

**437 WESTCOTT, JAMES D. – [JAMES DIAMENT WESTCOTT, SR.]**

**Printer, Publisher**

**Alexandria**

Publisher of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* (1797-99) with John V. Thomas (410); *The Times and District of Columbia Daily Advertiser* (1799-1802) with John Westcott Sr. (438), his father; and *The Columbian Advertiser* (1802) alone; later partner to James Lyon (274) in Georgetown and Richard Dinmore (139) in Washington; brother of John Westcott Jr. (439).

Westcott was a Philadelphia-trained journeyman who became the owner of Alexandria's first daily newspaper, a Jeffersonian journal. Thereafter, he was part of partisan publishing efforts in nearby Georgetown and Washington, before returning to New Jersey where he grew into a Jacksonian political figure in his native state.

**Origins**

Born in January 1775, Westcott was the latter of twin brothers who were the sons of John Westcott Sr. (d. 1813) and Sarah Diament (d. 1809), and who was named for his maternal grandfather. At the time, his father was conducting a school in Bridgeton, New Jersey, site of the first bridge over the Cohansey River in Cumberland County, off Delaware Bay; he was a third generation scion of an English family that settled the county, and which then owned large tracts of land along the Cohansey in Cedarville, Fairfield, and Bridgeton – and his son would reside in all three locales during his life. But with the outbreak of hostilities in 1776, the father joined the West Jersey Artillery regiment, rising to captain in 1777; he served in the battles of Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth, purportedly carrying the colors on board the boat carrying George Washington across the Delaware to Trenton – and was so memorialized in a painting (later destroyed) in the New Jersey state capitol building. After the war, he moved his young family to Philadelphia and was soon engaged in the card-making business – combing cards for the textile fiber stranding process that antedated the modern cotton gin – with one Andrew Adgate (d. 1793); Adgate was also compiler of the *Philadelphia Harmony* and the pair sold copies of that work in their store. That publication apparently led to his twin sons' training as printers in an unnamed Philadelphia press office, after having graduated from the University of Pennsylvania.

As a result of that training, young Westcott came to know Alexander McKenzie (1773-1822), also a bookseller there. When his father's business folded in 1794, the family returned to its Bridgeton roots; Westcott convinced McKenzie to join him there as the senior partner in a printing, bookselling, and stationery concern McKenzie & Westcott. In October 1795, the pair issued the first newspaper published in Cumberland County: *The Argus and New-Jersey Centinel*. While intended as a weekly mercantile advertiser, the *Argus* could not avoid the partisan polarization of the day. In mid-1796, as the presidential contest between Adams and Jefferson heated up, Dr. Jonathan Elmer (1745-1817) – formerly a U.S. Senator from Bridgeton and then a strong Adams supporter – gave Westcott an essay for publication in the *Argus*; the printer evidently ran Elmer's piece, but then he drafted a reply, published subsequently, that drew Elmer's ire. Local histories report that the retort "was so offensive to the doctor and his friends that they withdrew their patronage, and the paper failed."

The bibliographic record, however, shows that Westcott's arrangement with McKenzie expired on October 1, 1796, and McKenzie declined to renew it. His refusal was likely tied to the dispute between Elmer and Westcott, being an outsider dependent on local patronage, but a direct link is unproven; still, as a political war continued between the two Bridgeton families over the ensuing forty years, this affair may have been the point of origin.

Some sources suggest that the *Argus* continued under the direction of Westcott's brother, John Jr., until 1806; but the last known number was issued by McKenzie five weeks after parting from Westcott; rather, the imprint record indicates that John Jr. became an itinerant journeyman who joined James on occasion in his venues to the south, though returning to Bridgeton in about 1804 to conduct *The Minerva*, another short-lived weekly. The printer-editor, however, now had a new family to support, having married Amie Harris Hampton (1776-1849) in January 1796. So the well-recognized Jeffersonian began searching for a new publishing partner in a friendlier location.

### **Alexandria**

In the winter of 1796-97, Westcott found such in Alexandria, Virginia. John V. Thomas was a bookseller there, and was then considering a new print-trade project – a daily mercantile advertiser – at just the moment Westcott came calling. The thrice-weekly *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* of Ellis Price (342) and Henry Gird, Jr. (181) was then the only paper issued in the port town; that four-year-old journal was evidently failing to meet demand from local merchants for advertising space, despite the owners' overt commitment to such in their paper's title. Thomas and Westcott set out to rectify that problem with a second paper, so providing a needed and potentially profitable service with a political perspective differing from the mildly-Federalist *Mirror*.

By March 1797, the pair had set up a printing office adjacent to Thomas's bookstore and bindery, and advertised their intention to publish *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* as soon as a sufficient number of subscribers could be obtained. That their new daily appeared just five weeks later, on April 10th, indicates how readily they found such support, as well as the extent of pent-up demand for advertising among merchants there. In their introductory address, the firm of Thomas & Westcott suggested that it was "unnecessary" to explain the utility of a daily paper in such a mercantile locale, as the "peculiar advantages" that such a journal possessed were "sufficiently obvious." Rather, they wanted their readers to know of their commitment to the "early circulation of news, particularly commercial information" that the *Columbian Mirror* was unable to provide. In anticipation of modern journalistic practices, they promised that *The Times* would, in summer, "be served to the subscribers at an early hour in the morning, and contain the matter brought by the Northern and Southern posts of the preceding evening."

The new daily evidently achieved quick success, as the competing *Columbian Mirror* soon experienced financial difficulties. In February 1798, Price sold his interest to his partner Gird, a Dublin-trained printer, in order to reorganize his finances; Gird further undermined the paper's stability by opening the *Mirror's* pages to an intensifying antislavery campaign pressed by local Quakers like Samuel Janney; Price was pressured by his friends to reacquire

the *Mirror* from Gird in December 1799 so as to quiet the uproar. But Price still was not financially solvent and taking on the *Mirror's* indebtedness again forced that issue; he sold the paper once more in September 1800 in an effort to satisfy his creditors. The new owner, William Fowler (173), quickly discovered how poor the fiscal health of the *Mirror* was and so closed the newspaper at the end of 1800, selling its assets to the new Federalist-oriented concern of Samuel Snowden (393) and Matthew Brown (057), who were about to issue a new daily, the *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, in a challenge to the Jeffersonian-influenced *Times* of Thomas & Westcott.

By that time, however, *The Times* was published without the backing of Thomas; he had apparently committed to a two-year partnership with Westcott in April 1797, and so in April 1799, just as the tumult over the Alien & Sedition Acts grew, he left the newspaper business entirely, selling his interest to John Westcott Sr., who seems to have relocated from New Jersey in anticipation of the dissolution of Thomas & Westcott. Once in the family's hands, the daily became a more controversial journal, leading to a knife attack on the younger Westcott in an Alexandria street by a Federalist sympathizer in May 1799, and a subsequent armed invasion of his home by the attacker's friends who threatened his wife and family.

That attempt at intimidation apparently made Westcott more determined to challenge the Federalist administration of John Adams. In 1800, father and son joined an effort organized by the leaders of Virginia's Republican party to create a network of papers in the state in support of the presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson; that August, Westcott issued a proposal jointly with James Lyon, manager of that effort, to publish a nationally circulated edition of Lyon's new Georgetown weekly as *The National Cabinet*. Yet that venture was abandoned when Lyon scaled back his plans, having discovered that his *Cabinet* would not be the official voice for the incoming administration. Still, it seems that Westcott remained a key part of Lyon's network in the capital, particularly in his subsequent association with Richard Dinmore, a Washington bookseller who became Lyon's partner in early 1801.

Thus, at least for the short term, Westcott remained an independent entity, conducting his daily newspaper in Alexandria in partnership with his father, and with the occasional trade assistance of his brother. He even solicited the public-printing concession of the Executive branch from Jefferson himself in March 1801, a futile gesture given Lyon's disappointment earlier. But in the spring of 1802, his situation began to deteriorate. First, he was obliged to acquire his father's interest in *The Times*, when the aging patriarch chose to retire from the unceasing grind of a daily paper to focus on bookselling alone. Their partnership ended on May 1st, and Westcott found almost immediately that he could not sustain the effort either financially or physically. So at the end of July 1802, he transformed his daily into a thrice-weekly one entitled *The Columbian Advertiser and Commercial, Mechanic, and Agricultural Gazette*; yet he also noted that as a daily paper was essential in the port town, he stood ready to resume his former pace "whenever the state of affairs may render the measure necessary and expedient." The presence of a competing Federalist daily, the *Alexandria Advertiser* of Samuel Snowden, with its natural appeal for the port's merchant class, and the depletion of his resources in the buy-out of his father, meant that the publisher now faced financial collapse in the fall of 1802.

Westcott turned to Lyon for help. His journalistic ventures had all come to an end earlier in that year and the fiery editor wanted to acquire a solidly Republican journal as a way back into prominence as a partisan journalist; Lyon convinced Richard Dinmore, his partner in many of his recent ventures, that they should buy Westcott's newspaper. So on November 24th, Westcott ended his five-year association with the Alexandria journal he had founded. It was clear that the partisan warfare had taken its toll on him, as he began his valedictory address to his readers with a description of his travails in those years:

"In discharging the duties of editor of a newspaper, during a time when the fury of party prompted the friends of the late administration to acts of illiberality, insurrection, and unwarrantable resentment, I had too frequent occasion to regret the effects of the sad system of federal proscription and intolerance which prevailed."

But in transferring ownership to the new firm of Lyon & Dinmore, Westcott suggested that his successors would continue to serve the cause of democracy, as he had. On November 26th, their new *Alexandria Expositor and Columbian Advertiser* issued its first number, with the rest of Lyon's publishing enterprises moving across the Potomac from Georgetown.

### **In the District**

Over the next five years, it appears that Westcott engaged in a series of differing roles. Initially, it seems that he assisted Lyon & Dinmore in publishing their daily paper and literary monthly, so enabling the travels of Lyon as a confidential messenger for the administration. It also seems that Westcott was a clerk in the State Department in 1803, as a letter he sent to Dinmore that July was the first report of the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in an American paper. That fall, a son was born in Georgetown, indicating his continued presence there; but his next child was born in Cedarville, New Jersey, in June 1805, showing he had returned to Cumberland County in the interval; indeed that fall, he campaigned for election to the state's General Assembly for the first time, narrowly losing to two other Republican candidates. It also appears that Westcott joined with his brother John Jr. in May 1804 when he began another paper there – *The Apollo & Bridgetown Weekly Miscellany*, though often called *The Minerva* in local histories – in a reversal of their Alexandria roles; that paper lasted only until the end of 1804.

Still, Washington had its appeal for Westcott. He opened a new job-printing office there in April 1807 and shortly thereafter issued the definitive three-volume transcript of the trial of Vice President Aaron Burr for treason that spring. In June 1807, Richard Dinmore relocated his *Expositor* office from Alexandria to Washington proper and merged his concern with that of Westcott, forming the firm of Westcott & Dinmore. That Dinmore was more than simply a business partner for Westcott can best be seen in the birth of his fifth son in 1808, named Richard Dinmore Westcott. With such a reliable friend in Washington, Westcott could pursue business interests both in the District and in New Jersey, travelling often between the two locales. Dinmore retired from active business in 1810, just when Westcott acquired large parts of Jones Island in Cumberland County, while his Washington printing office apparently continued in operation. When Dinmore died in 1811, supervision of that press fell to John Westcott Sr., who was still selling books in Alexandria.

It was not until the father's death in 1813, that Westcott finally cut his ties to Washington. He convinced the Alexandria bookseller Robert Gray (190), a frequent collaborator in his late father's business, to administer the patriarch's estate; at the same time, he formed what appears to be a short-term partnership with a journeyman printer named Lindsley to complete the outstanding commitments of his press, as Westcott & Lindsley. When both situations were settled in 1816, Westcott found little need to leave New Jersey again.

### **Politician and Patrician**

The rest of Westcott's life was spent in the acquisition and exercise of political power in New Jersey, opposing the Federalist/Whig elite there, as exemplified by the Elmer family. From 1815 onward, he held at least one position of authority in New Jersey, either in the service of the state or federal governments. He was elected to the state's General Assembly that year, though the Federalists in that body blocked an attempt to make him secretary of state as well. That service was interrupted in the fall of 1817, when he declined to run for reelection following the deaths of his five-year-old son and four-year-old daughter within days of each other. But that deferral brought an appointment as the federal collector of the port of Bridgton, replacing Ebenezer Elmer (1752-1843), brother of his foe in 1796.

Westcott held that post until 1822, when he was dismissed for not submitting his accounts in a timely fashion, a result, he claimed, of the press of other business. Such a claim may not have been untrue, as he was now a justice of the peace for Cumberland County and a judge for the Court of Common Pleas, positions he held until 1829; he also served on the state's Legislative Council – the check on the popularly-elected legislature – in 1820 and 1821. But the pinnacle of his public career came in October 1829 when the newly-elected Jacksonian governor and legislature selected him to be the Secretary of State of New Jersey.

His tenure in that office was largely uncontroversial until the rise of the Whig party there. In 1838, the results of an election for one of New Jersey's congressional representatives were contested when Congress met that fall; in early 1839, after a long investigation, the Whig-dominated committee conducting the review declared that Westcott's certification of the election was politically motivated, and not a true report of the election result; they claimed Westcott had refused to accept the election of a Whig to that seat, and so had falsified the required certification. Westcott now became a lightning rod for New Jersey's Whigs, and so when that party finally gained control of the legislature and state house in late 1840, they summarily ousted Westcott and replaced him with an ally of the Elmer family.

Westcott appears to have been broken by the contest; he remained in Trenton after his removal, rather than return to Cumberland County, and quickly went into a physical decline; he died almost exactly four months later. Yet his political influence survived him.

His oldest surviving son, James Diament Westcott, Jr., a lawyer by training, was named the secretary of the Florida Territory by Andrew Jackson in 1829 and became a major early political figure there; he served in the territorial legislature and the state's constitutional convention before being elected as one of Florida's original U.S. Senators in 1844; an ardent states' rights advocate, he attended the commercial conventions of the 1850s; after the war, he fled to Canada in exile after being accused of aiding the escape of persons wanted

in the Lincoln assassination and died there in 1880, unrepentant. When Westcott Jr. went to Florida, he evidently brought his brothers Richard and John with him, who were soon followed by their uncle John Jr.; those three Westcotts were all trained printers and when Florida was admitted to the Union, they were jointly appointed as the state's first public printers, achieving a position their father had sought but never received.

***Personal Data***

Born: Jan. 26 1775 Bridgeton, New Jersey.  
Married: Jan. 1 1796 Amie Harris Hampton @ Cedarville, New Jersey.  
Died: Mar. 2 1841 Trenton, New Jersey.  
Children: Marie Adgate (b. 1796); James Diament\* (b. 1798); Sarah Diament\* (b. 1800); James Diament Jr. (b. 1802); Hampton (b. 1803); William (b. 1805); John (b. 1807); Richard Dinmore (b. 1808); Gideon Granger (b. 1809); George Clinton\* (b. 1812); Margaret Hampton\* (b. 1813); Emma (b. 1816); George Clinton (b. 1818); Bayse Newcomb (b. 1820); Isaac Hampton\* (b. 1822).  
\*died in childhood.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Nelson, *New Jersey Printers*; Cushing, *History of ... Cumberland, New Jersey*; Craig, *Cumberland County Genealogical Data*; election results from *A New Nation Votes* website (elections.lib.tufts.edu). *Biographical Directory of Congress*; genealogical data from various family histories posted on Ancestry.com and USGenWeb.com (May 2013), all from a Westcott family Bible in hands of James Jr.'s descendants.