

499 MIRICK, EDWARD

Bookbinder, Bookseller

Norfolk

Bookbinder and Bookseller in Norfolk (1799-1804).

Mirick was a Massachusetts-born bookbinder who conducted a bookstore and circulating library in Norfolk in the five years before his untimely death in 1804.

This tradesman was a part of a migration to Norfolk of Northern artisans and merchants in the 1790s. He arrived in the fall of 1799 after having dissolved a partnership with Henry B. Legge in a Boston bookbinding and stationery business that September. Mirick announced the opening of a "Book and Stationary Store" on December 5th that stocked "a well chosen collection of books, in the various branches of Literature." Yet its location at the "Head of Campbell's Wharf" reveals the likely incentive for his relocation: "Merchants and others can be supplied with account Books from the largest Ledger to the smallest Memorandum Book ruled to any pattern, on short notice." By situating adjacent to the port town's docks, Mirick was placing his bindery shop close by those engaged in Norfolk's rapidly-developing coastal trade in grain and foodstuffs, whether they were residents or transients.

The addition of a bookselling custom to his former ventures has made Mirick better known in the historical record as a librarian, rather than as a bookbinder, in light of his generous stock of novels and magazines. The only dedicated bookstore in Norfolk before his arrival was that of Robert Hannah (199), a circulating library – in effect a store that both rented and sold books – which he acquired from the estate of James Hunter (228) in 1795. But after Hannah lost his partner, Thomas Rainbow (347), to dismemberment in 1798, business waned, apparently because he lacked the ability to offer his patrons custom-made blank books. Any knowledge of his troubles among the merchant-traders traversing Norfolk could have easily reached Mirick in Boston, and so persuaded him to relocate.

Mirick was manifestly successful in this gamble. Just a year later, he moved his operation to a larger and more visible location on Main Street facing the Market Square. That new store had been the heart of the business ventures of Benjamin Pollard (508), a one-time Norfolk mayor who was one of the larger merchant-traders there, as well as a prominent attorney and business agent. And in enlarging his concern, Mirick diversified his offerings. He bought the stocks of Pollard's retail dry-goods business in the move, as well as a substantial number of books he possessed, apparently a cargo then in his charge. The ensuing spring, Mirick added fashionable wall-paper to his wares and then musical instruments the next fall.

In November 1801, Ruth Henshaw (later Bascom) of Leicester, Massachusetts, arrived in Norfolk for a winter-long visit with Mrs. Stephen Harris, a long-time friend who was the wife of a Boston baker who had moved to the port city the year before to start a "ship-baking" (i.e. bread & hard-tack) shop there. Her diary from that trip provides what is the only known window into the day-to-day life of Mirick's bookstore. After a month spent sewing – when not seeing the sights or calling on New England acquaintances then living there – Henshaw paid a visit to his library on December 5th and bought a geography dictionary, seemingly to learn the terms she often heard then but did not comprehend. Thereafter, she frequented

Mirick's library regularly, using Mr. Harris's membership, reporting that he carried "several thousand volumes in every branch of useful & polite literature. We cannot want for amusement while we have this privilege." Yet outside of her initial educative purchase, Henshaw took only romantic novels and literary magazines on loan from his shelves.

After October 1801, however, advertisements for Mirick's store and bindery are no longer found in the city's surviving newspapers. As he was still in business there near the end of 1804, that archival void may simply be the result of the burning of Norfolk's newspaper offices in a fire that devastated the port in February 1804, or through other such destructive episodes in the nineteenth-century. But then again it may be that Mirick could not afford to advertise as readily as he had at the outset once competitors started new stores there as well, particularly Augustus C. Jordan (244) in 1800 and Caleb Bonsal (040) in 1803; indeed one chronicle of this period reports that Bonsal always kept the best bookstore in Norfolk from the start of his business there – a clear challenge.

However, Mirick did not have the time or opportunity needed to fend off these challengers. He died unexpectedly in November 1804. The void in Norfolk newspapers means that today we only have the death notices published in journals along the New England coast to mark his passing. One sheet added the testimony that Mirick was "a native of Charlestown, and a very enterprising young man," though none reported his age. It is clear from that statement that he died a premature death, and so was likely still in his twenties, having married just three years before. That estimate conforms with what is known of his old partner in Boston, Henry B. Legge; he continued their bindery alone after 1799, but then died a month after Mirick did at the age of 41; that account makes him 36 when they parted ways, suggesting that their partnership was one between a master and his former apprentice; if so, then Mirick would have had to have reached the age of 18 by 1799 in order to legally assume an ownership role in a business concern then. So it seems he was born in 1780 or 1781.

In August 1805, Mirick's widow advertised the immediate sale of her household furniture. That sale would "be peremptorily made," for cash only, "as it is the intention of Mrs. Mirick, to remove to Boston." Hence, it also seems that she was another former Bostonian who had married a fellow "Yankee" émigré in 1801, and who now sought refuge among her friends and family to the North.

Personal Data

Born:	ca.	1780	Charlestown, Massachusetts.
Married:	Oct. 8	1801	"Miss Miller" @ Portsmouth, Virginia.
Died:	November	1804	Norfolk, Virginia.

No record of offspring yet found.

Sources: MEDSA Index no. 25062; *Simmons Norfolk Directory for 1801*; Roeber, "A New England Woman's Perspective on Norfolk" (1978), based on Ruth Henshaw Bascom Papers at American Antiquarian Society; and notices in *Norfolk Herald* (12/1799-10/1801), and *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* (16 July 1805), as well as [Boston] *Russell's Gazette, Commercial and Political* (8 July 1799), [Boston] *Columbian Centinel* (4 Sept. 1799), [Boston] *The Repertory* (20 Nov. 1804), and [Portsmouth NH] *Oracle Post* (27 Nov. 1804).