

**258 LAIDLEY, JOHN O. – [JOHN OSBORNE LAIDLEY]**

**Printer & Publisher**

**Morgantown**

Publisher of *The Monongalia Gazette and Morgantown Advertiser* (1810) as successor to its founder, Joseph Campbell (078).

Laidley had only a brief career in Virginia's printing trade, making a larger mark as a lawyer and legislator in far northwestern Virginia. Born in 1791 in Morgantown, Laidley was a son of a local merchant, Thomas Laidley, an Irish émigré and Revolutionary War veteran who had moved to Monongalia County from Philadelphia in 1783. The father had served in the General Assembly as a Federalist delegate, but lost his seat in 1799 after voting against the Virginia Resolution. Returning to Morgantown, he built a sizeable fortune in retail and land speculation, awaiting an opportune time to resume to his political career. In 1810, a chance for him to shape public opinion to that end emerged in the *Monongalia Gazette*.

The *Gazette* was begun in January 1804 by Joseph Campbell and Forbes Britton (053), two Philadelphia printers who had been induced to remove to Morgantown to start a mercantile advertiser in the Monongahela Valley, perhaps with the support of Thomas Laidley. The venture was apparently profitable for a time, despite Britton's departure for Clarksburg in early 1806. But by the spring of 1810, it appears that Campbell faced a combination of problems: the *Gazette* seems to have been losing money as subscriptions went unpaid in this cash-starved region; the growth of Pittsburgh drew job-printing away from his press; and new non-printing opportunities were available to him in the growing town. He found that there was a potential buyer for his office in the Laidley family. So in about March 1810, he sold the business and left the printing-trade forever. John Osborne Laidley was the titular buyer, although his father was clearly behind the purchase. Young Laidley had learned the trade in the *Gazette* office in the years after 1804, possibly right from its start, and was now sufficiently competent to take on the *Gazette*. But by August 1810, however, they had come to understand the dire financial condition of the venture and so cut their losses, closing the town's first newspaper. Accordingly, father Thomas never served in public office again.

Young John left for Parkersburg in Wood County to study law with his brother, James Grant Laidley – once a juror in the Aaron Burr trial in 1807 – so starting a long and distinguished legal career. He was licensed the following year and admitted to the Virginia bar in 1813. But his studies in were interrupted by the War of 1812; he travelled to Norfolk and served as a volunteer in the Virginia Artillery there until late 1814. On his return to the west, he settled in Barboursville in Cabell County to practice law there. Laidley was quickly appointed the prosecuting attorney of the county and held that position for the remainder of his life, even after it became a popularly-elected office in 1832. Eventually, he built a large estate on the Guyandotte River near Huntington which he called Lamartine. In 1829, Laidley was elected to the Constitutional Convention that met that winter, and then served in the Assembly for several terms thereafter, easily exceeding his father's prior service.

Yet Laidley was "a warm Democrat," not a Federalist, nor was he a secessionist in 1861. He was also a conspicuous member of the community: a staunch Episcopalian and a founder of Marshall College (now University). Laidley also had a long-lasting effect on the practice of

law in western Virginia, bringing several sons, nephews, and son-in-laws into the legal realm, a few of whom were major figures in creating the new state of West Virginia in 1864. But Laidley did not live to see that social contribution; he died of pneumonia at Lamartine in September 1863.

***Personal Data***

Born: Apr 28 1791 Morgantown, Monongalia County, VA/WV  
Married: ca. 1816 Mary Scales Hite @ Morgantown, VA/WV  
Died: Apr 14 1863 Huntington, Cabell County, VA/WV  
Children: Amacetta (b. 1818); Mary Louise (b. 1820); Theodore Thaddeus Sobieski (b. 1822); Albert (b. 1824); Thomas Mortimer (b. 1826); Alexander Ulysses (b. 1828); Sarah Ellen (b. 1830); John Hite (b. 1832); Eliza Matilda (b. 1834); James Henry (b. 1837); William Sydney (b. 1839); George Summers (b. 1841); Helen Medora (b. 1843); Leander (b.1846).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Callahan, *Morgantown; Prominent Families of Virginia*; Special Collections Authority Record, Clements Library, University of Michigan; Laidley, *History of Charleston and Kanawha County*; genealogical data from Kanawha County Family Tree Project hosted by Ancestry.com (August 2012).