

### 373 SEATON, WILLIAM WINSTON

Editor

Richmond, Petersburg

Editor and essayist for the Richmond *Enquirer* (1804-06) of Thomas Ritchie (360) and the Petersburg *Republican* (1806-07) of Edward Pescud (324); later joint-editor of the *National Intelligencer* (1812-64) in Washington as part of the firm of Gales & Seaton.

Seaton was a formidable editorial presence in American journalism for fifty years, who was trained for that role through his work on Jeffersonian journals in Richmond and Petersburg.

#### Virginia

Born in 1785 at the familial estate of Chelsea in King Williams County, Seaton was fourth child and third son of Augustine Seaton (1737-94) and Mary Winston, who both descended from some of Virginia's earliest English settlers, including Thomas West, Baron De La Warr [Delaware]. A family history reports that Seaton received his initial schooling through a "domestic tutor" before continuing his education under "Professor Ogilvie" [James Ogilvie] at Richmond. However, that same history notes that he "passed into the arena of public life, entering with manly earnestness upon the career of political journalism" at the young age of eighteen, thus in 1803, the year that Ogilvie relocated to the state capital from the Rappahannock River valley; so it is more likely that he studied with Ogilvie in Tappahannock about 1799-1800, when the professor conducted a school there in conjunction with Thomas Ritchie; Ritchie continued that school until 1803 after Ogilvie relocated to Stevensburg in Culpeper County. Moreover, Ritchie published Seaton's first essays when the former schoolmaster began issuing his Richmond *Enquirer* in 1804, suggesting that a standing familiarity between the two gave Ritchie a known and reliable contributor for his new partisan journal; as a result, the two editors remained life-long friends. Also in his Richmond days, Seaton clearly forged a close tie to the bookseller William H. Fitzwhylsonn (165), as his first son was named after that noted Welshman.

Seaton's association with Ritchie placed him in the heart of the Republican leadership in Virginia, so broadening his horizons. In early 1806, he was persuaded to remove south to Petersburg and become editor of the *Republican* there, conducted then by the York County native Edward Pescud. As Pescud was a printer by trade, he engaged a series of editors over his long proprietorship of the journal (1805-31), and Seaton was the second he employed, succeeding Col. Charles Yancey, one of that neighborhood's leading Republicans, as well as a friend and business associate of Jefferson. The family history described Yancey as

"one of the most discerning men of the day, [who] predicted a glorious future for young Seaton, advising him to strike for that fame he so nobly won and carried with him to an honored grave."

It was advice that the young editor soon followed.

#### North Carolina

After just a year in Petersburg, Seaton relocated south again, this time to Halifax, North

Carolina, where he became a journal owner for the first time, taking up the moribund *North Carolina Journal* in that former state capital. His move was instigated by Joseph Gales, Sr. (1761-1841), the well-known Jeffersonian publisher, then that state's public printer and the proprietor of the semi-official *Raleigh Register* in the new state capital. Gales came by his Republicanism in Britain where he was born and trained; but the suppression of "radical" political writers and publishers in the 1790s compelled his emigration to America, landing him in Philadelphia in 1793. His publishing work there brought him an invitation to remove to North Carolina at the behest of Nathaniel Macon; Gales set up shop in Raleigh in 1799, where he launched the *Register* and became a mentor to a new generation of Republican journalists, like Seaton. Gales spent much of 1806 recruiting Seaton for the task in Halifax, having met the young writer during his visit to relatives there the preceding winter. The editor's choice to agree to those entreaties altered the course of his life and career: he would marry Gales' daughter Sarah in 1809, and he would forge a life-long partnership with Gales' son Joseph Jr. (1786-1860) in 1812.

With Seaton's impending marriage to his daughter, Gales offered his son-in-law an interest in his Raleigh office, so forging the first Gales & Seaton partnership; Seaton sold his *North Carolina Journal* in October 1808 and removed to Raleigh. His association with the senior Gales continued until 1812, when he joined the junior Gales in Washington. Joseph Jr. had been dispatched to Philadelphia by his father to sharpen his trade skills under the tutelage of William Young Birch (1764-1837), a friend and colleague from his early days in America. Once that training was complete in 1807, the elder Gales offered the services of his son to another Philadelphia associate, Samuel Harrison Smith (1772-1845); Smith had moved his *Universal Gazette* – in which Gales held an interest – to the District of Columbia in 1800; in short order, that newspaper became a weekly ancillary to his new *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*; in early 1801, the new Jefferson administration chose to employ the *Intelligencer* as its official journal. By 1807, Smith was in need of reliable editorial aid, especially in recording and publishing the debates of Congress, and the younger Gales was the solution to his problems. His success in fulfilling that role induced Smith to yield control of the *Intelligencer* to young Gales in 1810. In October 1812, Gales decided to convert his thrice-weekly journal into a daily paper, and so brought Seaton to Washington, creating the second Gales & Seaton partnership; Seaton moved his young family north while the elder Gales resumed sole ownership of the *Raleigh Register*, which remained in family hands for two ensuing generations.

### **Washington**

The Gales & Seaton office promptly became the center of Washington's political press and continued in the role until the 1830s, when it became more of a local journal of record than a partisan periodical. A later account of their alliance noted that their paper had "ever held on its calm way, never deserting the public cause – as little extreme in its opposition as in its support of those in power." That account also shows that the proprietors worked cohesively from the start, reflecting their fraternal connection and the influence of the senior Gales in their approach to conducting the *National Intelligencer*:

"Raleigh, in this instance, gave to Washington a brace of editors trained in the office

of the Raleigh Register, who, during half a century, published a paper that for ability, fairness, courtesy, dignity, purity, and elegance of style, obtained a reputation equalled by few Gazettes in any part of the world."

In the years of the partners' conduct of the *Intelligencer*, the paper evolved from a strongly Madisonian perspective to a decidedly Whiggish one, largely as a result of the influence and actions of Andrew Jackson. With the start of the Adams administration in 1825, their daily ceased to be the voice of the incumbent administration, and so found its patronage from readers seeking a dispassionate recitation of the doings and directives emanating from the national capital, enhanced by their longer role as printers to the Congress – a function that resulted in the vast majority of the nearly 9000 imprints issued from their office.

Through those imprints, Gales & Seaton have had a lasting effect on modern scholarship about politics and government in early-Republic and antebellum America, providing many of the sources for such studies. Two particular series of government documents that they produced remain relevant. Firstly, the journalistic reports of the deliberations of Congress that appeared in their daily gave Gales & Seaton the ability to offer a collection of those debates; from the start, each partner took responsibility for reporting on the debate in one of the two Congressional chambers: Gales in the Senate and Seaton in the House; in 1824, they began issuing their annual *Register of Debates in Congress* (1824-38), drawn from both the notes they compiled and the documents they published. Secondly, they were engaged in 1831 to publish a collection of official documents dating from the start of the federal government in 1789; the *American State Papers* series eventually comprised thirty-eight volumes – twenty-one volumes between 1832 and 1834, and a further seventeen volumes between 1858 and 1861 – covering ten areas of the government's activities in topical subsets. Both collections have long drawn praise for their reliability and accessibility, though there are omissions in each that incited criticisms from specific officials, both elective and appointive, at the time of their publication. Still, the work was monumental, ensuring Gales & Seaton an unprecedented place in the history of American publishing.

Over their years in the national capital, both partners were willing to engage in practical politics within the city of Washington, but only out of popular demand rather than out of personal advancement. Both Gales and Seaton would serve as mayor of the city, as did other print-tradesmen there, such as Daniel Rapine, Roger C. Weightman, and Peter Force; Gales served three one-year terms between 1827 and 1830, but Seaton set the mark for longevity in office in antebellum Washington by serving ten terms from 1840 to 1850, after having previously declined the post in 1820 and 1834. He declined a new term in 1850 as a result of his advancing age. Indeed, the years thereafter saw a gradual withdrawal of both partners from the everyday conduct of their business, with both men now in their sixties.

The alliance of Gales & Seaton ended abruptly in August 1860 on the death of Joseph Gales. Seaton continued their paper with the aid of James C. Welling, their managing editor for the preceding decade. But in the midst of the ensuing Civil War, the pair could not sustain the effort, as the semi-official nature of the journal did not suit the changing tastes and times; so Seaton sold his venerable *National Intelligencer* on the final day of 1864, to new owners who tried unsuccessfully to make the paper into a modern metropolitan daily (it closed in

1869). A year before, Seaton had lost his wife of fifty-four years and was now in the throes of a losing battle with cancer. After the sale, Seaton was showered with tributes for the conduct of his lengthy editorial career, praise that daughter Josephine said constituted

"the verdict of posterity [which] came to him, as it were, while he yet could rejoice in this approval of his labors, while his living ear could catch the voices which rose in unison of benediction."

Seaton died surrounded by friends and family in his Washington home in June 1866 and was buried with considerable ceremony in the Congressional Cemetery.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Jan. 11 1785 King William County, Virginia.  
Married: Mar. 30 1809 Sarah Weston Gales @ Raleigh, North Carolina.  
Died: June 15 1866 Washington, District of Columbia.  
Children: Augustine Fitzwhylsonn (b. 1810); Julia (b. 1812); Altona (b. 1814); Gales (b. 1817); William Henry (b. 1819); Ann Eliza (b. 1821); Josephine (b. 1822); Caroline (b. 1824); Virginia (b. 1825); Malcolm (b. 1829); and Arthur (b. 1831).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Gregory; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; J. Seaton, *Biographical Sketch*; Ames, *National Intelligencer*; *Atlantic Monthly* (Oct. 1860).