That association, though both unofficial and unsanctioned, was the one by which he was most often known, as "rector" of the parish church attended by George Washington.

#### **Populist Publisher**

During his years ministering to the faithful in Anne Arundel, Weems started down his path into the book trade. In 1791, he was gathering subscriptions for publishing a collection of

the sermons of Robert Russel (fl. 1692) that were issued from the Baltimore press of Samuel and John Adams that same year. It was the beginning of a five-year association with that concern, one that issued similar subscription publications for him in a collection of sermons by Hugh Blair (1718-1800) in 1792 and an Episcopal catechism in 1793. But in 1794, Weems brought them a contract for publishing a recent English account of a captain ship-wrecked in the Pelew Islands (today Palau in the western Caroline Islands), and then a steady-selling moralistic novel about an orphaned English girl in 1795. These were the first of his extensive efforts in publishing salable non-religious works. Those efforts drew the remark from a clerical peer, Rev. William Duke, that he was "sorry to see Weem's pedling way of life." Still, these ventures show that by the early 1790s he had discovered that itinerant preaching could be combined profitably with subscription publishing. It was only a short step for him to then start selling books along his perambulations in Maryland and Virginia.

Weems married in 1795 and in doing so he established a base for his itinerant lifestyle. His union with Frances "Fannie" Ewell of Prince William County, near to Pohick Church, brought forth ten children, of whom seven survived childhood. It also brought him a residence at the Ewell family estate of Belle Aire, which served as his country home for the rest of his life. He also acquired a house in the county seat of Dumfries, which soon became the hub of his book trade activities.

With his relocation to Prince William, Weems now considered larger publishing ventures than what he had attempted previously. In early 1793, he employed a Philadelphia printer, Parry Hall (1758-93), to reprint a treatise by the Venetian engineer Luigi Cornaro (1475-1566) on longevity and diet, the first medical title he published. This introduction to that city's printing offices produced an expert result that enticed Weems to employ others there after Parry's death that fall. Over the next thirty years he engaged more than seventeen different presses there to produce many of the titles that he published. But it also set up a dichotomy in his printing choices: generally, Philadelphia was his choice for larger works, ones of more than 150 pages, while he distributed the printing of his pamphlet productions, items less than 100 pages, to presses near to where he was currently travelling – fourteen locales in all, stretching from Albany, New York, to Charleston, South Carolina. Weems also began carrying subscription papers for the proposed imprints of Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey about 1796, and recommending retail outlets to Carey for his book stocks.

The presses that Weems chose in Virginia all date to an early effort at almanac publishing, evidently recognizing a ready demand and their portability. What is more, those choices reflected his developing political views. The first press so employed was that of Lancelot A. Mullin (307) in Fredericksburg in 1791; Mullin had been brought to that town to produce a Republican alternative to the long established *Virginia Herald* of arch-Federalist Timothy Green (194), and Weems now moved to help improve Mullin's viability; he first engaged the printer to produce an almanac and a small collection of Bible stories in French for him, then recommended Mullin to Carey as a suitable distributor; but Mullin's business collapsed in September 1797, just after Weems's imprints were finished, with the young printer fleeing south with the store's stocks and monies. The ill-timing of Mullin's departure meant that Weems was compelled to hire Green to produce his 1798 almanac as the only available press near to Dumfries. But for his 1799 edition, he turned to the Richmond press office of

Thomas Nicolson (315), a neutral in the newspaper wars there; then for his 1800 edition, he employed the Alexandria firm of John (438) and James D. (437) Westcott, both devoted Jeffersonians then conducting *The Times & District of Columbia Advertiser*. However that was the last year that Weems published an almanac, having forged a new arrangement with Carey, also a Republican, to sell "suitable books" in Virginia. He did not again employ a printing office in the state to do his bidding, despite his continuing residence there.

### **Principled Biographer**

His relationship with Carey is the best known of his business connections, though often thought to be his only one in the book trade. That is likely because Weems convinced Carey early on in their 1799 arrangement to take on the most significant publication that he ever produced. When George Washington died in December 1799, Weems held in hand many written notes about the late founder's life, essentially a series of anecdotes recorded in the course of his travels; he suggested to Carey that those notes gave the pair an advantage over the various writers who had announced plans to publish a biography of Washington; Carey agreed and on February 22, 1800 – Washington's 68th birthday – they issued the first edition of Weems's *History of the Life and Death, Virtues, and Exploits of General George Washington* in Philadelphia. Over the next twenty-five years, Weems revised and reissued the work in twenty-nine distinct editions, with one 1825 account reporting that "more than a hundred thousand copies" had been sold. Now derided for its blatant fabrications, as in the "cherry tree" story, in Weems's lifetime the accuracy of his biography was secondary to its ability to shape readers' behavior via Washington's example of proper moral conduct.

Such morality plays were the hallmark of Weems's writing and publishing efforts. His *Life of Washington* was but the first of four biographies of exemplary Americans, all issued from the Philadelphia publishing house of Mathew Carey. The second was his *Life of Gen. Francis Marion*, which appeared in 1809, drawn again from anecdotes that Weems had collected on his travels through the Carolinas; by 1825, it had been reissued in seven new editions. But the following biographies were less successful. His *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, issued in 1815, was but an annotated edition of Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791); Weems evidently had better success with an earlier imprint which used extracts from the *Autobiography*, folding in elements of Luigi Cornaro's text and other pieces of conduct-literature, to create *The Immortal Mentor*, first issued in 1796 and regularly offered to printers who did not operate in Philadelphia. The final biography, *The Life of William Penn*, published in 1822, fared so poorly that there was not any demand for a revision or reissue.

However, the declining success of his illustrative biographies was not a problem for Weems, even as they strained his relationship with Carey; rather the bulk of his authorial work was published as pamphlet literature, often not from Philadelphia presses. Like the biographies, these were also morality plays, only in miniature, examining the lives and travails of people largely unknown before Weems told their stories. First came a paean to marriage (*Hymen's Recruiting-Serjeant* [1800], 7 editions), then a true-crime confession (*God's Revenge Against Murder* [1806], 11 editions), a diatribe against gambling (*God's Revenge Against Gambling* [1810], 4 editions), a condemnation of drunkenness (*The Drunkard's Looking-Glass* [1812], 8 editions), a censure of marital infidelity (*God's Revenge Against Adultery* [1815], 3 editions),

a critique of his contemporaries inflated sense of honor (*God's Revenge Against Duelling* [1820], 3 editions), and finally a strike at spousal abuse (*The Bad Wife's Looking Glass* [1822], 2 editions). He also wrote and published two political tracts (*The Philanthropist* [1799] and *The True American* [1807]) which, while Republican at their root, were efforts to rein in the bad behavior of politicians and journalists of whatever stripe.

This body of work reiterated his deep spiritual commitment to Christian charity that was always a part of his ongoing ministry. For even as he became an itinerant bookseller and celebrated author, Weems remained an active preacher, taking to the pulpit whenever asked, despite lacking a clear denominational affiliation. Thus Weems also published the occasional religious tract, as in 1818 when he issued a new edition of the sermons of Samuel Davies (1723-61), the Presbyterian divine, to considerable public acclaim.

### **Travelling Bookman**

Still, selling his own publications was not his principal bookselling activity. In acting as an agent for Mathew Carey, he solicited subscriptions for future imprints, sold a wide variety of books from Carey's extensive stocks (both of Carey's own issue and of others), and collected monies owed to Carey for books consigned to retailers. His sales of Carey's stocks were a continuing point of disagreement between the two; Carey was most interested in disposing of large, multi-volume titles, often finely bound, which carried the greatest profit per unit; meanwhile, Weems wanted to dispense smaller books which had a ready market and which did not require the spending of large amounts of ever-scare cash in the rural South. Hence Weems wanted to sell schoolbooks and popular literature, while Carey hoped he would sell intellectual and legal tomes. That difference meant that Carey continually heard Weems's insistent mantra: "small editions, Friend Carey, small editions forever." The argument led to a brief interruption of their association in 1804, but thereafter, the two agreed to disagree, so long as Weems's travels were profitable, if not wholly in line with Carey's judgment.

As a result, Weems spent most of the spring, summer, and fall on the road, far from Prince William, while in winter he stayed close to his home in Dumfries. Those travels took him on loops, combining Pennsylvania with New Jersey and Delaware, Maryland with Virginia, and the Carolinas with Georgia. On those journeys, he would be found with a horse and loaded cart, the most recognizable of the 200 or so travelling booksellers then traversing the country. Many noted that Weems often let his animal lead the way, as he either scribbled drafts of future publications or played his fiddle; indeed, his willingness to play at the drop of a hat, literally, left the impression among fellow clergy that his was insufficiently serious about religion, and so far too wedded to his bookselling business.

His last sojourn in 1825 was on his southernmost route where he developed an illness that forced him into a lengthy residence in Beaufort, South Carolina. At that time, his nephew, Elijah Weems (1787-1836), formerly a bookseller in Georgetown, lived there with his wife Mary Ann Shaw, a daughter of that town; so it is likely that the younger Weems took in his aging uncle in a time of serious need. Yet such a familial link was left unsaid when notices of the death of the "bookselling parson" circulated throughout the country in June that year. They simply stated:

"Died, in Beaufort, South Carolina, on the 23rd of May last, after a long and painful indisposition, the Rev. Mason L. Weems, well known as the author of the *Life of Washington*, and various other popular editions."

He had died "in comparative poverty" as a consequence of "his entire neglect of the means of accumulating a large fortune," reflecting his life-long devotion to charity and not money. Yet after his death, his family was sustained, at least for a while, by the copyrights securing his many literary efforts, copyrights that his widow renewed when possible.

**NB:** Current pronunciations of the Weems name employ a "long E" (as in "teems"); yet the spoken form heard in his lifetime employed a "short E" (as in "gems") as evinced in the contemporaneous poetry reported in Lewis Leary's 1984 biography; that form reflects the then-recent alteration in spelling of the original "Wemyss" surname to "Weems."

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Oct. 1 1759 Anne Arundel County, Maryland.  
Married: July 2 1795 Frances Ewell @ Prince William County, Virginia.  
Died: May 23 1825 Beaufort, South Carolina.  
Children: Frances Ewell (b. 1796); Susan Ann (b. 1798); Jesse Ewell (b. 1799); Charlotte (b. 1801); Ann (b. 1802); Harriett (b. 1804); Mason Locke Jr. 1806); Marion (b. 1808); Francis Marion (b. 1809); Milton (b. 1812).

Sources: Imprints; Wroth, *Mason Locke Weems*; Skeel, *Weems: His Works and Ways*; Leary, *Book-Peddling Parson*; Clarkin, *Mathew Carey, A Bibliography*; genealogical data from "Weems/Wemyss in America Family Archives" posted online at Ancestry.com (May 2013).