

A NEW JERSEY PRINTER'S "POCKET MEMORANDUM" FOR 1795

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FOR an attempt to reconstruct, and thereby understand, certain aspects of the printing trade in New Jersey during the closing years of the 18th century, a valuable though limited guide is Isaac Collins's personal copy of a pocket almanac in which he wrote of business activity in his Trenton shop. *Poor Will's Almanack for the Year 1795* was printed by Joseph Crukshank of Philadelphia, who was a long-time friend and former business partner of Collins. The almanac owned by Collins is now in the Special Collections of the Rutgers University Library, a gift of the late Harold E. Pickersgill of Perth Amboy.

The year 1795 for New Jersey's senior printer amounted to a routine business period at the end of which he would contemplate departure from the state he had served for more than a quarter century as public printer, newspaper editor, and book publisher. The "pocket memorandum" therefore not only provides valuable information on Collins's entire printing business, but it also sheds new light on the state of printing in New Jersey.

Collins's career in his adopted state began in 1770, when the Delaware-born printer who had learned his trade in Wilmington, Williamsburg, and Philadelphia was elected by the colonial legislature to succeed the late James Parker as public printer, a position then known as "Printer to the King." Seven years later the newly formed state legislature, led by Governor William Livingston, called upon Collins to publish the state's first permanent newspaper, the *New-Jersey Gazette*, which was issued from Burlington and Trenton until 1786. Collins also printed the first quarto edition of the English Bible in the state in 1791. It was the second printed in America, following

Robert Aitken's by nine years and preceding Isaiah Thomas's by only two months.¹

Meanwhile, Collins's Trenton printing office, undismayed at the printer's impending move to New York, continued to bustle with trade in 1795. Since the passing of the *Gazette* nine years before and the loss in more recent years of exclusive rights to New Jersey's public printing, Collins's publishing had turned almost completely to books. From February through most of December, the months recorded in *Poor Will's Almanack*, the printing firm issued a number of imprints, from Bibles and religious tracts to spelling books and state laws, totalling more than 3,000 single volumes.

Pre-eminent among these were Lindley Murray's *The Power of Religion on the Mind* and *The Life of Sarah Grubb*, the latter an anonymously edited volume of a late missionary's writings. Scribbled on the interleaved pages of the almanac are also several mentions of an octavo-sized Bible which probably refers to an edition Collins printed in 1793/94. (The Old Testament was issued in 1793 and the New Testament in 1794.) As late as November, 1795, Collins wrote in the almanac of sending sheets of his octavo Bible to binders. Sheets that had been printed in either 1793 or 1794 were stored by the printer and then bound as customers demanded them.

It is also worth noting that in 1795 Collins was still shipping copies of his quarto Bible, printed in 1791, to booksellers in Philadelphia and New York. As recorded in the almanac, one of the printer's best customers for the quarto edition was John Dickins (or Dickens), a Philadelphia bookseller of Methodist publications. Dickins bought 29 Bibles during the year. Other booksellers who handled Collins's Bibles were William Wilson of Philadelphia and Edmund Prior of New York.

Four more publications about which Collins wrote in 1795 are: "Peirce's Spelling-book," probably *The New American Spelling-Book Improved* by John Peirce Jr.; "Wilson's Laws," or the *Acts of the Council and General Assembly of the State of New-Jersey, etc.*, compiled by Peter Wilson for the Assembly; a "School Testament" and "Pica Testament," both synonymous entries no doubt for a New Testament edition Collins had printed in a previous year; and

¹ For other accounts of Isaac Collins see my studies in the *Journalism Quarterly*, Spring, 1963, and *Proceedings* of the New Jersey Historical Society, July, 1963.

“Dilworth’s Assistant,” an abbreviation for *The Schoolmaster’s Assistant* by Thomas Dilworth.

There is no record that Collins published an issue of Peirce’s spelling book. Evans’s *American Bibliography* lists Crukshank as printer in 1795, a fact that would seem to indicate Collins received the printed sheets from his friend and then had them bound into books. The same explanation applies to the Dilworth volume, which was also printed by Crukshank, not Collins, in 1793.

The Dilworth book was the reason for a slight controversy between Collins and one of his binders, George Hyde of Philadelphia. On November 10th, Collins wrote that he had sent 110 copies of the book to Hyde for binding. Thirteen days later, in what was exceptionally fast service, Hyde returned 50 bound volumes. By January 13th, in the only entry for 1796, Collins wrote that he had just received 160 more, or 100 above what he had originally shipped. The printer explained:

There being some Doubt, whether there came Home 180 or 160 of the above—and whether the Number sent to bind, entered 7 Pages back, should not be 210 instead of 110, the whole therefore must be submitted to the Binder—Hyde.

Collins, who appears willing to accept the blame, was not disturbed by the mixup. His main concern was to get the volumes bound.

Evidence that Collins and Crukshank continued to associate closely in business even after their partnership was dissolved in 1770 is found in *Poor Will’s Almanack*. On September 13th, Collins noted that he had sent 50 octavo Bibles to Crukshank “to replace those I borrowed of him last Winter or Spring.” On November 28th, he wrote the following: “Sent to Crukshank by Capt Ashmore 514 Borgois (sic) Text and 50 Pica Do. in 11 Bundles.” The descriptions, Bourgeois and Pica, are type sizes, nine and 12 point.

Throughout 1795 Philip Weaver, in Germantown, received a large portion of the binding work from the Collins shop. Also contracted were Hyde, and James Wilson, the Wilmington binder and bookseller. From early March until late November, Weaver bound more than 1,000 volumes—400 *Power of Religion*, 600 *Sarah Grubb*, 23 Bibles, and four *Wilson’s Laws*. Unfortunately the printer’s “pocket memorandum” does not reveal binding specifications, nor is it much help on the subject of binding costs. One entry shows that

Collins paid Weaver \$200, but for what or how many volumes we do not know. As for Hyde, from early April until late November, he bound 1,236 volumes—99 *Power of Religion*, 828 *Sarah Grubb*, 99 Bibles, and, as noted above, 210 (or was it 110?) *Schoolmaster's Assistant*. Wilson, who also purchased bound books from Collins, bound 448 Testaments and 449 spelling books during the period covered in the almanac.

Another part of the printing business delineated in the "pocket memorandum" was Collins's dependence upon booksellers in Philadelphia and New York. John Murray Jr. and Edmund Prior, to mention only two of those whose names appear, represented Collins's early efforts in the New York book market. In May, for instance, the printer wrote that he had sent Prior "a sample" of his imprints by way of Murray. Prior thereafter emerges from the pages of the almanac as perhaps the largest purchaser of Collins's imprints during the year which preceded the printer's move to New York. They would enjoy a much closer relationship later on when Collins opened a store at 189 Pearl Street near Prior at 261.

Two shipping firms, Ashmore of Trenton and Neilson of New Brunswick, provided the means of transportation for products of the Collins shop. Usual shipper across the Delaware to Philadelphia or on down to Wilmington was Captain Thomas Ashmore. His counterpart for shipments eastward to New York was Colonel John Neilson. "Sent by T. Ashmore" and "Dld on board Neilson's Boat at New Brunswick" appear frequently throughout the "pocket memorandum."

Still another peculiarity of the printer's craft in the 18th century was the supply of paper to the printing shop. Paper was seldom in abundance and often scarce because of the lack of rags for the paper mills and the difficulty in securing labor, especially during the war. An item in the memorandum, dated November 25th, shows that Collins bought paper from Jacob Hagy (or Hagey) near Philadelphia. On that date, the printer had set aside \$120 to pay for paper "expected" from Hagy, but the item was crossed out and the word "returned" written in. The order of paper never arrived.

Isaac Collins's personal copy of *Poor Will's Almanack for the Year 1795* is one of few known records of his business and practice. For this reason it will remain an important document for students of printing.