

**EULOGIUM ON THE
CHARACTER AND
SERVICES OF THE
LATE JOHN SERGEANT**

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Eulogium on the Character and Services of the Late John Sergeant by William M. Meredith

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WILLIAM M. MEREDITH

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EULOGIUM

ON

THE CHARACTER AND SERVICES

OF THE LATE

JOHN SERGEANT,

PRONOUNCED AT THE REQUEST OF THE

Select and Common Councils of the City of Philadelphia,

AND A

COMMITTEE APPOINTED AT A MEETING OF CITIZENS,

APRIL 22, 1858.

BY HON. WILLIAM M. MEREDITH.

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1858.

COMMITTEE ROOM, CITY HALL,

May 3d, 1853.

HON. WILLIAM M. MEREDITH.

DEAR SIR:—I have the honor to communicate to you herewith, a copy of a resolution of the committee appointed to devise proper tributes of respect for the memory of the late Hon. John Sergeant, and beg leave to express the hope that you will be pleased to accede to their request therein, and thus furnish them with the means of perpetuating an eloquent and appropriate testimony to the life and character of that great and good man.

With great respect,

Your obedient servant,

CHARLES A. POULSON,

Chairman Joint Special Committee.

In Committee, May 2, 1853.

Resolved, That the Chairman be requested to express to Mr. Meredith the thanks of the Joint Committee, for his Eulogy on the late John Sergeant, delivered at its request at the Musical Fund Hall, on the evening of the 22d of April last, and to ask from him a copy for publication.

CRAIG BIDDLE,

Secretary.

Philadelphia, May 11th, 1853.

MY DEAR SIR:—I have to acknowledge the receipt of your note, enclosing a Resolution of the Committee, asking for publication, a copy of the Eulogium on Mr. Sergeant. It gives me great pleasure to comply with the request of the Committee, and to assure you how sincerely,

I am, with the highest esteem,

Your friend and servant,

WILLIAM M. MEREDITH.

To CHARLES A. POULSON, Esq.

Chairman, &c.

EULOGIUM.

WE are assembled this evening, to pay a deserved tribute to the memory of a virtuous man. No custom is more laudable than that which benefits the living by setting forth the example of the illustrious dead. It is a custom, on the due observance of which, depends much of our future public welfare.

To neglect the memory of virtue is to discourage virtue. To lavish prostituted panegyric on profligacy, selfishness and treachery, would be to encourage vice. Our present purpose, is to call to remembrance the career of a man, who in all his relations, public, professional and personal, deserved well of his fellow-citizens; who devoted great intellectual ability, great power of eloquence, and great moral worth, during a long life, to the service of his country; and who had

his reward in the esteem of his enemies, the love of his friends, and the confidence of all.

JOHN SERGEANT was born in the City of Philadelphia, in the year 1779. He was the son of Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant, the first Attorney General of the State of Pennsylvania. His father died of yellow fever, in October 1793, having taken that disease in the discharge of a duty voluntarily assumed by him, as one of the committee of citizens, who, during that period of pestilence and calamity, bestowed their labors, and in some cases sacrificed their lives, in the active charity which the emergency required, from the few who had the courage to bestow it. John Sergeant was educated in the schools of the University of Pennsylvania, till the spring of 1794, when he went to Princeton College, where he graduated in September 1795.

After leaving college, he entered the compting-house of Messrs. ELLISON and JOHN PEROT, with the intention of qualifying himself to become a merchant.

Having changed that intention, in March 1797, he entered the office of the late JARED INGERSOLL, and commenced the regular study of the law.

In July, 1799, he was admitted to practice in the Common Pleas of Philadelphia County. At that time—before the age of twenty—his active life commenced.

His advance in the profession was rapid. In 1800, soon after the first election of GOVERNOR MCKEAN, he was appointed to prosecute for the Commonwealth in Chester County, and during that and several subsequent years, he prosecuted also in Philadelphia County, and occasionally in the Mayor's Court of the City of Philadelphia.

In 1802 he was appointed by MR. JEFFERSON a Commissioner of Bankrupts.

The first occasion which afforded an opportunity for bringing into notice his remarkable ability, was the argument of a case in the year 1806, before the Supreme Court of this State, involving a highly important, and at that time with us, a novel question of law. His argument as junior counsel in that cause, drew from the Bench a well deserved and unusual compliment, and from that period his professional advancement became accelerated. He soon took his station among the foremost, and before long, in the very first rank of the Bar, where he maintained his position, during the greater part of half a century. Without naming his contemporaries of his own age,—some of whom are yet living, and with whom the ability of competition was of itself an honor—an idea may be formed of the professional stature of that day, from the names of some of his seniors, who occupied the most prominent places at the Philadelphia Bar—

then as always, the first in the United States.—**WILLIAM LEWIS, JARED INGERSOLL, EDWARD TILGHMAN, WILLIAM RAWLE, ALEXANDER J. DALLAS, and ALEXANDER WILCOCKS** were then in the full maturity of life, and of professional vigour. It was among these that he was to win his way, and he succeeded.

MR. SERGEANT'S professional career, honorable and laborious, was faithfully, diligently and successfully pursued, almost to the close of his life. It would not be appropriate here to dwell upon its details.

As a counsellor, he was cautious, deliberate and safe. As an advocate, he was equally effective in addressing a jury, and in arguing a question of law before the court. His wonderful faculty of illustration, the clearness and soundness of his logic, together with his earnest and unaffected zeal, rendered him powerful under all circumstances.

He was scrupulously fair in his practice, and while he took no undue advantage of his adversary, on the other hand, he discarded no fact or principle, however apparently trifling, which could be legitimately used for the benefit of his client.

His integrity in this, as in every other pursuit of life in which he engaged, was always perfect. It is not wonderful that such qualities commanded, as they deserved, success.

His course as a public servant was equally distinguished.

In the year 1805, he was elected a member of the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, for the City of Philadelphia—the first of a long series of tokens of the confidence and regard of his fellow citizens. In 1806, the office of “Recorder of the City of Philadelphia,” was tendered to him by GOVERNOR MCKEAN, which he declined. That office had been successively held by MR. WILCOCKS and MR. DALLAS, immediately before the offer which has been referred to. Having declined a re-election in 1806, MR. SERGEANT was in 1807 again elected to the Legislature. During the session of 1807–8, he was chairman of the Committee on “Roads and inland navigation,” and in that capacity, reported the first act giving the direct aid of the State to internal improvements, a cause which he had always deeply at heart, and to which he never refused his assistance. The amount appropriated was nearly \$200,000, and it was applied to the construction of turnpike roads.

To us at present, the sum and the purpose may appear insignificant, but it was the beginning of that system, which has since led to such vast results, both of expenditure and utility. The State at that time numbered scarcely more than one-fourth of its present population. In wealth the disproportion was