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"William Littell

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William Littell (1768-1824) Lawyer, legal scholar and satirist. Born in New Jersey and raised in Pennsylvania where tradition says he studied theology and medicine, William Littell joined the migration to the Kentucky frontier, presenting himself in 1799 for admission to the Fleming County bar. Littell soon threw himself into the political turmoil of the new commonwealth. A Jeffersonian, his literary skills were enlisted by leading Republicans in their struggle with the Federalists over their alleged involvement in the so-called Spanish Conspiracy. In Political Transactions in and Concerning Kentucky (1806), Littell used historical narrative to defend his party's leading figures from the charge of conspiring to align frontier Kentucky with Spain.

Littell's political connections no doubt helped him in 1805 to obtain a contract from the Kentucky legislature to publish a compilation of the state's statutes. In a letter to the Kentucky Gazette published when he was attempting to promote the work on a private subscription basis, Littell set out his political justification for such a publication, noting that "[t]here is no principle more truly republican than that the people who are amenable to the laws should know their import." The idea that the law should be public and readily accessible to those under its rule occurs often in his writings.

The finished work, The Statute Law in Kentucky (1809-1819), would eventually run to five volumes. "Littell's Statutes," as it would be known to generations of lawyers, was immediately recognized (even by the author's many critics) to be of the highest quality and it cemented Littell's reputation as a legal scholar. While compiling this massive work, he took time to write

Principles of Law and Equity (1808), the first digest of Kentucky case law. Littell continued his work on Kentucky legislation with Digest of Statute Law (1822) compiled with the help of his protégé Jacob Swigert. He also published five volumes of reports along with a single volume of older unpublished decisions. In 1810, Littell's legal scholarship was recognized when Transylvania University, the leading institution of higher learning in the Western frontier, granted him the L.L.D.

It is as a bitter satirist of the politics and mores of the frontier that Littell has interested literary historians, but it is important to note that even his humorous writings were inspired by the law. In his first satiric work, The Epistles of William Surnamed Littell (1806), later reprinted as part of Festoons of Fancy (1816), he lampooned Federalist supporters of state banking interests, offered support for a divorce law, and recounted his efforts to convince the state to support the publication of its statutes. Along the way he tweaked the slaveocracy for sleeping with their slaves and skewered the avarice of the "merchants of Lexington."

It is perhaps not surprising that tradition records that Littell was not a well-liked man. Some biographical treatments are decidedly hostile, one impugning his morality while ridiculing his physical appearance. In a new frontier society desperately trying to rise to respectability, a satiric eye is not usually welcomed. Littell was not without friends; reportedly penniless when he died in 1824, the state legislature passed a law for the relief of his family.

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