

**THE ALMANACS OF
ROGER SHERMAN,
1750-1761**

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The Almanacs of Roger Sherman, 1750-1761 by Victor Hugo Paltsits

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ALMANACS
OF
ROGER SHERMAN

1750-1761

Containing also Prose and Poetical Selections, and a Complete
Collection of the "Sayings" found in them

BY
VICTOR HUGO PALTSITS

READ BEFORE THE AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY,
AT ITS SEMI-ANNUAL MEETING IN BOSTON,
APRIL 17, 1907

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INTRODUCTION.

American almanacs offer an interesting subject for inquiry, and several students have already written more or less of them, of which the best examples are those of Amos Perry, Samuel Briggs, Paul Leicester Ford, George Lyman Kittredge, Albert Carlos Bates and Matthew A. Stickney. To these has now (March, 1907) been added a "Preliminary Check List of American Almanacs, 1639-1800", compiled by Hugh Alexander Morrison, of the Library of Congress. This is a tentative list and the result of some years of devotion. Mr. Morrison hopes to be able to enlarge his list, and his plan is to produce, eventually, a full and accurately-described bibliography. The weakest part of his work is where he depends upon the "American Bibliography" of Charles Evans, because Mr. Evans has introduced many titles upon supposition, which will lead to endless confusion and catch the unwary. So intricate a subject can be studied best by the monographic method, in which a single series is given concentration for the solution of the problematic questions which are inevitably connected with such publications. A conviction of this need is responsible for the present paper.

Roger Sherman was born in Newton, Mass., on April 19, 1721 (O. S.). When he was two years of age his parents removed to that section of Stoughton which has since become Canton, and here he resided for twenty years. It was the formative period of his life, during which he attended the common country school and imbibed the limited knowl-

edge which it imparted. Here he also learned the trade of shoemaker from his father, with whom he worked. With an open book by his side he restored the soles of his neighborhood's shoes and was mindful of his own soul's needs. If fancy may take flight we may observe him jabbing with his awl the resisting leather and pulling out with the sewing threads the solution of some knotty problem in mathematics or philosophy. It is not unlikely that he was influenced in his intellectual pursuits by the example of the Rev. Samuel Dunbar, the pastor of his family's church. With this church he united in March, 1742, which was just a year after the death of his father. In June, 1743, the family removed to New Milford, Conn., where Roger Sherman began his official career in 1745, having been appointed "Surveyor of Lands for the County of New Haven," a post which he held until 1752, when New Milford was allotted to the newly organized Litchfield County. He served the new county in a similar position until his resignation in 1758. The New Milford period of his life is associated with his series of almanacs, and therefore arrests attention here.

From 1748 to 1756 Roger Sherman dwelt in his own house in Park Lane. In the latter year his brother William died, resulting in his removal to the brother's home, which was connected with the first village store-building in New Milford. Roger carried on the business until the year 1760, when he sold the property, and soon withdrew to New Haven. His business relations afforded him experience of the evils of a currency consisting of depreciating bills of credit of the colonies, and he gave expression to his opinions in a pamphlet on the subject, written under the pseudonym of "Phileunomos", and entitled, "A Caveat against Injustice", which was printed at New York, by Henry De Forest, in 1752. The only known copy of this tract is in the collection of his descendant and our lamented vice-president, the late Senator George F. Hoar. He reverted to the same subject while preparing his almanac for 1753 (New London), and in vigorous terms denounced the dishonesty which these depreciated bills produced in

business transactions. Besides his business activities and his office of surveyor of lands, Sherman was a justice of the peace for Litchfield County (appointed May, 1755) and justice of the quorum (appointed May, 1759); he also represented the town of New Milford in the General Assembly of the colony from May, 1755 until his removal to New Haven in 1761, during each semi-annual term, except those of the years 1756 and 1757, when, no doubt owing to the added duties of his business and late brother's affairs, he was prevented from engaging in that service. We have already observed that he sold his business in the year 1760, which was also the year of his great bereavement, for on October 19, his wife, Elizabeth Hartwell, whom he had married in 1749, died at the age of thirty-four years. He had spent eighteen years of his life in New Milford—a period of active preparation for the yet higher calling which awaited him in the service of his fellowmen and country.*

Sherman had for some years studied the mathematics for his own amusement, which led many of his friends and acquaintances to suggest to him the preparation of an almanac. He tells the story of this undertaking in his Boston almanac of 1750, viz:

"To the READER.

I Have for several Years past for my own Amusement spent some of my leisure Hours in the Study of *Mathematicks*; not with any Intent to appear in publick: But at the Desire of many of my Friends and Acquaintance, I have been induced to calculate and publish the following ALMANACK for the Year 1750—I have put in every Thing that I thought would be useful that could be contained in such contracted Limits:—I have taken much Care to perform the Calculations truly, not having the Help of any *Ephemeris*: And I would desire the Reader not to condemn it if it should in some Things differ from other Authors, until Observations have determined which is in the wrong.—I need say nothing by way of Explan-

*The biographical data have been interpreted from *The Life of Roger Sherman*, by Lewis H. Boutell, Chicago, 1896, pp. 18-41.

ation of the following Pages, they being placed in the same Order that has been for many Years practised by the ingenious and celebrated Dr. Ames, with which you are well acquainted.— If this shall find Acceptance perhaps it may encourage me to serve my Country this Way for Time to come.

New Milford August 1. 1749.

R. SHERMAN."

Not only did Sherman model his almanacs after those of Nathaniel Ames, the elder, but these two kindred spirits exchanged correspondence pertaining to astronomical calculations. One of these letters has fortunately survived the ravages of time, and is as follows:*

"New Milford July 14th 1753

S^r. I Received your Letter this Day and return you thanks for the papers you Sent Inclosed. I find that there was a Considerable Mistake in the Calculation of the 2 Lunar Eclipses which I Sent to you in my last letter which was occasioned by my mistake in taking out the mean motion of the Sun for the Radical Year and I have now Sent inclosed (them) with the rest of the Eclipses as I have Since Calculated them for the Meridian of New London—I have also Sent one of my Almanaks.—I Expect to go to New-Haven in August next and I will enquire of m^r. Clap about the Comet You mentioned and will write to you what Itelligence[sic] I can get from him about it the first opportunity——I am

S^r. Your very humble Serv^t

Roger Sherman."

The interest of the eighteenth-century public in the almanac-maker's products has been versified by the poet Freneau:

"Thus Nature waiting at his call,
His book, in vogue with great and small,
Is sought, admir'd, and read by all."†

*Copied from the facsimile in Briggs. *The Essays, Humor, and Poems of Nathaniel Ames*. Cleveland, Ohio, 1891, p. 224.

†"The Almanac Maker," in Freneau's *Poems*. Monmouth, N. J., 1795, p. 90.

But he also lampooned him because

“He tells us when the sun will rise,
Points out fair days, or clouded skies;—
No matter if he sometimes lies.”*

That the almanac-maker was not always responsible for the whole contents of his publication, is determined in Sherman's case by a very droll experience. He had prepared two almanacs for the year 1750, one for Boston and another for New York. In his haste to get off the “copy” to Henry DeForeest, the printer of the latter, he was obliged to send it incomplete, but gave the printer latitude “to put in whatsoever else he should think proper.” But the Dutch printer of New York had different standards of taste than the Puritan author of Connecticut. He inserted the following naive “Observations” on the months and quarters of the year, to which Sherman objected, as we shall see.

“OBSERVATIONS ON JANUARY.

This Year begins as the last ended, and truly very well it may, for their two contiguous End, eling so fast together, one can't thrust a Knife between 'em. I find by the Stars that the gr[eate]st disease incident to this Month is Want of Money, caus'd by the great Consumption of Wood, Candles, and Canary, three valluable Things this Cold Season: But besides the Coldness of the Season, we are like to have three other Sorts of Weather this Month; First, terrible nipping Weather, where the Maid gives the young Man a Denial: Secondly, suspicious Weather, where the Master kisses the Maid behind the Door: And thirdly, turbulent Weather, where the Mistress scolds and fights both Maid and Husband, making the House too hot for either.

OBSERVATIONS FOR FEBRUARY.

Now Valentine's Day approaches, which shall cause many to fall in Love, even as a Fly falls into an Honey pot; which may

* *Ibid.*