

210 HEISKELL, JOHN

Printer & Publisher

Winchester

Publisher of the *Winchester Gazette* (1811-26) and brother to William Heiskell (211), his predecessor, and Frederick S. Heiskell (209).

Heiskell was one of the three sons of Frederick Heiskell (1752-1815) and Catherine Von Steidinger (1756-99) who were trained in the printing trade in Winchester before going on to successful tenures as newspaper proprietors. In 1792, his parents had moved their large family (then numbering seven children) from Washington County, Maryland, to a farm in Shenandoah County; his father eventually established a dry-goods business in Winchester and began apprenticing his six sons to various trades in that town.

John was the eldest son, but only the second to come to the trade, after serving as an officer in the U.S. Army during the administration of John Adams. His younger brother William was the actual progenitor of the family press, having acquired it in 1808 from the estate of his late master, Richard Bowen (045). Bowen had founded the business, including its long-lived Federalist paper, *The Centinel and Winchester Gazette*, in April 1788 and had sustained it through five challenges from Jeffersonian alternatives. At his death, William Heiskell was his twenty-year-old shop foreman and heir-apparent. It appears that he used family money (provided by his merchant-planter father) to purchase the business and family labor (embodied in his brothers Frederick and John) to keep it running. In early 1811, William sold his interest in the business to John and moved to Richmond to work briefly in the office of Thomas Ritchie (360); he then moved on to Lee County, just north of Knoxville, Tennessee, retiring from the printing trade at that time to pursue a life as a slave-holding patrician and regional political figure. Frederick followed suit in early 1814, joining another brother, Daniel, in forging a new family base in the eastern Tennessee mountains near Knoxville; they were joined there by William in 1833. The moves left the Winchester press solely in John's hands.

John Heiskell had evidently been with the office since the 1808 transition, so his taking on its independent management appears essentially effortless. The one change seems to have been a switch to non-family hands in operating the press with Heiskell evidently training printers Peter Klipstine (253), who he teased in an 1812 marriage notice, and John Hines (220), as well as possibly training the Winchester-born Caldwell brothers James (071) and Joseph (073). Each tradesman would eventually leave his employ for new opportunities both in Winchester and without, but he continued the business and his *Winchester Gazette* with one brief interruption until 1826. In that time, his press issued several conservative religious texts, while his journal remained a voice of the region's old Federalists; that perspective drew him into an exchange of invective in 1818 with Samuel B.T. Caldwell (074) of Leesburg's *Genius of Liberty* over the conduct of Col. Charles Fenton Mercer, that town's representative in Congress, in his questioning of the motives of Republican Armistead T. Mason, who had challenged Mercer's 1816 election; by 1819, the controversy had spread beyond Winchester and Leesburg, leading to a duel that ended in the death of Mason at the hands of Mercer's cousin, John Mason McCarty, who was offended by Mason's conduct.

While Heiskell's ongoing support for those opposing the Virginia presidents Madison and Monroe helped a competing journal survive in Winchester – the *Republican Constellation* of Jonathan Foster (168) – the financial stability of his business does not seem to have been adversely effected. In late 1823, he apparently decided to cash out before his opposition to Jackson in the coming election could disturb that stability; he sold the paper and press to one Thomas Jones; just a year later, following the disputed election of John Quincy Adams, a fiscally-distressed Jones sold the *Gazette* operation back to Heiskell, evincing the wisdom of his earlier judgment to give way to predictable financial consequences. His return to the ownership of the *Winchester Gazette* lasted only two more years, as the now fifty-year-old publisher began to consider retirement in the light of his declining health. In late 1826, he sold his entire business once again, this time to Joseph H. Sherrard, a district court justice there of long and close acquaintance, and retired to his farm outside of Winchester.

Unlike his brothers William and Frederick, Heiskell made no further mark in the public arena after his retirement from journalism. Whether his withdrawal was from disinterest, disgust, or ill-health is unclear, though his simultaneous departure from his long-held seat on Winchester's Hustings Court and from active participation in Frederick County's Agricultural Society suggest that his health was at the root of his choices. Even so, Heiskell remained a leading figure in the town's Grace Church, a congregation of evangelical Lutherans. He lived yet another decade, dying in his Winchester townhouse in late November 1836.

Personal Data

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| Born: | June 9 | 1775 | Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland. |
| Married [1]: | June 17 | 1802 | Ann Sowers @ Frederick County, Virginia. |
| Married [2]: | Mar. 16 | 1824 | Sarah White @ Frederick County, Virginia. |
| Died: | Nov. 23 | 1836 | Winchester, Frederick County Virginia. |
| Children: | At least 2 sons, Henry Lee (b. 1803) & Robert (1812-19), likely more. | | |

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Morton, *Winchester*, Russell, *Winchester*, Eisenberg, *Grace Church, Winchester*; Hyskell, *Early Heiskells and Hyskells* (1958).