



JOHN A. KASSON

1822-1910

Diplomat — Legislator — Lawyer — Author

From a portrait in oil by Robt. Hinckley in the gallery of
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JOHN A. KASSON

Early Contrasting Environments*

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In the early autumn of 1842, as the chill winds descended from the North Pole, 20-year-old John A. Kasson—future Iowa politician and U.S. diplomat—shoved off from the Burlington docks. Having just graduated from the University of Vermont at Burlington, he, like many other young Vermonters of his day, was headed south to tutor the children of a Virginia planter, if some more attractive job did not turn up en route. Self-confident and gregarious despite his somewhat cloistered and restricted life, this slender, sprightly young man with an independent spirit was filled with ambition, and as he charted his first fortune-seeking course his thoughts eagerly anticipated a broader view of a wider world. Aglow with curiosity, he was determined to observe and learn as much as possible about people and things. Perhaps this voyage would dispel some of the clouds of doubt in his mind as to his choice of a career.

While John had composed transcendental poetry and

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extolled American nationality for four years in college, the pall of the depression had worn off. The time to go to school had been propitious, and now the time was opportune for a young college graduate to seek his fortune. For in America an old era had closed and the roaring forties rushed in a new one with illimitable opportunities, but also staggering problems which would put to a severe test the democratic process he had so loudly praised in his themes and orations. In this decade youthful, self-conscious America swaggered westward across the continent toward horizons which never seemed to vanish. In rapid succession came the annexation of Texas, the Mexican war, the acquisition of California and Oregon, and the sizzling gold rush of '49, tingling patriotic pulses, releasing dynamic energy, and at the same time creating in the Republic uneven sectional growth, bitter sectional animosities, and splinter political parties in which ambitious young men might rapidly rise.

Power continued to fall from the hands of professionally-selected leaders into those of popularly-elected representatives from the ranks. Great accumulations were being amassed through industry and finance. In the East, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, to which young men were being lured, were becoming famous, great cities of wealth and opportunity, of prigs and prudes, of fashion and reputed iniquity. The swelling West was persistently demanding more attention to its needs and a greater voice in national affairs. And the fateful question of slavery was being projected more and more into the national limelight. There was talk of cotton lords in the South and wage slaves in the North. In the South territorial and economic growth did not bring social ferment and sharp deviation in men's mode of living and thinking as in the East and Northwest. Here at least the ruling classes continued to cherish old institutions and to emphasize such personal values as men's honor and manners at the expense of the ideals of equality and pub-

lic education. Slavery in Virginia, considered as a curse by prominent leaders a decade before, was now becoming regarded as a positive good.

In this era people read penny newspapers, listened to lectures on animal magnetism, had their heads examined by phrenologists, and swallowed tons of patent medicines. In political campaigns crowds of sixty thousand or more colorfully paraded and chanted in honor of their candidates. The rich dressed richly and the social élite watered at Newport, Saratoga, and the Virginia Springs. As foreign observers journeyed from section to section they were impressed with the diverse nature of American society where a great mass of people were in constant transition. They described a land of crudities, local jealousies, and paradoxes, but also of optimism and easy opportunity where men by working hard could acquire wealth and position. And however numerous the contradictions, the future held bright prospects for John A. Kasson.

On his journey southward, unworldly young John, impressed with his high university training, met in New York George Perkins Marsh, a prominent Burlington lawyer and politician, from whom he received letters of recommendation, and there negotiated for a job. And though he was unable to procure it, he saw enough of New York to consider it "the most corrupt, illiberal, and deceitful city in all North America." Passing on through Philadelphia he was interviewed in Baltimore by the authorities of a private school, who wanted him to take charge of the whole French department for some eighty students. In spite of his vow in Burlington never to turn down a job "from want of an assumption of ability," he felt incompetent to handle so much French. Moreover, he thought they really wanted a "jack-of-all-trades at a paltry salary" in this school which for some reason he did "not deem one of the first order." In the evening he heard a famous professor lecture on the beauty of the English language. The lecture, he thought, was a mass of "tawdry orna-

ments," which "intelligent men" would consider a farce. But Baltimore itself was more pleasant than he had expected. Though black swine roamed the streets, the city was clean, and "whites, blacks, and pigs" were all "quite polite" in contrast to the selfish inhabitants of New York.

Going on to Washington he found a quiet city and few attractions during the recess of congress. Its few magnificent self-conscious, public buildings and isolated private houses were in sharp contrast to Baltimore's red brick and marble structures with their tinkling fountains. It was plain to him that Washington's resources were "those of public patronage"; and the paintings in the nation's capitol and library were "all matter of fact" such as an American artist would select and "an American people approve." Only on the Baptism of Pocahontas did the painter show real genius. From "select circles" in Washington he picked up gossip concerning the Distribution bill, and he learned that the old editor of the *Burlington Sentinel* had "quarters worth \$1,000" in the Post Office department.

In the late days of September he journeyed on down the Potomac to the Big Bend at Aquia creek, the steamboat landing for Fredericksburg, Virginia, and made his way through this town of some 4,000, and wound up at Hagley, the home of John Taliaferro, congressman and planter, whom Kasson came to idealize as personifying the admirable traits of a Virginia gentleman. Now his ship had "been driven into a temporary harbor, the sails furled," and he began his "Notes on Virginia" which, he facetiously wrote, were "doubtless destined to rival those of Jefferson."¹ For the next nine months, in long, gossipy letters, responsive young Kasson kept

¹ Kasson, Hagley near Fredericksburg, to his mother, 27 Sept., 1842. This is the first of six letters upon which the story of Kasson's Virginia experience is primarily based. The originals are in the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, as gifts from Misses Eunice and Katharine Wead and Mr. Frederick W. Wead. See also the same letters with editorial notes and a few deletions: Edward Younger, "A Yankee Reports on Virginia, 1842-1843," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LVI (October, 1948), 408-430; S. J. Quinn, *History of Fredericksburg, Va.* (Richmond, 1908), p. 67.

his family posted on Virginians and incidentally revealed many of his own attitudes and aspirations. His "Notes" covered such widely varied subjects as Virginia gentlemen and ladies, slavery and agriculture, politics and mesmerism, religion and education, holidays and weddings, feminine laces and spencers, ice cream and "egg-&-og."

Though the Taliaferros received him warmly and hospitably, desiring him to remain with them, there were unsatisfactory aspects in the situation: Old John Taliaferro's two grandchildren were "quite backward," he informed his mother, apparently meaning that for their ages they were retarded; and it would be unpleasant for him "to go back and teach the elements of a youthful education." Moreover, the salary of \$150 and board and washing were not attractive, although he might have had several hours each day to read law in old John's library. So Kasson, using a letter from G. P. Marsh to George Tucker—a former congressman, an eminent man of letters, and now a professor at the University of Virginia—found a tutoring position in Albemarle county paying \$250 plus board and washing. Before his departure he wrote his brother to find another tutor for the Taliaferros. And he asked his brother Charles to settle with Frederick Billings, a former schoolmate and the future railroad magnate, a small debt against him from the Society of Religious Inquiry.²

As cool nights and crisp autumn breezes sent tawny leaves fluttering to the ground in late November, Kasson traveled by rail and stage to Charlottesville, an easy-going little town sprawling in a deep intervale between wooded foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. As the crow flew this was some sixty miles southwest of north-tidewater Fredericksburg and about the same distance straight north from Hampden-Sidney college where John's former university professor, James Marsh, had spent profitable years.

² Kasson, Hagley near Fredericksburg, to his brother Charles, 21 Oct., 1842, Wead Coll.

Of all his adventures thus far he must have anticipated this one most eagerly. For Albemarle county in the Virginia Piedmont was noted for the University of Virginia, its great men, genial living, and salubrious climate. In Burlington, Dr. Marsh had told him that it was "the most delightful section and temperature of Virginia, even the Union." Fredericksburg had been too near the river to suit Kasson, but at Charlottesville he expected "a mixture of salt-water and mountain air" to make "a proper medium temperature."³

John undoubtedly had heard much about the galaxy of distinguished leaders produced by this community in which he was now to make his temporary home. People of Albemarle could boast of their presidents, senators, congressmen, supreme court justices, governors, and diplomats. They could point with pride to their author of the Declaration of Independence; their father of the Constitution (who though from an adjacent county, had been so intimate with Jefferson and the university that they claimed him); their father of the Monroe Doctrine; their conqueror of the Old Northwest; and their trail blazer to the Pacific Ocean. The county reeked with history significant to state and nation, and the atmosphere was pervasive with the spirit of lustrous statesmen.⁴

When Kasson reached Charlottesville, fresh out of college himself, he immediately visited the university, a "most enchanting place," he described it, with its "beautiful sloping lawn" surrounded by professors' homes connected together by an arcade and set off at one end by a classical rotunda containing library and lecture rooms. All in one day he attended a few lectures, became acquainted with three or four professors, and visited at length with two of them.

Professor George Tucker invited him into his home, but John, hasty in his judgment at his age, as he was

³ Ibid.; Mary Rawlings, ed., *Early Charlottesville . . . 1828-1874*, (Charlottesville, 1942), *passim*.

⁴ P. A. Bruce, *History of the University of Virginia, 1819-1919* (N.Y., 1920), I, 103-04, 110-115.

later to advise young men not to be, apparently did not enjoy the visit. Mrs. Tucker, he wrote his sister, was a "vain, affected, and deceitful woman . . . in possession of her fourth husband," while Professor Tucker, in possession of his third wife, was "vain and selfish." Though they "would like to entertain the rich and proud," Kasson thought they had "no genuine hospitality in a single vein" despite "their display of silver plate and fashion." Tucker was then widely known as a lawyer, author, and legislator. His urbanity, vivid imagination, sparkling sense of humor, and quick, emotional disposition were not always appreciated even by his faculty colleagues. It is not therefore surprising that sensitive young Kasson was unfavorably impressed with him. On the other hand Judge Henry St. George Tucker, popular professor of law, impressed him as a "true gentleman" whose acquaintance he valued highly.⁵

Student life at the University of Virginia presented some sharp contrasts to Kasson's college days at the University of Vermont. Early experiments in Jefferson's university with mild student government, administered by student censors and foreign professors, proved disappointing. When high-strung and fun-loving youths from individualistic families of high social rank, where drinking and gaming were usual, found themselves in uniform and subjected to elaborate rules of discipline, they struck back; and the ten years preceding Kasson's visit were fraught with riots, duels, and violent pranks. One professor was horsewhipped and murdered before the honor system, initiated by Henry St. George Tucker, the very session of Kasson's visit, solved the problem of discipline. Moreover, Jefferson's hope that the bright sons of indigent parents might enroll in numbers proved illusory. Instead, most of the students came from the social rank of the well-to-do in Virginia and the lower

⁵ Kasson, Keelona near Charlottesville to his sister Maria, 22 Nov., 1842, Wead Coll.; Sketch of Tucker by Broadus Mitchell in *D.A.B.*, XIX, 28-30; Malcolm Lester, *George Tucker: His Early Life and Public Service, 1775-1825* (M. A. Thesis, U. Va., 1946), *passim.*; Gates, *Men of Mark*, II, 86.

South, creating the popular impression that it was an institution of the socially-inclined wealthy.⁶

John Kasson was shocked. "You never heard of such extravagance," he reported to Charles. "One (student) spent \$1,400.00 in 4 or 5 months; and a thousand per session (10 months) I believe is quite usual. A great many high-blood Southrons resort here from all the Southern states."⁷ He probably did not know that officials of the university had been alarmed at its reputation as a "seminary of the wealthy" for fear among other reasons that taxpayers and the general assembly would not support it.⁸

Vowing to return to the university and get better acquainted with Judge Henry St. George Tucker, John took the red dirt road which wound east and south through a steep gap, separating Jefferson's Monticello on the left from Carter's Mountain on the right. A mile farther he passed Ashlawn, former home of James Monroe, and then turning south behind Carter's Mountain, he entered a cozy, wooded community interspersed with small plantations three or four miles apart. One of these plantations, ten miles from Charlottesville, was Keelona, the home of Isaac White, whose children Kasson was to tutor. From here he could see the low, wooded summit of Green Mountain, the southwestern fringe of the Carter's Mountain neighborhood. Within the general vicinity were some half dozen other New England tutors.

For the next eight months Kasson here lived among slave-holders and broadened his background in a genteel society of easy comfort, leisurely living, and intellectual vigor—the sunset glow of a golden era of antebellum Albemarle social intercourse and private entertaining still influenced by Jefferson's cosmopolitan spirit. He came into contact with such people prominent in the affairs of the state and nation as the Carters

⁶ Abernethy, *U. Va.*, 9-12; Bruce, *U. Va.*, II, 246-336.

⁷ Kasson, Keelona near Charlottesville, to his brother Charles, 4 Feb., 1843, Wead Coll.

⁸ Bruce, *U. Va.*, II, 70.

of Redlands, the Coleses of Estouteville and Enniscorthy, the Randolphs of Sharon, the Riveses of Sherwood, and the Stevensons later of Blenheim.⁹ He was keenly interested in the mode of life of these people living in their famous ancestral homes. Sometimes critical, sometimes complimentary, he was always observant, and apparently learned to mix well with them. In the end he found himself liking them. Though mildly critical of their institution of slavery, his views toward ameliorating the problem, even when his people were arrayed against these people in arms, were characterized by moderation. And impressionable young Kasson was plainly impressed with those personal and social attributes invariably associated with old Virginia gentlemen and statesmen. They were not only traits to be admired but also to be acquired.

At Keelona John "fell into the embraces" of a "petulant . . . pack" of seven children, the tallest running up to six feet two. One was too young for school, but two from a neighboring family made eight to be instructed. They were all "kind and clever" toward him and two or three were "passably good scholars." The Whites were Baptists who once had lived at a more famous residence called Farmington. Keelona which they now occupied was an old log house enlarged and clapboarded. It was an unpretentious building, one and a half stories high, L-shaped, and low-ceilinged. John occupied the attic space where his head barely cleared the ridgepole and where cold, wintry winds (even then considered unusual by Albemarlans) provided plenty of fresh air so anxiously recommended by the family when he left Burlington. Old man White, who owned some forty slaves and farmed about 800 acres, was tall, lean and "tight," but Mrs. White, who

⁹ Mary Rawlings, *Albemarle of Other Days* (Charlottesville, 1925), pp. 109-140, and *Ante-Bellum Albemarle* (Charlottesville, 1935), *passim*; Edgar Woods, *Albemarle County in Virginia* (Charlottesville, 1901), *passim*; Alexander Brown, *The Cabells and Their Kin* (Richmond, 1939), pp. 479-80; A. G. Coles, *The Coles Family of Virginia* (New York, 1931), pp. 641 ff.

mended John's clothes, was fatter and hence more "liberal."¹⁰

Betty White, the oldest child, must have been a tantalizing student for a 20-year-old masculine tutor. This popular and marriageable young lady with large black eyes and raven hair was "well bred and well disposed" as Kasson described her. An accomplished pianist she played for him the "magnificent" *Soldier's Burial* and the "agreeably funny" *Lucy Long*. But however great her charms might have been he seems not unhappy when she told him to regard her as a sister or when later she was married. To her John spoke jestingly for his brother Charles but not for himself. Apparently at this stage of his life he was not wife-hunting. Girls were things not to be courted but vain, gossipy things lightly to be gossiped with and about. Women the world over were "vanity and vexation of the spirit" and men of sense should leave them alone, he half-humorously reported to his sister. He was content to describe meticulously for his brother Betty's attire as she departed for a dance dressed in a short-sleeved white satin gown covered richly with laces and tassels, a jewel on her breast and orange blossoms in her raven black hair.

She took him here and there in the neighborhood to dinner parties where he realized his ambition to meet the leading families and other interesting people. At one affair he conversed with small and witty Elizabeth Mitchell, the young daughter of a famous Philadelphia physician and former Virginian whose experiments in mesmerism she told him about. In time she was to become the intellectual companion of the young minister, Phillips Brooks of later great fame; and though as a spinster she was to die of a cruel, long-suffering disease, John Kasson many years later was to find an interesting friend in her brother, Weir Mitchell, eminent neurologist and popular novelist of the Gilded

¹⁰ Kasson, Keelona near Charlottesville, to his sister Maria, 22 Nov., 1842, Wead Coll.; Albemarle County Records, Deed Books, Vols. 28, 29, 31, 38, 42, 44.

Age. At another party he met an exciting widow, Mrs. Margaret (Pollard) Henderson, whose husband had committed suicide. The niece of United States Senator William Cabell Rives, she had received "the address of 3 or 4 foreign ministers" and under the pen name of Maia she wrote "good prose and very good poetry" for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. John found her an excellent conversationalist except for a "little drawl." She owned a fine estate and John "putting romance and reality together" humorously recommended her to the attention of his brother.¹¹

Other subjects were equally as interesting to John as women. As he and Betty trotted their horses over the countryside and chatted with neighbors, his keen eye observed that times were shockingly hard. As on Vermont farms the soil had grown thin and unproductive because of careless and wasteful agricultural practices. And the "niggers," though uniformly treated with kindness, "are as lazy as the land is lean," he informed his brother. Moreover, the slaves (called servants in Virginia) "consumed all that could be produced" from the prevailing crops of wheat, corn, and tobacco. Farmers therefore were leaving the county for the virgin soils of the West. There was an exodus to Missouri, where Isaac White, embarrassed at insufficient cash to pay Kasson till summer harvest, thought of going.

Some families had already freed their slaves and since the time of Jefferson there had been a strong anti-slavery feeling in the county. Some twenty years previously Edward Coles from a nearby plantation had loaded his household and slaves on wagons and emigrated to free soil Illinois, emancipating his slaves and becoming the anti-slavery governor of the state. Some still contemplated emancipation; others suspiciously regarded Yankee tutors as abolitionists, and Kasson's

¹¹ Kasson, Keelona, to his brother Charles, 27 Dec., 1842 and 4 Feb., 1843, Wead Coll.; A. R. Burr, *Weir Mitchell* . . . (N.Y., 1929), pp. 33, 227-230, 161; Earnest Earnest, S. *Weir Mitchell* . . . (Philadelphia, 1950), pp. 11, 65-68; Weir Mitchell to Kasson, 25 Dec., 1895, Wead Coll.

friend, a young Yale graduate, was dismissed from a plantation a few miles away because he meddled with the slaves. John himself was apparently more circumspect though he had remarked at dinner on the same plantation that he "could not but admire . . . a servant in the act of seeking its freedom." An attempt to escape for so noble an aspiration "could not be reprehensible." But John's observations of the slave system in Virginia must not have made him a rabid anti-slavery man as was later claimed in Iowa and Vermont, for in time he himself was to own slaves.¹²

Kasson thought gossip was the main topic of conversation in Albemarle "higher society" where the "want of religious feeling and religious influence" betrayed itself. He also considered the colleges and high schools inferior. Then why, he wondered, had Virginians become in the past such sound men in public life? Setting himself to the task of answering this question he revealed some of his own aspirations.

The genuine, old Virginian with his "undeviating good sense" made no effort to display himself as young men frequently did in the North, according to John Kasson. Rather, he had a "natural air of kindness — not an air of patronism — but of truest civility" that made one feel completely at home. Into official relations he carried personal ease and the absence of uncertainty and excitement, making personal and political friends and waxing great with the occasion. These qualities, declared John, would hardly be termed "good common sense" in New England but they were in reality "a sort of universal instinctive benevolence and intelligence, which made a Washington, Madison, and Jefferson." Gratefully responsive to the courtesy accorded him, Kasson resolved "that if Providence ever favors me with a roof large enough to cover two, the scriptural injunction to use hospitality shall be remembered among my most prominent virtues." And furthermore in the future he would lend a helping hand to aspiring

¹² Kasson to his brother Charles, 21 Oct., 1842 and 4 Feb., 1843, Wead Coll.; Rawlings, *Albemarle of Other Days*, pp. 133-36.

young men who at "the beginning of the race" were "more ardent in their gratitude" and remembered kindness longer than any other age. Old John Taliaferro of Hagley, who let him use his congressional frank when postage was high and who had lost thousands of dollars serving others, was Kasson's ideal "worthy to be my example" as he put it. He was so deeply impressed with Taliaferro that a decade later, as a bright young lawyer from St. Louis, he paid him a call in Washington.

Virginians were more "epicurean" than in the North where men's heads were filled "with business and nothing but business." The ladies demanded "ease and elegance in manner," which John thought he had sacrificed to hard study in college. Therefore, he informed his brother, he was applying himself to the "lesson of conversation" which he "sturdily refused at home." Virginians also paid much attention to personal appearance and soon Kasson was buying a new overcoat worth six dollars despite his scanty supply of cash. He ended his chapter "on the construction of great men in Virginia" with a statement significant in explaining the development of a man later noted for his urbanity and polite manners: ". . . there seems no place for learning *true* politeness like the society of the old-school Virginians, and if a year's residence could teach it to me beyond forgetfulness, I should secure to myself a valuable recompense for the time."¹³

Certainly here was good training for a budding diplomat, but more dubious was its value for the rough and tumble politics of the West, say Iowa, where unpolished personalities were frequently more popular.

And John's preference for politics and law began to emerge during his Virginia sojourn. He showed a keen interest in his brother's political activities at home. He heard that Charles D. Kasson had become a colonel in the state militia, that he stood at the head "in business" of the largest bar in Vermont, and that

¹³ Kasson to his brother Charles, 22 Nov., 1842; 27 Dec., 1842; 4 Feb., 1843; 12 June, 1843, Wead Coll.

he was contemplating the establishment of a newspaper in order "to break up old cliques" and break down "worthless newspapers." Both Charles and his law partner Lyman were deeply immersed in Vermont politics, and John eagerly anticipated their attending the next National Democratic convention. When John learned that efforts were being made to line up delegates for Buchanan he was highly pleased, for he himself was already corresponding with an intimate of the Pennsylvanian. Such correspondence, he wrote, "might not be in vain for the individual interest" of the correspondents if Buchanan were nominated. When Charles intimated that either Lyman or himself might come to Virginia on a political mission, John urged the value of a visit to the Virginia Springs. He himself felt "compelled" to visit the Springs ostensibly because of "salt" rheumatism, but also undoubtedly because the South's social and political upper crust resorted there. He heard from "select circles" in Albemarle county that John Calhoun had "overleaped" himself politically. He kept abreast of national affairs from the *New York Evening Post*, which came to him from Burlington "like an old friend."¹⁴

An old acquaintance wrote him from Kentucky that he had given up a one-time fondly-cherished theological career for law and found the latter attractive. As Kasson approached his twenty-first birthday he weighed carefully his own professional aptitudes. A theological career would perpetuate his "bilious temperament of mind," he explained to Charles, while law would have a contrary tendency. Moreover, his "cranial inclinations" were antagonistic to pastoral duties which would bring him to his grave in ten years. If Conscience faintly whispered that Duty demanded the ministry, could not the influence and money acquired in a business life be expended "to produce results as beneficial as a direct appropriation of my person to the pulpit?" he queried. Charles still held open his offer to let him

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also letter for 21 Oct., 1842; Wead Coll.

"dabble in a legal way" in his office. And John declared, "I do *know* that with God's blessings I could succeed in law."¹⁵

As the soft, spring air of the Virginia Piedmont gave way to steaming hot sun in early July, 1843, John Kasson reluctantly bade farewell to the "pleasant" people around Keelona to whom he had become "quite attached." He was returning home now to commence his law studies presumably in Charles' office. In New York he would meet his brother Chester, who had drifted on down from Albany, and perhaps his sister Mary, who expected to visit Chester. At home he could exchange stories with his sister Maria, just returned from Mary Lyon's Mt. Holyoke seminary whose combination of the domestic work and literary department both she and John disliked.¹⁶ In Burlington he would perhaps hear that young men continued to go West and that a few of the more ambitious were turning their faces toward the East for careers in such cultural centers as Boston.

To John Kasson as he read law in his brother's office in the autumn of 1843 the lure of a more exciting life seemed irresistible. It was one thing to study law in Burlington, but to practice it there with Charles, as his family urged, was an entirely different matter. Instead of Vermont or the West, the cultural center of Boston beckoned him. When he laid bare his ambitions at home he met only opposition, and as winter approached he quietly slipped away without adieus. He had little money with him and his ultimate destination was vague.

Still pondering his fate he reached Boston, wandered aimlessly, and finally resolved to go to sea. Trodding from wharf to wharf, the gusty cold winds rushing in from the Atlantic, he could find employment only on an old schooner. As suspicious of the schooner's seaworthiness as the skipper was of Kasson's seamanship, he lost his ardor for a cruise, and as the New Year

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 Dec., 1842 and 4 Feb., 1843, Wead Coll.

¹⁶ Maria H. Kasson, Mt. Holyoke, to her mother and sister, 13 April and 2 May, 1843, in Smith College Women's Collection.

dawned he turned inland to Worcester, about forty miles to the west.¹⁷

Worcester, with its whitest of white buildings, looking as if they had been painted that morning, was a "pretty New England town," according to Charles Dickens, who visited there two years earlier. With a population of about 12,000 and the heart of a leading agricultural county, it was rapidly becoming a railroad center. More important to Kasson it was the most famous town in the state for prominent lawyers with the exception of Boston, and it was perhaps no accident that he made it his eventual destination. With him he carried a letter from the secretary of state of Vermont who recommended him as a "gentleman of pure character and of a reflective mind of much more than ordinary ability." If he had no letters from the well-known Marsh cousins of Burlington he could still use their names.¹⁸

On the same day of his arrival with only seventy-five cents in his pocket John entered the law office of Emory Washburn, "formerly an acquaintance of G. P. Marsh." Washburn had the largest law practice in Massachusetts west of Boston. Almost thirty years earlier he had attended college at Dartmouth with G. P. Marsh, James Marsh, and Rufus Choate. Soon he was to become a state judge, Whig governor, and finally a revered instructor of law at Harvard. With an even and sunny temper he made young people feel that they were the special object of his solicitous interest. John Kasson aspired in vain to fall heir eventually to his wide law practice which in time was inherited by another rising, young lawyer named George F. Hoar.

Soon after John entered Washburn's office, according

¹⁷ Kasson's own biographical sketch (typed manuscript) in Kasson Papers, Iowa State Dept. of History and Archives, Des Moines; *Iowa State Register* (W), 27 Aug., 1862.

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* . . . (London, 1842), pp. 78-9; George F. Hoar, *Autobiography for Seventy Years* (N.Y., 1903), I, 160-68; J. Mc. M. Shafter, Secy. of St. of Vt., to Whom It May Concern, 19 Jan., 1844, Aldrich Papers, Vol. II, Iowa State Dept. of History and Archives, Des Moines.

to a story later told in Iowa, a client requested advice during the absence of other members of the firm. Kasson gave it and charged two dollars. Washburn's junior partner soon returned and when John turned over the fee he coolly took it all to the keen disappointment of Kasson, whose seventy-five cents had disappeared.¹⁹

Hard pressed for cash John appealed to his brother for long-term loans rather than accept funds from his mother's savings. When he requested money the "merry mood" was seldom on him and his letters were "sad" and "depressed." Charles urged him to throw off "all such depressions" and promised funds, but only under certain stipulations which prompted John to fire back with an independence perhaps not surprising: ". . . one request for a favor without any legal obligation is enough for one man to make to another; and if declined there's an end of the matter with me. Take my bread but leave me the consciousness of well sustained sentiments of honor and it is bread enough." When he died, he declared, he wanted men to look upon his life stained by no "dishonorable act" nor "servile supplication." "And I ask you to watch me hereafter, when men begin to look at me, and mark if ever for the sake of place or prominence before the public . . . I am guilty of those things. . . . That word money has with me been a bitter thing," he grumbled on. "It has depressed my mind, deprived me of privileges, narrowed my thoughts and qualifications, excluded me from society, and sent shame into my face . . ."

Though he did not intend to use "that word" again he was determined henceforth to make his own decisions. ". . . Charles, I am weary, weary of opposition," he implored. Though he had always laid his plans before his family, they had never met with concurrence. Now he had to have approbation or nothing at all. He

¹⁹ Sketch of Washburn by Zechariah Chafee, Jr. in *D.A.B.*, XIX, 499; Hoar, *Autobiography*, I, 160-68; *The Western Life-Boat*, A. Monthly Magazine of Biography, History and Geography, XIV (Des Moines, 1872); Kasson; Worcester, to his brother Charles, 30 Jan., 1844, Wead Coll.

wanted his mother to know that he was "not going to be lost" as one of her letters implied. "By blessing of God," he confidently affirmed, "I am going to succeed, as in 5 years from this time she will most joyously acknowledge, and perhaps in three."

John Kasson surveyed the possibilities of a legal career in Worcester and found them good. Judge Charles Allen, a rising Free Soil politician, would soon resign from the bench and go into private practice inheriting the clients of Washburn who it was rumored was to be promoted to a judgeship. Kasson, unduly optimistic, hoped to become Allen's partner. As a successful lawyer in Worcester, he might in time move on to Boston taking his clients with him. In any event he considered Massachusetts with its six state courts and numerous Boston courts to offer advantages superior to those of any other New England state.²⁰ He could be admitted to the bar upon completing three years study; or better still, if he could pass a legal "inquisition . . . more or less severe" he could be admitted "as quick as Patrick Henry." It was an "impossible supposition," he informed his mother, that he would fail to pass the bar examinations.

Rejecting a proffered partnership in Vermont with his brother and giving his reasons, he disclosed his political ambitions and showed some insight as a political prophet:

" . . . to me it seems heinous to settle down in that little hilly state, and simultaneously resign all hopes of progress and preferment [sic.] To become a Whig I cannot; to surrender my democratic predilections I cannot, and I am unwilling to give up hopes of political advancement when the season shall come for it. Although this state is equally Whiggish, it will not be long before the third party will control matters here. There is a large class of first young men in Boston, and old men everywhere who are disconnected partially or totally from the Whig party, and entirely in favor of Abolition principles. And this Texas matter is making them spring up like toadstools in the rain. The Whigs are far more

²⁰ Kasson, Worcester, to his brother Charles, 19 Apr., 1844, Wead Coll.

ready to act with the Democrats than with themselves.

. . . Now and then a little Ohio fever comes over me."²¹

Kasson made these statements three days after the first telegraph line had brought word to Washington that in Baltimore the Democrats had nominated expansionist James K. Polk. A year earlier John Tyler had initiated a treaty for the annexation of Texas, and, at the moment Kasson wrote, it was under attack in the senate by Whigs and anti-slavery men generally. Polk's election in the fall, interpreted as a green light for annexation, and Tyler's forcing the treaty through congress the next spring by means of a joint resolution, stimulated in Massachusetts a closely-knit and aggressive anti-slavery faction in the Whig party. The leaders of this faction joined by Locofoco Democrats became the leaders of the later Free Soil and Republican parties.²² There is no evidence that John Kasson at this time held radical anti-slavery views, but his "democratic predilections" if carried to a logical end would eventually put him in the anti-slavery ranks. At the age of twenty-two, however, he was primarily interested in his law studies, in the performance of eminent lawyers, in the doings around Boston, and in whatever opportunities might arise out of the prevailing political flux.

Kasson was deeply impressed with Lemuel Shaw, state supreme justice and Webster Whig, whose greatness Oliver Wendell Holmes later said "lay in an accurate appreciation of the requirements of the community." A few years before Kasson saw him preside in Worcester, Shaw, in an epochal decision, had sounded the death knell for indictments of labor unions as criminal conspiracies. John thought his personal appearance remarkable "with his neck and mouth swallowed in a shirt collar, his eyes covered with spectacles and his forehead with the hair of his whig, leaving only the nose to indicate the judge." But when he opened

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31 May, 1844.

²² W. G. Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts . . . 1848-1860* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Harvard), p. 8 ff.

his mouth there came out "the most eloquent flow of legal language" John ever heard. The clear manner in which he set forth the law was "charming," and his "perfect self-possession" caused the bar to fear and respect him.²³

If charmed by Judge Shaw, John was entranced by Ole Bull, the Swedish violinist, traveling virtuoso, and showman, who before appearing at staid old Boston in the late spring had completed a tour of the raw American hinterland where as the common people's ideal of a great musician he won fantastic acclaim. In reference to Maine, Oregon and Texas he pleased expansionistic audiences by announcing: "John Bull goes out and Ole Bull comes in." From Boston John Kasson hurried back to Worcester to write pages to his family while his "heart and memory" were overflowing with entrancing music from the "greatest living musician in the world." With fingers "composed of nerves sprung from lightening" Bull brought the crowded Melodion to the "stillness of death." "Orpheus . . . lives still," John declared, "and I heard him draw the stocks and stones from their farms all around Boston . . . and charm them for nearly two hours and a half." Others like the Longfellows, Emerson, and Margaret Fuller were also impressed with the performance, and young ladies fell in love with tall, handsome Bull whom John described to be much like his brother in build and "decidedly a Yankee, *except*" for his "courtly and graceful" bow.²⁴

John found Boston packed with humanity not only to hear Ole Bull but also to attend a great, mass temperance convention. People numbering "tens of thousands" assembled on the Commons, sleeping on the ground and floor when rooms were filled. A friendly clerk responding to John's humor and "good temper"

²³ A. M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), p. 340; Kasson, Worcester, to his brother Charles, 19 Apr., 1844, Wead Coll.

²⁴ Mortimer Smith, *The Life of Ole Bull* (Princeton, 1947), pp. 44, 48, 59-62; Kasson, Worcester, to his brother Charles, 31 May, 1844, Wead Coll.

provided him with a single bed "reserved for favored strangers" in Marlboro chapel. As he returned on the train a spark landed in his eye and kept him half blind till he reached home.

In Worcester Kasson undoubtedly became familiar also with the activities of the Learned Blacksmith, Elihu Burritt. As a young man in New Britain, Connecticut, Burritt shared his time at the anvil with study in mathematics and languages. Following the financial crash of 1837, he walked all the way to Boston where he sought vainly a place to ply his trade and continue his studies. Turning to Worcester he found ready employment as a blacksmith and easy access to the rare library of the Antiquarian Society. When Kasson reached Worcester, Burritt had become famous as a lecturer and reformer. He had already started a weekly paper devoted to peace, temperance, and cheap postage. Two years later he was to make an extended tour of England advocating peace and a universal penny post.²⁵

John Kasson made a point of mixing in the local environment. In late May he requested a small bill from Charles for incidentals. He had just bought a coat, hat, pants, and umbrella; for he had been invited to membership in "the club," a little select *conversation* of ladies and gentlemen once a fortnight. This was soon after that (previous) remittance: "now that ought to make the mare go!"

Meanwhile he buried himself deeply in his studies, and within five months he had read under Washburn's direction twenty-seven volumes in law and equity. With so large an acquisition of legal knowledge he compared himself with the Great Western in dock at Bristol: ". . . there's no chance for her wheels to play, though her hold contains abundance of fuel. . . . Let me get into the ocean once, and fairly into deep water, and see if the spray does not fly!"²⁶

²⁵ Charles Northend, *Elihu Burritt* . . . (New York, 1879), pp. 13-33.

²⁶ Kasson, Worcester, to his brother Charles, 31 May, 1844, Wead Coll.

The autumn of 1844 found John Kasson in "deep water." In late summer he followed Washburn, now a judge, to Lowell and was there admitted to the bar in Washburn's court. In Boston Rufus Choate advised him to establish in one of the smaller towns like New Bedford a clientele which might later follow him to Boston. In late September he exultantly informed his mother, "Didn't I tell you I *should* succeed?" Three weeks earlier he had reached the whaling port of New Bedford, and in the interim he had found a job as an apprentice in a law office and had already collected his first legal fee.²⁷

Thirteen busy years were to hurry by before John A. Kasson was to appear on the Iowa scene. For six years at the romantic and booming old port of New Bedford he was to prove his competence as a lawyer, sharpen his spurs for politics, discipline himself in the ways of the world, woo and win a wife, and pass from adolescence to manhood. For the next seven years in St. Louis, under the influence of Southern, Western, and border-state men, he was to continue to enrich his experience in law and politics.

Just as Charlottesville, Virginia, and Worcester, Massachusetts, had been contrasting environments, so were New Bedford and St. Louis; and these contrasting experiences in part account for the urbane, moderate, and politically-wise Kasson, who was to zoom up in Iowa politics during the four years immediately preceding the Civil war and to loom large as a political leader in the era from Lincoln to McKinley.

²⁷ *Western Life-Boat*, XIV (1872); *Sioux City Journal* (Iowa), 9 June, 1907; Kasson, New Bedford, to his brother Charles, 25 Sept., 1844, Wead Coll.

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