

538 POTTER, SHELDON

Bookseller

Wheeling

Bookseller in Wheeling in 1819.

Sheldon Potter was a Philadelphia-based bookseller and stationer who conducted a branch store in Wheeling in 1819. That project was short-lived, however, evidently reflecting the currency issues that then dogged the print-trade business in western Virginia locales.

Potter was the third of eight sons born to the Rhode Island Quakers Joseph Potter (1757-1824) and Anne Brown Knight (1760-1833). During the Revolutionary War, Joseph served in the Quartermaster Department of the Continental Army, a non-combatant role that suited the pacifist principles of his faith. The land warrants that he later received for that service allowed him to move his growing family to Dutchess County, New York, in early 1792; there he started a farm in the part of the town of Beekman that later became La Grange, just east of Poughkeepsie, the county seat.

That larger town became the center of the lives of many of his sons. The eldest, Paraclete Potter (1784-1858) – named after the Greek term for the Holy Spirit – was bound out as an apprentice in the press office of Nicholas Power (1760-1811), publisher of the *Poughkeepsie Journal* from its inception in 1785 until 1806. By 1802, he was Power's shop foreman, and so succeeded his master as proprietor of the paper in 1806; he retained control of the *Journal* until 1841, when he took a federal post in Wisconsin in the Whig administration of Virginian John Tyler. Over those nearly forty years, Potter employed four of his brothers in his office, including the future Episcopal bishops Alonzo Potter (1800-66) of Pennsylvania and Horatio Potter (1802-87) of New York, as well as several nephews. But the first among them was his brother Sheldon Potter, the only sibling that the publisher took on as his partner.

Between 1813 and 1817, the imprints that issued from Potter's Poughkeepsie office carried an imprimatur stating "Published by Paraclete Potter, Main-Street. P. & S. Potter, printers." That mark evinces the early days of a decade-long business relationship between the two brothers. Initially, Paraclete shared ownership of his printing office with Sheldon, while retaining control over his bookstore, its attendant reading-room, and his newspaper. Then in 1818, Sheldon removed to Philadelphia, establishing the bookselling and job-press firm of S. Potter & Co. on Chestnut Street; Paraclete was his unnamed partner in this concern. All the titles Paraclete now issued in Poughkeepsie noted that they were available in Sheldon's Philadelphia store as well, so indicating that this new office was intended to be a springboard for the brothers' ambitions to play a larger role in the national book trade. Such can be seen in the growing number of titles issued in Poughkeepsie starting in 1818, as well as in the increasing number of subscription publications carrying the names of both brothers in both locales thereafter.

That ambition can also be seen in the Wheeling bookstore that Sheldon Potter opened in 1819. The war-delayed construction of the National Road had resumed in 1816, with the section between Wheeling and Cumberland, Maryland, being finished in 1818. That event led to an influx of entrepreneurs into Wheeling seeking to profit from the anticipated flood

of westward-bound migrants passing along the new road, or from serving those business interests. Indeed, Wheeling's first viable newspaper – *The Virginia North-Western Gazette*, published by Thomas Tonner (416) and Joseph Clingan (095) – published its initial number in April 1818, intent on facilitating the town's commerce and succeeded in doing so despite the ensuing economic downturn generated by the Panic of 1819. So it is not surprising that some of the larger bookselling concerns in the East would find this boom-town setting an attractive venue for expanding their business with a branch store, and Sheldon Potter was apparently the first to do so in 1819. Still, it is unclear how long S. Potter & Co. continued to operate in Wheeling. Any notices that may have appeared in the weekly of Tonner & Clingan are now long lost, while publication of the journal itself was suspended for fourteen weeks between May and October 1819 for want of paper, limiting such opportunities.

Sadly, the only witness to this Wheeling outlet's existence still known is an 1820 almanac that reports its availability in that bookstore. In 1806, Paraclete began an association with Danbury-based ephemeris calculator, Andrew Beers (1749-1824), to make use of his tables in the almanacs he published every fall. As was the case with many of his contemporaries, he produced multiple editions each year, customized separately for the business selling that edition. When Sheldon removed to Philadelphia, his brother printed almanacs for him that reported his office as its place of publication. Then in 1819, Paraclete printed a Wheeling variant as well – *The Farmer's Almanac for the Year of our Lord 1820* (1819.089) – for sale at Sheldon's new store there. But his 1821 edition was only issued from his Philadelphia store, indicating that the Wheeling branch had ceased operation by the summer of 1820. In view of that, it is clear that Sheldon never resided in Wheeling, even as he conducted business there; rather, he engaged an unnamed assistant to manage the bookstore for him, while he continued to be someone often seen in Philadelphia's newspapers.

Sheldon Potter never again strayed from the trade confines of metropolitan Philadelphia. But he became ever less an active printer and more a publisher and commission agent. He began that course in January 1824, when brother Paraclete sold his interest in S. Potter & Co. to bookseller James E. Moore (d. 1830). That alliance lasted just 30 months before the firm was dissolved by mutual consent in June 1826. In doing so, Sheldon severed his long-standing ties to the retailing of printed and blank books; he now joined Tristram B. Freeman (d. 1842) – the founder of the Philadelphia long-lived auction house that still bears his name today – as a partner in "the Book Auction branch of their business" and would "conduct the *selling of Books and Stationary [sic] at Public Auction or Private Sale.*" That collaboration continued until August 1828, when Potter abandoned book auctions for commission trading of paper and stationery at wholesale. And he continued in that line until he was compelled to retire from business in 1832 on account of his declining health.

Meanwhile, Potter served as the dedicated publisher of an Episcopal periodical. All of the sons of Joseph Potter, a life-long Quaker, found the rector of Poughkeepsie's Christ Church, Rev. John Reed (1777-1845), a persuasive and influential voice in shaping their religious views. Reed was responsible for the early clerical training of brothers Alonzo and Horatio, the future bishops, and his activities were regularly chronicled in Paraclete's *Poughkeepsie Journal*. Yet Sheldon's most visible connection to the Episcopal church came via another of Reed's students, Rev. George Boyd (1788-1850). Boyd was ordained in 1814 and sent to St.

John's Church in Philadelphia's Northern Liberties District, and so Sheldon found a friend from home in that city when he arrived there four years later. By 1819, Potter and Boyd had determined to publish an Episcopal magazine, and recruited Rev. Jackson Kemper (1789-1870), then the assistant rector in three other Philadelphia churches, to join to the project. (Kemper was later the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.) The resulting *Church Record* issued weekly until April 1823, when the governing Episcopate in Pennsylvania exchanged Rev. Gregory T. Bedell (1793-1834), rector of the city's St. Andrew's Church, for Kemper, the progressively more transient missionary. The editorial change was accompanied by an alteration in title, with the weekly becoming *The Philadelphia Recorder*. In 1828, Boyd was succeeded by Rev. Benjamin Bosworth Smith (1794-1884), who had been publishing a small church journal in Vermont. But he was called to a church in Lexington, Kentucky in late 1830, leaving the *Recorder's* future uncertain. Potter had withdrawn from the book trade by then, and seems to have found the weekly increasingly burdensome in his new circumstances. So with the issue of April 2, 1831, he retired as publisher in favor of William Stavelly (1800-77); Stavelly promptly retitled the journal as *The Episcopal Recorder* in an attempt to broaden its appeal to a national audience, and became the face of the paper after Bedell died in 1834; he was clearly successful as the journal even survived him.

Potter briefly returned to journalism in 1832, when he was assigned the assets of a failing magazine – the *Journal of Health* – in order to keep its insolvent publisher, Henry H. Porter, out of debtor's prison. Rather than continue the journal as his own, Potter liquidated those assets; he simply sold Porter's tools and furniture, before transferring the periodical to the care of Samuel Coate Atkinson, founder of the *Saturday Evening Post*. But he found that its subscription revenue only covered one-third of its production costs, so compelling Atkinson to close the magazine a year later, with litigation between Porter and his editors following closely behind.

That unhappy course may have been Potter's only alternative. While he still maintained a paper warehouse in the city, he was retreating from his prior civic and social commitments at that time. When he died in February 1834, the notices published in Philadelphia's papers offered the succinct comment that he had passed on "after a long and painful illness, which he bore with Christian patience and resignation." As he was not yet forty-five, that remark suggests his ailment was a wasting one, possibly cancer, and that his retreat from public affairs was induced by that condition. Consequently, Potter has also faded into obscurity, overshadowed by his more prominent siblings.

Personal Data

Born:	Apr. 19	1789	Cranston, Rhode Island.
Married:	Feb. 28	1811	Sarah "Betsy" Raymond @ Beekman, New York.
Died:	Feb. 1	1834	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Children:	Mary (1811-41); Beekman (1814-87); Alfred (1817-81); Elizabeth (1819-1909); Sarah (1822-1905); Joseph (1825-62); Annie (1828-42); Rebecca (1830-99); Emily (1834-1910).		

Sources: Imprints, esp. Shaw & Shoemaker 47950; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Smith, *History of Dutchess County*; Howard, *Records of Christ Church, Poughkeepsie*; Scharf, *History of Philadelphia*; *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania* (1883); Bidwell, *American Paper Mills; Proceedings*, American Philosophical Society (1995) on *Journal of Health*; and notices in [Philadelphia] *Poulson's American Advertiser* (1818-28) and *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1834). Sibling history from article published in *Sacramento Daily Union* (31 Mar. 1883) by his nephew Lorenzo, later reprinted in *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*; information on his children from family charts posted on *Ancestry.com* (April 2016).

Late nineteenth-century histories present conflicting publisher and publication dates for the periodicals discussed here. This entry relates dates based on the imprint record wherever possible, so correcting those inaccurate reports.