

## 465 ASHLEY, JOHN

**Bookbinder**

**Richmond, Norfolk**

Bookbinder in Richmond (1819), in Norfolk (1820), and in the Ohio River Valley (1821-42).

John Clinton Ashley was the son and grandson of Baptist ministers, who eventually followed their call to Christian ministry as an early leader in the Restoration Movement founded by Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). Some nineteenth-century histories report that he was one of the eight founding members of Campbell's church at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1817 (which actually then failed after a two year existence), whereas contemporaneous accounts of the Campbellite church (formally known as the Disciples of Christ) make no such claim, describing him simply as a "pioneer preacher" in the movement from 1822 onward.

The church's narrative matches the sparse evidence of Ashley's life before his arrival in the Pittsburgh area in late 1820 or early 1821. Born in 1800 in Norfolk, he was the only son of Rev. Benjamin Ashley, a minister in the Portsmouth Baptist Association of Virginia; by 1819, he was working in Richmond as a journeyman bookbinder, indicating that he had completed his training by that date, evidently in either Norfolk or Richmond, despite late-nineteenth-century reports of his completing a Pittsburgh apprenticeship in 1817 and remaining there until 1826. Rather, his father died at his Norfolk residence in September 1820, showing that Ashley had returned to his birthplace from Richmond in support of his financially-challenged family, so plying his trade there then, as he would in all of his places of residence until 1842.

Following his father's death, Ashley removed to Pittsburgh, then a fast-growing gateway to the West, and established an independent bookbinding business there. The move brought him into contact with the Campbellite community in and around adjacent Bethany, Virginia (today West Virginia), of which he quickly became a part. The association also brought him a wife, Mary Ann Kirkpatrick (1800-61), whose parents were early supporters of Campbell's Restoration Movement. Their union produced eight children, with six surviving childhood.

The most prominent of the couple's off-spring was their first-born, James Mitchell Ashley. He was a long-serving Congressman, who represented the Toledo district in the 1850s and 1860s as a Radical Republican, before being named as governor of the newly-established Montana Territory by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869. He would later report that his turn away from the family's ministerial tradition was decided by the rigidly doctrinaire religious education he had received as a child – particularly through his father's intensive defense of Campbellite theology in the 1820s and 1830s – which led him to run away from home at age 16 to work on Ohio River steamboats; that choice resulted in a life-long estrangement from his father, and thus to the inaccurate biographical data concerning his parents presented in many nineteenth-century histories of the politician's life and work – including the frequent misreporting of his middle name as either Monroe or Mansfield.

His son's defection does not appear to have discouraged Ashley, however. He was devoted to the Campbellite mission for the rest of his life. In 1826, he moved his family and business to Portsmouth, Ohio, situated at the confluence of the Ohio and Scioto rivers, where he began establishing Campbellite churches in the adjacent counties on the northern bank of

the Ohio. As he found a dearth of customers for his services there, Ashley was compelled to diversify his business, most notably by entering into the manufacture of soap and candles in 1831, an addition which seems to have sustained his growing family through the 1830s. By 1842, though, his ministerial calling overcame his commercial pursuits; he took letters as an ordained minister of the Disciples of Christ and began riding an itinerant circuit in southeastern Ohio, leading him to finally abandon the bindery trade completely. In 1850, he was reassigned to a new circuit in southeastern Illinois, travelling the counties near the junction of the Wabash River with the Ohio from a home-base in Wayne County. It was while riding this circuit that Ashley fell ill and quickly died in August 1855. His place was soon filled by his second son, John Kossuth Ashley, a practicing physician who had trained at the Ohio State University; he continued his father's ministry, as well as the familial tradition, for the next fifty years.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: May 14 1800 Norfolk, Virginia  
Married: In 1821 Mary Ann Kirkpatrick @ Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
Died: August 1855 Walnut Hill, Marion County, Illinois  
Children: James Mitchell (1822-96); John Kossuth (1824-1905); Benjamin (1826-47); William Henry (1828-1907); Mary Jane (1831-49); Eli Melville (1833-1909); and two daughters who died in infancy.

Sources: Imprint (binder's label); MEDSA Index no. 921; Randall & Ryan, *History of Ohio*; Evan, *History of Scioto County*; *History of the Disciples of Christ in Illinois*; *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*. VI; Benjamin Ashley obituary in *American Beacon and Norfolk & Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 27, 1820.