

THE EDUCATION OF JOHN A. KASSON*

By Edward Younger

At no other period in his life span of four score and eight years did John A. Kasson — politician, diplomat, legislator, lecturer, and author — rise so rapidly as in Iowa during the four years immediately preceding the Civil War. At the age of thirty-five, an unknown lawyer and without influential acquaintances, he turned up at the shabby little village of Des Moines late in 1857. Within a few months he was the governor's confidential adviser; within a year, state chairman of the central committee directing a young and vigorous Republican party; within three years, a useful delegate to the national convention which nominated Lincoln and co-author of the most significant political platform of the nineteenth century; and within four years, one of the half dozen most powerful politicians in Iowa and a vital influence in the national administration at Washington as Lincoln's first assistant postmaster general.

Kasson's swift political ascent must be attributed in part to significant political and economic developments taking place in Des Moines, in Iowa, and in the nation. But it must also be attributed in part to his youthful training and education, which for his day was decidedly superior.

John Adam Kasson was born January 11, 1822, at Charlotte, Vermont, where summer's cool, gentle breezes from the Green and Adirondack mountains meet and caress the eastern shore of Lake Champlain. The next year President James Monroe, in a memorable message to Congress, warned Europe to keep hands off America. At Brandon, Vermont, young Stephen A. Douglas worked for his uncle and attended the district school. At West Haven young Horace Greeley cleared land and fulminated against the hardships of boyhood in Vermont. Thad Stevens of Peacham, nearing thirty years, had already emigrated to Pennsylvania. A few years later Chester A.

*This article is based on the author's research for a full-length biography of John Adam Kasson. For the use of the letters and papers of John A. Kasson (hereafter referred to as *Wead Collection*), the author is indebted to Kasson's relatives, the Misses Eunice and Katharine Wead of Hartford, Connecticut, and Mr. Frederick W. Wead of Boston, Massachusetts. In support of his research on Kasson, the author has received grants from the University of Virginia Institute for Research in the Social Sciences and from the Richmond Area University Center.

Arthur was born at Fairfield and George Franklin Edmunds at Richmond. Sixteen years later the territory of Iowa was created.

Kasson was born not loaded with gold though many Americans of humbler origins have risen to prominence. Five years previously his grandfather Adam, patriarch of the migrating flock, had mustered half enough capital from his possessions in Huntington, Connecticut, to purchase 100 acres of improved land in Charlotte. For the rest he mortgaged the farm, and it took seven long years of toil and thrift to pay off the debt.¹ He was foresighted in choosing a place for his brood.

In the year of John Adam's birth a canal connecting Lake Champlain with the Hudson River was completed. People in the Champlain Valley thereafter prospered, and Vermont for the first time became firmly attached to the Union. In the rest of the state the frontier boom ended, economic decline set in, and by the end of the next three decades almost half the restless population had surged westward. Towns like Charlotte lying along the eastern shore of the Lake with easy access to the markets of the New York area now grew at the expense of those inland.²

In the Champlain Valley of John Kasson's youth clearings had become farms, and forests, woodlots. Neat, white, story-and-a-half houses had replaced log cabins. Occasionally there arose a large, square or rectangular, two or three story, white house like the Kassons', imposing and at the same time simple, with its doorways of dainty details and mantles of native marble. Close in were barns and sheds surrounded by orchards, meadows, and pastures. Along the brooks were grist, saw, and cider mills, iron forges, tanneries, and distilleries.³

The Kassons lived in the southwestern part of the town near the Lake, in a village called Charlotte (or Baptist) Four Corners. Over the years past

¹ The purchase price was \$3,500; the mortgage of \$1,900 with interest was paid off in 1824. *Charlotte Land Records*, VI, 289, 300; VII, 201; VIII, 12, 20.

² W. S. Rann (ed.), *History of Chittenden County, Vermont* (Syracuse, 1886), 311, 325; A. M. Hemenway (ed.), *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (3 vols., Burlington, 1868), 1:693-7; L. D. Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont* (Montpelier, 1948), 64, 154, 176, 200; Chilton Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary, 1763-1825* (Montpelier, 1949), 283, 288.

³ Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 98. In 1823 Charlotte contained three saw-mills (one sawing marble), four gristmills, five taverns, five tanneries, eight black-smiths, and one distillery producing 2,400 gallons of cider brandy and 3,000 gallons of whiskey. Zadock Thompson, *A Gazetteer of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier, 1824), 100. The old Kasson home, badly run down, was still standing in 1946.

the Lake had receded two miles, leaving a commanding elevation upon which rested the Kasson home, a former inn and tavern.⁴ Below, and rolling gently toward the Lake, was the Kasson farm. To the west, north, and south young John could gaze upon a broad expanse of blue water ornamented with irregular small bays and trim, little fleets of sloops and schooners. Beyond the Lake as far as his eyes could see were the picturesque Adirondack Mountains of New York. To the east, and nearer, were the rugged, irregular Green Mountains challenging his "youthful ambition to climb higher, to overcome obstacles, and giving him thoughts of a wider view of a wider world." Add sunsets and twilights, and the natural environment inspired the boy to "imagination and poetical sentiment."⁵

Some of his childhood memories he cherished; others he liked to forget. In later years it was a pleasure to recall the "whole view of the old garden, tall pear trees, blue plum trees, peach trees, berry bushes and beds, old peony stalks (. . . the four enormous heads in the middle of the garden with their monstrous red eyes), the flowering almond, the early jonquil, the yellow and crimson tulip, the big snow ball, and the great rose next to the gate;"⁶ or the bird voices singing among the clump of beeches near the old schoolhouse where he used to swing;⁷ or even the beet and onion beds which he had to weed till he doubted if nature's "fondness for weeds could be reconciled with her friendship for humanity." He enjoyed the winter evening spelling school which gave his "ambition a little scope"; and his "reckless indiscretion" at winter sports on snow and ice which in the absence of a father's supervision led to numerous, dangerous accidents. His best remembered friend was his intelligent Newfoundland dog, Buck, who carried notes to him at school, brought bottled beer to the field hands, and rescued his drowning brother. Old Buck, ever constant, "of many virtues and no faults," taught him fidelity to friends, he later recorded in his reminiscences.

⁴ Rann (ed.), *History of Chittenden County . . .*, 536; *Charlotte Land Records*, X, 375.

⁵ From Kasson's own account of his boyhood, *Wead Collection*. This manuscript of about 2,500 words in Kasson's longhand, written when he was about eighty, will be cited hereafter as *Memoirs of Boyhood*.

⁶ Kasson, St. Louis, to his sister Mary and his mother, May 4, 1851, *Wead Collection*.

⁷ Kasson, Fryston Hall, Femjbridge, England, to his sisters, June 12, 1867, *Wead Collection*.

Kasson did not recount all his boyhood experiences so fondly. The "bright and gay"⁸ did not predominate in the life of a Vermont boy in the 1820's and 1830's. As experienced by Horace Greeley and many others, farm life borne by the younger children was "mindless, monotonous drudgery, instead of an ennobling, liberalizing, intellectual pursuit" and its "weary sense of routine futility"⁹ drove from the state many young men, once the legal ties to their families ended at twenty-one. Young John Kasson, however, was more fortunate. His boyhood tasks were "slight, only incidental labor, light duties morning and evening with horses, cattle" and other chores, giving him time to read, wander in the woods, and get into mischief.¹⁰ But duty, not pleasure, was the main theme, he observed, "till I pushed my boat of personal adventure from the shore."¹¹

Charlotte was a town where common school, Sunday school, and the church were the controlling influences. Following the revolutionary era of religious liberalism, successive waves of revivalism swept Vermont in Kasson's youth, creating general unrest and inspiring organizations for the salvation of the world, like the temperance crusade and the colonization society for Negroes; and at the same time re-establishing the Puritan atmosphere of restraint with its coldness, rigidity, and strict morality.¹²

Though a church (probably Baptist) stood at Charlotte Four Corners, the "leading farmers" wended their way on Sundays about a mile eastward up the road through a gorge between two high hills to attend the orthodox Congregational Church and Sunday school. Here young Kasson spent a tedious day, attending long services in the morning and evening with Sunday school in between; listened to a preacher in a lofty pulpit elaborate upon doctrine and present Hell and Heaven as places of material punishment and reward; heard bickering over theology, church practice, and the personal conduct of members; and overheard the gossip at midday among the older people who found Sunday a relief from the monotony of weekday labors.

⁸ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

⁹ Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 134, 160.

¹⁰ M. E. Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark in America* (2 vols., Washington, 1906), 2:82. In this biographical sketch Kasson is frequently quoted.

¹¹ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

¹² D. M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York, 1939), 24-62; W. H. Crockett, *Vermont, The Green Mountain State* (4 vols., New York, 1921), 3:154; Hemenway (ed.), *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 1:737; Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 137, 179, 203.

In retrospect Kasson thought the preacher was too aloof from his people. His sermons failed to emphasize "the active life of Christianity. Deeds of charity and kindness to a fellow man, sympathy with the unfortunate and unhappy, did not count. Faith in doctrine, not a loving Christian life, marked the road to Heaven. It was a cold, unattractive system of so-called religion, which made the people hardheaded and unsympathetic, but rigidly truthful, honest, and self-reliant."¹³

Vermonters revealed the brighter side of the Puritan spirit in their enthusiasm for education. Free common schools in every town, preparatory academies, female seminaries, and cheap tuition at the University provided a "democratic ladder"¹⁴ up which bright, ambitious youths could climb. Circulating libraries, weekly newspapers and dailies from New York,¹⁵ and later lyceums disseminated information and stimulated social ferment. In the 1820's Charlotte itself, with a population of about 1,600, boasted of fourteen school districts and a female seminary along with its distillery and five taverns, "where liquor was a scourge of this town."¹⁶ Several years before Kasson's birth, numerous young men of Charlotte were graduating from Middlebury College and the University of Vermont.¹⁷ Families slaved and saved to send their brighter boys to college.

The responsibility of educating young John fell upon his mother Nancy

¹³ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*. At the age of fifty-six Kasson confided to his sister Mary that "our particular sort of religious instruction was rather gloomy and led us all . . . to look at life as a sort of special and solemn warning. A better climate and a less gloomy and terrible system of religion would have let us grow old more easily, in love with God and in charity with our neighbors, and in the enjoyment of God's good gifts." Kasson, Vienna, to his sister Mary, Nov. 3, 1878, *Wead Collection*.

¹⁴ Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 112-14.

¹⁵ The Charlotte Kassons were Democrats and subscribed to William Cullen Bryant's *New York Evening Post*, poisoned "with the gall of Jacksonism." Kasson congratulated the *Post* on its 100th anniversary: "It is now a graybeard among journals, but still shows the ruddy complexion of youth. My earliest journalistic recollection is of its welcome presence in my father's family. . . . Nothing yellow in its face then, and nothing yellow since. Always clean, always honest. Always critical, too, and sometimes too critical of Americans and American affairs, which touched our patriotic sentiments. Its editorials have been models of pure English from the time of Bryant to the beginnings of the XXth Century." Kasson to the *Evening Post*, Oct. 10, 1901, *Kasson Papers* (Iowa State Dept. of History and Archives, Des Moines); Kasson's biographical sketch of himself, *ibid.*, File 9.

¹⁶ Hemenway (ed.), *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 1:737; Thompson, *Gazetteer of the State of Vermont*, 36-100.

¹⁷ Hemenway (ed.), *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 1:737-8.

(Blackman) Kasson. The early years in Charlotte, though relatively successful economically, were also distressing. Despite harsh weather and pestilence, old Adam Kasson and his wife, Honor Maria, an unmarried son and daughter, and his married son, John Steele, with his wife and five children, paid off the heavily mortgaged farm when John was only two years old.¹⁸

They pursued the usual life of a Vermont farmer of the time, owning a span of oxen, a dozen cows, three or four horses,¹⁹ a fine stallion, and, by 1826, a flock of fifty sheep.²⁰ Into distant markets they sold horses, cattle, sheep, and wool; locally they sold butter, oats, potatoes, fruit, and whatever gadgets they could think up. Men and boys still wore some homemade clothes with such "outward signs of economy as patches on coat and trousers."²¹ Women and girls were "patterns of industry and economy" and took pride in the management of domestic affairs, though a local historian blushed at ordinary misses who aped the rich and attempted to heighten their charms "by excessive ornament in dress."²² John Kasson remembered that a silk dress was a rare purchase, "expected to last a lifetime, and then be made over for the children."²³

In a land and an era noted for diseases in epidemic proportions, like typhus, dysentery, and tuberculosis,²⁴ the Kassons were becoming well established when death strode ruthlessly through the household. Before he was five John lost his father of whose influence there remained only the recollection of a cheerful face, bright laugh, and kindly disposition.²⁵ The next year old Adam, his grandfather, passed away, and three years later his

¹⁸ Charlotte *Land Records*, VIII, 20.

¹⁹ As a boy Kasson was fond of horses in an area where enthusiasm for breeding fine horses rivaled Kentucky. Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 100, 159; Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark . . .*, 2:82.

²⁰ In the twenties the Saxony Merino "sheep craze" swept Vermont, giving the state King Sheep to rival the South's rising King Cotton. As a boy Kasson undoubtedly heard ringing arguments for a protective tariff on wool. Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 132, 157, 172, 198, 221.

²¹ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

²² Thompson, *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 39.

²³ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

²⁴ Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 107-108, 128-9, 202.

²⁵ Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark . . .*, 2:82; Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*, Charlotte Town Records, *Gravestone Inscriptions*, Barber Cemetery, Charlotte.

father's surviving brother and sister died. The problems of his training and education now fell upon two widows, his grandmother, Honor, age sixty-four, and his mother, Nancy, age thirty-seven. Both were considered "very intellectual women for their time and opportunities." In her early years in Connecticut Honor Steele Kasson was "quite noted"; she possessed "unusual strength of character and sound judgment."²⁶ Nancy Kasson also must have been endowed with strong character and sound judgment. As remembered by her son, John, she was "Calvinistic, rigid for truth telling . . . against Sabbath breaking and earnest for the education of her children."²⁷ Her photographs show a firm, alert, wise woman with an air of sobriety and determination, of strength and command. To her management, counsel, and decision, John Kasson owed much. The continued success of the farm upon which the livelihood of all depended, and the successful education of her children, attest to her ability.

As the years of the thirties wore "monotonously on" John finished common school with its three R's and the "stern rudiments of New England life." His two brothers and two sisters, all older, "felt bound" to supervise him, but he willfully refused to submit to any of them. He was strong, restless, insubordinate, with an excitable disposition. Headstrong as a youth, so he was as a man. His one great friend who never censored him was his dog, Buck. But he always remembered the general kindness of his sister, Mary Emeline,²⁸ who was patient when he was impatient, loving when he was perverse, understanding when he repented too late. With her from whom he "tried to learn virtue" he was to confide his inner thoughts during spells of loneliness in later life.²⁹ As his older brother, Charles De Forest, matured and became a man of affairs, John admired and respected him but did not always take his advice.

At the age of twelve his family sent him to an academy for boys about twelve miles away, where some of his uncles resided. Finding there the same "rigid orthodoxy, even sterner rules of living, and fewer opportunities for . . . foolish adventures," he did not like it. The next year (1835) his grandmother died, leaving Nancy Kasson and five children to their fate. The family decided to give John a university education. Soon they made

²⁶ Undated letter to Kasson from his sister Mary, *Wead Collection*.

²⁷ Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark . . .*, 2:82.

²⁸ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

²⁹ Kasson, Washington, to his sister Mary, Oct. 13, 1892, *Wead Collection*.

ready to leave Charlotte for a place with better educational and professional opportunities.³⁰

Of all the lake towns, Burlington, a few miles north, was growing fastest. Connected by steamboat with St. Johns to the north, Albany and New York to the south, by turnpike and the Winooski Valley to the east, it bustled with commerce and was becoming one of the great lumber ports of America. Moreover, it was the seat of the state university, a preparatory academy, and the center of a brisk law practice engaging some of the most prominent lawyers of the state. Irish and French Canadians were trickling in to find jobs, saying mass, and creating religious friction. Ambitious maidens were leaving the depleted hill farms of Vermont to teach school and work in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, for board and two dollars a week. Mill towns were spreading over the areas of Voluntown, Connecticut, and Huntington, Massachusetts. Economic life in Charlotte was becoming static, while Burlington boomed.³¹

John Kasson's older brother, Charles, age twenty-six, was weary of farming and wanted to read law. Already he had gone partly in debt to purchase a 100-acre farm adjacent to the Kasson homestead, perhaps for speculative purposes.³² John's younger brother, Chester, nearing twenty-one, had departed for Troy, New York, bent on a business career. His two sisters with their education partly finished, perhaps at the Charlotte Female Seminary, were ready to seek employment. John himself, age fifteen, must be given a college education.

So in the fall of 1837, as a serious financial panic blighted the Republic, Nancy Kasson sold the old Charlotte homestead and moved to Burlington. John Kasson never knew what became of his share of the estate but thought the proceeds from the sale "probably became a common fund out of which the children were clad and educated; and then went forth into the world expecting to make their own way in life . . . reared for a sturdy, honest

³⁰ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*, Charlotte Town Records, *Gravestone Inscriptions*, Barber Cemetery, Charlotte.

³¹ Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary* . . . , 284; Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 155, 184, 195, 211; Hannah Josephson, *The Gold Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates* (New York, 1949), 78; Helen D. Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (2 vols., Worcester, Mass.), 2:429-31; Samuel Orcutt and Ambrose Beardsley, *History of . . . Derby* (Springfield, Mass., 1886), 259; Hemenway (ed.), *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 1:734-7.

³² Charlotte *Land Records*, X, 138.

and self sustained manhood, independent and resolute, not accustomed to receive or bestow uncompensated favors."³³

Burlington in the late thirties was a charming, busy little village spread neatly over the side of a hill which sloped off gradually into the Lake. From the University on the hilltop students could gaze out over the seven-acre College Green enclosed with a fine white fence and cedar posts, over dwellings, taverns, and stores to the distant horizon in New York; etched in between was the cool face of the Lake, freckled with slow-moving, chugging steamboats and picturesque islands.³⁴

Nancy Kasson found on Main Street in the center of the town a suitable house built with a bombproof cellar to meet an expected British bombardment during the War of 1812. John was immediately assigned a room, and for a year attended the Old Academy, a solitary, two-story brick building standing midway between town and University. He studied Latin, Greek, and mathematics with the hope of passing the University entrance examinations.³⁵

The summer of 1838 saw young John complete his preparatory course at the Old Academy, pass his entrance examinations, and enter the University where life was a vivid contrast with his earlier intellectual and religious experiences. Under the "presiding genius" of Professor James Marsh, the University was going through an era noted for its inspiring faculty, its educational innovations, and its intellectual stimulation. In the words of a responsible admirer, the air was filled with a "lofty intelligence floating sometimes in the cloudland of the Coleridgean philosophy and like the soaring thought of James Marsh lifting some to misty spaces and inspiring men young and old."³⁶

³³ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood, Wead Collection*. The farm was sold for \$3,800, or \$300 above what Adam Kasson had paid for it. It is probable that some of its proceeds were divided among the older children, for about two years later Charles De Forest borrowed \$1,000 from his two sisters to apply to the debt on the farm he had purchased at Charlotte. Also the deeds of sale indicate division except for the minors, Chester and John. John's share was undoubtedly used to send him to the University. *Charlotte Land Records*, X, 375-7; XI, 62.

³⁴ University of Vermont, *Student Letters*, Oscar F. Dana, Jr., to D. G. Dana, June 26, 1836.

³⁵ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood, Wead Collection*, [An Octogenarian Alumnus], "University Life in the Forties," *Vermont Cynic and Monthly*, 26:28ff. (May 5, 1905).

³⁶ Frederick Tupper, *A Notable Chapter* (Paper read before Phi Beta Kappa, Burlington, 1923), 6.

The University of Vermont as John Kasson knew it was the product of James Marsh's study and imagination; his influence on his students and on general educational developments in America, though great, is yet to be adequately appraised. Certainly he did much to mold the character of young John Kasson. Marsh, studious by nature and an omnivorous reader, had attended Dartmouth College. While there, he and his cousin, George Perkins Marsh, together with Rufus Choate and Joseph Torrey (later professor at the University of Vermont) had purchased a complete library of Greek and Latin literature independently of the college and had begun the task of reading it. This circle was so studious that the faculty ceased to require their attendance at recitations.³⁷

For his lighter reading at Dartmouth, James Marsh perused the Cambridge Platonists, or the "old English writers" as he called them. Upon graduation in 1817 he attended the Andover Theological Seminary and found himself dissatisfied with the teachings of this center of orthodox Calvinism. For two years he tutored at Dartmouth, read German literature, and became fascinated with the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Soon he had a thorough mastery of all Coleridge works in America and was searching for a new theology to satisfy "the heart in the head." With a career of scholarship and teaching in mind, he accepted an invitation from a Southern friend, John Holt Rice, to teach at Hampden-Sidney, a Presbyterian college in Virginia.³⁸

While John Kasson learned to walk and talk at Charlotte, inroads were being made upon the old classical curriculum and the patrician function of education. At Thomas Jefferson's youthful University of Virginia a layman faculty, handpicked by Jefferson himself, experimented with the idea that higher education should be directly related to the life of a democracy and made available to all talented young men, rich or poor; that the course of study should be less sectarian and more practical; and that students should govern themselves and elect to take whatever courses they desired.³⁹ At

³⁷Charles Andrew Huntington, *The University of Vermont Fifty Years Ago* (Burlington, 1892), 15-46. Sketch of Marsh by Henry B. Parkes in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 12:299-300.

³⁸Marjorie H. Nicolson, "James Marsh and the Vermont Transcendentalists," *Philosophical Review*, 34:31-4 (January, 1925).

³⁹T. P. Abernethy, *Historical Sketch of the University of Virginia* (Richmond, 1948), 1-9; Roy J. Honeywell, *The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), 54ff.

Hampden-Sidney, Professor Holt and President Jonathan Cushing, eyeing the doings of their rival at Charlottesville, were said to be "secularizing" and giving the school its "nineteenth century form." From Massachusetts Rufus Choate wrote James Marsh: "How wretchedly adapted is our American liberal education . . . to form and mature a mind. . . . How vulgar and untaught we generally are with our unquestionable natural capacity."⁴⁰

In this environment of educational flux, Marsh taught classes, pondered the ideas of Coleridge, translated the works of German writers, and with Rice organized the Literary and Philosophical Society aimed at combining the "advantages of personal improvement with those of public influence." Instead of compulsion, students in this Society were assured "free and unrestrained feelings and habits" in their pursuit of excellence. Of Marsh, Rice once said: "Taking him all in all I value his character more than that of any man I have yet known, decidedly."⁴¹

After three years at Hampden-Sidney James Marsh returned to Vermont in 1826 as president of the University. Finding a struggling, ineffectual college lacking in financial support and weakened by theological conflict, Marsh transformed it, ten years before John Kasson matriculated, into the "original center of academic idealistic philosophy,"⁴² "a nursery of American Transcendentalism."⁴³ He had declared man's spiritual freedom from orthodox theology long before the first meeting of the famous transcendental club at Concord in 1836. His educational reforms were based on a combination of the ideas of Jefferson and Coleridge; his philosophy, a combination of Neoplatonism, German Romanticism, and Kant's distinction between Reason and Understanding interpreted in part by Coleridge.

Marsh wanted to break down the ancient barrier between a small learned class and an ill-informed public. The interests of American democratic civilization demanded that knowledge should be shared. Inquiring into the "fundamental purpose" of a university education, he concluded that a

⁴⁰ Choate to Marsh, Nov. 23, 1823, in S. G. Brown, *The Life of Rufus Choate* (Boston, 1891), 34.

⁴¹ A. J. Morrison, *The College of Hampden-Sidney: Calendar of Board Minutes, 1776-1876* (Richmond, 1912), 95n; A. J. Morrison, *Addresses . . . Before Literary and Philosophical Society* (Roanoke, Va., 1917), 4-5.

⁴² Nicolson, "James Marsh and the Vermont Transcendentalists," 29, 34-5.

⁴³ J. I. Lindsay, "Coleridge and the University of Vermont," *Alumni Weekly*, 15:9 (Jan.-Feb., 1936); Alice D. Snyder, "American Comments on Coleridge a Century Ago," in Edmund Blunden and E. L. Griggs (eds.), *Coleridge: Studies by Several Hands . . .* (London, 1934), 214ff.

classical curriculum did not suit the needs of every youth. Education should be much more than mere drill in mathematics or in Greek and Latin idioms. It should take a comprehensive view of all parts of knowledge as constituting a connected and organic whole; each course should be a progression toward the ultimate solution of man's worldly problems and his relation to the infinite; each day a steppingstone not to pecuniary advance but toward the mastery of all truth. Education should be grounded on Christianity, for Marsh would not go to the extreme in secularizing. Christianity was more than a mere philosophy or a religion; it was a way of life, the art of living well and happily.⁴⁴

In his reorganized "course of study and habits of discipline" he sought to give coherence to the various studies in each department so that the several parts would present a unity of development and growth, a growing and enlarging process of the mind until the student attained that position where with safety he could pursue his subsequent career. In support of this lofty aim he replaced tutors with permanent professors, relaxed rules and regulations, and encouraged a genial personal relation between teachers and students. Instead of college distinctions, each student by doing his best could advance in accordance with his own capabilities. The art of writing and speaking for the public was emphasized, and public exhibitions were arranged to make the class appear as a whole in the best manner.⁴⁵

Instruction was conducted by four departments: English literature; classical and modern languages; mathematics and physics; and political, moral, and intellectual philosophy. Marsh himself, in the senior year, taught philosophy, the "oscillating nerve"⁴⁶ connecting the various studies together. Like Bacon, he took all knowledge for his province. Beginning with crystallography, the lowest form of organization, he ascended through the geometry of natural existence, the laws of vegetable and animal life, to psychology and the connection of the senses with the intellect. Continuing this dynamic progression, he elaborated upon the laws of the intellect (logic) and as a capstone offered metaphysics as the highest and last form of speculative reasoning in which the spiritual characteristics of humanity

⁴⁴ Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943), 215, 217, 226, 243, 354; Nicolson, "James Marsh and the Vermont Transcendentalists," 44, 49-50; Huntington, *U. V. M. . . .*, 6-8.

⁴⁵ J. E. Goodrich, *A Sketch of the History of the University of Vermont* (Burlington, 1899), Pt. II, 159-61.

⁴⁶ Lindsay, "Coleridge and the University of Vermont," 8.

were distinguished from all other existence. From here he introduced fundamental problems in moral, religious, social, and political life.

Five years before John Kasson enrolled, Marsh resigned the presidency in order to devote his full time to philosophy. And it was his teachings, combined with a kind, genial manner, that left deep and lasting impressions on his students. "Marsh's philosophy" lingered long after his day; as late as the 1870's it awakened in a young student named John Dewey a "distinctive philosophic interest."⁴⁷

He inculcated his students with a spiritual philosophy which placed the individual squarely on his instincts, exalting man and finding infinite possibilities in human nature. He rejected Calvinistic theology because it ignored freedom of the will and the divine element in man. He rejected the philosophy of materialism which denied that man could attain knowledge only through the senses. Like Coleridge, he taught that Reason was related to a consciousness beyond and above experience; that Reason transcended experience and dealt with spiritual objects; that Reason was intuitive.⁴⁸ Hence, man should turn his mind inward to unfold the deep foundations of truth abiding in his inner consciousness. It was an optimistic philosophy which would permit the perfectibility of man and his democratic institutions. It was concerned with the quality of life and left man's mind unrestrained, except by his own conscience, to work out his destiny. With divine reason in every man he had merely to reach for the stars.

Teaching that the Christian belief was the perfection of human reasoning, Marsh was ever seeking a reconciliation of religion and philosophy; man's philosophy must become religious and his religion philosophical; religion must satisfy man's understanding and not contradict his reason. Words were a transcript of the unseen in man, the picture of the inner life of past generations. Philology was the key to wisdom. Modern, or romantic, poetry was the inevitable result of Christianity, naturally serious and melancholy in tone, reaching out beyond the bounds of the known to the unknown.

Fundamentally interested in ethics, he taught that all social schemes of self-seeking must give "law practically to the conduct of men in their intercourse with each other." And there must be a constant striving for things better. The world could not be redeemed by "a sort of dilettante process,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁸ Nicolson, "James Marsh and the Vermont Transcendentalists," 37-9.

to purge off its grossness, to make a political paradise in which hard work shall become easy, dirty things clean, and the churl a churl no longer." Stiff and diffident in society, but gentle and brilliant in conversation, he emphasized by example hard work, calmness, moderation, and courage.⁴⁹

John Kasson, who forever after included the works of Coleridge and Plato among his favorites, said students "reverenced" Marsh.⁵⁰ The writings and speeches of others are filled with references to his personality, teaching, and influence, which in those days were embodied in the graduates' literary and philosophical *Creed*: We believe in Professor Marsh, Coleridge, and the University of Vermont; in Conscience; in the distinction between Reason and Understanding and between the Natural and the Spiritual. Enthusiastic and optimistic graduates left the University confident of their superior instruction.

In addition to Marsh, John Kasson pursued his studies under three other professors. Succeeding Marsh as president was John Wheeler. Lincoln-esque in appearance, affable, and well-to-do, he conducted morning and evening prayers in a cold, smoke-filled chapel, gave lectures in political economy and natural theology, and on Sundays sometimes preached "awful long" sermons on evidences of revealed religion. Wheeler also had a penchant for making money, and John Kasson thought the "old coon" wore a strong "smile of business."⁵¹

Joseph Torrey (solemn "Old Joe" the students called him) occupied the chair of Latin and Greek. Known as the students' friend, he tried to reduce discipline by making every student "a law unto himself." He was reputed to teach more with fewer words than any other professor. His interests embraced, in addition to languages, such subjects as literature, botany, physiology, government, church history, and the philosophy of the mind and of morals.

Ferrand N. Benedict, professor of mathematics, was a hunchback noted for his rigorous discipline and distaste for superficial methods. "Snappy as to eyes and walk," he pleased the boys with his one-sentence prayer: "May we all Square our conduct with the Rule laid down in Thy word."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41, 49-50; Huntington, *U.V.M.* . . . , 15-46.

⁵⁰ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*, Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark* . . . , 2:85-6.

⁵¹ J. W. Dana to his family, Sept. 29, 1839, *Student Letters*, Kasson, St. Louis, to his brother Charles, June 13, 1851, *Wead Collection*, Huntington, *U.V.M.* . . . , 6-12.

He was supposed to be able to take the correct measure of every student, and those who did not pass mathematics found it hard to get a degree. Benedict was known to most as "Little Ben," but John Kasson, who did poorly in mathematics, called him an old, hard-headed "evil genius."⁵²

The power of this small faculty was said to be "like a running stream bearing down upon the students hour by hour." They were not "big uns," as a freshman from the country expected them to be, but unarbitrary and helpful. If plain living signifies high thinking, they lived in a cloud land of thought indeed. Annual expenses for no student exceeded \$100. Since John, staying at home the first three years, did not have to pay board, his expenses including tuition seldom reached \$40. The spare University plant consisted of three main buildings called North, South, and Middle College, all facing the Lake. Except for Middle College, decorated with a cupola and bell, they were barnlike structures of brick, three stories in height. In his senior year John occupied one of the limited number of rooms in North College or the Old Mill. With only one janitor for all the buildings, halls and stairways were often unclean. The rooms as remembered by one student were dreary and unkept, cluttered up with a bed, clothespress, washstand, tables, and chairs, and bursting with the winter's supply of wood which had to be brought inside to keep classmates from stealing it.

The students themselves, ranging in numbers during John's four years from 99 to 110, were neither sons of millionaires nor of polite society, as one alumnus put it. Most of them were middle class farm boys, frequently self-supporting. But according to another, these "young democrats" of the frugal depression years were "an aristocracy of brains."⁵³ At any rate, several of John Kasson's schoolmates made their mark.

A member of his freshman class was William A. Wheeler, a serious, simple-hearted lad from Malone, New York, who it was said lived on bread and water alone for six weeks. Studious and undernourished, this son of a widowed mother was forced to leave college at the end of two years because of failing eyes and financial difficulties. First as a Whig and then as a Republican he rose in New York politics to become eventually John Kas-

⁵² J. W. Dana to his family, Sept. 29, 1839, *Student Letters*, Kasson, New Bedford, Mass., to his brother Charles, Feb. 18, 1849, *Wead Collection*, *Vermont Cynic*, 26:288ff. (May 5, 1909).

⁵³ Tupper, *A Notable Chapter*, 6-10; U.V.M. *Calendars and Student Records*, 1838-1842.

son's colleague in Congress at Washington and finally Vice President of the United States. Moderate in his views and scrupulously honest, he survived the post-Civil War era of political corruption without a blemish. Another of Kasson's classmates to become his colleague in Congress was Robert Safford Hale whose scholarly tastes and cultural interests led him from law to the field of education. For twenty-two years he was to serve as Regent of the University of the State of New York. And like Kasson, he was to be a delegate at the stirring Republican Convention of 1860 which nominated for the presidency a man who had never been to college.⁵⁴

Two years ahead of John was diminutive, bright-eyed Henry J. Raymond, the tallow-faced son of a well-to-do farmer from Lima, New York. Raymond's habit of overwork developed in college led him to an early grave, it was said. Immediately upon graduation he was employed by Horace Greeley in New York as a journalist, became managing editor of *Harper's New Monthly* magazine, and eventually founded the *New York Times*. Like Kasson and Hale, he was to enter Congress during the Civil War era. And like Kasson he espoused the cause of Lincoln and Johnson, bringing down upon him the vengeance of the Radicals and political defeat. Moderate in opinion and expression, Raymond strove to substitute decency for personal invective in American journalism, reasoning and judgment for prejudice and passion.⁵⁵ Always a scholarly, urbane man he had few journalistic peers in his time. Another schoolmate of Kasson, and a classmate of Raymond, James R. Spaulding, also made his mark in American journalism as a founder of the *New York World*. Like Kasson, Raymond and Spaulding were to return to their alma mater as occasional speakers, singing praises of Professor Marsh's "system."⁵⁶

As a junior John Kasson knew a freshman named Frederick Billings from Woodstock, Vermont, but he probably did not suspect that here was a budding railroad tycoon. After graduation Billings caught the gold fever in '49. In California he found gold in law practice, business, and politics. After the Civil War he bought into the Northern Pacific Railroad, fathered the road's famous colonization project, and eventually became its president. Like

⁵⁴ Sketch of Wheeler by E. C. Smith in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20: 57-8, and of Hale by A. S. McDaniel, *ibid.*, 8:110-11.

⁵⁵ Sketch of Raymond by Elmer Davis in *ibid.*, 15:408-412; F. L. Mott, *American Journalism . . .* (New York, 1941), 269-70, 278.

⁵⁶ Rann (ed.), *History of Chittenden County . . .*, 205; Lindsay, "Coleridge and the University of Vermont," 9-10.

Kasson, Billings was always interested in libraries, books, and education and at one time was considered for the presidency of the University of California. And like Kasson he became an active promoter of a Nicaraguan canal in the post-Civil War era.⁵⁷

Despite the moderated discipline at the University of Vermont, John found himself tied down to a strenuous daily program regulated by laws on hours of study, religious exercises, and general deportment. The number of religious exercises in a single term ran to 374, and of literary to 240. Student activities were channelized into two literary societies and the Society for Religious Inquiry upon which, it was claimed, Congregationalism put few effectual checks. The literary societies, Phi Sigma Nu and the University Institute, were designed to supplement the study of rhetoric. Membership was determined by lot, and John probably considered himself lucky to be a member of Phi Sigma Nu, the older society with a larger library and more important periodical literature. Each society was represented by a speaker at commencement, and politics for the offices were as lively for the students as were the fall elections for the citizens. A prominent alumnus and historian of the University claimed that no social fraternities ever contributed so much toward making thinkers, writers, and speakers as did these literary societies.⁵⁸

Before the end of the first term students usually classified themselves as conservative Blues or liberal Bloats, and John, whose brother was a rising Democratic politician, was in all probability a Bloat. Moreover there were literary programs and forensics, sailing and skating parties, visits in town, and political oratory. And on commencement day Burlington and the surrounding countryside was alive with excitement and the roads dusty from numerous vehicles rolling in.⁵⁹

John must have remembered vividly the commencement at the end of his freshman year when the famous Whig candidate, Henry Clay, came to town. Clad in a black frock coat, white vest, and very wide drilling pantaloons, Clay sat on the stage and graciously endured the oppressive heat and the dull speeches. When Henry Raymond delivered an animated junior

⁵⁷ Sketch of Billings by J. D. Hicks in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2:265-6; J. B. Hedges, "The Colonization Work of the Northern Pacific Railroad," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 13:311-42 (December, 1926).

⁵⁸ Kasson's U.V.M. Record, 1840, *Wead Collection*, Goodrich, *Sketch . . . of U.V.M.*, 176ff.; *Vermont Cynic*, 26:288ff. (May 5, 1909).

⁵⁹ *New York Evening World*, Aug. 1, 1860.

oration, Clay was heard to say, "That young man will make his mark." John must also have had some interest in the exciting hard cider campaign of the next year, when the Whigs carried Vermont and the nation for General William Henry Harrison. It is doubtful, however, that he paid much attention to the fact that the Liberty party candidate polled 319 votes in Vermont. For though protests against the proposed annexation of Texas were reaching the state legislature, and Vermont's Representative William Slade was crusading against slavery in Washington, slavery was not a burning political issue in Vermont. But it was on the verge of bursting forth, and within eight years both John and his brother were to bolt the Democratic for the Free Soil party.⁶⁰

In college John seems to have had neither time nor inclination for excessive social and political activities. The attrition in his class from thirty-five freshmen to seventeen seniors indicates that the ordeal of mastering transcendental teachings was no light one. For the first three years in his room at home he sat humped over his books, eschewing company and conversation to his later regret. After moving to the Old Mill on the University campus in his senior year he still "confined his thoughts and feelings to his college room" so much that he felt ill at ease in society, even though his "spirit always flowed freely." Moreover during midwinter vacations of eight weeks he seems to have taught school in the countryside.⁶¹

His grades indicate hard study. In his freshman year only four students made a higher class average. As a sophomore he stood second. In his junior year he led the class in classical languages but dropped to sixth place in mathematics. Upon graduation he ranked first in Greek and second in the general class average in spite of 35 in trigonometry and 45 in calculus.⁶²

During his first three years he aspired to be a poet, wrote several poems, and read one of them as his contribution to the Junior Class Exhibition. Believing, however, that he had no real talent as a poet, he turned to prose composition and read widely in history and English literature.⁶³

His yellowed university essays and speeches,⁶⁴ with their long, stilted,

⁶⁰ Augustus Maverick, *Henry J. Raymond and the New York Press* (Hartford, 1870), 26-7; *Burlington Weekly Free Press and Times*, Jan. 10, 1900.

⁶¹ Kasson, Charlottesville, Va., to his brother Charles, Dec. 27, 1842, *Wead Collection*, U.V.M. Catalogues, 1838-1842, Gates (ed.), *Men of Mark . . .*, 2:80.

⁶² U.V.M. *Records of Examinations, 1834-1848*.

⁶³ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

⁶⁴ In *Wead Collection*.

and epigrammatic sentences, with a plethora of words and frequently a dearth of solid content, are a tribute to tireless efforts to achieve effect — to be exquisite — in the arrangement and choice of words. Here is evidence of the genesis of an indefatigable, hard-driving perfectionist. They cover a wide range of subjects but fall roughly into three categories: art and philosophy; education; government and religion. And they are signed John A. Kasson as he always subsequently signed his name.

Such essays as "Poetic Enthusiasm," "A Philosophic Poetry and a Poetic Philosophy," "Relation of the Artist to his Age," and "The Realm of Common Sense" are testimonials of Professor Marsh's philosophy. The poet should not confine himself to the visible and tangible in nature, wrote young Kasson, but should seek the unseen power of life — an inward, moving power which is his real strength. Both poetry and philosophy are attempts of the soul to realize her destined freedom. Enthusiasm arising in extraordinary belief in truth or right begets Imagination, and Imagination unlocks the soul and joins Enthusiasm to make the poet. Common sense manifests itself by experience, but speculative reason falls within the realm of the soul. The prerogative of the artist (or philosopher), he affirmed, is to "stand mediate, looking down upon nature, piercing through the mere clothing of existence, and looking up to truth in its pure and everlasting splendor," awakening beauty in the artist's breast which has dwelt with him since the birth of his spirit.

John regretted that in America, where only the "universal hum of gold-seeking men is heard," arts and letters found small favor. "Shall America never boast a bard worthy to sing of her discovery and deliverance?" he cried in a sophomore chapel piece. Before the literary society, he extolled modern German literature and exhorted his fellows to cast off their "old, shrivelled skins of sluggishness" and make the University a birthplace of literary abilities.

In a debate on whether learning is benefited in proportion as the number of colleges increases, he took the negative. In the absence of a permanent "intellectual high priesthood," he feared lowered standards, for until the great west was settled, few would devote their lives to study "from a love of study." Too many were "vomitted out of academic halls," their minds crammed "like a dung-cart," seeing "no beauty nor any enjoyment in the sublime energy of a determined spirit." He was critical of those who ran through a four-year course and considered their education finished.

His essays on government and religion are robustly patriotic, exalting the ideal of equality, freedom of the mind, the Constitution, and American nationalism. Revolutionary Americans, like the Puritans, found the secret of real power in freedom of the mind, he shouted in a long Fourth of July oration near the end of his senior year — "Mind! — that had been enslaved for a thousand years — Mind! that had been bought and sold for a corrupt priesthood. . . . Spirit of man was free!" Revolutionary fathers declared mankind equal, and if equal, entitled to uniform privileges, he went on. Every state except one had a constitution reserving to the people the right to alter their form of government. "But that one State! Alas for Poor Rhode Island . . . deeply wounded for want of any constitution by which the people are at liberty to attain their form of government." Thus his sympathies ran strong for Democratic Thomas Wilson Dorr who then was waging a revolution against an outmoded colonial charter which restricted suffrage, lacked democratic guarantees, and kept Rhode Island under the minority control of conservative Whigs.

As to Americans whose numbers would increase in a few years from 18 to 100 million (he predicted), let them be Americans, he admonished his hearers:

As we are eminently a peculiar people, we should glory in having a peculiar character. . . . Did not we devise an original plan for the welfare of man?

Men who ape the old world in fashions and peculiarities will ere long want to ape them in their whole system of government. . . . Preserve fashion that is American; teach American doctrines, American sentiments, American philanthropy. . . . Walk like Americans, talk like Americans, think American thoughts; drink water, the American beverage, pure as Hellican's fount; and marry American wives!

In another essay he sought the beautiful land of Idealism and found it, called Stephensis, to be an imaginary Republic in Central America.

As his senior year drew to a close, John must have grieved with the others at the untimely death of Professor Marsh at the age of forty-eight; and as he buried himself in his commencement piece, "The Heathen Philosopher and the Christian Fisherman," he may have had forebodings as to his graduation because of his poor mathematics grades. But when August 2, 1842, brought Commencement Day and a village full of life and gaiety and a church literally jammed with people, John was there on the stage with his

class, but only after the inevitable dressing-down by "little Ben," who, though passing young Kasson on, brought tears to his eyes and destroyed his happiness for that day. According to an eyewitness, however, the graduation of the class appeared well as a whole, some orations exhibiting research and clear thinking. And however deeply stung John may have been, he could comfort himself with the thought that the path to a new phase of his life lay open.⁶⁵

He could now pursue his own maxims set forth in his essays that "He, who possesses no spirit and neglects to enjoy what God bestows for his gratification and improvement, is in a situation of *being*, not *living*"; and that "To attain excellence in a pursuit, there must be vigour, determination, and constant zeal, a love of vocation, and a resolution to contest manfully for the highest success."

Yet John had not made up his mind as to the vocation he wanted to pursue. Surging within him was "an ambitious character irregularly forming under contradictory influences."⁶⁶ His independent, free-flowing spirit conflicted with a cloistered, supervised life at home. Puritan virtues of intellectuality and the ideal of service, common in the Vermont of his youth, were in contrast to assertive individualism, shrewdness, and greed. The lofty, moderate tone of his university teachings was not in accord with religious zealotry and the boiling temperance and simmering antislavery crusades; and slavery itself was a practical denial of the cherished ideal of equality. "Vermonters were nothing if not contrary," says a careful historian of this era. And "all Vermont was restless."⁶⁷

The flood of emigrants to the west continued unabated. In southern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and the future state of Iowa, upstanding Vermonters were coming in contact with the easygoing Southerners, looking somewhat condescendingly at their poor schools and illiteracy, and being themselves suspiciously regarded as too righteous and thrifty. Educated young men were trickling into Boston and New York for professional and business careers. And surprisingly, some continued to drift into the South where a few — a very few — settled down and "loved good liquor and went in for fun."⁶⁸ Most of those going south, however, were young men just out of

⁶⁵ Kasson, New Bedford, to his brother Charles, Feb. 18, 1849, *Wead Collection*, Manuscript Diary of A. D. Barber, Aug. 2, 1842 (U.V.M., Wilbur Library).

⁶⁶ Kasson, *Memoirs of Boyhood*, *Wead Collection*.

⁶⁷ Stillwell, *Migrations from Vermont*, 65-6, 132, 231.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 144, 146, 165, 166, 191, 195.

college, many with consumptive tendencies, who combined temporary employment with recovery in a milder climate. Southerners were willing to employ the graduates of northern schools in almost any educational capacity.

For a year after his graduation Kasson, at an impressionable age, lived with Virginia slaveholders as a tutor, finding among them friendliness and fine manners — traits he admired and acquired. For a year he read law among free soilers in Worcester, Massachusetts, and observed the performances of the cultural elite in Boston. For almost six years he practiced law and played politics in New Bedford, Massachusetts, during a boom cycle, saw the romantic whaling era giving way to the gold rush and manufacturing as the industrial revolution gained momentum, pled the cases of wealthy men and sailors, and participated in a society both rough and raw but also charming and cosmopolitan. And all the while as a New Englander he was living in the midst of a feverish, sometimes extravagant, wave of reform which grew in intensity with the years.

For seven years he practiced law and politics in the western metropolis of St. Louis, Missouri, and among his intimate associates were slaveholding border-state men who went west and who, finding their interests identified with a strong national government, were turning against the South. Here he was a witness to the fierce clashes resulting from the impact of Yankee and foreign immigrant with Southerners. Here he became familiar with the optimism, the drive, the braggadocio of the westerner who chafed at restraints on the exploitation of the nation's wealth.

As a delegate to a Northern free soil convention (Buffalo, 1848) and a Southwestern commercial convention (Memphis, 1853) he saw first hand the interplay of complex sectional forces.

Motivated in part by principle and in part by political opportunity, he had been, when he moved to Des Moines in 1857, a consistent free soiler for ten years but also a one-time slave owner. Moderate in his views toward slavery, he had, however, been attracted to those who did not want it extended. But over the years he had come to realize that a third party taking a radical antislavery position had little chance of success.

Thus when Kasson, at the age of thirty-five, aggressively threw himself into the pulsing life of the ambitious town of Des Moines, then becoming the new state capital, his education had reached its maturity.