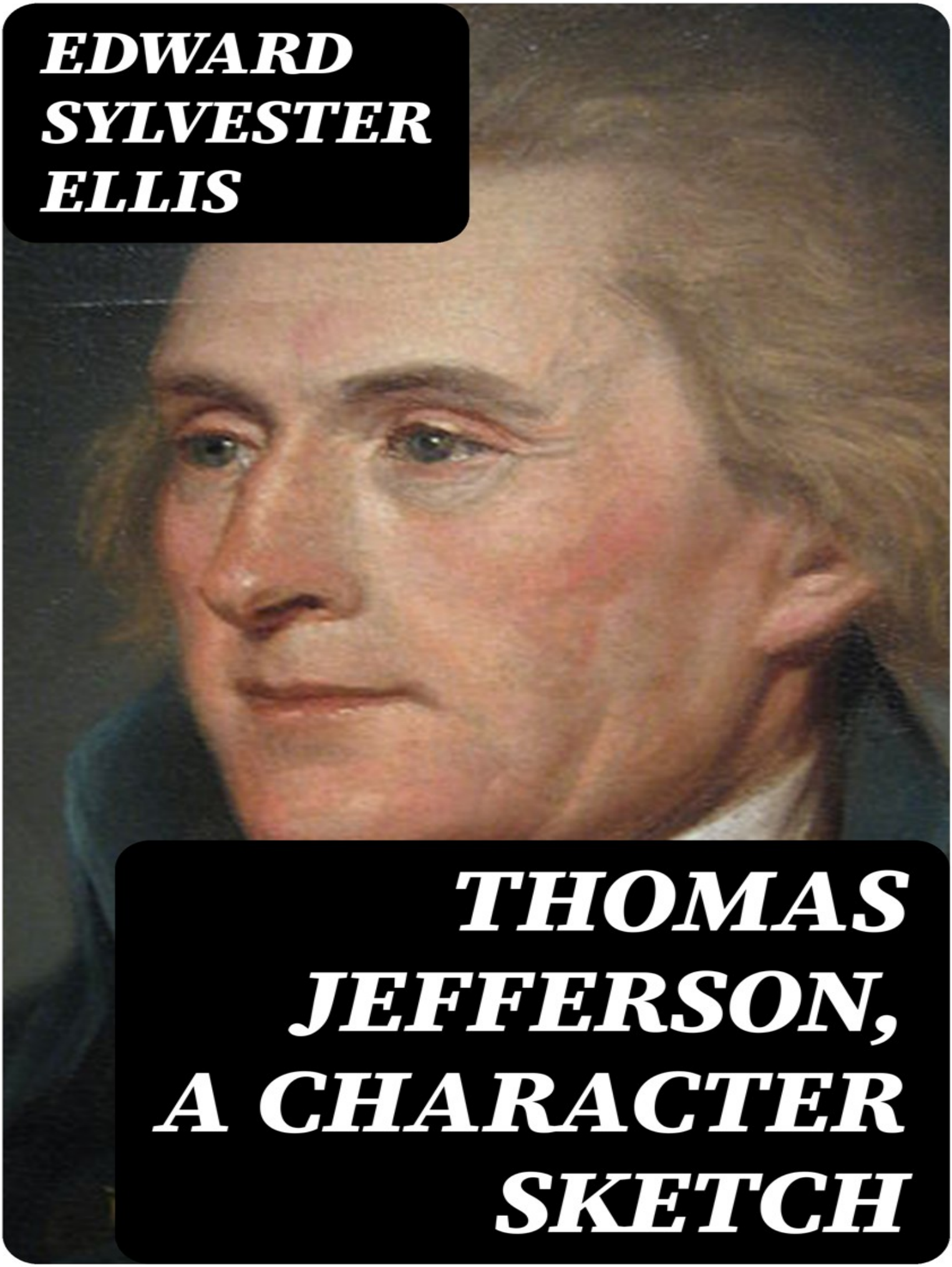

EDWARD SYLVESTER ELLIS

THOMAS JEFFERSON, A CHARACTER SKETCH

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Thomas Jefferson, a Character Sketch

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No golden eagle, warm from the stamping press of the mint, is more sharply impressed with its image and superscription than was the formative period of our government by the genius and personality of Thomas Jefferson.

Standing on the threshold of the nineteenth century, no one who attempted to peer down the shadowy vista, saw more clearly than he the possibilities, the perils, the pitfalls and the achievements that were within the grasp of the Nation. None was inspired by purer patriotism. None was more sagacious, wise and prudent, and none understood his countrymen better.

By birth an aristocrat, by nature he was a democrat. The most learned man that ever sat in the president's chair, his tastes were the simple ones of a farmer. Surrounded by the pomp and ceremony of Washington and Adams' courts, his dress was homely. He despised titles, and preferred severe plainness of speech and the sober garb of the Quakers.

"What is the date of your birth, Mr. President?" asked an admirer.

"Of what possible concern is that to you?" queried the President in turn.

"We wish to give it fitting celebration."

"For that reason, I decline to enlighten you; nothing could be more distasteful to me than what you propose, and, when you address me, I shall be obliged if you will omit the 'Mr.'"

If we can imagine Washington doing so undignified a thing as did President Lincoln, when he first met our present

Secretary of State, (John Sherman) and compared their respective heights by standing back to back, a sheet of paper resting on the crowns of Washington and Jefferson would have lain horizontal and been six feet two inches from the earth, but the one was magnificent in physique, of massive frame and prodigious strength,—the other was thin, wiry, bony, active, but with muscles of steel, while both were as straight as the proverbial Indian arrow.

Jefferson's hair was of sandy color, his cheeks ruddy, his eyes of a light hazel, his features angular, but glowing with intelligence and neither could lay any claim to the gift of oratory.

Washington lacked literary ability, while in the hand of Jefferson, the pen was as masterful as the sword in the clutch of Saladin or Godfrey of Bouillon. Washington had only a common school education, while Jefferson was a classical scholar and could express his thoughts in excellent Italian, Spanish and French, and both were masters of their temper.

Jefferson was an excellent violinist, a skilled mathematician and a profound scholar. Add to all these his spotless integrity and honor, his statesmanship, and his well curbed but aggressive patriotism, and he embodied within himself all the attributes of an ideal president of the United States.

In the colonial times, Virginia was the South and Massachusetts the North. The other colonies were only appendages. The New York Dutchman dozed over his beer and pipe, and when the other New England settlements saw the Narragansetts bearing down upon them with upraised

tomahawks, they ran for cover and yelled to Massachusetts to save them.

Clayborne fired popguns at Lord Baltimore, and the Catholic and Protestant Marylanders enacted Toleration Acts, and then chased one another over the border, with some of the fugitives running all the way to the Carolinas, where the settlers were perspiring over their efforts in installing new governors and thrusting them out again, in the hope that a half-fledged statesman would turn up sometime or other in the shuffle.

What a roystering set those Cavaliers were! Fond of horse racing, cock fighting, gambling and drinking, the soul of hospitality, quick to take offense, and quicker to forgive, —duellists as brave as Spartans, chivalric, proud of honor, their province, their blood and their families, they envied only one being in the world and that was he who could establish his claim to the possession of a strain from the veins of the dusky daughter of Powhatan—Pocahontas.

Could such people succeed as pioneers of the wilderness?

Into the snowy wastes of New England plunged the Pilgrims to blaze a path for civilization in the New World. They were perfect pioneers down to the minutest detail. Sturdy, grimly resolute, painfully honest, industrious, patient, moral and seeing God's hand in every affliction, they smothered their groans while writhing in the pangs of starvation and gasped in husky whispers: "He doeth all things well; praise to his name!" Such people could not fail in their work.

And yet of the first ten presidents, New England furnished only the two Adamses, while Virginia gave to the nation, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and then tapered off with Tyler.

In the War for the Union, the ten most prominent leaders were Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Thomas, Farragut, Porter, Lee, Stonewall Jackson, J. E. Johnston and Longstreet. Of these, four were the products of Virginia, while none came from New England, nor did she produce a real, military leader throughout the civil war, though she poured out treasure like water and sent as brave soldiers to the field as ever kept step to the drum beat, while in oratory, statesmanship and humanitarian achievement, her sons have been leaders from the foundation of the Republic.

Thomas Jefferson was born in Shadwell, Albemarle County, Va., April 2,1743. His father was the owner of thirty slaves and of a wheat and tobacco farm of nearly two thousand acres. There were ten children, Thomas being the third. His father was considered the strongest man physically in the county, and the son grew to be like him in that respect, but the elder died while the younger was a boy.

Entering William and Mary College, Thomas was shy, but his ability quickly drew attention to him. He was an irrestrainable student, sometimes studying twelve and fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. He acquired the strength to stand this terrific strain by his exercise of body. His father warned his wife just before his death not to allow their son to neglect this necessity, but the warning was

superfluous. The youth was a keen hunter, a fine horseman and as fond as Washington of out door sports.

He was seventeen years old when he entered college and was one of the "gawkiest" students. He was tall, growing fast, raw-boned, with prominent chin and cheek bones, big hands and feet, sandy-haired and freckled. His mind broadened and expanded fast under the tutelage of Dr. William Small, a Scotchman and the professor of mathematics, who made young Jefferson his companion in his walks, and showed an interest in the talented youth, which the latter gratefully remembered throughout life.

Jefferson was by choice a farmer and never lost interest in the management of his estate. One day, while a student at law, he wandered into the legislature and was thrilled by the glowing speech of Patrick Henry who replied to an interruption:

"If this be treason, make the most of it."

He became a lawyer in his twenty-fourth year, and was successful from the first, his practice soon growing to nearly five hundred cases annually, which yielded an income that would be a godsend to the majority of lawyers in these days.

Ere long, the mutterings of the coming Revolution drew Jefferson aside into the service of his country.

At the age of twenty-six (May 11, 1769), he took his seat in the House of Burgesses, of which Washington was a member. On the threshold of his public career, he made the resolution which was not once violated during his life, "never to engage, while in public office, in any kind of enterprise for the improvement of my fortune, nor to wear

any other character than that of a farmer." Thus, during his career of nearly half a century, he was impartial in his consideration of questions of public interest.

His first important speech was in favor of the repeal of the law that compelled a master when he freed his slaves to send them out of the colony. The measure was overwhelmingly defeated, and its mover denounced as an enemy of his country.

It was about this time that Jefferson became interested in Mrs. Martha Wayles Skelton, a childless widow, beautiful and accomplished and a daughter of John Wayles, a prominent member of the Williamsburg bar. She was under twenty years of age, when she lost her first husband, rather tall, with luxuriant auburn hair and an exceedingly graceful manner.

She had many suitors, but showed no haste to lay aside her weeds. The aspirants indeed were so numerous that she might well hesitate whom to choose, and more than one was hopeful of winning the prize.

It so happened that one evening, two of the gentlemen called at the same time at her father's house. They were friends, and were about to pass from the hall into the drawing-room, when they paused at the sound of music. Some one was playing a violin with exquisite skill, accompanied by the harpsicord, and a lady and gentleman were singing.

There was no mistaking the violinist, for there was only one in the neighborhood capable of so artistic work, while Mrs. Skelton had no superior as a player upon the harpsicord, the fashionable instrument of those days.

Besides, it was easy to identify the rich, musical voice of Jefferson and the sweet tones of the young widow.

The gentlemen looked significantly at each other. Their feelings were the same.

"We are wasting our time," said one; "we may as well go home."

They quietly donned their hats and departed, leaving the ground to him who had manifestly already pre-empted it.

On New Year's day, 1772, Jefferson and Mrs. Skelton were married and no union was more happy. His affection was tender and romantic and they were devoted lovers throughout her life. Her health and wishes were his first consideration, and he resolved to accept no post or honor that would involve their separation, while she proved one of the truest wives with which any man was ever blessed of heaven. The death of his father-in-law doubled Jefferson's estate, a year after his marriage. His life as a gentleman farmer was an ideal one, and it is said that as a result of experimentation, Jefferson domesticated nearly every tree and shrub, native and foreign, that was able to stand the Virginia winters.

Jefferson's commanding ability, however, speedily thrust him into the stirring incidents that opened the Revolution. In September, 1774, his "Draught of Instructions" for Virginia's delegation to the congress in Philadelphia was presented. The convention refused to adopt his radical views, but they were published in a pamphlet and copies were send to England, where Edmund Burke had it republished with emendations of his own.

Great Britain viewed the paper as the extreme of insolence and punished the author by adding his name to the list of proscriptions enrolled in a bill of attainder.

Jefferson was present as a member of the convention, which met in the parish church at Richmond, in March, 1775, to consider the course that Virginia should take in the impending crisis. It was at that meeting that Patrick Henry electrified his hearers with the thrilling words:

"Gentlemen may cry, 'Peace, peace!' but there is no peace! The war has actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the North will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field. Why stand we here idle? What is it the gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, GIVE ME LIBERTY, Or GIVE ME DEATH!"

Within the following month occurred the battle of Lexington.

Washington, Jefferson and Patrick Henry were members of the committee appointed to arrange a plan for preparing Virginia to act her part in the struggle. When Washington, June, 20, 1775, received his commission as commander-in-chief of the American army, Jefferson succeeded to the vacancy thus created, and the next day took his seat in congress.

A few hours later came the news of the battle of Bunker Hill.

Jefferson was an influential member of the body from the first. John Adams said of him: "he was so prompt, frank,

explicit and decisive upon committees that he soon seized upon every heart." Virginia promptly re-elected him and the part he took in draughting the Declaration of Independence is known to every school boy.

His associates on the committee were Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston. It was by their request that he prepared the document (see fac-simile, page 49,) done on the second floor of a small building, on the corner of Market and Seventh Streets. The house and the little desk, constructed by Jefferson himself, are carefully preserved.

The paper was warmly debated and revised in congress on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th of July, 1776. The weather was oppressively hot, and on the last day an exasperating but providential invasion of the hall by a swarm of flies hurried the signing of the document. Some days afterward, the committee of which Jefferson was a member provided as a motto of the new seal, that perfect legend,—E Pluribus Unum.

The facts connected with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence must always be of profound interest. The public are inclined to think that our Magna Charta was accepted and signed with unbounded enthusiasm and that scarcely any opposition to it appeared, but the contrary was the fact.

While Jefferson was the author of the instrument, John Adams, more than any one man or half a dozen men brought about its adoption. When the question was afterward asked him, whether every member of congress cordially approved it, he replied, "Majorities were constantly

against it. For many days the majority depended on Mr. Hewes of North Carolina. While a member one day was reading documents to prove that public opinion was in favor of the measure, Mr. Hewes suddenly started upright, and lifting up both hands to heaven, as if in a trance, cried out:

'It is done, and I will abide by it.'

I would give more for a perfect painting of the terror and horror of the faces of the old majority at that moment than for the best piece of Raphael."

Jefferson has given a synopsis of the arguments for and against the adoption of the Declaration. It will be remembered that the hope of the colonies or new States, even after the war had continued for a considerable time, was not so much independence as to extort justice from Great Britain.

Had this been granted, the separation would have been deferred and when it came, as come it must, probably would have been peaceable. At the same time, there was a strenuous, aggressive minority who was insistent from the first for a complete severance of the ties binding us to the mother country.

The debate in congress showed that New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and South Carolina were not ready to take the irrevocable step, but it was evident that they were fast approaching that mood, and the wise leaders tarried in order to take them in their company.

In the vote of July 1, the Pennsylvania and South Carolina delegates still opposed, while those from New York did the

same, contrary to their own convictions but in obedience to home instructions, which later were changed.

The signs of unanimity became unmistakable on the Second, and two days later, as every one knows, the adoption of the Declaration took place, though it was not until the Second of August that all the members, excepting John Dickinson had signed.

Five years passed before the Articles of Confederation were formally adopted by the states, by which time it had become clear that they must totally fail of their purpose, for each state decided for itself whether to respond to the demands of congress. The poison of nullification thus infused into the body politic at its birth bore baleful fruit in the years that followed.

On six separate occasions, there were overt acts on the part of the States.

The first occurred in 1798, when Virginia and Kentucky passed nullification resolutions.

The second was the attempt of New England in 1803 to form a northern confederacy, comprising five New England States, and New York and New Jersey. The third was Aaron Burr's wild scheme in the Southwest.

The fourth, the resolution of the New England States to withhold cooperation in the War of 1812.

The fifth, the nullification acts of South Carolina in 1832.

The sixth and last, the effort of eleven states to form the Southern Confederacy. This brought the burning issue to a head and settled the question for the ages to come.

It seems incredible in these times that the country submitted for a month to the intolerable Alien and Sedition

acts. Should any congressman propose their reenactment to-day, he would be looked upon as a crank and be laughed out of court. They were enacted when Jefferson was Vice President and were the creation of the brilliant Alexander Hamilton, whose belief was in a monarchy rather than a republic.

The Sedition act made it a felony punishable with a fine of $5000 and five years imprisonment for persons to combine in order to impede the operation of any law of the United States, or to intimidate persons from taking Federal office, or to commit or advise a riot or insurrection or unlawful assembly.

It declared further that the writing or publishing of any scandalous, malicious or false statement against the president or either house of congress should be punishable by a fine of $2000 and imprisonment for two years.

It will be noted that this law precluded all free discussion of an act of congress, or the conduct of the president.

In other words, it was meant to be the death blow to freedom of speech.

But bad as it was, the Alien act, which congress passed at the same session, 1798, was ten fold worse.

There had been much unrest caused by the intermeddling of foreigners in the States, and it was now decided that the president might drive out of the country any alien he chose thus to banish, and to do it without assigning any reason therefor. It was not necessary even to sue or to bring charges; if an alien receiving such notice from the president refused to obey, he could be imprisoned for three years.

President Adams afterward declared that he did not approve of this stern measure which was the work of Hamilton, and boasted that it was not enforced by him in a single instance.

Nevertheless, the Sedition act was enforced to a farcical degree.

When President Adams was passing through Newark, N. J., he was saluted by the firing of cannon. One of the cannoneers, who was strongly opposed to him, expressed the wish that he might be struck by some of the wadding. For this remark, he was arrested and compelled to pay a fine of one hundred dollars.

Editor Frothingham printed his belief that Hamilton wished to buy the Aurora for the purpose of suppressing it. For expressing that opinion he was fined and imprisoned. Thomas Cooper made the remark that in 1797 President Adams was "hardly in the infancy of political mistakes," and these mild words cost him $400 and kept him in prison for six months.

It is hard to believe that the following proceedings took place within the present hundred years in the United States of America, and yet they did.

In the case against Callender, Judge Chase denounced the accused to the jurors and forbade the marshals to place any one not a Federalist on the jury. The lawyers who defended Callender were threatened with corporal punishment.

In Otsego, N. Y., Judge Peck obtained signers to a petition for the repeal of the obnoxious acts. For such action he was indicted and taken to New York city for trial.