

523 STRAHAN, CHARLES

Engraver

Richmond

Engraver & Copperplate printer in Richmond in 1818 and 1819.

Charles Strahan was a Philadelphia-trained engraver who practiced his trade in Virginia for about a year, apparently in concert with Richmond silversmith Reuben Johnson.

The sparse number of newspaper notices that Strahan published during his life reveal little about him beyond his offering to engrave both copper printing plates and metal-wares. But Philadelphia city directories show he was part of an influential family of French-Canadian immigrants who arrived in that city before the Revolutionary War. And an examination of Canadian records discloses that his family was prominent in Nova Scotia, and so was one of those cast out of that province in the forced expulsion of the Acadian people in 1755.

Strahan's father was Gregoire Trahan dit Strahan (1752-1811); he evidently shortened their surname to Strahan once in Pennsylvania, conforming to the pronunciation of that name, as suggested therein ("Trahan spoken as Strahan"). That truncation masks his Acadian roots in American sources, while Canadian ones respect both forms. The family's North American progenitor was Guillaume Trahan (1601-84), an "edge-tool maker" from Anjou who came to the French colony in 1636; he was the syndic (managing agent) of the Port-Royal settlement in 1654 when the English conquered Acadia for the first time. (France recovered it in 1667.) In 1755, during the Seven Years War, Joseph Trahan (d. 1757), Guillaume's grandson and Charles' grandfather, was exiled from Acadia, along with his wife Élisabeth Thériot (d. 1756); they were among the 1500 colonists sent to Virginia, with Élisabeth one of those who died on board the transport ships stranded in the Hampton Roads when Gov. Robert Dinwiddie refused their landing in the Old Dominion, and with Joseph dying in Liverpool while bidding to return to Nova Scotia. As their son Gregoire was an infant at that time, he seems to have been entrusted to relatives who escaped these deportations by fleeing west into Quebec. Sometime after 1763, when the Treaty of Paris gave the British control of all French Canada, Gregoire removed to Philadelphia from a village near Trois-Rivières on the St. Lawrence. There he married Marguerite Bourg in 1780 (also spelled Bourque and Bourke; 1757-1852), also a child of Acadian exiles, after serving in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. The couple had seven children, with Charles being their last born.

Contemporaneous records concerning the family in Philadelphia are dominated by his elder brother Joseph (1783-1834), who was regularly described as a carpenter; today, however, he would be more correctly called a building contractor who built a substantial fortune in a partnership with Joseph Simes (d. 1846); he is seen as early as 1807 in the city's directories and is recurrently seen in Philadelphia papers as an officer in a volunteer militia company, rising to the rank of colonel after the War of 1812; Joseph is also reported in items about St. Mary's Catholic Church, in whose yard many family members (but not all) were buried.

Charles, however, is not noted in those city directories until after their father died in 1811, and then he is documented as residing and plying his trade at the inn and tavern that his mother Marguerite (Margret) inherited from husband Gregoire (Gregory) and continued to

operate for many years. And then, those listings cease after the 1819 directory was issued. What is more, Charles did not advertise in that city's newspapers until late 1828, when he offered for sale engraved portraits of Pope Leo XII, which "might be an article of speculation to gentlemen going to South America." That notice, which was also published in New York City, indicates he was still resident in his mother's lodging-house, evincing an apparent filial obligation to an aging parent. Indeed, Charles was never recorded as a head-of-household in the federal census, even after his marriage in 1830. Consequently, the engraver has left a nearly invisible trace in Philadelphia's historical record. His presence in Richmond, while brief, is much more obvious.

In April 1818, Charles Strahan placed a promotional advertisement in the *Virginia Patriot, and Richmond Daily Mercantile Advertiser*, declaring the availability of his services "on the second floor over Mr. R. Johnson's jeweler, nearly opposite the Eagle Hotel, Main Street, Richmond." That site indicates that he had forged an arrangement with silversmith Reuben Johnson (1782-1820) to engrave objects purchased from that tradesman. Johnson had built a considerable business in the city by 1818, largely as a result of his partnership with James Reat (1782-1815); yet in the wake of Reat's death, he seems to have been under increasing pressure in continuing his trade, as he was then also serving as an elected member of the Common Council and on various civic committees. Adding Strahan's services to his offerings likely enhanced his business, even as he did not take the Philadelphian into partnership as he had with Reat.

Strahan's notices in the *Virginia Patriot* continued until at least February 1819. In choosing that newspaper alone, he clearly targeted the city's merchants who had long supported the Federalist sheet of Augustine Davis (119). But over the course of his Richmond stay, Strahan faced increasing competition from other tradesmen, like the well-connected Samuel Brooks (054), who was favored by the city's Republican citizens; he may also have been challenged by the incapacity of Johnson, as he died after a lengthy illness early in 1820. He may also have been pressed to return to Philadelphia, as a brother died at sea at about this time. In whatever case, Strahan plainly retreated to Pennsylvania in the spring of 1819, never to ply his trade in Virginia again.

The spare trace that Strahan now left there obscured his 1830 marriage and 1846 death, neither of which was noted in Philadelphia papers. His post-Richmond fate is only known from a French-language genealogical resource on the Acadian exiles published in 1965.

Personal Data

Born:	July 16	1796	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married:	Nov. 11	1830	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Died:	Sept. 3	1846	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

No record of children in either church or public records.

Sources: MEDSA Index no. 38411; notices in [Richmond] *Virginia Patriot* (1818-19), and various Philadelphia newspapers (1810-52); genealogical matter from Arsenault, *Histoire et Généalogie des Acadiens* (1965).