

## 525 SWAN, JOSEPH C.

**Bookbinder, Bookseller**

**Petersburg**

Bookbinder and bookseller in Petersburg (1818-65).

Joseph C. Swan was Petersburg's leading bookseller and blank-book manufacturer between the end of the War of 1812 and the start of the Civil War. Yet that longevity and prominence was far from certain when he began there, competing with several other booksellers.

Local histories describe Swan as a bookbinder from Londonderry in Northern Ireland, with the federal census invariably stating that he was born in Ireland. Those reports suggest that he was related to a pair of father-son bookbinders named Swan who worked in Dublin for much of the eighteenth-century, a suggestion bolstered by his 1792 birth date; yet such an implied connection remains unconfirmed. It may also be that he came to the United States in the company of his parents or relations during the Irish uprising of the late 1790s, and so learned his trade here, possibly in New York City, given his later connections to that port.

Swan is first seen in America when he entered into a partnership with Ebenezer Watts (530) in Petersburg in May 1818. Watts had been conducting a bookstore and bindery there since at least August 1816; yet as their association would last just four months, it seems as if Swan was already at work in that bindery, and that Watts had formed this firm as a way to sell his shop to Swan. Indeed, after their firm's dissolution on September 1st, Watts is not seen again in Petersburg's newspapers, and was recorded in the 1820 census as residing in Charlottesville, where he conducted a bindery that served the new University of Virginia.

Their concern's dissolution also came in the context of the sale of their leased "stand." Its location on Sycamore Street was a highly-desirable one, opposite the new buildings of the Common Council and District Courts – all rebuilt after the July 1815 fire that devastated the town center. And so it is interesting that a week before the two bookbinders parted ways, their building was sold at auction to satisfy the debts of its unnamed owner; the notice for that sale reported that the current tenants – Messrs. Watts & Swan – had a lease on their space in the building until January 1831 that paid its owner \$500 per year. As Swan quickly became the sole agent for his late partnership's accounts, as well as the new lessee of their shop, it appears that Watts was the insolvent owner of the building, and through the sale, he left Swan in as stable a position as he could, via this lengthy lease. That Swan remained in this place for the duration of his business's life is evidence of both Watts's foresight and Swan's capabilities.

The book trade in Petersburg was in growing disarray when Swan acquired Watt's interest in their shared venture. The future of the longest-lived and largest bookstore in town was then in doubt as a result of the growing infirmity of its proprietor, John Somervell (394); he would die in January 1819, forcing the dispersal of his stocks. His main competitor, Richard Cottom (108), served primarily as an outlet for subscription-publishing networks established by others, particularly those of his Richmond-based brother, Peter (107). The small shop of John W. Campbell (077) specialized in classical educational texts that supported his school and would continue to do so until his death in 1842. But remarkably none of these houses

advertised the manufacturing of blank books, long a steady-selling staple in entrepôts like Petersburg. Indeed, the last identifiable bookbinder there before Watts was the Richmond-trained Leighton Wood (533), who left town in mid-1816 – about the time that Watts began his bindery – to seek his fortune first in Tennessee and later in Kentucky. Given these circumstances, it clearly made sense for Swan to make every effort to meet an obvious need. From the start, his Sycamore Street store was publicized as being situated at the "sign of the Ledger," evincing its unique role there. Then just six weeks after becoming sole proprietor of this bindery, he announced his acquisition of:

"an extensive assortment of paper for blank books; and in consequence of an arrangement lately made to the north in purchasing, he is enabled to sell 20 per cent cheaper than he has been in the habit heretofore of doing."

That notice also fit a pattern he now adopted in his advertising custom: short notices that promoted the individual parts of his business. Rather than combining lists of all his offerings into one lengthy announcement, as was common in the book-trade, Swan often had three, four, or five brief notices running concurrently in the *Petersburg Republican*, his preferred advertiser. As with the notice above, the longest ads he published featured his blank books and custom bindings, usually illustrated with a cut of a ledger bearing his initials on its spine. The work generated by those notices meant that, by the mid-1820s, he could inform other booksellers that he could supply them "Blank Books, on as reasonable terms as they can get them from New York," in whatever quantities they desired.

Swan's grasp of the contemporary bookselling trade can also be seen in the suppliers that he mentioned as his providers. Most of Virginia's booksellers were tied to sources in either Philadelphia or Great Britain or both. But Swan quickly built contacts with those in New York City, who were fast becoming the country's leading importers of European titles, in contrast to Philadelphia, where the domestic publication of those same titles reigned. Those imports consistently proved less expensive than the American-made equivalents, even when greater shipping charges were added, so allowing Swan to undersell his competitors. These tactics clearly worked, as can be seen in the short lives of the two new bookstores established in Petersburg in 1820 – those of the Philadelphians Hazzard (208) & Hickman (220) and local merchant John Gordon (553): both closed after about a year in business. It also helped that Swan embraced the sidelines commonly found in bookstores of this period – fashionable wallpaper, sheet music, musical instruments, and patent medicines.

Once he became an American citizen in March 1819, Swan engaged in an increasing number of public and private roles in Petersburg. The best known of those functions was his part in forming and guiding the Petersburg Mechanics Benevolent Association (PMBA). That project seems to have grown out of his involvement in settling the estate of his late competitor, John Somervell, in 1819. The bookseller died intestate and his debts devoured nearly all of his wealth, leaving his young wife, Elizabeth, destitute. Swan bought a domestic slave from the widow three months later, paying a premium price with a three-year payout, so giving her a continuing income while the estate was settled. Then when the PMBA was formed in 1825, Elizabeth Somervell was one the first recipients of aid offered by the group, aid that continued until her death in 1853.

Meanwhile, his commercial success allowed Swan to make considerable investments in new local business ventures, which led to his service as a leader among the area's Jacksonian partisans. Outside of reports of the local political meetings that he attended seen in friendly journals, the most visible evidence of these ancillary activities is found in the records of a protracted chancery-suit over the debts of the bankrupt City Point Railroad Co., which was settled in 1851. Swan was one of the numerous securities of that railroad's debts, a list that included every major commercial and political figure in the area, whether as individuals or as partners in firms offering such guarantees; they show that he was a silent partner in at least two of the companies involved. Yet despite these manifest alliances in his new home, Swan did not forget his émigré origins, becoming the sole Virginia bookseller acting as an agent for *The Truth-Teller* in New York City, that city's first and foremost Catholic journal from 1825 to 1855, one aimed at Irish immigrants to the United States.

The standing resulting from this success meant that Swan did not feel the need to advertise his business in Petersburg's newspapers after about 1830, but his bookstore is mentioned elsewhere until the dawn of the Civil War. The last explicit sign of that store is in a listing of Southern booksellers published in 1860. That account reveals that Swan was still in business when the conflict began, but likely retired as a result of the 1864-65 siege of Petersburg, in which Union shelling leveled the area of town where his store was situated. Indeed, the 1870 census shows he was a "retired bookseller" then, living in a boarding house owned by Alexander Garland, an agent for the aforementioned City Point Railroad.

Those federal records also show that Swan held a handful of slaves during the antebellum period, mostly female domestic servants and their children. He acquired three more adults in the 1820s, then another two and a child in the 1830s, before shedding one of the adults in the 1840s. That chattel, as well as his real property, gave him a personal estate valued at \$28,000 in 1850 and \$50,850 in 1860. But after the war, following the death of his wife and the exodus of his children, his estate had been reduced to a \$10,000 valuation in 1870.

As Swan's will was entered for probate on January 1, 1874, it is obvious that he had died in the preceding month. Yet the state's numerous newspapers did not publish an obituary for this influential pre-war figure. This was a particularly mysterious oversight for Petersburg's journals, given that the town had then been Swan's home for nearly sixty years.

### ***Personal Data***

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|----------|----------|------|--|
| Born:    | In       | 1792 | Londonderry, Ireland.                          |
| Married: | ca.      | 1822 | "Jeannette P." @ Petersburg (1802-before 1860) |
| Died:    | ca. Dec. | 1873 | Petersburg, Virginia.                          |

Margaret (m. 1847); Josephine (b. 1835); Namie (b. 1846); Joseph Jr. (b. 1849); and another unnamed daughter born ca. 1824.

Sources: MEDSA Index no. 38841; Barnes, "Southern Artisans," *VMHB* (1999); Federal Decennial Census (1820-70); Petersburg Chancery Court records for Baltimore Steam Packet Co. v. William Shands, et al (1845-51); and notices in *Petersburg Republican* (1816-30), [Petersburg] *Old Dominion* (1830), *Richmond Enquirer* (1830-55), and [New York City] *American Publishers' Circular and Literary Gazette* (1860).