

553 GORDON, JOHN

Bookseller

Petersburg

Bookseller in Petersburg in 1818 and 1819.

John Gordon was a Petersburg dry-goods merchant who left that established trade behind in 1818 in order to sell books and stationery alone. Yet, it appears that his new bookselling business survived just six months, as only a corresponding run of advertising notices provide any evidence of its existence.

Gordon first appears in such public notices in early 1811 when the firm of Gordon & Walker sold the "stock of Dry Goods and Groceries" of their store to the newly-founded partnership of Drury Burge and James Wright, which also took possession of the space from which they operated. Subsequent notices indicate that James Walker had financed their business, and that Gordon was the store's manager; that association may have resulted from the death of Gordon's father, as one Thomas Gordon was associated with Walker when he died in 1808, and making his son a partner in his existing business would have simplified the settlement of a merchant's complicated estate. However, no clear link between the two Gordons has been uncovered in the public prints, the only viable source as Petersburg's records from this period are now lost as a result of the July 1815 fire and the military siege of 1864-65.

In September 1811, Gordon & Walker announced the end of their partnership, with Gordon empowered to settle the firm's outstanding accounts. A month later, he formed a new retail concern with William Clarke that dealt in "fancy goods" though not groceries. That business evidently thrived during the war years, as the two partners were able to open a second store in late 1814, under the banner of John Gordon & Co., that offered more mundane dry-goods items. That new firm became a leading advertiser in the short-lived *Petersburg Daily Courier* after it was sold in December 1814 to printer George A. Martin (281) by its founder John Wood (456). But after that journal's demise in the spring of 1815, Gordon is not seen in the city's papers until October 1818. That is when he advertised the opening of his "New Book-Store" on Sycamore Street, separate from his businesses with Clarke.

Over the following seven months, Gordon regularly advertised his shop in the *Petersburg Republican*, then conducted by Col. Edward Pescud (324). Therein, he maintained a standing notice of the store's general offerings, with occasional short reports added to the larger one of titles he had recently received. However, those notices also evince the marginality of his store, in that Gordon did not offer customized blank books for sale; such items were staples in the port-town's bookstores, particularly that of Joseph C. Swan (525), who had acquired the established business of bookbinder Ebenezer Watts (530) shortly before Gordon opened his new store. But then he may not have seen such a void in his offerings as a problem, as Petersburg's largest bookseller, John Somervell (394), was dying, and his inevitable death (in January 1819) would soon open the local markets to new competitors. Accordingly, Gordon redoubled his efforts in March 1819; he withdrew from his nearly eight-year-long alliance with William Clarke – which brought an end to both of their retail stores – evidently in order to focus on bookselling alone.

Nonetheless, just how long Gordon's new venture continued is unknown. After the spring of 1819, he no longer placed advertisements in Petersburg's papers. It could be that it was still operating as late as April 1822, when Gordon was listed as Petersburg agent for Richmond's *Family Visitor*, a non-denominational religious weekly published by Nathan Pollard (335). From its outset, Gordon's store was advertised as a supplier of religious titles, which would have made it a predictable locus for Pollard's subscription efforts in 1822. However, Gordon is the only one in a list of seventy names with any known connection to the book trade; the rest are civic or religious leaders in the stated locale, suggesting that Gordon had assumed that role in Petersburg as well, rather than continued as a bookseller.

After the advertising flurry of early 1819, Gordon's fate as both a businessman and a person is uncertain. There are several individuals bearing his name found in Virginia at this time, and none of them were recorded in the 1820 federal census as residing in Petersburg; indeed, the only Gordon noted in the town then was a single woman, probably the widow of the late merchant Thomas Gordon. Consequently, the only certain statement that can be made about this bookseller is one based solely on his newspaper advertising from 1811 to 1819, which leaves the remainder of his life a mystery.

No verifiable Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Advertising notices published in *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1807-11), *Petersburg Daily Courier* (1814-15), *Petersburg Republican* (1818-19), and [Richmond] *Family Visitor* (1822).