

533 WOOD, LEIGHTON – [Leighton Wood III]

Bookbinder

Petersburg, Richmond

Bookbinder in Richmond, approximately 1799 to 1815, and in Petersburg in 1815-16.

Leighton Wood was a Virginia-born bookbinder with familial connections in the American print trade, but who left only a spare trace of his trade work in Virginia and Tennessee.

The name "Leighton Wood" is one that was carried by many individuals in the early Republic era, leading to considerable confusion among historians and genealogists as to which family each particular carrier belonged, as well as resulting in conflicting narratives in modern-day online genealogical resources. Older print-trade histories assert that this bearer was the grandson of a like-named bookbinder in London, given his choice of trade. But this Wood's link to the print trade came from the maternal side of his family, making him the first in his paternal lineage to embrace bookbinding.

His mother was Elizabeth Blagrove (1745-93), a sister of the Rev. Benjamin Blagrove (1746-93), the rector of Williamsburg's Bruton Parish Church. In 1773, he married Sarah Creese Pelham (1754-1834), a daughter of composer Peter Pelham (1721-1805), that church's long-serving organist, and granddaughter of the like-named Boston mezzotint engraver (d. 1751). Three of their sons – contemporaries and cousins of Wood – became part of the American printing trade, two in Virginia and one in Boston. William Blagrove (1784-1828) was first, sent to the care of his uncle William Pelham (1759-1827) in Boston, who had been trained there by his grandfather's former associates. His brothers, Charles (1786) and Henry (1790), trained in Richmond after their father died and cared for their widowed mother there.

Shortly after her brother wed, Elizabeth Blagrove married Leighton Wood, Jr. (1746-1820) of Hanover County. He came to Virginia from Bristol, England, as agent for the business of his tobacco-merchant father, Leighton Wood, Sr. (1715-95). In that role, Wood became adept at pursuing debts and conveying property in the colonial courts in the counties of central Virginia. The associations he fostered in the process led him to side with the colonists when the Revolutionary War broke out, which reportedly led to his being disowned by his father in England. His service during the war was largely administrative, organizing funding efforts and managing the accounts of Hanover County. In 1781, Wood became the solicitor-general for the Commonwealth, an office he held until 1791, when George Washington convinced him to take a clerkship under Alexander Hamilton in the new federal Treasury Department. In 1801, he returned to England to administer and settle his father's substantial estate, after evidently reconciling with him before his death in 1795. He died there as well in 1820.

His son, Leighton Wood III, remained in Virginia when his father returned to his birthplace. It seems likely that he was trained as a bookbinder in Philadelphia, when his father served the Federalist administrations there, particularly as his mother died in the 1793 yellow-fever epidemic there when he was just seventeen. Yet despite the visibility of his parents, the son's pursuits are essentially invisible before 1815. That obscurity is probably the result of a combination of factors. Wood's paternal uncle, Basil (d. 1805), joined his family in Virginia after the war, bringing with him a cousin who had also been named for the senior Wood. He

became a constable in Henrico County in 1802, after acting as a collector of accounts in the city, in the tradition of the bookbinder's father. That cousin died in Hanover County in 1808, leading some family histories to report that the subject of his published obituary was either Leighton Wood, Jr., even though he was then in England, or his bookbinding son.

The cousin's death and his father's removal make this Leighton Wood more visible. Yet little can be said definitively about his trade work, a result of having only fragments of evidence, widely-spaced in both place and time. The only notice that Wood is known to have issued in Virginia promoting his trade services appeared in the *Petersburg Republican* in November 1815. That date corresponds with the breaking-up of the Richmond bindery that had been spun off from the Argus Office of the late Samuel Pleasants (331). Prior to his October 1814 death, the publisher had owned the largest bookstore-bindery combination in the city, one established in 1803 by his brother-in-law, William Lownes (271). Both men had family ties to Henrico County's Curles Quaker Meeting, a group that included Pleasants Younghusband (1750-1808), a cousin of the late publisher, and the father of Wood's wife Mary Ann. (He was also one of the two Henrico County justices who presided over the trial of the slaves involved in Gabriel's Revolt of 1800.) This context suggests that, before the fall of 1815, the bookbinder worked as an anonymous hand in either the Pleasants office in Richmond (fl. 1803-15), the Lownes office later in Petersburg (fl. 1809-24), or both. Similarly, this period coincides with the peak of the print-trade careers of cousins Charles and Henry Blagrove in Richmond, so making their office another possible location.

It is also instructive that his one notice appeared in the context of the rebuilding of all of the city's press offices in the wake of the disastrous Petersburg fire of July 1815. Wood reports that he was taking "a part of the house occupied by" Marvel W. Dunnivant (154); his was apparently the first job-press to resume business after the fire, and so an enticing place for a new bindery concern to locate at that time. Still, it is unclear just how long Wood stayed in Petersburg, as the only other notice he published there was a solicitation for an adolescent apprentice in January 1816, two months after his previous advertisement.

Wood is next seen in the newspaper record in late 1817 in Knoxville, Tennessee. The sizable interval between appearances makes it difficult to determine when Wood moved west. But that relocation could have been as early as the summer of 1816, as Ebenezer Watts (530), a new bookbinder in town first advertised his trade services there late in August 1816; it may also have come as late as the fall of 1817, as by December that year, Watts was settled into Wood's former space in Dunnivant's office. The latter date makes more sense historically, as the state legislature would meet in Knoxville (once again) in the winter of 1817-18, after three sessions in Nashville, having been named the state's capital in its 1815-16 session. In December 1817, Woods announced the opening of a dancing school, coincident with that assembly; that notice indicated that he was already well-known there as a bookbinder.

Unfortunately, that announcement is the last reliable indication of Wood as a practitioner of the bindery trade. As the site of the state capital was assigned to Murfreesboro in that session, Wood may have followed the government there in 1818. However, nothing has been found in the newspaper record to confirm that suggestion.

After Knoxville, the reports of his residence, activities, and fate are in disagreement. One

genealogical source reports his name as Rev. Leighton Woods III, suggesting he had joined one of the evangelical movements then rife in the Southern interior; but that writer offers no substantiation for that account. Moreover, the published biographies of his cousins' children after the Civil War – Confederate war heroes, one and all – differ on where he died. They all report that event came in 1824, but depending on the source consulted, his death came in either Tennessee or Kentucky. However, information that would corroborate one or the other report has not been found in public records. That uncertainty seems a fitting riddle for historians to resolve, given the wide-spread confusion already created by the few verifiable events in this elusive bookbinder's life.

NB. Contradictions in published genealogical records have been resolved herein by reference to the newspaper record whenever possible. Hence, this account varies from parts of those earlier works.

Personal Data

Born: In 1776 Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia.
Married: May 16 1794 Mary (Polly) Younghusband @ Richmond, Virginia.
Died: In 1824 In Kentucky or Tennessee.
Children: Only two daughters noted – Mary Ann (b. 1804) & Caroline (b. 1805)
 – but other children are possible, given decade-long union before
 first daughter was born.

Sources: MEDSA Index nos. 45015 & 45016; Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade*; editorial notes in *Papers of George Washington* and the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*; Edward Pleasants Valentine Papers, Valentine Museum, Richmond; Crews, "Early Musical Activities in Knoxville;" Harden, *History of Savannah and South Georgia*; notices in various Richmond newspapers (1781-1820) about family generally, and the *Petersburg Republican* (1815-16) about Wood specifically.