

William Elliott

(- 30 Dec 1837)

The National Intelligencer, January 1, 1838

Suddenly, on the forenoon of Saturday last, Mr. William Elliott, Surveyor of the city of Washington, aged 64. Mr. E., though a native of England, was an old resident of this city -- was the founder of the Washington City Gazette in 1813, and, possessing considerable scientific attainments, was a useful as well as a kind-hearted citizen. He was one of the earliest and most zealous members of the Columbia Institute, and his remains were attended to the grave by that Society.

Will of William Elliot, of City of Washington, D.C. (dtd. Jan. 30, 1837, probated Jan. 26, 1838, Book 5, pp. 23-24; O.S. 2087; Box 14).

To sons Seth Alfred Elliot, and William P. Elliot, to be equally divided, all balance now due me from William P. Elliott, of the purchase money of my property sold to him for \$4,500 and lying on Capitol Hill, Washington; notes to the amount of \$2,000 being yet unpaid.

To the children of my son John B. Elliot, or to his son William, if no more there be, all my estate in fee in Schrewbury twp., Lycoming Co., Pa., with grist mill, saw mill, house, and about 2,000 acres to be held in trust by John B. Elliot until they are of age, if there be more than said William

To my two nieces Mary Fitch and Kessiah Tipping, each \$1000; all my linen, bedding and other household furniture to be equally divided between them

Should the school for the promotion of virtue and knowledge ever be established in Lycoming Co., Pa., I bequeath all my books on science and all my mathematical and astronomical instruments.

After all debts are paid, divided equally amongst three sons: Seth A., William P., and John B. Elliot, the remainder of real and personal estate.

Exr.: Edward T. Backhouse, of New York

Wits.: J.B. Anthony; John Gardiner; Anne Gardiner

Surname also found as "Elliott"

Stewart, John. "Early Maps & Surveyors of the City of Washington," Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. 2, pp. 66-67.

I desire to correct some imperfect statements lately appearing in public print, and for that reason I state, first, that a Mr. William Elliott, a civil engineer, emigrated from England in the year 1810 to the city of Washington, where he became known as a celebrated teacher of algebra and mathematics. He was appointed to a position in the Pension Office of the War Department, and being commissioned by the President of the United States to fix the longitude of the Capitol from Greenwich, England, on April 10, 1821, he resigned his position in the Pension Office on the 30th of that month.) He completed his instrumental Celestial observations for the longitude on February 21, 1822. (Its calculations were made by Wm. Lambert.) He built a frame house for a private observatory at the rear of his dwelling in March, 1824 (From his notes, in possession of his granddaughter, Miss E. Elliott, 216 North Capitol St.), and on April 2, 1824, he was engaged running a meridian line to the north of his observatory. He was appointed surveyor of the city of Washington in 1832, and continued in that office till his death in 1837.

The first United States Naval Observatory was brought into existence chiefly by the efforts of the said Mr. William Elliott. Lieut. L.M. Goldsborough, U.S.N., was the first officer who was placed in charge of that office in the Navy Department, in the year 1830. Lieut. Goldsborough was succeeded in that year

by Lieut. Wilkes, U.S.N., who obtained permission from the Naval Commissioners to remove the Observatory office to a small frame building on a high elevation that was located at the rear of Mr. William Elliott's residence, No. 222 North Capitol street, situated on the west side between B and C streets, and N. 5 degrees 0 minutes W., 1,200 feet (nearly) from the center of the Capitol, being the same observatory as was built by Mr. Ellicott in March, 1824.

Biography, Submitted by:

Ann Frances Gray Benson, daughter of Elizabeth Elliot Chase Gray,
Silver Spring, Maryland

William Elliot

Mathematician and Astronomer

William Elliot was born in 1773. He emigrated from England with his mother and brothers, Jonathan and Seth, and perhaps other siblings. (Seth is named as a brother by only one source. However, William named his firstborn Seth Alfred, so it is likely that the older Seth Elliot was kin.)

William appears in the New York City directories in 1802 through 1804. He then made New Jersey his home for a few years before returning to New York. Two sons were born in this period, Seth Alfred about 1804 and William Parker in 1807. There were two younger children, John and Emily.

It is through cemetery records that we learn that William's mother also emigrated with her sons. Congressional Cemetery recorded her burial on September 10, 1820 (32/21). Incidentally, the handwritten cemetery receipt for \$9.00 for "interring mother" has been handed down for 170 years and is still legible.

William had three wives of whom we know very little. The first was Sarah. Listed among the papers of William Thornton is an "obituary for Sarah Elliot," dated August 29, 1821. Sarah was the mother of William's four children.

On January 3, 1823, William and Elizabeth Little were married. Elizabeth was the daughter of Rev. Robert Little who was minister of the First Unitarian Church at 6th and D Streets N.W. from 1824 until his death in 1827. (William was named administrator of Rev. Little's estate.)

Within a year tragedy struck. Elizabeth died and was buried October 19, 1823. She was 28 years old. The cemetery record suggests the possibility that Elizabeth died following childbirth in that we find a son of William was buried on September 6, 1823, and another child of William was buried on November 15, 1823. Or Elizabeth and the children could have been victims of the cholera epidemic that moved into Washington in July of 1823.

Sophia M. Elliot was William's third wife. All we know of Sophia is that she died at age 43 and was buried December 19, 1833, preceding William in death by four years. B.J. Federico in his research found a letter written by William's son, William P. Elliot, on December 21, in which he refers to "a deep family affliction."

There is a Congressional Cemetery record listing "sister, age 30, William Elliot" interred June 18, 1821. This may or may not be our William Elliot.

In New York City, William published at least two city directories, 1811 and 1812 and patented his invention of an improved printing press. In 1813 we find Elliot has moved his family to Washington, making his home in the vicinity of the Capitol, at 222 No. Capitol Street. His house shared one wall with the double house George Washington had built in that block, making it in appearance a "triple house." A marker in the park to the North of the Capitol shows the location of George Washington's house.

In Washington, William formed a printing partnership with Daniel Rapine, the book-seller, and made plans to publish an evening newspaper to be called The Washington Gazette. George Waterson (later librarian of Congress) was the editor and Jonathan Elliot was the printer. The paper was published at least until the British invaded and burned Washington's public buildings in 1814. Sometime later

William's connection with the paper ends. Jonathan Elliot is the publisher and printer when it reappears as the Weekly Gazette.

William is described as well educated, a mathematician and astronomer. He built an observatory behind his house on Capitol Hill and made observations on which were based the calculations for the Washington meridian. He taught mathematics to military and naval students and took an active role in the Columbian Institute. There is also mention made that he taught Latrobe's children for a time.

Perhaps William's first contract with the Patent Office occurred when he made application to patent his printing press improvement. Dr. William Thornton had been head of the Patent Office since 1801. Years before (1792) Thornton had submitted the winning design for the Capitol Building and made his name and fortune as an architect. Thornton and Elliot were both British born and were familiar with the area of Carlisle, England. Elliot had lived in Carlisle for a number of years and Thornton, in his diaries, mentions visiting there. At any rate, Elliot began working in 1816 as Chief Clerk in the Patent Office under Dr. Thornton, an association that was to continue for 12 years, until Dr. Thornton's death. Elliot resigned in 1829 when the Jackson administration came into power.

Robert W. Fenwick, a contemporary of Elliot's at the Patent Office wrote: "Prior and up to the administration of General Jackson the entire business of this office was carried on by four persons, viz: Dr. William Thornton, William Elliot, William P. Elliot and Benjamin Fenwick." In those early days a pony was kept by the government for the messenger to ride when he carried patents to the Secretary of State for signature. John Quincy Adams was the Secretary of State during eight of the early years. The old Blodgett Hotel building on E street at 8th, N.W. was the Patent Office's first home. It was there in 1814 that Thornton successfully appealed to the British invaders to spare the building and its valuable models and records from the torch.

Elliot was evidently a close associate of George Hadfield, early Washington architect, best known for the Custis-Lee Mansion (Arlington House) and the City Hall in Judiciary Square. Hadfield also served as superintendent of construction for the Capitol, following Hallet in that position. It is thought that William's son, William P. studied architecture for a few years with Hadfield. In 1826 Hadfield died and was buried next to the Elliots (33/30) in Congressional Cemetery. William and his son were acquainted also with Alexander Jackson Davis and Ithiel Town, architects who visited frequently from New York.

One of Elliot's duties at the Patent Office was to order supplies and services for the running of the office. Many of the receipted bills were found in State Department records and among Adams Family Papers. Following are a few excerpts:

Postage for letter from ... (It seems the recipient had to pay the postage for a letter received.)	\$ 0.25
Carriage of John ...'s model from NYork	0.75
1 doz. red tape	2.00
Ax for office	2.00
Cartage of coal for Patent Office	4.44
Materials for making ink powder	2.50
Green bag and making, for Ben to carry letters, etc. for office	0.75
Four quarts of black sand	1.50
100 quills	4.00
1 pr. bellows	0.40

Following his years at the Patent Office, William served as City Surveyor from 1832 to 1835. His son, William P., followed him in this office and served as surveyor from 1836 to 1845.

Entries from the National Intelligencer concerning William Elliott indicate his involvement with the botanical garden, the Washington Library Company, publisher of a Washington Guide, being nominated for common council from 4th ward, and recording and submitting monthly weather reports.

William died December 30, 1837.

Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Volume 2, 1899, p. 66-67

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