

**053 BRITTON, FORBES – [FORBES BRITTON, SR.]**

**Publisher**

**Morgantown, Clarksburg**

Founding publisher of the first newspapers issued in Morgantown (1804) and in Clarksburg (1810); the first with Joseph Campbell (078), and then with brother Alexander Britton (052).

Britton came from a long-established colonial-era family; his forebears had originally settled on Staten Island before moving on to New Jersey (1670s) and then to Pennsylvania (1730s). He was born in Philadelphia in 1784 where his father, Thomas, was a prosperous lumber merchant. That situation put him in proximity to the growing printing trade, and he may have actually been an apprentice there; what is certain is that Britton came to know Joseph Campbell, an Irish immigrant working in Philadelphia's printing offices. The two evidently formed a plan to there to strike out on their own in the West.

They chose Morgantown, a small port town on the Monongahela River and county seat of Monongalia County, as the place to start a newspaper and job-printing office. Merchants there were increasingly pressed for access to the limited space then available in nearby Pittsburgh newspapers; their weekly was an effort to provide such access as in indicated by the choice of the journal's title: *The Monongalia Gazette and Morgantown Advertiser*. Early histories of Morgantown report that publication began in January 1803, but its numbering indicates a start date in January 1804, suggesting occasional suspensions over the course of its life. So it seems that Campbell and Britton moved in 1803, and started their paper once established in town. The *Gazette* was apparently an immediate success, surviving for more than six years despite ongoing problems bringing needed materials from eastern suppliers. Yet Britton sold his interest in the *Gazette* to Campbell in January 1806 and moved on to nearby Clarksburg.

By that time, Britton had married Elizabeth Pindall, the sister of James Pindall, a Clarksburg attorney and a leading Federalist political figure in the area. He plainly aligned his course to that of his brother-in-law: to build the town into an important commercial center beyond Pittsburgh's shadow. In the span between 1806 and 1810, Britton seems to have operated a job-press there, as had been his tactic in Morgantown. But he needed a trade partner if he were to produce a newspaper there. By early 1810, he had convinced his brother Alexander to join him in Clarksburg, and on July 28th their new weekly journal, *The Bye Stander*, began its five-year run. Like the *Gazette* before it, this new journal was beset by supply problems, problems heightened by the disruptions on the War of 1812 – not the least of which was Britton's service in a local militia regiment. Nonetheless, in terms of the *Bye-Stander's* long-term survival, the most significant issue that the paper faced was apparently its Federalist perspective and its support of Pindall. By the end of the War of 1812, the Britton brothers faced imminent bankruptcy from their unpaid bills and uncollected debts, seemingly a result of a decline in subscribers for a "pro-British" paper during a war with Great Britain. Thus in mid-1815, the brothers reluctantly closed their paper.

In the wake of the closing, Alexander Britton left Clarksburg for Ohio, having married in 1814 a widow with connections there, and quickly disappears from public records. Forbes, however, had now planted deep roots in the town and struggled to recover. Another weekly

would appear that fall, published by Gideon Butler (067) and Alexander G. McRae (300), possibly printed on Britton's press, as their predecessor sorted out his debts; such a course is suggested by that succeeding paper's demise at just the moment Britton went bankrupt in mid-1820. At that time, he lost his house, and had his financial affairs assigned to another brother-in-law, Thomas P. Moore, husband of his wife's sister Rachel, for settlement. It seems Moore had more than a passing interest in Britton's survival; his son, Pearson Moore (500), had been employed in Britton's press office and so may have had a financial interest in the settlement as well. Britton's brief reappearance as publisher of a new weekly, *The Rattlesnake*, in 1822, indicates that such a settlement took place. But his death less than two years later, barely forty, also indicates that the entire adventure in Clarksburg broke him physically as well as financially.

Still, Britton left a noteworthy legacy in his only son, Forbes Jr. A celebrated West Point graduate, he had an extensive military career in the Indian removals and the Mexican War. By 1850, he had settled in Texas, becoming a major business and political figure there. He died while serving as a delegate to the state's 1861 secession convention.

#### ***Personal Data***

Born: Feb. 13 1784 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Married: Nov. 1 1805 Clarksburg, Harrison County, VA/WV  
Died: April 5 1824 Clarksburg, Harrison County, VA/WV  
Children: Ann Pollard (b. 1807), Forbes Jr. (b. 1812).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Haymond, *Harrison County*; Wiley, *Monongalia County*; Callahan, *Morgantown*; Moore biography, Harrison County Historical Society; dates established by Pennsylvania and Virginia vital records posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).