

531 WILEY, HIRAM

Bookbinding Apprentice

Alexandria

Bookbinding apprentice in Alexandria between 1803 and 1813.

Hiram Wiley was an ill-fated soul who was apprenticed to an Alexandria bookbinder after his parents died. That training, however, did not shield him from further misfortune as a journeyman in Baltimore, where he died bankrupt.

Wiley first appears in public records as an eleven-year-old orphan whose future was being decided by the Orphans Court of Alexandria County, then a part of the District of Columbia. That body ordered him to be bound out to the care of John Gray (189), then a partner to his eldest brother Robert (190) in the Alexandria bookselling firm of Robert & John Gray, "until he arrives at the age of Twenty one years," as an apprentice in the bookbinding trade. That business had opened in 1799, and would continue until 1808, when John Gray retired from the concern in ill health. Wiley probably continued in that office until it closed in late 1814, a year after his indenture expired, as Robert was himself a Philadelphia-trained bookbinder. But Robert Gray was also an opponent of "Mr. Madison's War," and was one to the town's merchants who negotiated with the British forces who burned Washington in August 1814 to avoid a recurrence there; Gray's loyalty and patriotism were questioned after Alexandria was sacked as a result of those talks, forcing his removal to Fredericksburg that fall.

The contiguity of Gray's retreat to the end of Wiley's apprenticeship, as well as the reasons for that departure, suggests that Wiley was someone who shared Gray's partisan views, and so had sought refuge in the Federalist bastion of Baltimore after his master had closed his Alexandria bindery. Still, the earliest evidence of Wiley's residence in Baltimore comes from lists of unclaimed letters in the city's post-office published in papers there in 1820, some seven years after his court-ordered indenture had expired. He is then seen in the annually-published rosters of Baltimore's Mechanical Fire Company from 1823 to 1826, a private fire-fighting company that included many of the city's print-tradesmen, or mechanics, including Hezekiah Niles (1777-1839), publisher of the renowned *Niles' Weekly Register*.

Subsequent notices evincing Wiley's presence in Baltimore, however, show that his status there declined quickly. By September 1827, he had filed for protection under the "Insolvent Laws of Maryland" with his affairs apparently placed in the hands of a trustee the following March. Wiley is not seen again in Baltimore newspapers until December 1834, when a brief notice of his death on Christmas Eve appeared in two of the city's newspapers, both with Federalist roots. That notice was reprinted in Alexandria ten days later, but only in the *Alexandria Gazette*, whose founder had joined Robert Gray in those infamous talks in 1814 with the British. Editor Edgar Snowden added an additional comment to the original notice that Wiley "was highly esteemed by all [of] his acquaintance, during his residence here, for his upright conduct and generous disposition." However, the bookbinder left little trace of his life, outside of these few newspaper reports, which would allow for a fuller description of the extent of his obvious travails, or identify his employers.

Personal Data

Born: Aug. 11 1792 Alexandria, Virginia (later District of Columbia).

Died: Dec. 24 1834 Baltimore, Maryland.

No record of a wife or children yet discovered.

Sources: MESDA Index no. 43822; Alexandria County Orphans Court Records (1803); notices in various Baltimore newspapers (1820-34); and obituary in *Alexandria Gazette* (9 Jan. 1835).