

SALMON P. CHASE

A BIOGRAPHY



JOHN NIVEN

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A Biography

JOHN NIVEN

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*To the memory of my sister
Mary Ann Niven*

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Preface

“Salmon P. Chase is going to be a tough nut to crack,” wrote John Hay to John G. Nicolay, his collaborator on the massive biography of Lincoln they were writing. After toiling for many years on a biography of Chase and an edition of his papers, I heartily concur with Hay’s statement.

Chase was an exceedingly complex individual with many conflicting facets to his character. A moralist torn by ambition, he appeared before the courts of Cincinnati and Columbus defending slaves for social justice and for personal recognition. A realist in politics to a point, he exhibited this quality when he first became involved with the Ohio Liberty party, a fledgling abolitionist enterprise in 1840–41. At the time the Liberty party seemed a forlorn hope to most practical politicians, but Chase sensed its importance in a reform movement that was beginning to sweep the northern states on the issue of slavery. And he meant to capitalize on what he was certain would be an exciting future that would yield benefits to him yet at the same time satisfy a genuine desire to help his fellowman regardless of his color or his condition of servitude.

But with all his faults and all his virtues—which were many—Chase was preeminently a representative nineteenth-century man. He moved through those turbulent years as a majestic figure with an air of conscious superiority that many found repellent. Yet he performed invaluable public service in the drive to end slavery, in his financial policies as Secretary of the Treasury during the Civil War, in his role as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court during

the turmoil of the Reconstruction years. And he played a constructive role as presiding officer over the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson in the senate.

Despite his years of service as a distinguished American statesman, but few works have dealt with his life and career. In 1874, Robert B. Warden, over the objections of Chase's imperious daughter Kate Sprague, published a rambling part memoir, part opinionated biography that with all its weaknesses brought to light much important manuscript material. That same year one of Chase's private secretaries, Jacob Schuckers, published an authorized biography. Better organized than the Warden work, it too printed important letters and diary entries. In 1899, Albert Bushnell Hart brought out the first biography of Chase in the *American Statesman* series that met the critical standards of the day. But it was not until 1987, some 82 years later, that in his biography, *Salmon P. Chase, a Life in Politics*, Frederick Blue recreated the man and his career and documented his life from manuscript sources.

My work seeks to go beyond Chase's political adventures the better to explain his career as an eminent American, yet not slight his family life and the environment in which he acted and which acted on him as a proper setting for his career.

Numerous individuals and colleagues have helped me in researching and writing this book. First, I want to recognize the inestimable assistance I have received from my fellow editors on the Chase Papers project. They are James McClure, Leigh Johnsen, William Ferraro, and Steve Leiken. My deep appreciation goes to Henry Gibbons, Hans L. Trefousse, and Bennett H. Wall, who read all or portions of the manuscript. I have profited much from their invaluable criticism.

Support for the Chase Papers project from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) helped me immeasurably during the research phase of this book. Thus I record here my deep appreciation to Roger Bruns, Gerald George, Mary Giunta, Kathryn Jacob, and Nancy Sahli of the NHPRC and to Douglas Arnold of the NEH. I wish also to thank John McDonough and Oliver Orr of the Manuscript Division and Mary Ison, Head, Reference Section, Prints and Photograph Division of the Library of Congress; Richard Baker, Historian of the U.S. Senate; Bernard R. Crystal, Curator of Manuscripts, the Butler Library, Columbia University; the Manuscript Department of the New York Historical Society; the Cincinnati Historical society; the Huntington Library; and the New York Public Library, for assistance in unearthing relevant documents; and Chase's great grandson, Edward Hoyt of Berkeley, California, who made available some valuable family documents.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Sheldon Meyer, who provided me with

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Claremont, California
1994

J. N.

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Contents

1. Threshold, 3
2. Trials and Triumphs, 16
3. The Young Professional, 29
4. Upward Bound, 39
5. A Distant Shore, 55
6. To Recognize the Distinctions, 71
7. Climbing the Slippery Pole, 87
8. “Free Soil, Free Labor and Free Men,” 99
9. Among the Great, 114
10. Mid-passage, 129
11. Independent Democrat, 140
12. An Uncertain Future, 153
13. On the Campaign Trail, 165

14. As Others See Us, 176
 15. For the Good of the Party, 191
 16. Defeat at the Summit, 206
 17. Visit to Springfield, 222
 18. Loaves and Fishes, 233
 19. War, 243
 20. No Other Recourse, 259
 21. Military Moves and Missions, 274
 22. High Stakes, 290
 23. Emancipation with Exceptions, 302
 24. Mixed Results, 314
 25. Old Greenbacks, 330
 26. Bad Company, 346
 27. "It Is a Big Fish," 355
 28. "So Help Me God," 367
 29. A Trip South, 384
 30. Universal Suffrage, Universal Amnesty, 397
 31. Impeachment, 415
 32. One Clear Call, 433
- Abbreviations Used in Notes, 453
- Notes, 459
- Index, 529

Salmon P. Chase

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chapter 1

Threshold

At a few minutes before one o'clock on March 5, 1868, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase and senior associate Justice Nelson, in their black judicial robes, met the deputation that would escort them to the Senate Chamber. The trial of Andrew Johnson, seventeenth President of the United States, for high crimes and misdemeanors, was about to begin. As the group moved out, Chase and Senator Samuel Pomeroy were in the lead, followed by Nelson and Senators Henry Wilson and Charles R. Buckalew, the lone Democrat. They walked the 100 feet or so from the Supreme Court chambers to the south central doors of the Senate. As soon as they appeared, the senators rose as a body, not out of any respect for Chase and Nelson, but because the Republican majority and the Democratic minority had agreed, for their own particular reasons, to clothe the proceedings with dignity, emulating the great Anglo-American state trials of the past.

Chase himself was equally eager to dramatize the event because he was conscious of his own singular importance in presiding over a trial of obvious historic importance. The contrast between him and his escort, Samuel Pomeroy, could not have been more sharply defined. As the procession moved slowly toward the Vice President's desk the crowded galleries and the senators themselves noted that the tall, stately Chase overtopped Pomeroy by a good four inches, noted also how his strong, chiseled features differed from those of

the suave, smooth Pomeroy's much to that Kansas senator's disadvantage. There was little doubt in anyone's mind that Chase's appearance, his massive frame enhanced by his flowing robes, dominated the scene.¹

Well aware of the image he wished to project, Chase was satisfied that he had struck just the right note at the onset of the proceedings. If the senators were anxious to clothe their actions with the semblance of a profound public act, Chase outdid them by focusing attention on himself and on the judicial role he symbolized. But with him it was not just the trappings of a state trial that the senators had in mind, but the preservation of basic constitutional principles—the distribution of powers between the three branches of the federal government, the executive, legislative, and judicial. For some time he had feared that this time-honored system might be so seriously modified that the government of the nation would be transformed into a parliamentary mode of rule. The checks and balances the founding fathers had made the cornerstone of public policy would be hustled on their way to extinction. Congress would possess supreme power not just in its legislative capacity but in executing and interpreting its own laws.

Chase had always been devoted to measured change, as he understood the needs of society. To his orderly mind, slavery, the abasement of human beings, had always been an alien force, a kind of radicalism, that threatened the existence of the Republic, and a grave affront to personal and public morality, a subversion of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Now that slavery had been abolished and civil rights of the former bondsmen guaranteed by the thirteenth and in all likelihood the impending fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Chase was satisfied that their freedom and their security were well protected.

It was time to "bind up the nation's wounds," in Lincoln's words, not a time to replace armed combat with the continuation of a divisive cold war against the former enemy. To his mind now that the ruling oligarchy had been displaced the people of the South were basically as law-abiding as their northern counterparts. Believing as he did, he had coined the slogan "Universal Amnesty and Universal Suffrage."

Thus he deplored the unprecedented action of the Congress to remove a President, however impractical his stubborn stand against Congress on Reconstruction, however dogmatic his policies upholding white supremacy and old-fashioned states' rights. In impeaching and trying Johnson under the partisan passions of the moment, the radicals in Congress among whom he had counted his closest political friends were acting more stubbornly and more irresponsibly than the President.

At least Johnson had observed constitutional constraints even if he interpreted them literally, not so the small group of able and articulate radicals who had driven their moderate colleagues along the dangerous road of political

revolution. Chase had come to believe that this minority was manipulating the majority of their fellow Congressmen, much as the prewar minority of southern slave owners had crushed the moderate unionists and precipitated the unimaginable death and devastation of Civil War.

As he repeated after Nelson the oath to “do impartial justice according to the Constitution and the laws” he was reenacting what amounted to a life-long belief that the stability of society rested on interacting social and moral imperatives. He would if he could interpose the dignity of his office and his status as a preeminent public man against the “madness of the hour,” to protect the government, not just the executive branch but the Congress itself, against its own excesses and somehow keep the Court free and independent while it painstakingly moved to interpret the Constitution so as to protect the civil rights of both black and white citizens.

There was of course, another side to this exceedingly complex individual. Political goals were never far from his mind. Invariably they were not to be sought for their own sake but rather for the good of the country and for the highest of moral purposes, the freedom and equality of all mankind. Yet these lofty motives masked a thirst for office and power that was deeply ingrained in his character, rooted as they were in a troubled childhood and adolescence.

His uncle, Philander Chase, the Episcopal Bishop of Ohio, recognized this flaw in his character during those years when his nephew was a member of his household. He wrote his brother, Baruch, that Salmon’s “temper is not good, tho’ much modified by discipline. His genius [is] extraordinarily good. If he finds someone to govern and direct him aright, he will with God’s blessing make one of the finest of men; if otherwise, he may make one of the worst.”²

Salmon Portland Chase was born in Cornish, New Hampshire, on January 13, 1808, the eighth child of Ithamar and Janette Ralston Chase. Chase’s father, a prosperous, hardworking, and well-respected farmer, was a leading citizen of the town that his grandfather founded.

The town itself was a self-contained community as New Hampshire villages and towns were at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Situated almost in the middle of New Hampshire’s western border, it profited as a sort of rural entrepôt conveying the resources from the rich farmlands in the upper Connecticut River valley, by way of the river to the more thickly settled areas of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and through Long Island Sound to New York City. By New Hampshire standards, Cornish was a relatively prosperous community, where some of the frontier heritage still lingered. His father, older brothers, and sisters formed a tightly knit group that counted themselves the leading spirits of the community. Chase’s numerous uncles were all well-educated members of the professions, lawyers, clergymen, and physicians. In fact Chase owed his pompous name (which he disliked intensely) to one of his uncles, also a Salmon, who had been the foremost lawyer in Portland, Maine.³

Many extended families like the Chases, isolated for the most part in remote, rural New England, were riven with emotional turmoil and individual controversy. The Ithamar Chase family, however, was free of such internal jealousy and hatred. The elder Chase seems to have had a genial and expansive nature that avoided local quarrels and rivalries. His neighbors looked up to him as a natural leader that was manifest through his election to a succession of offices.⁴ As his son remarked many years after Ithamar's death, he had also been a Justice of the Peace with Honorable before his name and Esquire after it, titles in which his wife took pride.⁵

Ithamar Chase, the sixth child of Dudley and Alice Corbett Chase, was born in 1763 in Sutton, Massachusetts, which later became the center of agrarian discontent and the seat of Shays' Rebellion. The family had emigrated from England in 1640 and settled first in Newbury, Massachusetts before moving westward to Sutton. Samuel Chase, Salmon's great-grandfather, seeking better land and prospects, moved a hundred miles northwest to New Hampshire where he had found a wilderness meadow in the fertile valley of the Connecticut River. Chase and several associates purchased the land very cheaply from the original proprietors, who had acquired a large land grant from the royal Governor, Benning Wentworth. Samuel Chase laid out a town which he named Cornish after the county of Cornwall in Great Britain, ancestral home of the Chases.⁶

Samuel Chase's offspring were prolific and hardy. Only one of the fifteen children born in Dudley Chase's family died in infancy and the immediate family was extraordinarily long-lived. Samuel Chase died in 1800 at the age of ninety-three. Born during the reign of Queen Anne, he had seen in the course of his lifetime three wars with France and their Indian allies, the Revolutionary War, and the creation of a new nation. Salmon's older brother and sister remembered the old gentleman. Chase's paternal grandparents both lived in good health until their mid-eighties. Longevity persisted into his parent's generation when their average mortality exceeded seventy-five years.

That generation was also a precocious lot. Five of Ithamar's brothers attended Dartmouth College. And the sisters, though they had the benefit of only the rustic one-room school in Cornish, were not neglected. Their self-educated parents saw to it that they continued reading and studying with their brothers when at home and with the local clergyman. Ithamar's younger sister Alice, the most conscientious of the girls in the family, vied with her college-educated brothers in the translation of Latin and Greek.⁷ Religious training of the strict Calvinist variety pervaded not just the Dudley Chase family but all of the settlers in Cornish, a regimen that Chase's children continued.

Salmon Chase was thus born into a household where work, self-improvement, and religion were interchangeable. The only departure from this ancestral norm, variation more of form than of substance, occurred before

Chase's birth. The youngest of the eight brothers, Philander, became converted to Episcopalianism while a student at Dartmouth. He embraced his new faith with such fervor and determination that he managed not only to have his parents and all of his siblings confirmed in the denomination but to raise the necessary means for building an Episcopal church in Cornish.⁸

Chase's father, Ithamar, seems to have been less of a driven person than his brothers. He did not attend college, but he was a highly successful farmer who produced enough of a surplus in cereal grains, fodder, and animal products to provide a comfortable life for his large family.

Nature had bestowed beauty on the Cornish countryside. The fecundity of the Chase women and the fertility of Ithamar's fields bred security for young Salmon. But such comfort of a prosperous extended family did not mean exemption from the never-ending cycle of farm work.

Like his older brothers and sisters, Salmon had to earn his keep as soon as he was old enough to help in the fields or the barns. Moreover, winters in that northern climate were long and harsh for man and beast alike. The Chase homestead was a substantial structure that Ithamar built in the 1790s, but it was drafty, heated only by an inefficient fireplace which served for cooking along with a "bake kettle and a Dutch oven." Fare was coarse and monotonous during the windswept, snow-driven winters. All-too-short summer months brought significant improvement and variety to the family diet. Fresh meat, though lean and tough by modern standards, garden vegetables, and some orchard fruit were plentiful, but of little variety. Chase's younger sister, Helen, remembered that her brother gave her the first peach she had ever eaten when he returned from Ohio in 1823. She was then eight years old.⁹

Chase's mother, Janette Ralston Chase, was a resolute woman who was determined that her children improve on whatever natural gifts she observed in them. She was the second daughter of Scottish immigrants, who had come to Massachusetts in the mid-eighteenth century and migrated to Keene, New Hampshire, a market town some fifty miles south of Cornish. Janette Chase's father, Alexander Ralston, for many years had prospered and when she married Ithamar was the richest man in town.

Protected and loved by a large and caring family in comfortable circumstances, young Chase enjoyed a secure early childhood. But when he reached the age of eight, a series of tragic and difficult circumstances befell his family during the harsh winter and very late spring of 1816.

Ithamar Chase, who for so many years had farmed his acres in Cornish and who had provided a good living for his large family, suddenly decided to make a drastic change in occupation. Attracted by what he heard were large profits to be made in the glass business because of the war, which cut off these essential imports, Ithamar sold out his holdings in Cornish and went into partnership with Ebenezer Brewer and William M. Bond, both part-time