

247 KEMPE, JAMES

Publisher

Dumfries

Publisher of *Republican Journal & Dumfries Weekly Advertiser* (1795-96), briefly as partner to Col. Willoughby Tebbs (526) and Dr. Thomas Thornton (414) in the venture.

Kempe was an Irish émigré who arrived in Prince William County in late 1794 or early 1795, and so was not a member of the well-known and long-established Kempe family of Princess Ann County. Family legend holds that this Kempe was a refugee from the United Irishmen rebellion, but his appearance in Virginia antedates that 1798 uprising; it is more likely that Kempe left Ireland in 1793 or 1794, as did other Irish journalists – such as Richmond's James Carey (080) – following the British Parliament's enactment of "seditious libel" laws in 1792 and 1793. Such a prospect is consistent with the fact that Kempe was clearly a trained printer on his arrival in America, given the brief period between his initial appearance and the start of his Dumfries newspaper.

In May 1795, Kempe issued the first number of his *Republican Journal and Dumfries Weekly Advertiser*. At that moment, it had been eighteen months since the demise of Dumfries first weekly, *The Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* of Charles Fierer (163), as a result of the publisher's financial difficulties and declining health; but it had then only been four months since the dispersal of Fierer's estate in January 1795; in that administrator's sale, Fierer's press and tools were purchased by an influential Prince William County leader, Col. Willoughby Tebbs; a veteran of the Revolutionary war, Tebbs was a determined advocate for commercial development, particularly given the mercantile potential of the county's proximity to the Potomac. Hence it seems that he acquired the orphaned press intending to engage a printer to produce a new mercantile advertiser in Dumfries; four months later, Kempe's journal made its appearance there, printed on Fierer's old press. Still, Kempe's association with the venture was apparently limited to a one-year contract, for exactly one year later, he transferred his interest in the *Republican Journal* to Dr. Thomas Thornton, only son of a well-respected and like-named Episcopal clergyman, who had bought into the weekly the preceding November. Thornton's involvement brought a more insistently Republican tone to the paper, as well as an infusion of capital to sustain what appears to have been a marginal enterprise, as the few of surviving copies suggests. It may have been that Kempe remained in the office operating the press, as Thornton was not a trained printer, and he is not recorded independently in any extant county documents until 1798; but after March 1796, Kempe's name no longer appeared on the masthead. Thornton struggled to keep the *Republican Journal* going until November of that year, when he finally gave up the effort and closed the weekly permanently. Dumfries would not again host a newspaper until after World War II.

It also appears that Kempe never again worked in the printing trade again. In 1798, he was recorded as conducting a retail business in New Market, some twenty miles from Dumfries, near the site of the Civil-War-era Manassas battlefield. He also began speculating in land within the county, amassing substantial holdings in the following decade. As a result, he was appointed to a series of county-government committees, culminating in his being named in

1805 as the Overseer of Roads in the county. That role brought him an assignment in 1808 as a commissioner of the Fauquier & Alexandria Turnpike Company, then building east-west roads in the county to connect with existing north-south ones. But by early 1809, Kempe had turned his attention away from Virginia, selling off his Prince William properties to finance a relocation to the Mississippi Territory. The urgency of that planned move became more crucial in October 1809, when he killed a Prince William county-court justice in a duel on the nearby Maryland shore; Federalist Bernard Hooe, Jr. had impulsively challenged the Republican Kempe and paid the price for his rashness; but Hooe's family sought a murder indictment against him; none was issued when Kempe left the county shortly after the duel.

Kempe settled on a farm near Natchez and began acquiring more land in the neighborhood; when he died in 1819, he had large plantations in both Adams County, Mississippi, and Concordia Parish, Louisiana, just opposite Natchez. He had also acquired considerable social prestige, having served with the Mississippi Dragoons during the War of 1812, and so saw action in Andrew Jackson's Indian campaign of 1813-14 and his defense of New Orleans in 1814-15. After the war, Kempe was promoted to the command of the Mississippi Cavalry as its Colonel. He still held that post when he died at his Natchez home in September 1819.

Yet Kempe made a more noteworthy contribution after his passing. In 1823, his daughter, Margaret Louisa (1806-67), married William Burr Howell (1797-1863), son of New Jersey's third governor, Thomas Howell (1754-1802), and a major Mississippi plantation owner; then in 1845, their daughter, Varina Banks Howell (1826-1906), married Jefferson Davis (1808-89), soon-to-be a U.S. senator, Secretary of War, and later President of the Confederacy. With the end of the Civil War, she took their four surviving children into exile in Canada, dying there in 1867, during Davis's post-war imprisonment.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1775 Castlefin, County Donegal, Ireland.
Married: August 1801 Margaret McAlester Bird @ Prince William, Va.
Died: Sept. 19 1819 Natchez. Adams County, Mississippi.
Children: Thomas Beckett (b. 1800); Jane Boleyn (b. 1802); Frances Elizabeth (b. 1804); Margaret Louisa (b. 1806); James Jr. (1808-15).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Library of Congress Newspaper Index; Kempe Biography in *VA Genealogist* (1977); Lercher, "Printer Soldier of Fortune" (1936); genealogical data from Howell and Davis family charts posted on Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com (November 2012)..