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Charles Mason and Federal Aid to Agriculture

In his "eminently practical and patriotic address" opening the State Fair at Burlington in 1864, Judge George G. Wright, the president, expressed gratification at Iowa's achievements in supporting the troops at the front and in the total outstanding contribution which his State had made to the common effort.

As an official pronouncement of Iowa's agricultural priority, Judge Wright read a letter from the new Federal Commissioner of Agriculture, the Quaker dairyman of Philadelphia, Isaac Newton: "The reports of the average yield of the crops throughout the country, for the present year, clearly show that your State has the honor of being placed at the head of the list. . . . It not only speaks volumes of praise in behalf of the enterprise and industry of your rapidly growing and thriving population, but it seems very clearly to indicate that you are peculiarly blessed with an adaptation of climate and soil, unsurpassed, if equaled, by any other State in the Union. . . . With this astonishing growth of population and wealth, a boundless career of influence and im-

portance awaits the futurity of your noble state."

This rather verbose tribute was a marked understatement, both as regards the productive achievements of Iowa and its influence upon national policies respecting that interest. The State's participation in all of the achievements which stemmed from the basic acts of the sixties is generally known. What is not so well known and appreciated is the long ante bellum campaign of agitation and preliminary organization that eventuated in the "Civil War Agricultural New Deal".

In these preliminary labors the youthful State participated in definite ways that forecasted future leadership. Iowa was a center of the movement in the West which had the interrelated objective of establishing agricultural colleges and creating State and Federal bureaus to promote agriculture. Suel Foster, reformer and horticulturist, and William Duane Wilson, reformer and agricultural journalist, were among the many Iowans who championed the cause of the farmers and urged that the government assist in the promotion of agriculture. Among those who did valiant service in helping to organize the Federal agencies dealing with agriculture was Charles Mason, most versatile of Iowa pioneers.

In March, 1853, Charles Mason was appointed Commissioner of the Patent Office. It was, in

some respects, an unusual choice, for Mason had had only incidental experience with such work, but a casual glance at his activities reveals his varied interests. A native of central New York, he had graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point at the head of his class — a class which included Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston. He had later studied law and served as editorial writer on the staff of the *New York Evening Post*. In 1836 he came to Belmont, Wisconsin Territory, and in 1838 had been appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the newly created Territory of Iowa, serving with distinction until June, 1847. Later he served as one of the commissioners who drafted the *Code of 1851* and was a candidate for United States Senator and for Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Judge Mason brought to his new office a wide variety of experiences and interests. In addition to his military and legal education he had considerable mechanical genius and he was interested in farming and machinery having to do with farming, including steam tractors and harvesters. He was also a practical farmer on a large scale and a heavy investor in Iowa and Wisconsin lands.

At the time of Mason's appointment, the Patent Office was included in the Department of the Interior, having been established in 1836 to take

over the patent registration duties in the office of the Secretary of State. It was transferred to the Interior Department in 1849. In addition to its proper business of issuing and supervising patents, including patents on agricultural implements and machinery, there was an irregularly administered, indifferently housed, and inadequately financed division devoted to the collection of agricultural statistics and studies of various agricultural productions and problems. How came the Patent Office to have such a division?

The story goes back to Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, appointed the first Commissioner of the Patent Office. Like Charles Mason, Ellsworth was a man of varied interests. When he took over the Patent Office in 1836, it was a ward of the State Department and the new Commissioner became interested in the collection of seeds and plants via the consular service. He then distributed them for trial in the United States. This dabbling in agricultural affairs was looked upon with suspicion in some quarters, but in 1839 Congress appropriated \$1,000 "out of the patent fund, to be expended by the Commissioner of Patents in the collection of agricultural statistics, and for other agricultural purposes".

The work grew. The appropriation act of 1847 granted \$3,000 of the patent fund for agricultural

purposes, with the proviso that the Commissioner's report on agricultural subjects must not exceed four hundred pages. The appropriation from the Patent Office fund for agricultural purposes in 1853 was \$5,000.

Mason brought system and efficiency into the Patent Office, improving personnel by dismissing incompetents and political schemers and employing women clerks on an equal status. His own strict regimen as set down in his diary for December 29, 1856, suggests that of John Quincy Adams: "Rise at 6 — read or write until breakfast. Go to office a little before 9. Remain steadily at work until 3:30 — then home to dinner. After dinner read hour to daughter — then walk for an hour — go to office for an hour or two — return home at 8 — call on friends or receive visits for an hour — read for 2 hours and go to bed at 11 P. M. In this way I am accomplishing a good deal in the course of a day." One would think that he was, indeed! Possibly Mason's life-long habits of order and application were a hold-over from the long, regimented days at West Point.

While Judge Mason's general administration of the Patent Office was highly efficient, his promotion of agricultural activities was to have the most permanent significance. Expert scientists were brought to the service either as regular staff mem-

bers or as collaborators. The immediate direction of the agricultural work, including the editing of the agricultural report, was placed in charge of Daniel Jay Browne, who after study at Harvard had been a farmer, farm editor and writer, and an extensive traveler.

The beginning of a corps of permanent investigators was made in 1854 with the employment of an entomologist, Townend Glover. He remained with the Patent Office until 1859 and served continuously with the Department of Agriculture from 1863 to 1878. His appointment may be regarded as the beginning of a career service in agriculture. Chemists and botanists were employed on a temporary basis and an arrangement was made with the Smithsonian Institution for regular weather observations and reports. Thus were established the rudimentary bases of the "line agencies" of what became the Department of Agriculture.

The annual reports on agriculture were systematized and made more definitely informing. Senator James W. Grimes complained to Mason, his fellow townsman, in June, 1853, that the "letters from Tom, Dick, and Harry amount to but little. Occasionally there is one of some value, but the greater part of them are not worth as much as the paper upon which they were written." The

drawings of feral animals and similar embellishments were, Grimes felt, of no practical value and he suggested such subjects as the breeds of cattle. Elaborate essays on the latter subject as well as on methods of planting and cultivating crops and on farm machinery were prepared by Browne and some of the leading scientists. To make room for these papers the former regional correspondence was condensed and the long tables of agricultural "statistics", admittedly unreliable and therefore of little value, were abandoned.

Mason's interest in scientific agriculture soon showed results. By this time, too, the influence of farm journals and agricultural societies was making an impression on the members of Congress. Federal purse strings were being loosened. Previous to 1854 the agricultural appropriations had been taken from the Patent Office fund. In May of 1854 an appropriation of \$10,000 was made to the Treasury Department from the general fund for the collection of agricultural statistics and the distribution of seeds and cuttings, all such work to be under the supervision of the Commissioner of Patents — Charles Mason. In August of 1854 Congress made another appropriation for agricultural work, this time for \$25,000. From that time on, the appropriations were made directly from the Federal treasury and in 1855 the Patent Of-

fice was reimbursed for funds used for agricultural purposes to the extent of \$40,078.

With more funds available the work of collecting and testing new plants and seeds was extended and systematized, but the conscientious Commissioner was greatly concerned to avoid the wastes and abuses which had brought discredit and contempt upon this branch of the service. "It certainly was never the purpose of Congress", Mason wrote in his final report, "to convert this office into a common seed-store, intended to supply the public at large gratuitously with the means of planting their ordinary gardens." Should the government resort to such gifts it would come to be regarded "as the fountain of favors and benefits. The people would be gradually parting with that self-reliance which is the parent of energy and the mainspring of success in every undertaking, and which is so necessary to the preservation of individual self-respect, and therefore of personal, and finally of national, independence."

But there was more emphasis on experimentation and the search for new agricultural products. Among the importations of especial importance were Chinese yams, Chinese sugar cane or sorghum — which led to the establishment of the Federal propagation garden and, finally, to an extensive and hopeful cultivation in the Middle

West during the Civil War — and the tea plant, whose acclimation was to be a leading interest of the Commissioner of Agriculture under President Hayes. Of far greater value to the nation's economy than these exotics were the new and superior grasses that were introduced.

With his assured standing as an engineer, farmer, and jurist, Mason had the respect and confidence of agricultural leaders in all regions. He corresponded and advised with such key men in the movement for an agricultural department and colleges as Charles B. Calvert of Maryland, John Delafield and Benjamin F. Johnson of New York, Henry F. French of Massachusetts, and many others. He carried on his seed and plant testing through State and local agricultural societies and secured the good will and support of the influential United States Agricultural Society. Appropriate interrelations with the Smithsonian Institution and its great director, Dr. Joseph Henry — which were to be greatly extended under departmental organization — were auspiciously started.

But in spite of his success as Commissioner of Patents and agricultural promoter, Charles Mason was not entirely happy in his Washington office. For one thing, the salary of \$3,000 paid to the Commissioner of Patents was hopelessly inade-

quate for a man with Mason's business interests and professional ability. He was confident that he could secure at least double that compensation from a Chicago firm of patent attorneys and his later professional career fully verified this estimate. In the summer of 1855, he returned home with the expectation of retiring from office, but after characteristic deliberation he determined to continue to the end of the existing administration — and live strictly within his salary.

For a bureau chief, he was on terms of considerable intimacy with President Franklin Pierce, who apparently felt that the western leader might influence his State's delegation in favor of a re-nomination. But Mason was never an effective politician, either for himself or the organization. His judicial temperament and disciplined mind were naturally opposed to the political "game" as conducted in his day. He came into sharp disagreement with Buchanan's Secretary of the Interior over removals and appointments and on August 1, 1857, he resigned from an office that, in the judgment of all impartial observers, he had conducted with signal credit and effectiveness. At various times he was mentioned for Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, created in 1862, and for Secretary of the Department of the Interior, but his ambition for public employment was

not sufficient to bring the requisite maneuvers and concessions.

Amid the barrage of criticism of "patent office agriculture" and the demands for an organization more in keeping with the dignity and relative importance of the occupation, no one was more aware of the anomalous and uncertain status of the inadequate agricultural agency than the Commissioner himself. But while others made vague suggestions for some sort of a bureau or department with functions largely unspecified, he proposed a specific, economical, decentralized plan of action in which emphasis was to be placed upon the aims rather than upon control and direction.

In his final report — for 1856 — he pointed out that the great objective of scientific investigation might be carried on in one of two ways. One would involve the establishment of regional experimental farms. Such a plan might be feasible for the Old World, but it involved a centralized bureaucracy that would not be tolerated under the American system. The preferable alternative was to coördinate existing State and local agencies through the supervisory activity of an "experimental agriculturist" who could arrange with individuals and societies for conducting experiments and make an annual report of the results. The annual expense of such an official with two assis-

tants would be, Mason estimated, about six thousand dollars.

To the possible objection that such appropriation was "beyond constitutional warrant", the Commissioner argued that it was as fully justified as the provision for training for defense, the promotion of commerce, and the protection of manufactures. What the agricultural interests sought, he argued, was parity treatment: let the government serve all interests or disregard all.

It seemed "manifestly just and proper that commerce, manufactures, and agriculture — the three great branches of national industry and wealth — should be regarded with equal favor by Congress." The farmers looked not "for any special favor," but had a "right to expect equality." If all interests were to be unaided they would be satisfied to take their chance with the rest, "but, while, at the common expense, the favor of government is almost lavished upon the other great branches of industry, they expect something for themselves. This expectation is so reasonable, that the favorable consideration of Congress is confidently invoked."

Even so reasonable and modest a proposal went too far for a State-rights administration and congressional majority. The realization of the aims of the pioneer champions of agriculture on a parity

basis awaited the necessities and organized pressure of a more fully commercialized and class-conscious occupational interest and the consequent broadened conceptions of the functions of government in promotion, regulation, and direction.

All the same, the foundations were being laid. Considering the rudiments of organization established and the precedents of service inaugurated, the Patent Office agricultural division may be regarded as the beginning of the Department of Agriculture and Charles Mason may properly be classed as the forerunner of Iowa's distinguished and influential heads of what has become "one of the largest agencies of government in the world."

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