

Connecticut's Roger Sherman, The Everyman Founder

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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Connecticut's Roger Sherman was a man of distinctive character and talent. The signer of the Declaration of Independence, which we will celebrate Thursday, was reserved, awkward, quiet, even-tempered, open-minded and extraordinarily active. Sherman had virtually no formal education, but he wound up one of the most accomplished Founders.

The stolid, tireless Sherman was "one of the most innovative political thinkers of his age," according to historian Bernard Bailyn. Late in life, John Adams suggested he was "one of the most sensible men in the world."

Raised amid modest circumstances in Massachusetts, Sherman had few of the advantages of wealthy Virginians such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both of whom were tutored as children and educated at prestigious colleges as teenagers. Although he attended school occasionally, Sherman was largely self-taught, depending upon his father's library and a friendly minister.

As a young man, Sherman worked at many vocations — from cobbler to store owner — before studying law on his own. He was admitted to the Connecticut bar at 33. Sherman held a bewildering series of public offices, usually holding more than one at a time. He was a county surveyor and local justice of the peace, a U.S. senator and state superior court justice. For the last decade of his life, Sherman was mayor of New Haven and a respected professor of religion at Yale College.

In 1783, he and a fellow state judge recodified all of Connecticut's laws.

One of six signers of the Declaration of Independence who would also sign the Constitution, Sherman was alone among the Founders to sign both the Articles of Association in 1774 and the Articles of Confederation (1777). John Adams wrote Abigail in March 1777 that Sherman — who served with Adams on the five-member committee that drafted the Declaration — was an "old puritan, as honest as an angel and firm in the cause of American Independence as Mt. Atlas."

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Sherman gave approximately 140 speeches. Georgia's William Pierce recalled: "Mr. Sherman exhibits the oddest shaped character I ever remember to have met with. He is awkward ... and unaccountably strange in his manner. But in his train of thinking there is something regular, deep and comprehensive; yet the oddity of his address, the vulgarisms that accompany his public speaking, and that strange New England cant which runs through his public as well as his private speaking make everything that is connected with him grotesque and laughable — and yet he

deserves infinite praise — no man has a better heart or a clearer head. If he cannot embellish he can furnish thoughts that are wise and useful."

Thomas Jefferson said that Sherman was "a man who never said a foolish thing in his life."

At the convention in August 1787, Sherman and South Carolina's John Rutledge fashioned the important compromise on navigation laws and slave trade. Sherman was a strong advocate for ratification of the Constitution, and, with Alexander Hamilton, denied that a bill of rights was needed.

When in June 1789 Virginia Congressman James Madison proposed a series of amendments that became the Bill of Rights, Sherman drafted an alternative based on the natural rights of Americans. Sherman opposed inserting a bill of rights into the existing Constitution, but labored consistently on the committee that drafted Madison's proposals, which became the first 10 amendments to the Constitution.

Throughout trying times and heated controversies, Sherman maintained his equanimity. Author Lewis Henry Boutell tells the story about a farmer who visited the Sherman household to sell some of his homemade cider: "Mr. Sherman having made some enquiry about the quality of the cider, the farmer stormed and swore at a furious rate. Finding Mr. Sherman perfectly unmoved at his tirade, he looked up at him in astonishment, exclaiming, 'The Devil himself couldn't provoke you.'"

What the devil could not do, a pervasive bacteria did. In 1793, still active at age 72, Sen. Roger Sherman died from a typhoid infection.

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