Charles Mason

Charles Mason was a soldier, author, lawyer, pioneer, and jurist, in addition to being the fifth Commissioner of Patents. He was born at Pompey, New York, October 24, 1804. He attended the United States Military Academy, graduating first in the class of 1829. Robert E. Lee was a classmate of his.

Mason served as assistant professor of engineering at the Academy for two years. In 1831 he resigned from the army to study law in New York City, being admitted to the bar the next year. From 1832 to 1836 he practiced law at Newbury, New York, and New York City. For a time, he was also acting editor of the New York *Evening Post* during the absence of William Cullen Bryant.

In November 1836, he moved to Burlington, Iowa, and the next year became district attorney in Des Moines County. President Van Buren appointed Mason Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Iowa Territory on July 4, 1838. He retired from this position on May 16, 1847. Mason was one of the commissioners who revised and codified the laws of Iowa in the Code of 1851. He was also president of two western railroads in 1852 and 1853.

President Franklin Pierce appointed Charles Mason Commissioner of Patents in March 1853. Mason was never too happy in this position, having frequent clashes with the Secretary of Interior under whom he worked. In addition his salary of $3,000 was not adequate for a man with his business interests and professional ability. He resigned August 1, 1857, and returned to Burlington to practice law. From 1861 to 1881 he practiced law with a Washington, D.C., law firm. Mason died at Burlington on February 25, 1882.

In addition to his varied experience in military, political, financial, and legal fields, Mason had other qualifications for Commissioner of Patents. He had considerable mechanical genius. He was interested in farming and machinery, including steam tractors and harvesters. Mason was a practical farmer on a large scale, being a heavy investor in Iowa and Wisconsin lands.

When he assumed his office, the Patent Office had been irregularly administered, indifferently housed, and inadequately financed. Mason was to bring system and efficiency to the operation.

Mason's first problem was to get more room in which to work. He was especially concerned about the models submitted with patent applications. They were exposed "to constant danger of injury and destruction." Mason wrote of the rejected models which had been placed in the basement:

The plight to which they have been reduced for want of space is such as to elicit loud complaints from those who deposited them. . . . They have been heaped upon one another, lost from search, and exposed to injury. Many of them have been broken. . . . These models should be . . . brought from their present dark and inconvenient recesses . . . and exposed to the clear light of the upper day.

Mason had the trophies of the American Exploring Expedition removed from the hall originally designed for the models. The models were then exhibited to the great joy of the inventors.

Mason soon introduced many innovations and changes. Accurate descriptions and drawings of all patents were printed for the first time. When he took office, American citizens were charged $30 for a patent while British subjects paid $500 and other aliens $300. Mason recommended that everyone be placed on the same footing.

Business was increasing rapidly. During the four years prior to 1853 the average number of applications each year was 2,522. During Mason's tenure it was about 4,000. Prior to 1853 the number of patents issued annually was 990; after 1853 it increased to about 1,850.

To cope with this greater work load Mason had a staff in 1856 that consisted of a chief clerk, 12 examiners, 12 assistant examiners, a draftsman, an agricultural clerk, a machinist, a librarian, and about 50 clerical employees. In addition, the law permitted him to hire "temporary clerks" to make copies of patents. They received ten cents for

each 100 words they copied. Without sufficient office space much of this was done by copyists working outside the office. A few women had been employed to do this work at home in the late 1840's and the early 1850's.

Commissioner Mason employed women on a more regular basis. He probably was the first one to use them for more than temporary work for brief periods of time. He also paid them the maximum amount permitted by the law, the same rate paid to men for the same work. After he removed the patent models from the basement, Mason used it as quarters for the women copyists. Thus, he became the first government official to permit women to do their work within a government building. This aroused some opposition, especially on the part of his chief, Secretary of Interior Robert McClelland.

Among the women Mason hired was Clara Barton, who later became famous as a Civil War nurse. She began work in April 1855. During her first three months of April, May, and June she was paid $71.35, $93.39 and $83.35, probably more than she received as head of the school in Bordentown, New Jersey, where she had taught. The thing that undoubtedly recommended Clara Barton to Mason was her neat, precise, beautiful handwriting which could be read as easily as print.

The *Scientific American* summed up Mason's contributions to the Patent Office:

Mr. Mason came into power in May, 1853. At that time the affairs of the Patent Office were in such a lax and disgraceful state that it took from six months to a year to get a patent through, and as much longer to obtain a hearing on an appeal. With an energy wholly unknown to his predecessors, he set about the work of renovation and reform, determined, if it was in the power of man, to restore the Department to respectability and usefulness. Before the year closed he had so far completed his herculean task that inventors were enabled to receive their patents within a less number of weeks, after filing their applications, than they had previously waited months and before the close of his administration, patents were often ordered to issue within six days after the application was placed on file. We need hardly say that under his admirable direction every other branch of the service was brought up to the same standard of promptness and efficiency, and the whole department, reinvigorated and organized.

At another time the *Scientific American* said of Mason's work at the Patent Office:

Our readers are familiar with the history of his reforming operations; they know he gradually rescued the department from its deplorable condition, infused new life apparently into the entire patent system, put an end to those deadly delays in the issue of patents which had so long disheartened inventors, increased business and revenues, and then, to the regret of all, left office.