

469 BELL, JOHN B.

Bookbinder

Leesburg

Bookbinder in Leesburg (1817-19).

Bell has left a spare trace on the history of the American printing trade, evinced only by a series of newspaper notices published between 1810 and 1819 and a case in the Maryland Orphans Court at Baltimore in 1811. That record shows Bell plied his trade as a bookbinder successively in Boston, Baltimore, Leesburg, and Frederick, Maryland, for at least a decade.

Notices for this binder appear first in Baltimore papers in the fall of 1810, with one seeking Bell's return to Boston where he would "hear something to his advantage." While it is still unknown whether this notice was a ploy or an opportunity, it makes clear that Bell learned his trade in that Northern print center. Concurrent notices for mail he had not yet claimed in the Baltimore post office suggest that he began work there shortly before the appeal was printed. Bell was well-enough established there by May 1811 that the Orphans Court for Baltimore County bound out an orphan to his care then; his experience with his apprentice, one Nicholas Silence, was evidently problematic, as just nine months later Bell published a "ran away" notice for Silence, offering just six cents for his return after the boy absconded for a second time. Bell is last recorded in Baltimore in the 1812 city directory, working and living with printer William Fry (1777-1855), formerly of Philadelphia. But with the start of the War of 1812, Bell disappears from the pages of Baltimore's newspapers and its public records. It may be that Bell was a Federalist – given his Boston origins and later associations, as well as having advertised only in that party's newspapers in the city – and so was driven from Baltimore by the anti-Federalist violence that erupted there in the summer of 1812; still, such a suggestion is conjectural, absent any evidence of Bell's activities for the duration of the war with Great Britain.

In September 1817, Bell reappears in the newspaper record via a business notice published in the *Genius of Liberty* at Leesburg, Virginia. Over the next year, Bell advertised his services in that paper alone, one published by Samuel B.T. Caldwell (074), who was also a native of Massachusetts. The timing of Bell's arrival in Leesburg, as well as that of his departure from that town, seems closely tied to Caldwell and to the publisher's changing political views.

Caldwell was raised in the Federalist stronghold of Newburyport, removing to Virginia only when that port town's commercial future was undermined by the War of 1812; once in Leesburg, Caldwell found himself disenfranchised by the state's property requirements for voters; so he began publishing the *Genius of Liberty* in January 1817 (with hired tradesmen) as a way to effect changes in Virginia's property-privileged laws; the project quickly put him in conflict with the Federalist politicians of northern Virginia. Bell appeared in Leesburg in the early days of Caldwell's venture, and left the town immediately after the single greatest controversy stoked by the *Genius of Liberty*. Local Republican leader Armistead Thompson Mason (1787-1819) was given free rein in Caldwell's journal to dispute the reelection to Federalist Congressman Charles Fenton Mercer (1778-1858) in April 1817; the quarrel concerned votes cast by non-resident property owners in that election, and with property-based suffrage generally. In the end, Mason accused John Mason McCarty (1795-1852), his

Federalist cousin, of voting illegally for Mercer, resulting in a duel between the kinsmen on February 6, 1819, one that left Mason dead. Exactly two weeks later, Bell announced his relocation to nearby Frederick, Maryland, with a notice appearing in the *Star of Federalism* published there by Charles Sower (1789-1820), a member of the noted Sauer/Sower family of German-language printers from Pennsylvania, and a partisan ally of Alexander Contee Hanson (1786-1819), the arch-Federalist publisher of Baltimore.

How long Bell conducted his Frederick business is unknown. The only surviving advertising notice that he published there is that initial announcement. With small-town bookbinders linking their businesses to local printers then, it seems likely that Bell remained in Frederick until at least November 1820, when the still-young Sower died unexpectedly and his *Star of Federalism* ceased publication. Thereafter, Bell has not been found in the extant record of the American printing trade.

A search of digitized nineteenth-century imprints reveals that one "John B. Bell" was acting as the secretary of the Bank of Pittsburgh in 1836. However, evidence linking the two Bells has yet to be uncovered, leaving just a tantalizing suggestion based solely on the relative proximity of Pittsburgh to Frederick.

No Personal Data yet discovered

Sources: MEDSA Index nos. 2268, 6481, 45725; *The Western Address Directory* (1837).