

EDWARD WEST SILVERSMITH AND INVENTOR

BY MARGARET M. BRIDWELL

Kentucky, with the exception of a few scattered towns, was still practically a wilderness in 1785 when Edward West, a Virginian of diversified talents and ideas, braved its dangers with a group of other hardy pioneers.

The first *Census of Kentucky*, 1790, lists him as a landowner in Bourbon County and it is probable that he first settled there. Early records list seven land grants to Edward West:¹

FAYETTE COUNTY ENTRIES

ACRES	BOOK	PAGE	DATE OF ENTRY OR SURVEY	COUNTY	WATERCOURSE
2100	2	36	1-11-1783		Sandy

VIRGINIA GRANTS

200	11	6	4-11-1784	Lincoln	Dix River
2100	14	133	1- 4-1787	Bourbon	Big Sandy Cr.

OLD KENTUCKY GRANTS

415	7	78	11- 5-1795	Lincoln	Cumberland R.
1313	7	79	11- 5-1795	Lincoln	Cumberland R.
200	7	365	9-28-1791	Nelson	Mill Creek

GRANTS SOUTH OF GREEN RIVER

200	28	260	8-10-1799	Warren	Webb Grove Cr.
200	28	261	6-26-1806	Barren	none

Lexington, with a rapidly increasing number of newcomers, was Kentucky's most promising town and offered unusual business opportunities for craftsmen. So, it is not surprising that *The Kentucky Gazette* of August 9, 1788, carried West's announcement of the opening of a watch and clock shop in Lexington. As "Edward West, Junr." he later advertised for an apprentice to the "Gun and Silversmith business."² His shop

was located in 1788 on High Street. On February 10, 1795, he moved to Main Street, opposite the printing office of his friend, John Bradford, editor of *The Kentucky Gazette*.³ In 1799 his shop was again on High Street.⁴

The 1806 Directory of Lexington lists him as "Edward West, Silversmith." *The Kentucky Gazette*, July 8, 1806, reported that Edward West's shop had been robbed the night before of several silver watches.

West, like many of his fellow artisans, failed to mark his silverplate, clocks, watches, or guns with a distinguishing characteristic mark or device. Had he done so evidences of his skill as the maker of such would not be lacking. There are undoubtedly many pieces of his handiwork in Lexington and throughout Kentucky, unmarked and unrecognized. Mrs. Ellis Allen, of Louisville, a descendant, owns an unmarked silver candle snuffer and a tray attributed to West. Mr. Charles R. Staples, of Lexington, in a letter to me says that he "never saw a piece of silver by Edward West, but have heard he marked it 'E. West'. The only information I have is that he made spoons of various sizes and that his knives were usually silver handles with good steel blades."

In *The Kentucky Gazette* of December 11, 1799, Edward West notified the public that he had "Discovered an effectual cure for the Rheumatic Pains and Cramps, by means of Metallic Rings of a particular composition." He published testimonials of persons benefited by wearing the rings, the truth of which he swore to under oath. Rheumatism was one of the frontiersman's most dreaded maladies, and in those days when people, even learned doctors, were governed largely by superstition, I feel sure that Edward West was acting in good faith when he advertised his rings as a cure.

Samuel D. McCullough, one of West's contemporaries, in his "Reminiscences of Lexington,"⁵ said of him:

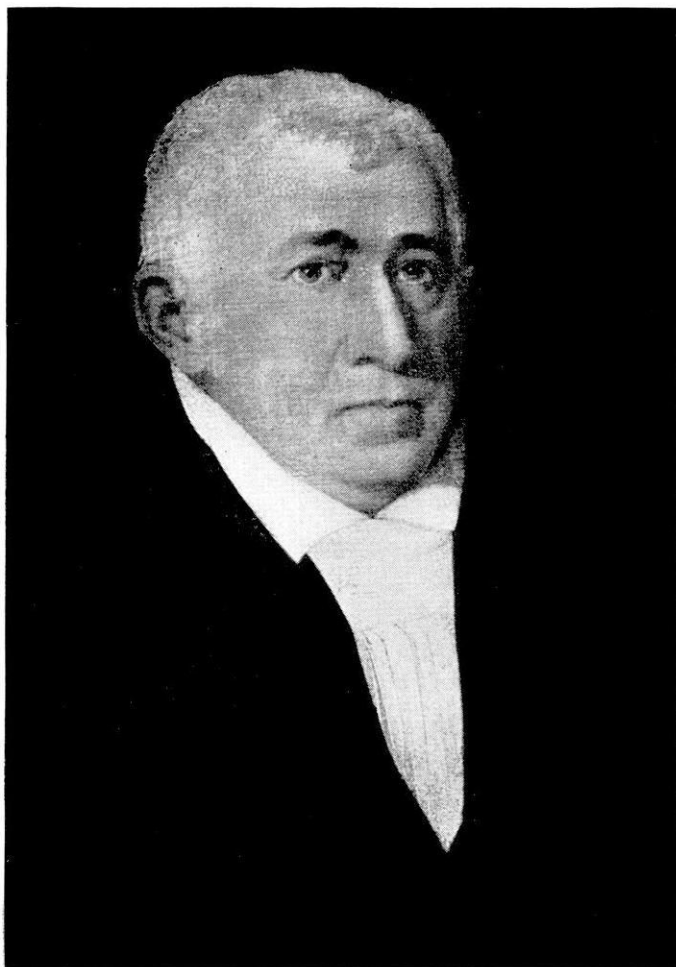
"Many is the time when I was a stripling I visited Mr. Edward West's workshop. He was a man of all work and all ideas. He could make a watch or clock or mend one; he could make a rifled gun or mend one; he could make a bank lock or key. Within my recollection he could make or mend anything."



EDWARD WEST

Painted by his son, William Edward West

*Print obtained through courtesy of Calvert's Photographers,
Nashville, Tennessee*



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West was for many years a member of the Board of Trustees for the City of Lexington. Fayette Order Book "A," page 19, shows that he was allowed one pound ten shillings for making the first Fayette County seal.

The inventory of Edward West's estate, filed November 27, 1827, in the Fayette County Court, lists a few items of interest:

"1 doz. dining spoons, \$9.00; 1 doz. dessert spoons, \$7.00; 1 doz. tea spoons, \$5.00; 1 set Knives & forks, .25; 1 pr. sugar tongs, \$1.75; 1 clock and case, \$25.00."

The tools of his various trades were listed as:

"2 Screw plates & tap pan vice; 2 small lathes; 1 iron screw prep; 1 Box small tools; 1 pr. large shears; 1 lot shears, venders and handirons; 2 bench vises; 1 anville & block; 1 grindstone and frame; 1 small bellows; 1 bench vise; 1 glue pot; 1 case with drawers and small tools; 1 cloth prep; 1 pr. rollers; 10 hammers; 1 lot tongs; 1 iron mortor & pistle; 3 turning lathes & tools."

Although Edward West was a silversmith, clockmaker, and gunsmith by trade, an uncommon inventive turn of mind made itself evident soon after his arrival in Lexington. Dr. Robert Peter, in his *History of Fayette County, Kentucky*, says:

"With the year 1793 commences the history of invention in Lexington, for at that time, in all reasonable probability, was invented the first steamboat that ever successfully plowed the waters of the world. The inventor, Edward West, was a hard student and close investigator, and spent all of his leisure time in experimenting with steam and steam machinery of his own construction. The little engine that so successfully propelled his little boat was the result of years of untiring industry. It is said that John Fitch, of Pennsylvania, made the initiatory step in steam navigation in 1787, but it is also known that he had no success till August, 1807; while West's boat was a success as early as 1793, years before Fulton had built his first boat on the Seine. In that year (1793) in the presence of a large crowd of deeply interested citizens, a trial of West's wonderful little steamboat was made on the town fork of the Elkhorn, which was dammed up for that purpose. The boat moved swiftly

through the water. The first successful application of steam to navigation was made.”

The construction of Edward West's steamboat is explained briefly by Richard H. Collins:⁶

“This miniature steamboat had no fly-wheels, but to overcome the dead point the piston rod was made to strike metallic springs at every return motion given by the steam. . . . On April 28, 1816, a steamboat made by Bosworth & West, on Mr. West's model, left the mouth of Hickman Creek, on the Kentucky River in Jessamine County, for New Orleans. This boat, an editorial notice in *The Kentucky Gazette* says, was upon a plan distinct from any other steamboat then in use, and on a trial against the current of the Kentucky river, at a high stage, more than answered the sanguine expectations of her owners (a company of Lexington gentlemen) and left no doubt that she could stem the current of the Mississippi with rapidity and ease. She did not return.”

Thomas H. Barlow, one of West's friends, and himself the inventor of a locomotive and a planetarium, in an interview with John D. Shane, said:

“West was the first person in the United States to make a steam engine. It was a two inch cylinder and four inch stroke. It had no airpump—this was its defect & could not be compensated for by having two condensers. This would never have answered. He dammed Elkhorn there in Lexington and put a boat in it in which he put his engine. The boat was not big enough for a man to get in. The engine as a power had not been perfected at the time of West's trial. West got all the knowledge he had about the engine from a cyclopedia which was published before Nicholson's. [A set of Nicholson's Encyclopedia, valued at \$6.00, was included in the list of Edward West's personal belongings in the inventory of his estate.] I convinced Mr. West of two things. The first was that time began. The other was an argument to prove there was a God.”⁷

The Kentucky Gazette, on May 14, 1802, in an editorial called attention to a machine invented by Edward West for

"Cutting nails at the rate of 1,000 pounds in 12 hours, which on yesterday, in the presence of a number of guests, cut five pounds in 50 seconds, which is at the rate of 4,320 pounds in 12 hours." Mr. West in that issue published a notice that he had taken the proper steps to obtain a patent and warned all persons from making use of his invention.

He made a trip to Washington in 1802 to obtain patents for his inventions. Dr. Samuel Brown, of Lexington, in the post-script to a letter dated May 24, 1802, to President Thomas Jefferson, wrote:

"Mr. Edward West has gone to Washington from his place in order to procure Patents for several mechanical inventions. The simplicity of his manners & the deficiency of his education cannot conceal from your discerning eye his uncommon ingenuity. You are infinitely more competent to appreciate the result of his several discoveries than I am. I shall therefore say nothing concerning them."^e

On July 6, 1802, Edward West received a patent for his steamboat invention, and, on the same day, for a gun lock and his nail cutting and heading machine. He had, previous to this time, sold his rights to the latter for \$10,000. Soon after the patent for the nail cutting and heading machine was granted, Lexington began exporting nails to Louisville, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, and the nail industry was launched in America.

With his ever inquisitive, imaginative mind, West sought earnestly with John Bradford, the editor of *The Kentucky Gazette*, for the secret of perpetual motion. It is well known that he made wooden type for Bradford for displays in newspaper advertising.

Other inventions for which West is given credit are a pistol, a wire-bound cannon, a hemp breaking machine, and a machine for cutting or pressing molding on tin gutter pipe.

The inventory of West's estate lists "1 engine, \$5.00." This engine was bought by Joseph Bruen who had a machine shop in Lexington. Models of West's steam engine and nail cutting and heading machine were destroyed in the patent office in Washington by fire in 1814. A model of the steam engine is in the possession of the Kentucky State Historical Society, Frankfort.

Edward West's delay in obtaining a patent for his steam engine and for his failure to adapt his idea from the miniature to a large, practical, working steamboat, was most probably due to lack of capital. His friends, though well aware of his genius, were not willing to finance such an enterprise. Being a dreamer, he may have lacked the ability to carry his idea further than a working model.

West was born in Virginia in 1757. He was the son of Edward West and his wife, Elizabeth Mills, of Stafford County. The marriage of Edward West, Sr., and Elizabeth Mills is recorded in Stafford County along with the birth and marriage records of several other Wests:⁹

"Carty West, dau. of Thomas & Catherine
born Mar. 12, 1743

Dorothy West married Lawrence Suddeth
April 18, 1745

James West, son of Thomas & Catherine
born Feb. 10, 1746

Edward West married Elizabeth Mills
Oct. 6, 1752

William Mills West, son of Edward & Elizabeth
born March 29, 1755"

I do not know the relationship of Carty, Dorothy, or James West to Edward West, Sr., but if they were brothers and sisters then Edward was also the son of Thomas and Catherine West. According to the family records of Mrs. Ellis Allen, Edward West, Sr., had three sisters, Polly, who married a Williams; Sarah, who married first a Beasley and second a Keith, and Jane, who married a Blanchard.

Rev. William West, who died in Maryland on March 30, 1791, was probably closely related to Edward West, Sr. Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography* (Vol. VI, pp. 441-2) says that the Rev. William West was born in Fairfax County, Virginia, in 1739. Fairfax County and Stafford County both lie on the Potomac, separated only by narrow Prince William County. Elizabeth Mills, the wife of Edward West, Sr., was from Fairfax County.

Before coming to Lexington, Edward West, Jr., married

Sarah Brown (1756-1824), the daughter of Samuel Brown and Maria Creed. They were the parents of twelve children:

1. Jane, married August 25, 1806, Joseph Woods
2. John B. .
3. Catharine, married July 11, 1809, Dr. Arthur Campbell
4. William Edward, born 1788, died 1857, unmarried
5. Maria Creed, married October 4, 1810, Samuel Price
6. Edward, died at the age of 19
7. Thomas Lewis, died April 14, 1806, aged 10
8. Sarah Brown, married May, 1818, Robert Woods
9. Hannahretta, married March 1, 1814, Moses Norvell
10. Eliza Mills, married November 15, 1818, Simon Bradford
11. Benjamin Franklin, unmarried
12. Patterson Bain, unmarried

William Edward West, born December 10, 1788, in Lexington, Kentucky, inherited some of his father's genius. He became a celebrated portrait painter, and is, perhaps, most famous for his painting of Lord Byron. He went to Europe in 1822 and exhibited in Paris in 1824-5. He exhibited at the Royal Academy in London from 1826 to 1833 and in other London exhibits until 1837, but returned to America in 1840. He died November 2, 1857, in Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁰

Sarah West, the wife of Edward West, died February 7, 1824. Edward West died August 23, 1827, and was buried in the garden of the West home on High Street in Lexington, beside his wife. Several years later their bodies were moved to the Presbyterian Cemetery in Lexington. The inscription on West's tombstone is simple: "Ed. West, died Aug. 23, 1827, aged 70 years." The *Kentucky Reporter*, September 1, 1827, carried a brief notice of his death:

"DIED—Last Week, Mr. Edward West, an old highly respectable citizen."

Edward West's contributions to Kentucky's early growth and development are manifold. His machines for making cheap,

well-pointed nails and for cutting molding on gutter pipe helped the early settler build his home in the wilderness. He made clocks and silverplate to make those homes more livable. He made guns for protection from marauding Indians, and for the procurement of game for food from the forests. His wooden type helped print the first newspaper in Kentucky. His steam engine was a direct contribution to the development of commercial steam craft. For these and other contributions Edward West is, undoubtedly, Kentucky's foremost pioneer craftsman.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *The Kentucky Land Grants*, by Willard Rouse Jillson, p. 159; *Old Kentucky Entries and Deeds*, by Willard Rouse Jillson, pp. 134, 250, 251, 431.

² *The Kentucky Gazette*, November 13, 1790.

³ *History of Pioneer Lexington*, by Charles R. Staples, p. 105.

⁴ *The Kentucky Gazette*, December 11, 1799.

⁵ *The Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, Vol. 27, 1929, p. 420.

⁶ *History of Kentucky*, by Richard H. Collins, p. 174.

⁷ The Draper Mss., 15CC201-4.

⁸ *The Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, Vol. 35, p. 105 (1937).

⁹ *Overwharton Parish Register*, Stafford County, Virginia.

¹⁰ *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. XX, p. 12.