

**498 McWHIR, WILLIAM** – [Rev. William McWhir, D.D.]

**Bookseller**

**Alexandria**

Bookseller in Alexandria in 1791.

Rev. McWhir was a Presbyterian minister and educator who sold books in Virginia during his tenure as the master of the Alexandria Academy. In so doing, he followed a course taken by many other schoolmasters in this era, selling extra copies of the titles that they employed in their curriculum, so subsidizing their limited salaries with the profits.

A native of the Scots-Irish-dominated region of northern Ireland, McWhir was raised in a staunchly Presbyterian household, which led to his preparation for the ministry at a college in Belfast and then the University of Glasgow. Assigned to the Synod of Ulster upon his graduation, he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Killileagh, in the county of his birth, in December 1782, before being formally ordained there in September 1783. Shortly thereafter, McWhir sailed from Belfast for Philadelphia in search of fresh opportunities in the newly-independent United States.

In the winter of 1783-84, Alexandria's Presbyterian elders moved to open an academy in the town with the approval and financial support of George Washington, recently returned to the neighborhood from his service in the Revolutionary War. McWhir's removal to the new nation's capital put him close by the agents they engaged to recruit a fitting person to head their new school. Consequently, the recent immigrant was persuaded to relocate to Virginia to conduct the Alexandria Academy in the fall of 1784. That school became the focus of his labors for the succeeding eight years. Some nineteenth-century denominational histories report that the invitation proffered to McWhir was actually made while he lived in Ireland; but the lengthy interval between the dates of his departure from Belfast and his arrival in Alexandria – possibly as much as fifteen months – indicates that such is improbable.

It is evident that Washington thought well of McWhir and his school, for he enrolled two of his nephews there – George Steptoe (1773-1809) and Lawrence Augustine (1775-1824), the sons of his late brother Samuel (1734-81) – in November 1785. As a result, McWhir is often mentioned, and sometimes seen, in the General's correspondence over the next five years, largely in consequence of complaints over the misbehavior of the elder boy. That behavior induced Washington to change both the residence where the two boarded and the school that they attended in early 1789, when the newly-elected president left Mount Vernon for New York to preside over the creation of the federal government. While the change ended McWhir's direct link to Washington, an indirect one endured; the president continued his financial support for the school through the new minister of the city's Christ Church, Rev. James Muir (306), and then left the academy a sizable bequest in his 1799 will.

Following the departure of Washington's nephews, McWhir can be seen advertising books for sale in what was then Alexandria's only newspaper. Such notices, especially the series he published in the spring of 1791, suggest a reduction in his revenue after 1789 that he was now attempting to offset. Those items imply that the school had lost some of its reputation when the Washington brothers left, with a consequent loss of its patronage as well. Such

diminished circumstances may also have been the result of an ongoing inability to find and employ a capable mathematics teacher. Discussions of that problem recur in Washington's papers, explaining the transfer of his nephews to the care of Gilbert Harrow, a well-known instructor in that discipline – and the father of the later Fredericksburg publisher, James D. Harrow (204). Indeed, McWhir wrote Washington in New York in 1791, asking him to have recruiting notices placed in that city's papers, apparently without success.

As a friend later reported, McWhir "found that his expenses of living in Alexandria were too great to justify the expectation of being able to lay up any part of his income," and so he was willing to listen to offers of employment elsewhere. In 1792, a friend persuaded him to travel to Augusta Georgia, to consider taking charge of both a school and a church there. That trip proved a pivotal point in his life; although McWhir found the situation in Augusta untenable – fraught with both partisan rancor divisions and deficient recompense – he did discover that other such opportunities existed in a state with a fast-growing population. He returned to Alexandria only long enough to settle his affairs there, formally resigning as the master of the Alexandria Academy at the end of the spring term in 1793.

That summer McWhir embarked for Savannah, and then travelled further south to coastal Liberty County; there he assumed responsibility for a Presbyterian church and its associated academy in the town of Sunbury – a settlement never rebuilt after its destruction near the end of the Civil War during Gen. Sherman's march through Georgia. That place became the center of his life and ministry, particularly after he married the widow of Revolutionary-era militia leader Colonel John Baker (1731–1787) in about 1795.

Georgians considered McWhir "a Greek and Latin scholar ... without a rival," an assessment regularly repeated in the histories of the state. Yet, church histories paint a picture of the Irishman as someone conducting a ministry that varied from Presbyterian doctrine, in that he had questioned the divinity of Christ in an 1804 sermon. Hence, those works classify his ideas as ones tainted by Unitarianism. (Curiously, there were many adherents to that faith then living in Georgia after relocating from Massachusetts.) McWhir himself placed greater emphasis on his work as an educator, even as he filled pulpits in the three coastal counties south of Savannah – Bryan, McIntosh, and Liberty – for the rest of his life.

McWhir left this Georgia base for extended periods only twice after moving there. The first came after his wife died in 1819, when he travelled to Ireland and Scotland to renew old acquaintances; that journey proved longer than planned, as he was beaten and robbed on a London street, requiring a months-long recuperation that kept him away from Georgia until 1822. Then in 1824, McWhir was persuaded to take on a mission to St. Augustine, Florida, to establish the first Presbyterian Church in that state; after organizing a congregation there in June 1824, he oversaw the construction of its first building, which opened on January 1, 1825. (In 1890, the congregation moved to its current home, the striking Flagler Memorial Presbyterian Church.) It appears that he returned to Sunbury later that year.

McWhir ultimately left Sunbury behind in 1838, at the age of seventy-nine, to live in the now larger city of Savannah. From 1840 to 1847, he resided with his friend, Maj. William J. McIntosh, just outside the city in Bryan County, before moving in with his step-grandson, and former student, Edward Jenkins Harden (1813-1873), back in Savannah in 1847. Even

though still hobbled by his London injuries and advancing in age, McWhir continued to be a visible presence at religious meetings in Georgia for the remainder of his life; he was even engaged as a colporteur for the American Tract Society in the late 1840s. Accordingly, it is not at all surprising that he died while visiting friends in Liberty County in January 1851 in his 92nd year. He was buried in Sunbury, next to his wife; their markers are among the few that are still extant in that long-abandoned cemetery.

***Personal Data***

Born: Sept. 9 1759 County Down, Ireland.  
Married: ca. 1795 Mary Baker, widow @ Sunbury, Georgia. (d. 1819)  
Died: Jan. 31 1851 Liberty County, Georgia.  
Children: No record of offspring, though many step-children are known.

Sources: Sprague, *Annals* (vol 4: Presbyterians, 1859); White, *Historical Collections of Georgia* (1854); various editorial notes in *The Papers of George Washington*; and notices in the [Alexandria] *Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser* (1784-91).