

484 CUSACK, M. B. – [MICHAEL B. CUSACK]

Bookbinder

Richmond

Bookbinder in Richmond from mid-1818 to early 1819.

Cusack has left only a thin trace through the American print trade, one starting in Vermont in 1815 and ending in Philadelphia in the fall of 1819. For just under a year during that span, he conducted the "Richmond New Blank-Book Manufactory" in Virginia's capital city.

The imprint record offers the first view of Cusack. In 1815, he printed a children's religious token book in Bennington, Vermont, for Joseph Dix (1778-1821), an evangelical Methodist who was also the father of the mid-century social-reformer Dorothea Dix. Over the ensuing year, Cusack's name appears on lists of unclaimed letters published by post offices in both Bennington and Plattsburgh, New York, suggesting that he was then working as an itinerant journeyman in the area around Lake Champlain. However, Cusack disappears from our view after that and is not seen again until he advertised the opening of his new bindery shop in Richmond's newspapers in May 1818.

As Cusack's Virginia residence was followed by a business partnership in Philadelphia, the personalities involved with that succeeding situation suggest that he had moved on to the country's largest printing center in search of steady work, where he built a relationship with a major bookseller there. By mid-1816, Benjamin Warner (429) was the sole owner of three bookstores established by the firm of Johnson & Warner during his decade-long partnership with Jacob Johnson (237). Those retail outlets were located in Philadelphia, Richmond, and Lexington, Kentucky, meaning that Warner employed capable hands to manage each of the stores, and rode a circuit between the three as an absentee proprietor. Just who his proxies were in each place is generally unclear; but in May 1818, Cusack was ensconced in a space adjacent to his Richmond store, opposite the office of the Bank of the United States. When he closed that bindery a year later, Cusack joined with Philadelphia printer Samuel Frankish (1798-1824) – as the firm of Cusack & Frankish – and quickly began printing items intended for sale in all three of the Warner stores – including the 1820 edition of his mass-produced annual almanac (see 1819.056). Hence, these known circumstances imply that Cusack fell into Warner's Philadelphia circle at about the time that the Johnson & Warner concern was dissolved in May 1816, and was then dispatched to Richmond in 1818 to conduct a bindery that was linked to the store there, as a result of his acquaintance with Warner.

Cusack's Richmond advertisements stressed his expertise in making "patent spring-backs." Such were blank record-keeping books, clad in robust boards, with a spine that was capable of lying open on a flat surface without straining the binding itself. It was a design "made on the exact principle with those of H. Williams of London" – son of one of the 1799 patent holders, John and Joseph Williams. Still, this utilitarian style was not fitting for the so-called "fine binding" of items not intended for record-keeping, making his specialty a low-demand item. But it was likely more problematic for Cusack that he was an outsider in a place where the bindery trade was dominated by men with long and deep ties to Virginia. So sometime between February and June of 1819, Cusack moved to Philadelphia and formed his ensuing

with Samuel Frankish.

Remarkably, this new, well-publicized affiliation was shorter-lived than had been his implied one with Warner. In September 1819, after barely three months together, Cusack parted ways with Frankish after his partner was declared insolvent and forced into bankruptcy. (He died a journeyman in New York in 1824, just age 28.)

Thereafter, Cusack's track is hard to both find and follow. Indeed, what little evidence seen in the extant newspaper record for "Michael Cusack" over the next decade may not actually be our bookbinder. In September 1826, a list of unclaimed letters in the Baltimore post office suggest that he had moved there sometime in the intervening years; a similar list of letters in the Cincinnati post office in August 1830 insinuate another relocation. That Ohio notice clearly refers to an individual sought for in an advertisement in the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* in April 1831; therein his daughter had "arrived in this city, a few days since, from Ireland, and seeks information of her father, Michael Cusack, whom she supposes in Ohio." Ebenezer S. Thomas, editor of *Daily Commercial Advertiser* in Cincinnati, reprinted that notice in his newspaper with the comment that the Cusack cited "was known in this city some years ago, and is, or was lately a resident of Indiana." As Thomas was lately of Baltimore himself, it may be that he was acquainted with this sought-after Cusack as a result of that residence, and was aware of an old colleague's trail after leaving Baltimore.

Still, our subject's known Philadelphia ties would recommend that he remained in that city as an anonymous tradesman in the years after the firm of Cusack & Frankish was dissolved, rather than assuming a life of transiency. And, indeed, one Michael Cusack was buried in the city's Old Cathedral Catholic Cemetery in 1857. That particular Cusack was age 61 at his death, making him a man in his early twenties at the time that our subject left his trace on the American printing trade – an age appropriate for someone trying to establish himself as an independent tradesman. But absent further evidence of Cusack's life and work, it cannot be ascertained which direction that the Virginia Cusack chose after he left Richmond.

No Personal Data yet confirmed.

Sources: Imprints (Shaw/Shoemaker 35008 & 51951); MEDSA Index # 8183; Maddox, *Richmond Directory* (1819); notices in *Plattsburgh [NY] Republican* (1816), [Bennington VT] *Green-Mountain Farmer* (1816), [Richmond] *Virginia Patriot* (1818-19), *Richmond Commercial Compiler* (1818-19), *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette* (1819-20), *Baltimore Patriot* (1826), [Cincinnati] *National Republican* (1830), and [Indianapolis] *Indiana Democrat* (1831).