

SAMUEL DEXTER, COUNCILOR, AND HIS
SON, HON. SAMUEL DEXTER, SECRETARY
OF WAR, AND SECRETARY OF THE
TREASURY

BY CLARENCE WINTHROP BOWEN

THE most striking character in Woodstock, Connecticut, at the beginning of the Revolutionary War was Samuel Dexter, born in Dedham in 1726. His father, Rev. Samuel Dexter (Harvard 1720), prepared him for Harvard College. The son preferred business, became a successful merchant in Boston, retired at thirty-six, and built a home in Dedham, which is still standing, where he entertained Governor Thomas Hutchinson, Lt. Governor Andrew Oliver and members of the Council.

He was Moderator at Town Meetings, Deputy to the General Court, a member of the first Provincial Congress and of the Supreme Executive Council. His election to the Council and the election of James Bowdoin and Prof. John Winthrop were several times vetoed or "negatived" by the Governor. When Artemus Ward was appointed General and Commander-in-Chief, Samuel Dexter administered the oath. When George Washington was about to start from Philadelphia for Cambridge, John Adams wrote Washington: "Mr. Bowdoin, Mr. Sever and Mr. Dexter, lately of the Council, will be found to be very worthy men." Samuel Dexter was Commissioner for settling the Land Bank business, was Chairman of a Committee of thirteen to report regarding the defense of the province (Hancock, Gerry, Heath and James Warren being other members of the Committee) and was also on the Committee to draw up a Resolve to be

a part of the address to General Washington. But Dexter was opposed to the concentration of poorly equipped troops against British regulars, and was consequently suspected of being at heart a Royalist. "A haughty integrity cannot endure suspicion," wrote his son. Dexter, therefore, retired in the spring of 1775 with his family, to Woodstock, Connecticut and bought the Rev. Abiel Leonard house on Woodstock Hill, which subsequently became the home of Rev. Eliphalet Lyman.

Dexter's letters to Deacon Caleb Davis, the Boston merchant, who was born in Woodstock, are owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society, and Dexter's letters to Lyman, I found in the Lyman house in Woodstock in 1873, and gave them a few years ago to Worthington C. Ford to be added to the collection of Dexter letters in the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Dexter wrote Davis from Woodstock: "I have got Madeira and Lisbon wines here, but want some cheap Malaga to give to country people." He wanted table fish from Marblehead, six pounds of shells and eighteen "of your best chocolate" and tried to rent to Davis his Dedham house. In January 1776, Dexter wrote declining the appointment of First Justice of the Court of Common Pleas of the County of Suffolk. He also declined the election offered him by Woodstock to the General Assembly of Connecticut and added: "I think I would prefer a private life in Woodstock to any public employment whatsoever." He spoke in other letters of his Woodstock neighbors: Charles Church Chandler, elected later to Congress, Captains Benjamin and William Lyon, Captain Matthew Bowen and General Samuel McClellan, the last named the great-grandfather of Gen. George B. McClellan of the Civil War, and said: "I do not soon forget old neighborhood and friendship."

Dexter's grandnephew, Samuel F. Haven, Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, said of him: "His name stands by the side of Otis, Bowdoin, the

two Adamses, Hawley, Hancock and Quincy." President Quincy of Harvard, regarded Dexter as one of the most remarkable men of his age, and Worthington C. Ford wrote: "He is one of the characters who have been neglected and to his cost, for I find there have been doubts cast upon his patriotism and he is even mentioned among the Royalists, something which he did not deserve." After the death of his wife, seven years older than himself, he sold his homes in Woodstock and Dedham, and from 1786 to 1800 lived in Weston, where President Willard of Harvard and his son, Prof. Sidney Willard, visited him.

In Weston, Dexter wrote the pamphlet on "Jacob and Esau," published in 1791 by Isaiah Thomas, a copy of which is owned by the American Antiquarian Society. The last ten years of Dexter's life were spent in Mendon where he died June 19, 1810, in his 85th year. He was buried in Woodstock in the center of a piece of land of three and a half acres fronting on Woodstock Street, which as a boy I often crossed. "The Dexter Lot," as everybody called it, adjoined my father's home. Dexter's will, deposited in Worcester, written by himself in a thirty-seven page volume, bound in leather, contains the words:

"Nor let any stone tell where I lie."

Abiel Holmes, born in Woodstock, who remembered Dexter's wife, Hannah Sigourney, as a lady of dark complexion, with French features and pronunciation, said: "Samuel Dexter had a large library which attracted much attention at the time of its removal. I have seen the lot in which he was buried not far from the first church in my native town, but no sign of his grave can be traced." Dexter left \$5000 to Harvard College, \$350 to the City of Boston, \$170 to the Schools of Dedham, and to the Church in Woodstock, "the Dexter Lot" and \$40 in money.

Of Dexter's five children, four grew up. One daughter was married in Woodstock to Rev. John Bradford, Jr. (Harvard 1774). Another daughter

married a son of Gen. Artemus Ward, Chief Justice Artemus Ward (Harvard 1783), who received an LL. D. degree from Harvard, was a member of Congress and law partner of Dexter's youngest son, Samuel Dexter, Jr. Dexter's oldest son, Andrew, joined the church in Woodstock in 1777 and was the father of Andrew Dexter, Jr., (Brown University, 1798) who was prominent in erecting in 1808 in Boston the Boston Exchange Coffee House, seven stories high, destroyed by fire in 1818. Andrew Dexter, Jr. was the founder of Montgomery, Alabama. Gilbert Stuart painted portraits of him and of his wife, a daughter of Attorney General Perez Morton of Boston and of Sarah Wentworth Apthorpe, a relative of Gov. Sir John Wentworth.

The youngest child of Samuel Dexter of Woodstock, Samuel Dexter, Jr., was born May 14, 1761, came to Woodstock when he was fourteen and was prepared for Harvard by a Harvard graduate, Rev. Aaron Putnam, of Pomfret. A fellow student was Elijah Paine (Harvard 1781), who afterwards became United States Senator from Vermont. Another fellow student of Samuel Dexter, Jr. in Pomfret was the Revolutionary War Patriot, Col. William Prescott's son, Judge William Prescott (Harvard 1783), whose daughter married Franklin Dexter, son of Samuel Dexter, Jr.,

Samuel Dexter, Jr. (Harvard 1781) studied law in Worcester under Levi Lincoln the Elder, was a member of the General Court, Member of Congress, United States Senator, Secretary of War under John Adams, followed Oliver Wolcott as Secretary of the Treasury, which office he held under Jefferson for almost a year, or until he was succeeded by Albert Gallatin. Dexter also acted as Secretary of State so that he could administer the oath to John Marshall as Chief Justice of the United States. On retiring from office Dexter became famous as an advocate before the Supreme Court of the United States. His enunciation was slow, his eloquence thrilling. When Dexter and

William Pinckey spoke before the Supreme Court all the belles in Washington attended, and were "entranced for hours," as Chief Justice Marshall wrote his wife. Samuel Dexter, Jr. wrote the reply of the Senate to President Adams' address on the death of Washington. He received the LL.D. degree from Harvard in 1813, and declined in 1815 the mission to Spain tendered him by President Madison, having previously declined another mission offered him by President Adams.

Dexter was a candidate for Governor of Massachusetts in 1814, against Caleb Strong, and the following year was again a candidate, receiving 47,000 votes to Caleb Strong's 49,000. Dexter was President of the first Temperance Society in Massachusetts. He wrote pamphlets but no books. He did not write out his speeches. His Eulogy on Fisher Ames, however, has been preserved. Daniel Webster spoke of Dexter on equal terms with James Madison, Fisher Ames, Christopher Gore, Rufus King, Chancellor Kent and Chief Justice Marshall. After the death, May 4th, 1816, of Samuel Dexter, Jr., John Adams said: "I have lost the ablest friend I had on earth in Mr. Dexter."

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