

THOMAS NELSON

Thomas Nelson was born at Peekskill, in Westchester County, New York, on the 23rd of January 1819. He was the third son of the Honorable William Nelson, a representative in Congress from the Eighth Congressional District of New York -- a gentleman whose earnest and successful devotion to the laborious profession of law in early life, and practical wisdom as a politician and statesman, as well as his virtues as a man of principle, won him the suffrages and respect of a large majority of his fellow-citizens, who several times testified by popular vote their confidence in his principles, public spirit, and private worth.

As a youth and during the earlier years of boyhood, young Nelson was the subject of those wholesome family influences which give the right direction to moral character; and to early parental precept and example may, doubtless, be traced, in a large measure, the germs of that honorable and manly ambition which now distinguishes Judge Nelson as a public man.

Mr. Nelson graduated at Williams College, in 1836, at the early age of seventeen; and although it has always been with him a matter of regret since that he entered college so young, yet he distinguished himself as a scholar, and graduated honorably as a boy of great promise, for he was then but a boy. It was, therefore, thought advisable, before entering on his clerkship as a student at law, that he should continue the scientific and literary habits he had formed in college by prosecuting his studies in the city of New York. He there chose his residence in the family of a French gentleman, a professor of the French language and literature, that he might have the opportunity of acquiring not only a thorough theoretic knowledge of that language, but a correct idiomatic use of it, while at the same time he attended, as an amateur, a regular course of lectures at the Medical College in that city, giving his attention chiefly, however, to the study of anatomy and physiology.

A love of general knowledge, and a desire for liberal and elegant culture, have always been marked characteristics of Mr. Nelson's mind, and given scope to his general reading and studies; for though a successful student and practitioner of law, and not undistinguished at the bar, he is still more remarkable as a general scholar, having a full, ready, and well-furnished mind, to which refined culture has added the grace of a polished literary and aesthetic taste.

Having completed this course of medical lectures, he entered his father's office as a student at law, where he continued until he was of age, when he was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of New York; and, in due time, he was also admitted as a counselor of the same court, a solicitor and counselor of the Court of Chancery of that state, and an attorney and counselor of the Supreme Court of the United States.

After Mr. Nelson had finished his professional studies, and be-

fore entering on the practice of the law, he expressed a strong desire to visit the old world. He had in this a twofold purpose; one was to increase his general health by travel; and the other, to gain that knowledge of men and things which books cannot give. In this wish his family and friends very readily acquiesced. And Mr. Nelson accordingly spent the greater part of the year 1842 in England and Continental Europe, making himself familiar with every thing during his travels which he thought would be most useful to him, as a well-read and well-informed man.

This tour not only afforded him opportunity for personal observation on the present condition of European society and institutions, but it gratified and strengthened that taste for classic scenes and reminiscences with which his academic and collegiate studies had early inspired him. As a scholar, however, Mr. Nelson's knowledge is by no means limited to the acquirements of a college class-room. He has made himself, in the broad sense of the word, a scholar, by a critical study of the English classics, and an extensive acquaintance with the literature of modern Europe.

Mr. Nelson's temperament and refined taste, as well as his correct moral judgments, naturally inclined him to a quick and instinctive admiration of beauty, goodness and truth in character, as well as in art and literature. This was early manifested when, at the age of seventeen, he chose for the theme of the oration assigned him when he graduated, "The Character of John Jay," -- a choice which showed that young Nelson had, from his earliest recollections, not only loved and admired in Gov. Jay the scholar, the patriot, the jurist, and the statesman, but that he also revered the Christian as the highest style of the man. The oration was well conceived, and delivered in an easy and graceful manner. As a whole, it would have been creditable to a graduate of maturer years, for it gave to all unmistakable evidences that he was destined, ultimately, to rank among the distinguished men of the commonwealth and the country as a man of capacity, principle, and untiring industry.

On Mr. Nelson's return from his European tour, he entered vigorously on his profession, (as a partner with his father in Westchester county,) which he pursued with great success until he was appointed Chief Justice of Oregon, in January, 1851, when he entered upon his duties as a judge of that distant territory.

Mr. Nelson had, as the lawyers call it, a good legal mind, clear and discriminating -- fond of investigation, and whilst he has a dislike to what is called the drudgery of his profession, yet during his practice of the law, he invariably prepared his cases with such care and research, that he was always ready for any emergency in the progress of the trial of his causes. He was ardent and persevering, and invariably summed up his causes before a jury with ability, and not unfrequently with great force and eloquence.

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At the bar of the court of his native state he discussed questions of law with a clearness and ability, manifesting a research and knowledge of the reasons and principles of law greatly beyond his years. During the few years he was engaged in his profession, he earned a reputation as a skilful advocate, an eloquent speaker, and a lawyer, such as but few of his age had attained. His manners and address, as a public speaker, as well as in his private intercourse with his friends and fellow citizens, were modest, courteous and agreeable. His social and domestic character was faultless. His truthfulness and integrity were unquestioned and unquestionable. Few men were held in higher estimation by those who knew him, as a gentleman of refined manners, a ripe scholar and a lawyer of no ordinary attainments.

As the Chief Justice of Oregon, Mr. Nelson proved himself to be all that his friends desired or expected of him, faithful to duty, capable, and of unflinching integrity. Unfortunately for Oregon, in the course of the last year an exciting controversy sprung up among the people of that territory concerning the location of its seat of government, whether it was by law at Oregon City or Salem. This as a legal and constitutional question came before the Supreme Court of the territory for its adjudication, and a majority of that court (Judge Nelson and Strong) held and so decided that by law the seat of government was Oregon City. But a majority of the members of the legislature of that territory chose to regard Salem as the seat of government, and acted accordingly. This of course produced much excitement and confusion in Oregon. Whatever the merits of that question as to where the seat of government, as a matter of expediency, ought to be, no sensible and unprejudiced man, certainly no good lawyer, who had examined the question, could doubt, at the time it was presented to the court for its adjudication, that by law the seat of government was Oregon City. And the court being called on to decide, not from considerations of policy or expediency, but by those rules that should always govern in settling a legal and constitutional question, we cannot see how Judges Nelson and Strong, as intelligent and impartial jurists, could have decided otherwise than they did. And, indeed, such is the opinion generally expressed by the best lawyers who have looked at the subject.