

FISHER AMES IN LANCASTER

By William Frederic Worner

Fisher Ames, American statesman, orator and political writer, the youngest son of Nathaniel Ames, a physician, was born in Dedham, Mass., April 9, 1758. He was a precocious scholar and was graduated from Harvard college at the early age of sixteen. He studied law in the office of William Tudor, and in 1781 began its practice in his native village. He eventually abandoned his profession for the more congenial pursuits of politics. His abilities in this direction were disclosed through several political essays, published under the signatures of "Brutus" and "Camillus," which he contributed to Boston newspapers. In 1788, he was elected a representative to the legislature of Massachusetts, where he so distinguished himself by his eloquence and readiness in debate that he was elected to the convention which met in Massachusetts the same year to ratify the Federal constitution. His speech in that important assembly gave him fresh repute as one of our foremost orators.

Joining the Federalist party, he was elected to Congress from the district that then included Boston. During the eight years of Washington's administration (1789-1797) he was a prominent member of the House of Representatives and became widely known as a public speaker of unusual ability.

On April 28, 1796, when the Republicans, hostile to the treaty which John Jay negotiated with Great Britain, were on the point of withholding the appropriation necessary for its execution, Ames, who had just arisen from a sick bed, made what has been considered the greatest speech of his life. It was an appeal of such eloquence and effectiveness that the other party protested against taking a vote at the time because the House was too excited to decide rationally. Before the delivery of this eloquent and powerful address his opponents had claimed a majority of six. The appropriation was finally passed, however, in the committee of the whole, by the vote of the chairman.

Upon the adjournment of Congress, in the spring of 1796, in Philadelphia, at that time the capital of the United States, Mr. Ames travelled in Virginia to recuperate his health. He hoped to be benefited by drinking of the warm springs in Berkley county. In a letter written to Thomas Dwight, and dated "Philadelphia, May 30, 1796," he states: "Congress will rise June 1st, as most of us expect.....I shall leave this city for the South on June 2nd, unless Congress should linger in their seats. I reckon three weeks for the journey."

Mr. Ames evidently spent more than "three weeks" in Virginia in seeking to restore his health. On his return journey to Philadelphia, he stopped over in Lancaster borough, as the following excerpt, which is taken from the Lancaster Journal, a newspaper published in Lancaster, Pa., under date of Friday, July 29, 1796, will show:

"On Monday last [July 25, 1796] the celebrated orator and patriot, Mr. Ames, (of Massachusetts) arrived in Lancaster. He has been on a tour to the southward for the benefit of his health, and it is with pleasure we find that he is considerably recruited since the rising of Congress. On Tuesday a number of gentlemen of the borough gave a handsome dinner at Mr. Slough's to this American Cicero. On Wednesday morning he proceeded to Philadelphia, from whence in a few days he will depart for Massachusetts."

It is to be regretted that we do not have the names of our distinguished townsmen who sat down to the complimentary dinner tendered Mr. Ames. The newspaper states that it was held "at Mr. Slough's." It will be recalled that in former papers I have called attention to the fact that Matthias Slough was the proprietor and genial host of the famous White Swan tavern then located at the south-east corner of Penn square and South Queen street. It was in this ancient and time-honored hostelry that the leading citizens of Lancaster "gave a handsome dinner" to Fisher Ames, whom they regarded as the "American Cicero."

The White Swan tavern, in its day, was the scene of many a notable gathering. Within its spacious interior were held the great social functions, the "practicing balls", and brilliant assemblies, for which Lancaster was justly famous. Under its hospitable roof, many notables who visited Lancaster were entertained. A list of the great, and the near-great, who at various times were housed in its comfortable quarters or who tarried at its bounteous table to satisfy the "inner man," would weary the writer and tax your patience. When the "Father of His Country" honored the borough of Lancaster with his presence and assisted the good people fitly to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of American Independence, it was at the White Swan tavern that he was entertained. When President Adams passed through Lancaster on his way to the Federal City, it was at the White Swan that he spent the night. When Jerome Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon and subsequently the husband of Elizabeth Patterson, passed through Lancaster on his way to Baltimore, where Miss Patterson lived, it was at the White Swan that he was comfortably quartered. General William Henry Harrison, the Hero of Tippecanoe, on the occasion of his visit to Lancaster, was a guest at this famous hostelry. And it was here that President Zachary Taylor, when he honored Lancaster by a visit, was lavishly entertained and met the townspeople.

Mr. Ames arrived in Lancaster borough on Monday, and remained until Wednesday. He was tendered a banquet at the White Swan tavern on Tuesday. Where and how did he spend the remainder of his time in this ancient little borough? That is a question we may never be able to answer. The newspaper gives such a meager account that all we can authoritatively state is, that he was here, and that he was handsomely entertained by prominent citizens of the borough at a complimentary dinner in the leading tavern of the town.

Mr. Ames was in Philadelphia on July 30, as we know by a letter written by him on that date, headed "Philadelphia." He had gained sufficient health to be able to attend the next session of Congress. When Washington retired from the Presidency, Congress voted him an address, and Fisher Ames was chosen to deliver it.

In 1797, Mr. Ames returned to Dedham and resumed the practice of law, which the state of his health, after a few years, obliged him to relinquish. He published numerous essays, chiefly in relation to the contest between Great Britain and revolutionary France, and its effect upon the liberty and prosperity of America.

On the death of Washington, he delivered a eulogy upon his noble life and character before the legislature of Massachusetts.

He was elected president of Harvard college in 1804, but declined the honor on account of ill health. His last years were spent in retirement.

He died July 4, 1808.

Mr. Ames was one of the most distinguished and eminent statesmen and essayists of his times. He was devoted to the noblest interests of his beloved country and served it with a loyalty worthy of the highest commendation. "The times that tried men's souls" developed patriots whose memory it is a delight to perpetuate and to honor. Fisher Ames is a noble example of what all true statesmen should aspire to be.