

510 RAGSDALE, BENJAMIN

Bookseller

Petersburg

Bookseller in Petersburg in 1804.

Ragsdale has left only fleeting evidence of his part in the Virginia print trade, based on a short run of advertisements for his Petersburg bookstore in the winter of 1804-05.

The bookseller was a 6th generation descendant of a Henrico County settler who died in the April 1644 massacre of colonists initiated by the native chieftain Opechancanough. He was a son of a Revolutionary War soldier, a private in the Continental Army who became a captain in the Virginia Line. His mother died during the war and his father did not marry again until 1789, meaning that Ragsdale was in the care of unknown hands for most of his childhood. Then, as he was nineteen when his father did remarry, it would seem that he had found some form of employment in Petersburg in the 1780s.

Ragsdale married there in April 1794, taking a daughter of merchant Thomas Lorrain, Sr. as his wife. Although nineteenth-century histories report her surname as Loraine, her family was clearly the Huguenot-descended one that arrived in Petersburg a few years before that. The descriptions of her father in those accounts are identical to those describing the father of Thomas Lorrain (270), the Petersburg-born printer-publisher, so making him her younger brother.

Still, the bulk of that printer's trade career came after Ragsdale's death, suggesting that his entrée into bookselling came as a result of a business relationship with his father-in-law. The sole run of advertising notices for his store "on Old Street, in the house lately occupied by Laurence Gibson & Co." stress his ability to provide books and stationery to patrons in North Carolina, manifesting the town's function as a shipping entrepôt for the land-locked areas south of Petersburg. After those few notices appeared, however, Ragsdale is not seen again in any public record as a bookseller. Yet he remained in the town until about 1811, as evinced by the 1810 census which records a family of ten – a husband and wife with seven children and an older female relation – that owned four slaves.

In late 1810, the North Carolina Assembly chartered the state's first bank, the State Bank of North Carolina, headquartered at Raleigh. When that bank began operations in the fall of 1811, Ragsdale was serving as its Chief Clerk. That situation suggests that his long-standing association with his father-in-law had ended with the death of the senior Thomas Lorrain early in 1811, and that his routine connections in North Carolina had then convinced him to remove to that state's capital to take up this new post. Unfortunately, Ragsdale did not hold that position long, as he died sometime during 1812. It is also unfortunate that any record of the ensuing disposition of his estate, and so a history of his days in North Carolina, was destroyed by a fire that claimed the records office in the Wake County courthouse in 1832. As a result, even the date of Ragsdale's death has been lost, as well as any record of his family before 1820.

NB. The linking of Ragsdale's wife to the Lorrains described above is established by an autobiography written by the printer's brother Alfred (1790-1860), where their father's trade as

a retail merchant is portrayed in the same way as Ragsdale's wife's in family histories and North Carolina records; later events caused their surnames to develop differing spellings.

Personal Data

Born: In 1770 Prince George County, Virginia.
Married: April 4 1794 Elizabeth Loraine @ Petersburg, Virginia.
Died: In 1812 Raleigh, Wake County, North Carolina.
Children: One son, Thomas L. Ragsdale, and six daughters; only name known
 among them is Ann M. Ragsdale; all dates are unknown.

Sources: *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1804); Federal Decennial Census, 1810; Ragsdale-Van Leer, *Ragsdale Family in England and America*; Lorrain, *Helm, Sword, and Cross* (1862).