

536 BALLS, GEORGE

537 BALLS, THOMAS

Publishers

Norfolk

Music publishers and sheet-music sellers in Norfolk (1817-1822).

George and Thomas Balls were American distribution agents for their family's London-based music publishing firm of James Balls & Company. British histories of music publishing there suggest that the three men were either brothers or a father in business with his two sons; but those histories do not provide any information about their lives before 1790 nor after 1820, except to note that the London store on Oxford Street continued in the family's hands into the 1850s, following the disappearance of James from public records about 1822.

Both George and Thomas Balls removed to the United States in about 1816 and established businesses that sold sheet music, much of which had been published by James Balls, as well as musical instruments, especially pianofortes. George went to Philadelphia, where he soon found printers to publish American editions of European music books for him. Meanwhile, Thomas landed in Norfolk, where he opened a dry-goods store that carried on the family business as a major sideline. The Norfolk store proved the more viable of the two ventures, with George joining Thomas there in 1819. Two musical titles were issued from that Norfolk store, one under Thomas's name in early 1817 and another under George's in late 1819.

For the ensuing year, it seems that George taught piano and vocal music in the Norfolk area, while Thomas conducted the store; George also rented out pianos purchased in London to "the Ladies of Norfolk" when sales of those expensive instruments lagged as a result of the Panic of 1819. But George soon found this approach unsustainable and so decided to return to England; in October 1820, he consigned his stock of sheet music, as well as the rights to his pianos, to James H. Swindells, then principal of Norfolk's Female Seminary and organist for the city's Christ Church (Episcopal). Once back in London, George remade himself into a comedic actor and evidently returned to America in that role several times over the next twenty years. He died while on such a theatrical tour, this in Ireland, in the fall of 1844.

Thomas, however, remained in Norfolk, apparently for the rest of his life. As was often the case with dry-goods merchants, his business evolved into one serving as a business agent for his foremost customers, commonly called commission or exchange agents. Shortly after George's departure, Thomas can be seen "selling slaves south" in the records of the port of New Orleans; the names of the slaves that he sold there suggest he had acquired them in settling accounts with some of Norfolk's most prominent families, particularly for the Boush family. By 1830, he was acting as agent for the Tazewell family of Norfolk and Williamsburg, primarily for then U.S. Senator Littleton Waller Tazewell (1774-1860), once a Congressman and later a Governor of Virginia; the surviving letters between Balls and Tazewell end with the Senator's retirement in 1832, but do not resume when the Governor assumes office and residence in Richmond in 1834. Given their previous association, this ensuing absence from Tazewell's papers suggests Balls died sometime in that intervening period, but a supporting obituary notice for that suggestion has yet to be found.

Personal Data

George Balls died in Dublin, September 18, 1844.

Thomas Balls died in Virginia sometime after 1832.

No record of a spouse or children has been found for either man.

Sources: Imprints; *British Music Publishers, Printers, & Engravers*; *Cultivated Music in Antebellum Philadelphia*; *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines*; advertising notices in the *American Beacon* (Norfolk), 1817-1820; "Inward Slave Manifests for the Port of New Orleans" and letters in Tazewell Family Papers at the College of William & Mary for post-publishing career of Thomas; obituaries for George in Philadelphia papers, October 1844.