

John Sherman's Life and Career (1823-1900)

Seven Generations of Law

Born into a seven generation family of lawyers, it was destined that John Sherman would become a lawyer, as did his older brothers Charles Taylor Sherman and William Tecumseh Sherman, and before them their father Charles Robert Sherman, Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court. Brother Charles became a district judge of the State of Ohio. William Tecumseh practiced very briefly and later became a great general. John became a United States Senator, Secretary of the Treasury and Secretary of State. He served forty years in public service. He was born on May 10, 1823 in Lancaster, Ohio to Charles Robert Sherman and Mary Hoyt Sherman. He was the eighth child born to the family that would eventually become a family of eleven children, six sons and five daughters.

Judge Charles Sherman Dies

When John was six years old, his father died while on circuit attending court in Lebanon, Ohio. Mary Sherman, left with no income to support this large family, relied on friends and family to help raise her children. Keeping three daughters, a toddler son and infant daughter in the home with her, she sent her three middle sons, William Tecumseh, John and Lampson, to be raised by friends and family. The two oldest sons, Charles and James, had already left home, and the oldest daughter Mary Elizabeth soon married.

No Permanent Home

When John was eight years old, he was sent to Mount Vernon, Ohio to live with his father's cousin John Sherman and thereafter did not live in one place longer than four years. Young John lived with his cousin and his family until he was twelve years old. It had not been an easy task to raise him and John himself said; "I was a troublesome boy, frequently involved in controversies with the teachers and sometimes punished with the switch." He also referred to himself as a "rather wild and reckless boy at the disagreeable age of eight to twelve years." At the age of twelve he returned to his mother's home in Lancaster where he remained until the age of fourteen when he left school and went to Beverly, Ohio to take a job as a junior rodman on the Muskingham River Improvement. While there he lived with the Paul Fearing family. John toiled at this job for two years but then lost his job due to a change in state government.

Mary Sherman was happy to have John back home again but that lasted only a year. At the age of seventeen John made the decision to follow family tradition and become a lawyer. His older brother Charles had become a lawyer and was practicing in Mansfield, Ohio. John lived with Charles the next four years and studied law under him

and his uncle Judge Parker. He passed the Ohio Bar Exam at the age of twenty-one in Springfield, Ohio where the Ohio Supreme Court was sitting.

John Marries and Enters Politics

John married Cecelia Steward, the daughter of a wealthy Mansfield judge in 1848 and she proved to be a great asset to him throughout his political career. He first entered politics as a Whig in 1854 when he was elected to represent the Ohio Thirteenth District in the House of Representatives. That summer the new Republican Party was formed and John Sherman embraced this party and was elected President of the Ohio Republican Convention since the members wanted a president who had not yet been conspicuous in politics. He served in the U.S. Senate from 1861–1877, where he served as Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He served as Secretary of the Treasury under President Hayes and then returned to the Senate from 1881-1896. He sought the Republican nomination to the presidency in 1880, 1884 and 1888 but failed. This was a great disappointment to him and a sharp contrast between him and his brother, General William T. Sherman, who was sought after by both the Republican and Democrat parties but refused. General Sherman had a great distaste for politics.

John was appointed Secretary of State by President William McKinley in 1897 but resigned in 1898. His health was failing and he died in Mansfield, Ohio two years later on October 25, 1900. John Sherman left a legacy of two Acts that bear his name, the Sherman Antitrust Act and the Sherman Silver Standard Act. It is ironic that he should have such an impact on national finance, which a generation ago had a negative effect on his father, Charles R. Sherman.

Source Material

John Sherman's Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet.

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