

An American Servant: Portrait of a Man from the Era of the American Revolution

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"He had examined with great caution; he deliberated with calmness and discretion; and, when he decided, it was done for the best of reasons...few men, of any age, ever possessed more entirely the confidence of their fellow citizens, than Roger Sherman; and few men ever improved it for the general good with a more uniform approbation of their fellow men."¹ This poignant statement describes Roger Sherman extremely well, and captures the essence of the American servant as one who works hard for the betterment of all. When his numerous accomplishments and activities are examined and added to the fact that he was the only individual to sign the colonial Declaration of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the United States Constitution, there can be no doubt that Roger Sherman was truly an American servant.

Born April 19, 1721, Roger Sherman was a quiet, self-taught Connecticut man who got his first taste of public life at the age of 33 when he was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly as the Representative from New Milford in 1755. He served a total of five years (1755, 1757-1761) in the Connecticut General Assembly, which gave him invaluable experience that he would take to the State Legislature three years later. There he served as the Representative from New Haven from 1764-1766. After holding these "preparatory" positions, where he no doubt learned the importance of compromise and the needs of the citizens of Connecticut, Sherman took a break from making law as he received an appointment as the Judge of the Superior Court of Connecticut, a position he would hold from May of 1766 to 1789.

His next encounter with the political arena presented a far greater challenge, a challenge that would draw upon the skills he had perfected in his first positions as a member of the legislative body of his colony. In 1774, Sherman was named a member to the first Continental Congress, where he presented himself on the first day the body met. There, Sherman would ultimately deny the supremacy of Parliament and sign the Association Agreement.² This agreement established a total boycott through the means of non-importation, non-exportation, and non-consumption accords.³ These seemingly simple acts show that Mr. Sherman was in favor of an American nation, a nation with a government that valued the individual spirit and gave the people the power to regulate those who possessed the power over them.

The following year he returned as a member of the Second Continental Congress where he served in several vital capacities. First, he was a member of the Board of War and Ordinance, which oversaw the needs of the newly formed Continental Army.

Even more importantly, however, Roger Sherman was one of five delegates who served on the Committee to write the Declaration of Independence, the document that officially created the new nation. In the following years, he would also serve on the committee that wrote the Articles of Confederation, America's first government.

Roger Sherman's service as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention is perhaps what he is most well-known for. One could argue, in fact, that he saved the nation by proposing and promoting what would become known as the Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention. Many long days were spent debating the issue of representation in the new Congress, and without his compromise, it may be very likely that the Constitution and the United States would not exist today, because without a compromise, no agreement would have been reached, no new government would have been formed, and the nation would have crumbled.

As a fitting tribute to his efforts, Roger Sherman was elected to the first House of Representatives in 1789 and became a Senator in 1791, where he assisted with the Bill of Rights, a document designed to keep the government from infringing on the rights of the people. He was a public servant to the end, dying in 1793 at the age of seventy-two while still holding public office.⁴

This is what makes Roger Sherman the true American servant. He constantly worked toward creating a better government and a better nation that would serve his fellow citizens. Throughout his work as a public servant he gained the respect of his colleagues, without which his proposals would have had held little weight. He never asked for much recognition, he simply wanted the satisfaction of knowing that he had a part in creating a government that would truly serve the needs of the people it governed.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ N Dwight, *Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1895), 80.

² Bernard Bailyn, *The Debate on the Constitution: Part One* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1993), 1037.

³ Available Online, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h650.html>, January 30, 2007.

⁴ All of the biographical information and dates concerning Roger Sherman were obtained from two excellent volumes: *The Signers of the Declaration of Independence* by N. Dwight and *The Debate on the Constitution: Part One*, published by The Library of America.