

Sam Chase, 'bacon-face,' spreading spirit of revolution



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By HAL BURDETT

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Samuel Chase's Tory enemies in Annapolis called him "Bacon Face," no doubt because of his florid complexion that suggested he imbibed excessively.

But this lawyer-patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence was called much worse.

In fact, the conservative mayor and alderman of Annapolis proclaimed him a "busy, restless incendiary, a ringleader of mobs, a foul-mouthed and inflaming son of discord and faction, a common disrupter of the public tranquility, and a promoter of the lawless excesses of the multitudes."

The description had the clearing of truth. But Chase was not one to shrink from such a challenge; among the milder invective he unleashed upon his critics was that they were "despicable tools of power, emerged from obscurity and basking in proprietary sunshine."

Sam Chase did not limit his rebelliousness to name-calling. He was a vigorous activist who did much to spread the spirit of the American Revolution throughout Maryland.

Came to Annapolis

Tutored by his father, the Rev. Thomas Chase, who was a scholar of Hebrew and Latin in England, before settling in Baltimore, Samuel at 18 had the equivalent of a college education in the classics when he arrived in Annapolis in 1759 to study law in the offices of John Hammond and John Hall.

Within five years, he became a member of the Maryland General Assembly, where he promptly joined the opposition to the royal governor and supported such measures as regulating clerical salaries, which cut his own father's salary in half.

He also aligned himself with the extremist Sons of Liberty, whose violent reaction to the British Parliament's Stamp Act of 1765 was responsible for arousing the wrath of the Annapolis city fathers.

When Parliament later repealed the Stamp Act, Chase addressed these words to his fellow colonists:

"I admit, gentlemen, that I was one of those committed to the flames, in effigy, the stamp distributor of this province, and who openly disputed the parliamentary right to tax the colonies, while you skulked in your houses, some of you asserting the parliamentary right, and esteeming the stamp act as a beneficial law. Others of you meanly grumbled in your corners, not daring to speak out your sentiments."

He continued to voice his opposition to the tyranny of Great Britain and in 1774 he became a member of the Maryland Committee of Correspondence and a delegate to the First Continental Congress. The hawkish Chase was dissatisfied when that august body decided to seek

peaceful solutions to the grievances with England.

Long before the colonists decided to take up arms, he was making fiery speeches in Congress publicly declaring that he "owed no allegiance to the King of Great Britain." Such sentiments flustered his more conservative colleagues.

Supported Washington

The meeting of the Continental Congress in 1775, after fighting had begun at Concord and Lexington, was more to his liking. There he urged a total embargo on trade with Great Britain, which he contended would speedily force the oppressors into submission or bankruptcy. Voting for the organization of the Continental Army, he was a leading supporter of appointing George Washington as its commander-in-chief.

Chase won the admiration of the Continental Congress when he took the floor to fearlessly expose one of its members, John Joachim Zubly, as a traitor. The Marylander learned that Zubly had been writing to the royal governor of Georgia about the Congress' consideration of independence for the colonies. Zubly managed to escape to Georgia where he was protected by the proprietary governor.

In 1776, Chase accompanied Charles Carroll, Benjamin Franklin and John Carroll on an unsuccessful mission aimed at enlisting the support of Canada on the side of the American colonists. When he returned to Philadelphia in June, Chase discovered that the instructions of Maryland delegates to Congress prevented them from voting for independence.

Stumped for break

He hastened to Maryland where he stumped extensively before gatherings of farmers and villagers, imploring them to let the legislature know that they wanted the instructions changed. His efforts succeeded and he returned to Philadelphia in time to sign the Declaration of Independence on July 4th.

Chase continued to serve in Congress until 1778 when it was discovered that he used inside information obtained as a member of Congress to make a profit on the sale of flour to the army.

He returned to Annapolis where he continued to serve in the state legislature and practice law. Once on a trip to Baltimore, he attended a meeting of a local debating society where he became impressed with the oratorical skills of a young apprentice pharmacist. Learning that the young man had no funds to pay for his law studies, Chase brought him to Annapolis to study law under his personal guidance. The young man, William Pinkey, later served as a diplomat, a United States senator and Attorney General of the United States.

Chase, whose first wife, Anne Baldwin, of Annapolis, died in 1778 after 16 years of marriage, met and married Hannah Kitty Giles while on a mission to London in 1784. He failed, however, at the original purpose of the trip which was to recover some \$800,000 owed to the colony of Maryland by the Bank of England. Thirteen years later William Pinkney, while serving as U.S. Commissioner to England, collected the debt.

Became conservative

As the years progressed, Chase, the onetime flaming revolutionist, became more and more conservative. By 1787, he was an active and outspoken Federalist. He was at the vanguard of the opposition to

the proposed United States Constitution when it was brought before the Maryland Convention for consideration. However, he had lost much of his popularity and influence by that time and the state convention voted overwhelmingly to ratify the document in 1788.

That same year he was appointed judge of the newly established criminal court of Baltimore and later received an appointment as chief justice of the general court of Maryland. The General Assembly attempted to remove him from office and although

the motion failed to get the necessary two-thirds vote, a majority of the Assembly felt that his holding two judgeships violated the state constitution.

President Washington submitted Chase's name as an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States on January 27, 1796 and on the following day the nomination was confirmed.

Backed sedition laws

During the administration of his old friend John Adams, Chase was a firm advocate of the sedition laws, that forbade public expressions of opposition

to the law and government of the United States. Adams had used these laws to stifle political opposition from Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party.

On May 2, 1803, Justice Chase, appearing before a Baltimore Grand Jury, denounced the adoption of manhood suffrage in Maryland, claiming that it would convert "our Republican Constitution...into a mobocracy." He was also reported to have assailed the new Jefferson Administration as "weak, pusillanimous, relaxed."

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Through the efforts of President Jefferson, impeachment proceedings were brought against Chase and got under way in February, 1805. The key question became whether the term "high crimes and misdemeanors" could be extended to Congress's interpretation of "good behavior." A majority of the Senate found him guilty on two of the charges, but because a two-thirds plurality was needed for conviction he was acquitted.

Chase remained a member of the Supreme Court until his death at the age of 70 on June 19, 1811.

More than six feet tall and largely proportioned, Chase was described by A. J. Beveridge in his "Life of John Marshall" in this manner: "His face was broad and massive, his complexion a brownish red. 'Bacon face' was a nickname applied to him by the Maryland bar. His head was large, his brow wide, and his hair thick and white..."

Joseph Storey, who filled Chase's vacancy on the Supreme Court after his death, described his predecessor as a man whose "manners are coarse, and in appearance harsh; but in reality he abounds with good humor... In person, in manners, in unwieldy strength, in severity of reproof, in real tenderness of heart, and above all in intellect, he is the living, I had almost said the exact, image of Samuel Johnson."

A strong mind

More than two decades after Chase died, Chief Justice John Marshall wrote of his former colleague:

"He possessed a strong mind, great legal knowledge, and was a valuable judge, whose loss was seriously felt by his survivors. He was remarkable also for his vivacity and his companionable qualities. He said many things which were much admired at the time, but I have not treasured them in my memory so as to be able to communicate them."

In Annapolis, a reminder of this controversial patriot exists in the Chase-Lloyd House which stands on a plot of land at what is now the corner of King George Street and Maryland Avenue. Sam Chase purchased the property for 100 pounds sterling in 1769 and erected the three-story house on it. The height of the first floor above the ground allows room for a huge wine cellar with a barrel vault of brick that runs the full depth of the house.

It is uncertain whether Chase, who sold the property in 1771 to Edward Lloyd for 504 pounds sterling, ever occupied the house. But the building came back into the Chase family in 1847 and it has borne the Chase name ever since.