

517 SIMPSON, ARCHIBALD

Bookbinder

Northampton County

Bookbinder in Northampton County in 1735.

Archibald Simpson was a bookbinder residing in the southern-most counties of Maryland's Eastern Shore, who offered his trade-services to the county-court in nearby Northampton County in 1735. Their agreeing to his offer makes Simpson a part of Virginia's print trade.

The brief history of Simpson's trade career in British North America – evidently from 1731 to 1739 – corresponds with the period when William Parks (321) was shifting the focus of his custom from Maryland patrons to Virginia ones. His entrée into the bookbinding trade came in 1724 when he was bound out as an apprentice to the Glasgow printer, stationer, and bookbinder Alexander Miller (d. 1748), after the death of his father, John Simpson. His next appearance in trade records is seen in a petition to the Northampton County Court in September 1735, wherein:

"Archibald Simpson, Stationer & bookbinder offering to bind such of the Record Books w^{ch} wants [i.e. which need binding] at Two hundred pounds of Tobacco for each book."

But where this Virginia court agreed to his proposition, Simpson was not so successful with the Maryland General Assembly. Not long thereafter, he made a like offer to that body for the repair of county record books throughout the colony; however, those legislators seem to have ignored the petition from this "bookbinder of Dorchester County," as no record of either an agreement or a payment is now known.

That course was a typical one for that Assembly at this time. Printer William Parks had been granted a license by that body in 1726 to produce public documents for the colony. But he would only be paid for such, county-by-county, when he delivered finished imprints to each locale. During Parks's tenure as Maryland's public printer (1726-37), they were unwilling to appropriate funds for such colony-wide efforts. That reluctance, and its financial effect, was a contributing factor in his decision to found a second press office in Williamsburg in 1730, after being appointed "printer to the colony" there. As the Virginia colony paid Parks more regularly and more profitably, he closed his Annapolis office and consolidated his printing in Williamsburg in 1734, infuriating the Maryland Assembly. Still, it was another three years before they terminated their contract with Parks.

It was during this dispute that Simpson made his offers to both the Northampton County Court and the Maryland Assembly. That timing suggests that he was attempting to fill a void created by the closing of Parks's Annapolis office – which was considerably closer to those eastern locales than was Williamsburg. Yet this effort also raises the question as to why a Glasgow-trained bookbinder & stationer would relocate to such a rural venue on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The colony's quit-rent rolls from this era show that Simpson resided in the settlements ("hundreds") on the creeks along the border between Somerset and Dorchester counties, alternating between Wicomico Hundred in Dorchester and Pokomoke Hundred in Somerset. These two counties also bordered Virginia's Eastern Shore counties to the south;

as Northampton is the southern-most of two counties taken from the original Accawmacke Shire, his petitioning suggests Simpson offered his services to the Accomac County Court as well, but there are now no known records from that court that would prove such.

Unfortunately for Simpson, these patronage appeals evidently did not keep him out of debt. In July 1738, he was obliged to sell the bulk of his tools to Maj. Thomas Nevett (1685-1749), the chief justice of the Dorchester County Court, for £51.17.10, in order to satisfy the most pressing of those debts. That sale did not resolve his problems, however, and Simpson soon ran out of time to address them. He died sometime between October 26, 1738, when he is last noted in court records, and March 14, 1739, when his will was entered for probate. Still, his inventoried estate of £28.11.00 appears to have been enough to cover his outstanding debts so that he could bequeath an elderly slave named Robin to his son John, and assign "all that whatsoever Right Title or Interest I have or may have (in that part of Great Britain called Scotland)" to both his wife and son. Simpson's tools were still in Nevett's possession when he died in early 1749; he wife & executrix then sold them to unnamed individuals.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1710 Glasgow, Scotland.
Married: In 1730s Woman named Elizabeth in Maryland.
Died: Winter 1738-39 Dorchester County, Maryland.
Children: One son, John (no dates known), mentioned in his will.

Sources: MEDSA # 35622; Scottish Book Trade Index; Northampton County Order Book, 1732-42; photocopies of Maryland court records in manuscript collections of the Rockefeller Library at Colonial Williamsburg; biographical sketch in Biographical Series of Archives of Maryland online, and finding aids there; and Carr, Morgan, & Russo, *Colonial Chesapeake Society* (1988).