

504 OWENS, WILLIAM

Bookseller

Lynchburg

Bookseller in Lynchburg in 1818.

William Owens was a long-lived and beloved physician who, in his early years, conducted a bookstore and lottery-office in Lynchburg. At that time, his mother, Jane Hughes (1748-1835), oversaw a school for young women that employed both his sister Sarah (1784-1825) and future wife, Jane Latham, as teachers, so making the bookstore a vital adjunct to that familial venture.

In her reminiscences of early Lynchburg, Margaret Couch Cabell reported that she had been a student in their school, and provided a brief history of the book-shop:

"Many years since, they [the Owens family] established a circulating library, with a number of choice volumes by the best authors. The works of Madame de Stael, Madame de Sevigne, Madame de Genlis, the works of Lady Morgan, Miss Burney, Monk Lewis, the works of Miss Edgeworth, as many as were then written — all these adorned their bookshelves, in addition to a large quantity of useful and valuable reading, which fostered in Lynchburg a taste for the best writings; and Owens' Circulating Library has been the means of bringing many acquainted with the standard British authors, and stimulating them to pursue still farther their reading, when perhaps their taste for literature might have remained dormant, but for the facilities afforded by this library."

As Cabell wrote this passage in the 1850s, it is clear that the family continued this business for some time. Yet William's involvement with that enterprise same was apparently short-lived as his medical practice was the focus of his life for sixty years. Still, the earliest known evidence of its existence is the advertisement he had published in the *Lynchburg Press* in March 1818. None evidently followed in subsequent years.

Owens came to Lynchburg in 1791 when his parents moved their family there. His obituary reported that he had started his professional life as an apothecary – not an unusual primary function for many small bookstores of the era – before studying medicine in Philadelphia before the War of 1812. That same account indicates that his practice continued from about 1810 to 1870, when his sons convinced him "to rest from his prolonged labors."

"How much good he did in all that long period; how much suffering alleviated; how much disinterested charity extended; how much weariness and toil and pain he endured himself for the good of others can never be known. And it is entered to his credit where noble deeds are written in characters of gold. It is probable that no physician ever did more gratuitous practice than Dr. Owens."

Yet that remembrance did not mention the physician's activities as bookseller and librarian, nor did it detail his pursuits in politics and agriculture when he was not caring for the ill. The newspaper record reveals an avid viniculturist and cattle breeder who owned a farm just

outside Lynchburg; those interests led him to become a founder of the Central Agricultural Society in 1836, serving for many years on its executive committee. Owens was apparently also an ardent Whig, leading an "Anti-Jackson Committee of Vigilance and Correspondence" during the 1832 presidential campaign. He was also an active medical theorist, sponsoring a lecture in phrenology in 1834 (with his brother-in-law, Dr. Henry Latham) and contributing articles for medical journals until the start of the Civil War. However, that conflict drove the aging physician into the sociopolitical background, meaning that the most visible evidence of his life thereafter came in the lengthy tribute published widely on his death in 1875.

Personal Data

Born: Jan. 12 1788 Staunton, Virginia.
Married [1]: Aug. 26 1819 Jane Latham @ Lynchburg, VA (1795-1827).
Married [2]: July 28 1832 Otway Anna Carter @ Lynchburg, VA (1805-52).
Died: Jan. 22 1875 Lynchburg, Virginia.
Children: William Otway Owens (1820-91) and Robert Latham Owens (1825-73) with Jane; none by Anna.

Sources: Not listed in MESDA Index; Cabell, *Recollections of Lynchburg*; and notices in *Lynchburg Press* (1818), *Lynchburg Virginian* (1829-75), and *Alexandria Gazette* (1860-75).