

496 KEATING, WILLIAM

Apprentice Printer

Alexandria

Apprentice in Alexandria office of John Corse (106) and Nathaniel Rounsavell (367) in 1820.

The only definitive evidence of this William Keating as being a part of the Virginia print trade is found in the published notices of his absconding in August 1820 from his apprenticeship in the office of the *Alexandria Herald*, conducted by the firm of Corse & Rounsavell:

20 DOLLARS REWARD

Absconded from our service on Sunday night last [Aug.20], WILLIAM KEATING, an apprentice to the printing business about 17 years old, but very small for his age—well made, freckled in the face, and rather struts in his walk—has no clothes with him but what he had on, a blue roundabout and pantaloons, having left the remained behind at his mother's, having eloped without her knowledge or consent, and has caused her great uneasiness. He was accompanied by James Alexander, near 21 years old, who has followed a sea-faring life for several years, and is supposed to be a principal in enticing him off—They may probably endeavor to ship. The above reward and charges will be paid in reason for bringing him home or securing him so that we may get him. —The police constables will give their attention to this notice, and visit the wharves, where they will likely find him.

As that notice ran for three months in the weekly *Genius of Liberty* in Leesburg, it is clear that the proprietors were determined to make good on his indenture, likely because they needed to reconcile their accounts, as Corse was then negotiating a withdrawal from their nine-year-long partnership. But it remains uncertain whether the two were successful in "bringing him home."

As Keating's name was a fairly common one in that place and time, tracking this particular tradesman in historic and bibliographic records is unworkable. However, there is a William Keating living in Alexandria between 1822 and 1826, as seen in published lists of unclaimed letters in the Alexandria post office, suggesting that Corse and Rounsavell were successful in their quest; yet a conclusive link between those two Keatings remains elusive.

Likewise, a William Keating issued a tri-weekly journal in the town in 1829 – the *Republican and Alexandria Commercial & General Advertiser* – in a partnership with Charles W. Violet; his partner was evidently a younger brother to the late Franklin Violet (422), the nineteen-year-old journeyman who died in 1815 while employed in the *Alexandria Gazette* office of Samuel Snowden (393); their mother was a sister of the three Gray brothers – John (189), Robert (190), and William (192) – who sold and bound books in Alexandria before 1815 and who were associates of Snowden. So it is unsurprising that the venerable editor published a cordial commentary on that new sheet when it first issued. However, the *Republican* did not survive more than five months, as that August, this Keating removed to Woodstock to take up publishing the *Sentinel of the Valley* there for its owner Benjamin L. Bogan (037), another Alexandrian once allied with Snowden. That assignment continued for just one year, with

this Keating dropping from sight in the bibliographic record until 1838. At that time, Edgar Snowden (1810-75), successor to his father's business, noted that "our old friend Mr. Wm. Keating" had been "entrusted" with the management of the *Mobile* [Alabama] *Mercantile Advertiser* by its new owner, Sol [Solomon Franklin] Smith (1801-1869) – showing that these journalists named Keating were one and the same person. That assignment was, once again a single year long, as that sheet was sold in 1839. After the sale, this Keating is not recorded in the newspaper record, making his next destination uncertain, and so his eventual fate, a result of not knowing where to look for him in public records. In 1868, the three existing newspapers in Mobile were merged into one daily sheet, and a history of the now-defunct *Advertiser* was published therein; that report described their Keating as:

"An obscure and humble mechanic, a practical printer, and at the same time [that his] soul-stirring editorials appeared, was foreman of the *Advertiser* printing office. Keating was a remarkable man. He never put pen to paper in the preparation of his editorial, but all were 'set up' by himself from the 'case.' And they were 'set up' with a rapidity greater than an ordinary editor would write, and with an accuracy which seldom called for any correction of 'proof.'"

That account reported that Keating left Mobile after the 1839 sale of that paper, headed "for his native State (Illinois, we believe) and we have never heard from him since." That line suggests that between his Woodstock and Mobile days, this Keating plied his trade in the Old Northwest before landing in the Deep South.

These three narratives could very well be parts of the biography of one William Keating. But then again, linking them together lacks any sense of certainty. If they are tales of the same individual, then it may also be that the first Keating above was actually born in Alexandria in 1801, the son of James Keating (1770-1811) and Mary Ann Dunn (1771-1854), based on the records of Alexandria's Episcopal Church; they list only that William's christening, leaving a void for later events in his life, including any early death and burial. That means he would have been 19 at the time of his flight in 1820, not 17, and so possibly annoyed that Corse & Rounsavell were excessively strict in their insistence that he remain bound in their service, especially if he had been so bound since the death of his father nine years before.

Regrettably, all that can be said categorically about the absentee apprentice is that he fled his masters in August 1820. Still, the presence of a like-named person in that town just two years later, someone who seems to have connections to the competing *Alexandria Gazette* and who then left that place in the 1830s in search of new trade opportunities, raises the intriguing, but ultimately unverifiable possibility that these known events simply evince one fairly long life in the American printing trade.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1803 probably in the Alexandria area.

Sources: Records of Christ Church, Alexandria; *Alexandria Gazette* (1820-39); *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* (1820); [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1820); [Mobile] *Daily Register* (27 Feb. 1868).