

211 HEISKELL, WILLIAM

Printer & Publisher

Winchester, Richmond

Publisher of the *Winchester Gazette* (1808-11) and brother to John Heiskell (210), his successor, 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.

While William was the middle son of the three Heiskell printers, he was the first to come to the trade. He was trained in the office of Richard Bowen (045), an English immigrant who had come to the Valley in early 1788 to start *The Centinel and Winchester Gazette* in opposition to the German-oriented paper of Matthias Bartgis (024) there. During the 1790s, his *Gazette* became the leading Federalist paper in the region, leading to five challenges from Jeffersonian alternatives that it weathered successfully. In May 1808, Bowen died unexpectedly, leaving his twenty-year-old shop foreman, William Heiskell, as his heir-apparent. It seems 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 operating. But after three years in charge, he decided to move on from the Valley. It was a choice that made his post-Virginia life more vital than were his days in the trade.

In early 1811, William sold his interest in the business to brother John and removed to Richmond to work briefly in the office of Thomas Ritchie (360); there he apparently learned of available land in Lee County, the southwest tip of the state at the junction with Kentucky and Tennessee, just north of Knoxville. There Heiskell established himself as a slave-holding patrician and major regional political figure. He was elected the county's sheriff and served as a delegate to the General Assembly from 1823 to 1827; he was also a member of the celebrated 1829-30 Constitutional Convention. Still, Heiskell would move on again to new opportunities in Tennessee. Brother Frederick moved there in 1814 to join another brother, Daniel, in forging a new family base in the eastern Tennessee mountains near Knoxville; there Frederick had found success as publisher of the *Knoxville Register* and printer for the state government. William joined his brothers there in 1833, quickly being elected as a justice of the Hancock County court. By the 1840s, he had moved on to Monroe County, south of Knoxville, where he sought election to the state legislature in 1849 to work with Frederick, then a state senator from Knox County, to charter and build the East Tennessee & Georgia Railroad; William would serve as a director of that company until 1870.

With the coming of the Civil War, Heiskell moved once again, this time to Knoxville proper. He was a delegate from Knox County to the Constitutional Union convention in 1860, being elected a vice-president of that body, reflecting a familial embrace of Unionist ideas; that participation made Heiskell a leading figure in Tennessee's Reconstruction government, which utilized the members of that convention to determine the membership of the state's

initial post-war legislature. Indeed, he was elected representative to the state legislature both during and after the war, serving as Speaker of the House in the Reconstruction government from 1865 to 1867. While age and attitude apparently limited his involvement in the Confederate war effort, such did not diminish Heiskell's social and political standing in east Tennessee. During the war, he was a Trustee of the Hampden-Sidney Academy and of the East Tennessee University (today the University of Tennessee), as well as being one of the founding trustees of the Hiwassee College in Monroe County, chartered while he was in the legislature. And as the war ended, Lincoln appointed him as the Receiver of Customs at Knoxville, so legitimating the Federal administration there.

In the end, however, Heiskell's active life began to wear on his health. In 1867, the nearly eighty-year-old patrician retired from political life to focus solely on his administrative roles. But eventually he had to relinquish those tasks as well. In his last year, he was essentially a recluse in his Knoxville home, where he died in September 1871.

Personal Data

Born: in 1788 Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland
Married [1]: in 1813 Elizabeth Davis Mitchell @ Winchester, Virginia.
Married [2]: in 1855 Julia Josephine Gahagan @ Knoxville, Tennessee.
Died: Sept. 9 1871 Knoxville, Knox County, Tennessee
Children: By Elizabeth: John Mitchell Heiskell & William King Heiskell.
 By Julia: Samuel Gordon Heiskell (1858-1923).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Morton, *Winchester*, Russell, *Winchester*, Speer, *Prominent Tennesseans*; Heiskell, *Jackson and Early Tennessee History*; Hyskell, *Early Heiskells and Hyskells* (1958).