

014 ARMSTRONG, ALEXANDER

Printer & Publisher

Wheeling

Publisher of *The Wheeling Repository* (1807-08), the first newspaper issued in Ohio County, and later publisher of the *Wheeling Compiler* (1830) there.

Alexander appeared as a trained printer in Wheeling in the winter of 1806-1807, coming from Washington County, Pennsylvania, where he was evidently born in 1786. Just before that, the county was established under the leadership of Col. James Armstrong, a military hero on the Pennsylvania frontier in both the Revolutionary and French & Indian wars. This Armstrong may have been the Colonel's son, but the presence of numerous Armstrongs there during the 1780s makes such a definitive link uncertain, as does a lack of genealogical data. However, such seems likely as he was trained in that county's original press office, a Federalist bastion in the town of Washington, backed by the Colonel, among others, which issued the *Western Telegraphe* (1795-1811) there.

This was an establishment to which the printer seems to have been inextricably bound. In early 1804, John Colerick (099), the *Telegraphe's* publisher, died young and unexpectedly, leaving that journal in the hands of his staff, who operated the paper for the benefit of his family. Armstrong was clearly the key figure in this arrangement, as the deceased Colerick was listed as the publisher of an 1806 imprint that he produced. Yet, by the end of that year, Armstrong had left the office in the hands of others and set out to establish his own press in Wheeling. There he published *The Wheeling Repository*, the first newspaper issued in Ohio County (recognizable today as the panhandle of West Virginia) and the second one produced west of the Alleghany ridge in early Virginia.

As a result, Armstrong immediately became a leading figure in the small town of about 800 people, serving as a delegate to the Protestant Episcopal convention held in Winchester during his first summer in Wheeling. But his new paper could not survive in this then-distant place where, as one local historian claims, Armstrong transported "the paper on which it was printed on pack horses over the mountains." As winter approached in late 1808, he gave up the effort, closing his *Wheeling Repository* and returning to Washington to again take up the reins of his late master's office and paper. However, Armstrong now found himself competing with another Federalist journal (*The Washington Reporter*) with a new Jeffersonian alternative (*The Western Corrector*) about to enter the mix. By the summer of 1810, he had finally extricated the *Telegraphe* and its press from Colerick's estate; and in the summer of 1811, he removed both to St. Clairsville, Ohio, some 40 miles to the west, situated on Zane's Trace, and about to become part of the new National Road.

The commercial potential attending the National Road seems to have been Armstrong's primary business focus: starting out in Washington, then to Wheeling, back to Washington, then out to St. Clairsville, and finally back to Wheeling – all of them located on the roads that became that vital overland artery after 1816. His Ohio press proved to be his longest-lived one, even as he returned to Wheeling for the last 40 years of his life. Between 1811 and 1825, he operated a press there, as well as a paper. His new *Belmont Repository* started in December 1811, but by the summer of 1813 it faced stiff competition from an even

newer *Ohio Federalist*; fortunately for him, one of that journal's two proprietors tired of the contest after the first year, likely from the financial concerns caused by the War of 1812. This allowed Armstrong to join with the surviving partner, Charles Hammond, to publish a single Federalist paper that used both papers' subscriber lists; their unified *Ohio Federalist and Belmont Repository* survived until the end of 1818, sinking a nascent Jeffersonian journal (*True American*, 1815) along the way.

Still, Armstrong was eventually drawn back to Wheeling as the growth of river commerce began to outpace that of wagons in the dawn of the age of steam. By 1830 he was heavily invested there and lived in a large house in the town's center. One such investment was the *Wheeling Compiler*, a daily newspaper begun in 1828 as the *Virginia Statesman* that now needed an infusion of capital and enthusiasm after its first year; Armstrong provided both and became its lead editor. But the aging publisher relied on his new partner, James Green, for the tradecraft needed to produce this daily paper; thus when Green wanted to retire from the demanding business at the end of 1830, Armstrong was forced to buy him out. The *Compiler* closed shortly thereafter, with Armstrong selling its press and supplies.

His only subsequent connection to the printing trade came in 1836. That year Armstrong built and opened a large steam-powered paper mill in town, naming it after the developer of the steam-powered water craft that now visited its waterfront: the Fulton Mill. By that time, Wheeling issued two daily and three weekly newspapers under three distinct titles, making reliable supplies of paper essential. The fifty-year-old Pennsylvanian rose to this new challenge successfully; his rag-pulp mill lived on into the twentieth century.

Armstrong spent the rest of his long life as one of the town's elder statesmen. Visibly active in both church and state, his Federalist proclivities were never far from sight. He was a vocal critic of Andrew Jackson, particularly of Old Hickory's banking policy and its impact on the nation's commerce. As a Whig, he was a Unionist during the Civil War, seeing his adopted state break away from its secessionist government. But at war's end, now eighty, Armstrong retired to the countryside home of his daughter in Woodsfield, Ohio, 40 miles down the Ohio River from Wheeling. There he died in September 1868 in his eighty-third year.

Personal Data

Born: About 1786 Washington County, Pennsylvania [?]
Died: Sept. 11 1868 Woodsfield, Monroe County, Ohio
Children: Wife Sarah died Nov. 21, 1830 in Wheeling at age 30; at least one unnamed daughter lived to adulthood.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Meade, *Old Churches*; Crumine, *Washington County*; Cranmer, *Wheeling and Ohio County.*; obituary in the *Wheeling Intelligencer*, 12 Sept 1868.