

## 438 WESTCOTT, JOHN SR.

**Publisher, Bookseller**

**Alexandria**

Publisher of *The Times and District of Columbia Daily Advertiser* (1799-1802) with James D. Westcott (437), his son; also father of John Westcott Jr. (439).

Westcott was a New Jersey merchant who became part of the Virginia print trade through a partnership with his son in publishing an Alexandria newspaper. When that arrangement ended, he remained in the port town as a bookselling stationer for another decade while assisting in that son's subsequent ventures in nearby Georgetown and Washington.

The father of two journeyman printers, Westcott was born in Cumberland County, New Jersey, in about 1741; he was the eldest son of David Westcott (1715-72) and Rachel Dare (1719-57), both descendants of the earliest English settlers of the county's Cohansey River valley, off Delaware Bay. In 1765, he married Sarah Diamant, formerly of Philadelphia, so establishing connections there as well. Westcott's first appearance in historical accounts of the county date to 1773 when he was conducting a school in Bridgeton, the site of the first bridge built over the Cohansey in Cumberland.

### Early Days

When the Revolutionary War began in 1776. Westcott enlisted in an artillery company in the New Jersey Line organized in the western counties along the Delaware River. Under the command of Captain Samuel Hugg, Westcott was elected the company's first lieutenant and eventually rose to command as a successor to Hugg in 1777. This "Western Company of Artillery" served ably in the battles of Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth, before becoming a garrison unit in the war's later years. Westcott was long remembered as having carried the colors on board the boat that conveyed George Washington across the Delaware to Trenton, and so was memorialized in a painting of the event (later destroyed) in the New Jersey state capitol building.

After the British withdrawal from Philadelphia in 1778, Westcott relocated his young family to the national capital, near to his wife's family, as his service continued. Thus he began his post-war life there by engaging in the card-making business – combing cards for the textile fiber stranding process that antedated the cotton gin – with one Andrew Adgate (d. 1793). Adgate was also a noted singing-master and compiler of the popular *Philadelphia Harmony*; that publication apparently led to his sons' training as printers in an unnamed Philadelphia press office, with the pair selling large quantities of that work in their store.

Adgate died in 1793, leaving their manufacturing business in Westcott's hands alone; but within a year, the venture had failed and litigation over its debts and assets quickly ensued. Westcott took his family back to New Jersey in an apparent effort to escape the effects of a Pennsylvania debt execution, a common practice then. In returning to Bridgeton, Westcott turned to retailing, setting up a dry-goods store there. He may also have had a hand in the weekly mercantile advertiser started there by his son James in October 1795 – *The Argus and New-Jersey Centinel* – though such a link is speculative, based in subsequent events. It

is clear that Westcott continued in business in Bridgeton until the winter of 1798-99.

In the meantime, his son James had relocated to Alexandria, Virginia, where he established the first daily newspaper in that port town in a partnership with John V. Thomas (410), a successful bookseller. His Bridgeton paper had failed after his partner there, the bookseller Alexander McKenzie, declined to extend their arrangement after the printer had had an ill-fated exchange with a local Federalist leader, Dr. Jonathan Elmer. In Alexandria, James had found a more receptive audience for his Jeffersonian attitudes, and seems to have brought his brother John Jr. there to help produce his new *Times and Alexandria Advertiser*; but as the uproar over the Alien & Sedition Acts grew in early 1799, Thomas decided to withdraw from the venture as McKenzie had. But rather than let his *Times* die, as the *Argus* had, he convinced his father to join him in Alexandria, where he would both finance the operation and conduct an ancillary bookstore. The patriarch agreed to the plan and so left Bridgeton and his familial roots behind.

## Virginia

In April 1799, Thomas sold his interest *The Times* to the elder Westcott, creating the new company of J. & J. D. Westcott as its proprietors. Once in the Westcotts' hands, the daily became *The Times & District of Columbia Advertiser*, evincing a broader regional focus; it also adopted an ever more controversial attitude, 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 the pair 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, James issued a proposal jointly with James Lyon, manager of that effort, to publish a nationally circulated paper entitled *The National Cabinet* out of nearby Georgetown. Yet when that paper finally appeared in December, neither Westcott was identified as an owner or contributor; Lyon had scaled back his plans, after discovering that his *Cabinet* would not be the national voice for the incoming administration. Still, it appears that James remained a key part of Lyon's network in the capital city, particularly in his subsequent association with Richard Dinmore, a Washington bookseller who became Lyon's main partner in early 1801.

Yet the father was not a controversialist, despite his unhappy encounters with moneyed Federalists in his past. His credentials as a hero of the Revolution evidently gave him some insulation from the many published attacks on his son James – which only intensified after 1799, with the brutal 1800 presidential campaign and the 1801 introduction of a competing Federalist daily, the *Alexandria Advertiser*, of Samuel Snowden (393) and Matthew Brown (057). So in early 1802, the sixty-something Westcott decided to retire from the unceasing grind of the daily paper and focus on bookselling alone; he sold his interest in *The Times* to son James on May 1st, and stepped into the background.

Over the next dozen years, Westcott conducted a small but profitable bookstore that sold medicines and stationery as well; he also engaged in a few publishing projects with fellow

Alexandria bookseller Robert Gray (190). His son John Jr. returned to Bridgeton where he started his own short-lived newspaper in 1804 before embarking on a career as an itinerant journeyman. Meanwhile, son James split his time in those years between Washington and Cumberland, working with the Republican publishers James Lyon (274) in Georgetown and Richard Dinmore (139) in Washington through 1810, while acquiring farm land along the Cohansey in Cumberland after 1803. The patriarch acted as his agent in the District of Columbia whenever James was in New Jersey, so maintaining his links to the Republican presses there.

Westcott died in Alexandria in late 1813. His passing was evidently expected, as the county Orphans Court assigned Robert Gray to be his executor just five days later. Son James was then owner of a job-press in Washington while residing on a farm in Cumberland; his father had supervised that office, so James now needed to bring in a partner, a journeyman printer named Lindsley to complete the commitments of his press, as Westcott & Lindsley. When both situations were settled in 1816, the Westcott family finally severed its long-standing connections to Virginia and the District of Columbia.

#### ***Personal Data***

Born: ca. 1741 Cumberland County, New Jersey.  
Married: ca. 1765 Sarah Diament @ Cedarville, New Jersey.  
Died: Nov. 24 1813 Alexandria, Virginia.  
Children: Mary (b. 1767); Moses (b. 1770); and twin sons John Jr. (b. 1775) & James Diament (b. 1775).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; *Official Register of the Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Revolutionary War*; Nelson, *New Jersey Printers*; Cushing, *History of ... Cumberland, New Jersey*; Craig, *Cumberland County Genealogical Data*; 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 D. Jr.'s descendants.