

440 WHARTON, JOHN

Publisher

Winchester

Publisher of poetry volume (1814) from the Winchester press of Jonathan Foster (168).

Wharton was a physician and surgeon who was induced by friends to publish a collection of his original poetry in 1814. The work was his only connection with the Virginia print trade.

Born on an estate on the Rapidan River in Culpeper County in 1775, Wharton was a man devoted to the place of his birth. He descended from the family of the English earl Thomas Wharton, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland under William III, who were given large land grants in the county by Alexander Spotswood in the 1710s; his father, also named John (1750-1834), owned a sprawling plantation near Raccoon Ford that stretched from the Rapidan in the south to the Rappahannock in the north. The father apparently had an Oxford education and so was determined that his son should have a proper formal education as well – as is reflected in the book of original poems that he published in 1814.

Wharton's poetry has been termed patriotic and quixotic, but it is also autobiographical. This solitary volume provides, in its footnotes and introductory epigrams, a clear record of his life between 1799 and 1814, as well as his outlook on contemporary norms. In one verse on "Pseudo Philosophers and Doctors" he bemoans the loss of classical education among those practicing medicine, noting that "Among doctors of old, it was a fix'd rule, To study some years in a good grammar school." Such an imperative was a part of his training; after receiving as much education as Virginia could provide him, Wharton crossed the Atlantic in 1803 to attend medical school at the University of Edinburgh. There he became President of the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh even before his graduation in September 1806, and evidently had hand in creating the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1805.

Upon receiving his degree, Wharton set out for London to visit his English relations before returning to Culpeper. He saw patients at the city's Guy's Hospital while in London, gaining an honorary membership in the hospital's Medical and Physical Society as a result. During that residence he was smitten by a young widow named Ann Abbott; they were married after a brief courtship in early 1807. She promptly became pregnant, meaning that she did not accompany Wharton when he returned to Virginia that May; the doctor lamented their separation in two poems in his collection, as well as marking his elation at their reunion in Baltimore in December 1809 in a third; she brought with her their one-year-old son who Wharton had never seen.

Where the reunited family settled down initially is unclear, as Wharton advertised his establishment of a medical office in Stevensburg – then the largest settlement in Culpeper County – in September 1810 after residing elsewhere. In 1799, he had lived at Newington in Orange County, the plantation of the late William Taliaferro (1726-98), suggesting that he had conducted a school on the Mountain Run there before heading to Scotland. So he may have returned to that neighborhood or to the estate of his father when his wife reached America, but they could have just as easily landed elsewhere in the Rapidan River valley.

It is clear, however, that once Wharton was reestablished in Stevensburg, that village was the focus of his life as both a physician and an educator. In March 1812, he announced the opening of a medical school associated with the Stevensburg Academy – the school which had been relocated from Tappahannock by James Ogilvie in 1801, employing schoolmaster Thomas Ritchie (360) before he became a newspaper editor, and chartered by the state in 1802. Wharton's two daughters were born there as well, leading to an error in nineteenth-century histories of assigning that birthplace to his London-born son as well.

By 1813, Wharton had developed a reputation among his network of friends and colleagues as a gifted poet, as well as a physician. For much of his adult life, he had scribbled short verses on a variety of subjects; once in Scotland, he began publishing them individually at the request of his friends; eventually they saw print in Edinburgh, London, and Baltimore, as well as other unrecorded locales. Their scattering among ephemeral imprints on both sides of the Atlantic prompted his friends to suggest publication of a collected edition before they were lost to posterity. Wharton was agreeable to the plan, particularly once those friends gathered subscription payments from nearly 500 patrons, among them Samuel Dilworth (138), Marvel W. Dunnavant (154), and Edward Pescud (324) of Petersburg; William Waller Hening (213) of Richmond; and his publisher, Jonathan Foster of Winchester.

At that same time, Foster was attempting to expand his simple newspaper-and-lob-printing concern into a regional book-publishing center. Wharton's 105-page work was suitable in both size and content for his Winchester office, and so *The Virginia Wreath* issued from his press in January 1814. The poems therein were all brief, reflecting the motto Wharton took from Horace's *Ars Poetica* and placed on the book's title page:

*"Quidquid praecipies, esto brevia: ut cito dicta
Percipiant animi dociles, teneantque fideles.*

[Whenever you instruct, be brief, so that what is said quickly
the mind may readily grasp and faithfully hold.]"

Commentators have remarked on the patriotic paeans to Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington included in the work. But the subject he most frequently addressed was the untimely deaths of friends and contemporaries, composing well-received elegies on those subjects. The most often noted among them was the verse he wrote in January 1812 in the wake of the Richmond Theater of December 1811. But perhaps the most personal – outside of the lines devised for his beloved wife – was the poem "Written at the author's birthplace" on his return from Europe; it was an ode to both place and parentage:

Again behold me! parents clasp your boy!
His troubles o'er beyond the western main,
Be this his pride – Be this his greatest joy.
Your affection, and your smiles to claim.

Similarly, the collection was "most affectionately inscribed" to "John Wharton, Esquire," by an "ever grateful and dutiful Son." Unfortunately for the father, he outlived his poetic son.

Wharton continued his practice in Stevensburg through the winter of 1828-29. But in early 1830 he noted the onset of a wasting disease that took his life at the end of March. His

family and friends draft a lengthy obituary for the deceased, ending with the comment that:

"As a husband and father, his affection knew no bounds – as a friend he was ardent and sincere, and as a neighbor he was kind and obliging – thus lived and thus died, Doctor Wharton."

Remarkably, genealogical sources have not noted the clear dating of events in his life found in the *Virginia Wreath*; likewise, literary scholars have not considered the highly personal nature of his verse in their repeated assessments of his patriotism and romanticism.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1775 Culpeper County, Virginia.
Married: Early 1807 Ann Abbott @ London, England.
Died: Mar. 24 1829 Stevensburg, Culpeper County, Virginia.
Children: Dr. John James (b. 1807); Sarah; Eliza; and a third unnamed daughter.

Sources: Imprint (S&S 33657); *Poets of Virginia*; *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* (1806); Historic *Culpeper*; obituary in [Fredericksburg] *Virginia Herald*, April 1, 1829.