

486 DEEBLE, EDWARD

Bookbinder

Alexandria

Bookbinder in Alexandria, 1814-16; apprenticed there to Robert Gray (190) in 1805.

Deeble was a well-known and respected member of the bookbinding trade in the District of Columbia for more than sixty years. His was a career that began in Alexandria.

This binder first appears in public records when his indenture as an apprentice in the trade was recorded with Alexandria's Orphan's Court in October 1805. The spare detail of that entry offers little hard evidence as to his origin, especially as it records his age incorrectly; while stating that he was then "12 years of age," the marker on his grave states that he was born in 1791 in England, making him actually fourteen at that time. That entry also noted that he was the son of one Mary Duffey, so the differing surnames between mother and son helps to further obscure his situation in 1805. Given the legal context, Deeble was clearly either orphaned by then or else a son of a destitute widow who bound out her minor child in order to support him. If he was not illegitimate, her surname indicates that she remarried sometime after his birth, although where is most likely unknowable; that name's Irish origin suggests she married a man who fled his homeland during the political upheaval there in the 1790s, and who brought his new wife and stepson to the United States before dying in the Alexandria neighborhood. Still, drawing such inferences from a brief entry in this court's records is problematic, if not completely conjectural.

The assignment of that indenture, however, clearly set the young Deeble on the path to a long and successful career in the bindery trade. His master was the Alexandria bookseller and bookbinder Robert Gray, elder brother in the family firm of Robert & John Gray. The pair had opened a bookstore and bindery at the corner of Duke and Fairfax Streets in 1799, which continued under Robert alone after John's retirement in 1808. Their business seems to have included the largest bindery in this port town, so providing Deeble with the training needed to conduct such an extensive commercial operation, as he would later. But once the War of 1812 erupted, Gray was perceived as a merchant of dubious loyalty because of his Scottish roots, which may have induced Deeble to strike out on his own. Indeed, his first independent advertising notice was published on August 12, 1814, just one week before British troops landed in Maryland to launch their assault on Washington and two weeks before they occupied Alexandria. That occupation devastated Alexandria's commerce, as that force emptied the port's warehouses and merchant establishments, even as it saved the town's buildings from the torch. Gray was widely believed to have aided the British, along with several other town merchants, which compelled him to permanently remove from Alexandria within weeks of the British withdrawal. That relocation brought an end to his business ventures, and so provides a definitive "not after" date for Deeble's association with his original master.

Over the ensuing two years, Deeble can be seen advertising the sale of furniture imported from Portland, Maine, in Alexandria's two daily papers, with notices of his bindery business appended to them. Such publications imply that, while he continued to ply the trade he had

learned under Gray, he had been forced to diversify his activities in order to survive as an independent businessman. But after 1816, those advertisements disappear, suggesting that Deeble's business had failed, and that he had returned to employment as an anonymous journeyman in one of the capital district's bindery shops. Indeed, his next appearances in the newspaper record are for unclaimed letters in the Georgetown post office during 1819 and 1820, indicating he had moved across the river to facilitate such work – Georgetown then being the residential choice for many working in the District, as Washington proper was slowly rebuilt after the war.

It was at about this time that Deeble found stable employment in the office of the *National Intelligencer*. Its proprietors – Joseph Gales, Jr. (1786-1860) and William Winston Seaton (373) – were then being contracted by the federal government for a considerable amount of printing and innumerable blank books, as well as publishing the semi-official journal of the Monroe administration. After 1820, Deeble is readily identifiable as the superintendent of their bindery operation, and so is frequently seen in the official records that report the expenditures for "public printing" by both the Executive and Congress. That post gave him the wherewithal to build a house in Washington on 9th Street, between H and I streets, before 1830 (today the site is part of the CityCenterDC development, seven blocks east of Lafayette Square); that dwelling barely avoided destruction in 1843, when Deeble's adjacent stable burned to the ground.

Sometime between 1857 and 1860, Deeble left the *National Intelligencer* office in order to manage the bindery in the new public-printing complex built in 1856 by Cornelius Wendell (1813-70), later the home of the Government Printing Office after its formation in 1861 (still standing today on North Capitol Street NW between H & G streets). The binder remained the supervisor of that shop until the establishment of the government's public-printing arm, but was evidently employed in the shop in a lesser capacity until shortly before his death; indeed, he was recorded as working 314 days there between November 1867 and October 1868. But the reordering of the public work also seems to have induced the now-seventy-year-old bookbinder to slow down his pace somewhat; in May 1861, he offered for sale a variety of his own bindery tools, apparently relying on those provided by the Government Printing Office itself thereafter.

His long residence in Washington, in combination with his standing as an apolitical public employee, means that Deeble was often served on petit juries in controversial criminal trials in the District, as reported in the city's papers, particularly in the 1840s. He also published notices refuting attempts by others to link him (and so his reputation) to political causes within the city throughout the 1840s and 1850s. It seems that Deeble well understood the threat to his livelihood embodied in any partisan affiliation, and so diligently avoided such dangers throughout his career.

Despite this lengthy public service, Deeble is probably best known today for his claim for compensation under the federal law that abolished slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862 (12 Stat. 376). That petition has been widely circulated in the data found in many websites detailing the individuals involved in the "peculiar institution," whether as a slave holders or enslaved persons. Here, Deeble asked for recompense – as provided for under

that law – for his loss of the "service or labor" of a 24 year-old mulatto woman named Elizabeth. He acquired her as a child when he purchased her mother, Milly, from Accomack County planter E. A. Hopkins in October 1843. Milly had either died or been resold before the act was passed, leaving Elizabeth in Deeble's household until 1862. He reported that he had paid \$550 for them as a package, and now valued the grown child at \$800; the three commissioners hearing his claim allowed him \$569.40 for his loss.

The timing of that 1843 purchase is interesting, as no other record of Deeble's slave-holding status, such as in tax lists, is known. The sale came shortly after the death of Deeble's eldest daughter, suggesting Milly was acquired to help in the care of his youngest daughter, then perhaps 10 or 12. Moreover, the spacing of the birth dates of his known children suggests that his wife had suffered multiple miscarriages and/or infant deaths during their fifty years together, leaving her in need of the assistance of a household servant. But again, these inferences are essentially speculative.

When Deeble finally died in April 1869, it was an event that was noted with some awe, particularly by Edgar Snowden, editor of the *Alexandria Gazette*, a long acquaintance of the late bookbinder dating to his childhood:

"It is a remarkable fact that the death of Mr. Deeble occurred on the anniversary of the death of his wife, one year ago yesterday; and some ten days since, when the attack of pneumonia first prostrated him, when he remarked to his physician that medicine could do him no good, he should die on the sixteenth of this month. His prediction came true."

While Deeble eschewed active participation in politics, his only surviving son, James William Deeble, did not. He served in several different elective offices in the district from the 1850s through the 1880s, and so is a visible figure in local histories of that era.

Personal Data

Born: Oct. 8 1791 in England.
Married: June 11 1817 Margaret McClish in Alexandria, then DC (d. 1868)
Died: Apr. 16 1869 Washington, District of Columbia.
Children: James William (1819-87); Mary Elizabeth (1824-43); Ann Louisa (m. 1848).

Sources: MEDSA Index nos. 13187 & 24607; *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, vol. 23 (1920); Congressional reports on the Public Printing concession (1824-68); Kerr, *History of the Government Printing Office*; "Petition of Edward Deeble, May 5, 1862," in Accounting Officers of the Dept. of the Treasury, 1775-1978 (NARA Record Group 217.6.5); published notices in *Alexandria Gazette* (1814-69), [Baltimore] *Federal Gazette* (1814), [Washington] *National Intelligencer* (1819-61), and [Washington] *National Republican* (1857-66). Birth & death dates taken from Deeble's grave marker in Washington's Oak Hill Cemetery (photo @ findagrave.com).