

**SKETCH OF GENERAL
JAMES WILSON OF
NEW HAMPSHIRE**

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Sketch of General James Wilson of New Hampshire by James F. Briggs

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JAMES F. BRIGGS

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BY HON. JAMES F. BRIGGS.

MANCHESTER, N. H.
MANCHESTER HISTORIC ASSOCIATION,
1902.



GEN. JAMES WILSON.

GENERAL JAMES WILSON.

A PAPER BY HON. JAMES F. BRIGGS, READ BEFORE THE MAN-
CHESTER HISTORIC ASSOCIATION, OCTOBER 3, 1900.

MR. PRESIDENT: I regret that the duty of furnishing a sketch of the life and public services of Hon. James Wilson, late of Keene, N. H., had not been assigned to some one better qualified to do justice to the memory of this remarkable man. By way of introduction, with your permission, I desire to say a few words of his father, James Wilson, to show the seed from which he sprang.

James Wilson, the father of James Wilson, Jr., was born in Peterboro, N. H., in 1757. He fitted for college at Phillips Academy, at Andover, Mass.; entered Harvard in 1785; and graduated in 1789. He was reputed to be one of the most skillful wrestlers in college, which was then the test of championship. He took the badge in his Freshman year and retained it during his whole course. His distinction in this particular was justified by the remark of John Quincy Adams to his son, "Long Jim," when he learned his parentage, "Your father was the best wrestler in college."

On his graduation he entered the office of Judge Lincoln of Worcester, Mass., as a student of the law. He remained with Judge Lincoln until December, 1790, when he was called home on account of the death of his father. He remained in Peterboro from that time, completing his studies with Judge Jeremiah Smith then in practice in the town of Peterboro. He was admitted to the New Hampshire Bar in 1792. Judge Smith having been elected to Congress from New Hampshire, and continuing in that office for several succeeding years finally, removed to Exeter and Mr. Wilson continued his practice in his

native town, until his removal to Keene in the year 1815. He retired from the active professional duties of his office on the admission of his son to the bar, in 1823, and devoted his time to his private affairs.

James Wilson, Sr., is represented to have been a good lawyer, familiar with the science of the law, a man of quick preception, careful and thorough in the preparation of his cases, and he conducted them before the court and jury with marked ability and success.

His practice in Cheshire and Hillsborough counties was extensive, and he was generally retained on one side or the other in every important case. When asked by Mr. Levi Chamberlain why he did not address the reason of the jury instead of their feelings, he replied: "Too small a mark; too small a mark for me to hit."

James Wilson was elected from the Hillsborough District of New Hampshire a Representative in the Eleventh Congress of the United States as a Federalist. He served with distinction from May 22, 1809, to March 3, 1811. His term of service, though brief, was one that no descendant of his, familiar with his services, but will be proud of the record he made.

There were many young men in New Hampshire who were students in his office who afterwards achieved distinction in their profession. Among them were Gen. James Miller, John Wilson, David Smiley, Thomas F. Goodhue, Zaccheus Parker, Stephen P. Steele, David Scott, Charles J. Stewart, and Matthew Perkins. After he removed to Keene his students were David Steele, Amos Parker, Amasa Edes, and his son James Wilson, Jr. Mr. Wilson held many offices of trust and honor in his native town. He was moderator from 1800 to 1814; and representative to the Legislature from 1803 to 1815. He was a member of Congress from the Hillsborough District from 1809 to 1811, being the first two years of President Madison's administration. He was an old-fashioned Federalist. He was a grateful, dutiful son, a good husband, a sympathetic parent, very kind to his children and to all his friends; a good citizen, and noble-heart-

ed man. He was industrious, just, vigilant in all matters of business. He died at Keene, January 4, 1839, universally respected and lamented, at the age of 73 years.

James Wilson, Jr., was born in Peterboro, N. H., March 18, 1797, and died at Keene, N. H., May 29, 1881. He was the son of James Wilson and Elizabeth Steele. His early life was passed in his native town, with only such educational privileges as were there to be had, which at that early day were very limited. His mother became an invalid when her son James was only two years old, and remained so during the remainder of her life, thus depriving him of that kind, maternal care and attention so indispensable to the proper development of a young mind. She departed this life when he was in the ninth year of his age.

In the year 1807, young Wilson was sent for a few months to the academy at New Ipswich. In 1808, he was sent to the Atkinson Academy, where he remained for some three or four years. In the year 1813, he attended Phillips (Exeter) Academy, at Exeter, N. H., for some six months.

Our country was then involved in war with Great Britain, and young Wilson at sixteen years of age was desirous of joining the American army, as some of his acquaintances but little older than himself had already done. His father would not give his consent to his son's enlistment, and he was not old enough to be subject to the draft. Disappointed at being deprived of the privilege of entering upon a military career, he left Exeter, and returning to his native town he went into the North Factory at Peterboro, and continued to work there from the Autumn of 1813 until the Spring of 1815, when peace between the United States and England was proclaimed. Young Wilson went home in the Spring and worked on his father's farm as a common farm-laborer. In the Autumn of that year, as his father was about removing to Keene, the son picked up his books and went back to his studies.

He entered Middlebury College (Vt.) in 1816; graduated from that institution in 1820; entered his father's office at Keene as a

student at law, and was admitted to the bar in Cheshire county, N. H., at the Fall term, 1823.

His father, James Wilson, Sr., retired from the active professional duties of his office on the admission of his son to the bar, and the young man attaining to his father's business, continued to practice law in Cheshire, Sullivan, Grafton, and Coös counties, until the year 1836, when by a stroke of paralysis his father became unable to attend to his own private affairs, and then required his son's assistance. He then gave up the Northern counties and continued the practice of law in Cheshire county.

On leaving college in 1820, and fixing his residence at Keene, James Wilson, Jr., entered the military service of the State. He was elected Captain of the Keene Light Infantry on the first day of January, 1821, and continued in the militia, constantly doing duty, until 1839, when he resigned the office of Major-General of the Third Division of the New Hampshire Militia.

At the March election in 1825, he was chosen as one of the two Representatives from the town of Keene to the State Legislature.

In 1828, he was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives of New Hampshire, the duties of which he performed with signal ability to the acceptance of all parties. In that House there were several men of distinguished reputation and of prominent standing in the Whig party, such as the Hon. Ezekiel Webster, the Hon. Benjamin M. Farley, the Hon. Joseph Bell, the Hon. Parker Noyes, and others from different parts of the State. From the year 1825 to the year 1840 inclusive, he represented the town of Keene in the State Legislature every year, except 1833, 1838, and 1839. The last two years, namely, 1838 and 1839, he was the candidate of the Whig party in the State for Governor, but was defeated by his Democratic opponent.

The year 1840 was a year of great political awakening in this country. The Democratic party had nominated Martin Van Buren for President of the United States for a second term.

The Whigs went into the political battle under the banner of 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too,' 'and with them' determined to 'beat little Van.' The Whigs succeeded. Gen. James Wilson, of New Hampshire ('Long Jim,' as he was familiarly called), did a good deal of political service in that campaign. He stumped almost all the New England states, spoke several times in Pennsylvania, and gave a whole month's work, on the stump, in the State of New York, Mr. Van Buren's state. Mr. Van Buren lost New York, Pennsylvania, and most of the New England States, and was defeated.

Gen. Harrison was elected President, and John Tyler Vice-President. They were inaugurated on the 4th of March, 1841. Gen. Harrison lived only one month after his inauguration, and Mr. Tyler succeeded to the Presidency. About June, 1841, Mr. Tyler offered to Gen. Wilson the office of Surveyor-General of the Public Lands in the then Territories of Wisconsin and Iowa, which office he accepted, and took possession of the Surveyor-General's office, at Dubuque, Iowa, in the early part of the summer. He continued to hold that office and to perform its duties for four years. In 1845, James K. Polk having been elected President, he was removed.

In 1846, the voters of the town of Keene returned Gen. Wilson again, as their representative, to the General Court. That year the Whigs and a party styling themselves 'Independent Democrats' succeeded in defeating the regular old line Democracy in New Hampshire. The State was districted for the choice of Representatives to Congress, and the following year he was elected Representative from the Third Congressional District to the Thirtieth Congress. He was re-elected to the Thirty-First Congress, and held his seat until the 9th day of September, 1850, when he resigned and left this Eastern country for California. He resided in California eleven years continuously, and only returned East at the breaking out of the Civil War in 1861. On meeting his old friend Abraham Lincoln, then President of the United States, Mr. Lincoln offered him a Brigadier-General's commission in the