

530 WATTS, EBENEZER

Bookbinder, Bookseller

Petersburg, Charlottesville

Bookbinder in Petersburg from 1816 to 1818, then in Charlottesville from 1820 to 1862.

Ebenezer Watts labored as a bookbinder in Virginia for nearly forty years. But in that time, his trade skills apparently did not advance beyond those seen in his earliest work, primarily because he did not adopt the newer methods and tools that emerged as the bindery trade evolved in the nineteenth century.

The basic outlines of Watts's life can only be discerned from the brief obituaries published on his death in 1862. They report that he was a native of Dinwiddie County, which explains his initial appearance as a bookbinder in nearby Petersburg in 1816. They also indicate that he served in the Petersburg Volunteers during the War of 1812; that troop gained fame for its exploits in helping lift the British siege of Fort Meigs on the Maumee River in Ohio in May 1813; yet, his name is not seen in the surviving muster-rolls for that unit. Still, such reports indicate that Watts had close ties to Petersburg both during and after the war, whether accurately portrayed or not.

Watts first advertised his services as a bookbinder in late August 1816. His early days seem to have been ones of instability, as he moved his business twice in the ensuing year, the first time after just two months in its original setting. By December 1817, he had removed to a space in the office of the *American Star*, about the time its publisher, Marvel W. Dunnivant (154), engaged the Boston-trained journeyman John H. Perkins (323) as a partner, in a last ditch effort to save his six-month-old paper. Dunnivant was probably in need of both the revenue that came with the rent Watts paid, as well as the serviced he offered. However, the publisher's struggle came to an end in April 1818 when he closed the paper. That event seems to have finally shaken Watts's confidence in the town as a viable site for his business.

In May 1818, Watt formed a partnership with another bookbinder, Joseph C. Swan (525), and they took space in a tenement opposite the new buildings of the Common Council and District Courts, which had been rebuilt after the July 1815 fire that devastated the town center. Swan was a well-trained trained bookbinder from Ireland, and may have already been at work in the bindery, as their alliance would last just four months. So it may be that Watts formed this new concern in order to sell his failing shop to the newly-arrived Swan. That inference is bolstered by the fact that the firm's dissolution on September 1st came in the context of the sale of their leased "stand." Just 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 until January 1831 that paid the building's owner \$500 per year. As Swan now became the sole agent for the late partnership's accounts, as well as the new lessee of that space, 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.

After the dissolution, Watts is not seen in Petersburg's newspapers again, suggesting that he left Petersburg soon thereafter. He was recorded as a resident of Charlottesville in the

1820 census, taken in June that year. As he would conduct the Charlottesville bindery that served the University of Virginia until the Civil War, it appears Watts saw the opening of the new college as a path to success in the book-trade. That project was already well advanced when Watts parted from Swan in September 1818, and the General Assembly that met that winter would finally grace Thomas Jefferson's creation with a charter. As that outcome was generally presumed, new businesses intent on serving the school and its students began to appear in Charlottesville in 1819; Watts's bindery was clearly just such a venture.

Oft-repeated accounts of Watts from the late nineteenth century report that he was at least the printer, if not the publisher, of Charlottesville's *Virginia Advocate* – apparently based on the known fact that many bindery-bookstore concerns also did job printing. However, the imprint record offers a contrary view, and reveals that Watts feuded with that journal's staff in 1829. That paper began publication in January 1820 as *The Central Gazette*, published by brothers Clement P. (292) and John H. (293) McKennie, and named for the Central College that would be subsumed into the new University of Virginia that same year. In June 1827, C. P. McKennie, now its sole owner, sold his journal to a young Charlottesville lawyer named Thomas W. Gilmer (1802-44), who was then the *Gazette's* editor. Gilmer promptly formed a partnership with another local attorney, John A.G. Davis (1802-40), and renamed the paper the *Virginia Advocate*. After Jackson's election in November 1828, the weekly was sold to Dr. Francis "Frank" Carr (1784-1843), who conducted the business via short-term contracts with trained printers. From the outset, the *Advocate* issued from an office adjoining the building where Watts lived and conducted his business. And as the *Advocate* was then the only newspaper in the town, Watts regularly advertised his services in its pages. But in April 1829, a running dispute over shared toilet facilities boiled over into an assault case brought by Watts against "C. Brigham and S. K. Head," two journeyman printers working for Carr.

The *Advocate* gleefully issued a half-sheet extra edition describing the affair after they had prevailed in the Albemarle County Court. In alluding to the *Sacellum Cloacinae* – the "Shrine of Venus of the Sewer," for the deity guarding the sewers of Rome – that report noted that the case stemmed from:

"the desire on the part of the defendants to sacrifice at the shrine of the goddess Cloacena [*sic*], in the same temple with the plaintiff, (being the only one on the premises,) which the plaintiff claimed as being devoted to the use of himself and family, exclusively."

The printers had dumped a basin of water on the landlord who owned the buildings while in the company of Watts, apparently inadvertently. The binder took umbrage at this, believing it to be a deliberate act that missed its intended target, in light of insults he had previously received from the *Advocate's* staff. Words soon led to an exchange of blows which Watts perceived as an assault on his person. But as witness testimony painted the printers' actions as defensive, the case was dismissed and Watts "admonished to put a better *binding* on his temper." Notably, the journeymen were defended in court by Thomas W. Gilmer.

Within days of this event, Watts relocated his family and business to new quarters on Main Street, and a tailor, Daniel M. Hawes, had moved into his former one. And once the new *Charlottesville Chronicle* issued in 1832, Watts shifted his printing custom to that office, as

his surviving bookplates attest. He probably also ceased his advertising in the *Advocate* for some time, but the dearth of surviving issues of any of Charlottesville's antebellum papers makes an assessment of his advertising practices after 1832 purely speculative. But what is most instructive here is that, after Carr sold the *Virginia Advocate* in July 1830, the roster of its ensuing owners does not include Watts, evincing the inaccuracy of those old stories.

These contretemps suggest that Watts was not a particularly well-liked individual in town, despite his service to the university. Nor was he the only bookseller there. Indeed, on that score, Watts faced a considerable challenge in the university itself. In the years between the school's chartering in 1819 and his death in 1826, Jefferson convinced the Board of Visitors to sponsor a bookstore for the convenience of the students. What emerged from this effort was a branch store supplied by the Boston bookselling firm of Cummings & Hilliard, which had assisted the former president in replacing his personal library after he sold his original one to the Library of Congress in 1816. That store was managed by M.W.D. Jones, then the postmaster at Graham's Store on the road to Brown's Gap in northwestern Albemarle, and later a marshal for the Superior Court of Chancery for the Albemarle district. After Jefferson died, the Board ultimately privatized the bookstore in 1829, with Jones and C. P. McKennie forming a partnership to purchase its stocks from Cummings & Hilliard; the pair evidently financed the acquisition by auctioning off about \$2000 worth of what they deemed surplus, as what they had bought was "much too large for this market." That store remained the largest one in Charlottesville through the Civil War; McKennie bought out Jones in 1834 and built a new store closer to campus on a tract of land purchased from the estate of William G. Garner (d. 1816), a well-to-do merchant and land speculator; he conducted the store until shortly before his death in 1856, mainly as a partnership with son Marcellus (1824-90) from about 1840 onward. Consequently, Watts was compelled to focus his efforts on blank books and bindery work, with printed books serving as a simple sideline, and with the sale of lottery tickets supplementing his income.

Still, by 1834, Watts had accumulated sufficient capital and credit to allow him buy property north of town along Ivy Creek, in Fredericksville Parish. There he can be seen in the ensuing three federal censuses, raising a family of four children with a wife fifteen-years his junior, and ruling a small handful of enslaved servants. That same year, he was listed as a trustee when Charlottesville's first Methodist Church was organized; then in 1836, Watts served as a delegate to the first Virginia Temperance Convention. On both occasions, he was the sole representative of Charlottesville's print-trade community.

Recent articles published by artisan bookbinders of our day indicate that Watts was also an outlier among the bookbinders of his era. Examinations of blank books that he produced for the University of Virginia, still in the school's archives, reveal archaic trade practices in their construction – both simplistic and unsophisticated. His advertising notices never mention that he had licensed patented binding systems, such as the then popular "spring-back" style for making record-keeping books with a spine capable of lying open indefinitely on a flat surface without straining the binding stitches. Rather, his productions were little more than stitched gatherings of sheets whose end papers had been pasted into inexpensive leather-covered boards. Yet these assessments are based on the university's record books, and that sample may simply represent a standard form that binder and patron agreed upon to limit

the costs involved. All the same, his "Charlottesville Blank-Book Manufactory" remained in business at least until the Civil War began. At that time, Charlottesville's two existing papers – one Democratic, one formerly Whig, both secessionist – were forced to suspend their publication as a result of shortages of paper and labor. It may be that Watts was obligated to close as well for the same reasons. Yet all that we now know for certain is that early in the second winter of the war, Watts died at his Albemarle farm. He was mourned as "a kind husband and affectionate parent [whose] loss is deeply felt by his surviving friends."

Personal Data

Born: In 1790 Dinwiddie County, Virginia.
Married: Jan. 1 1828 Mary Adeline Cooper @ Staunton, Virginia.
Died: Dec. 17 1862 Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Virginia.
Children: John Cooper (b. 1830); Ann (b. 1835); Victoria (b. 1842); & Euphemia
 Adeline (b. 1844).

Sources: MEDSA Index no. 42549; Woods, *Albemarle County*; Cometti, *Jefferson's Ideas on a University Library*; notices in the *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1816-18), *Petersburg Republican* (1816-19), [Petersburg] *American Star* (1817-18), [Charlottesville] *Virginia Advocate* (1827-30; extra on 9 April 1829), *Richmond Enquirer* (1834-62), [Richmond] *Southern Churchman* (1836), and *Staunton Spectator* (1862). Genealogical information from charts posted on *Ancestry.com* (April 2016) and the Federal Decennial Census (1820-60).