

Sherman, Roger (19 Apr. 1721-23 July 1793), merchant and revolutionary leader, was born in Newton, Massachusetts, the son of William Sherman and Mehetabel Wellington, farmers. He moved with his family two years later to the part of Dorchester that became Stoughton and is now the town of Canton, Massachusetts. He grew up on his father's farm and attended district schools, an apt student with a particular interest in arithmetic. William Sherman was somewhat downwardly mobile and had reduced his farm from 270 acres to 73 acres by the time of his death in 1741.

Roger's older brother, William Sherman, had taken up a small parcel of family-owned land in New Milford, Connecticut, in 1740. At his father's death, Roger bought a farm in that part of New Fairfield that became the town of Sherman. He moved there around 1742, taking his mother and younger siblings with him.

In Connecticut Sherman began his ascent to leadership. At some point he had learned the craft of cordwainer. His family no doubt worked the farm in New Fairfield, and perhaps, as tradition has it, he continued cobbling as a way to sit still so he could study surveying. At any rate, within a few years Sherman was appointed New Haven County surveyor, a position of great activity in that rapidly populating frontier area along an only recently resolved New York-Connecticut boundary. When Litchfield was created in 1752, Sherman became one of two official surveyors for that county. Surveying fees provided Sherman with a considerable income, and by 1745 he had given up cobbling. The surveying business had opened up opportunity for land speculation, and ultimately Sherman, while still in his late thirties, became the largest landowner in Litchfield County.

In 1748 Sherman moved to the central village of New Milford to enter into a partnership in a general store with his brother William. The Sherman store was a tightly run business with books cleared uncommonly often, and apparently it thrived. At the age of twenty-seven Sherman bought one of the finest houses in the village, journeyed back to his home town in Massachusetts, and married Elizabeth Hartwell. They had seven children, three of whom died in infancy. Sherman gave up his surveyorship around 1758. He continued to operate the store with his brother and kept up activities designed to bring attention to himself and to promote his ambitions. From 1750 to 1760 he published a series of annual almanacs of the sort then common that included astronomical data, quotations from poems by Englishmen of letters, and homilies and aphorisms, some of which he may have written himself.

Sherman enjoyed upward political mobility that paralleled his economic success. In 1748 he began his career in public office, which was broken only by his death. He moved rapidly through lesser local offices to become one of five selectmen, who administered town affairs, in 1753 and two years later one of New Milford's two deputies to the Connecticut General Assembly, the pinnacle of local elected office. He continued in those positions until he left New Milford in 1761, adding, in 1755, the prestigious position of justice of the peace for New Milford and Litchfield County.

Meanwhile, Sherman had been reading law, and in 1754 he was admitted to the bar. His law business soon became his primary occupation, though he still dealt in land, operated his store, published almanacs, and held increasingly responsible public offices.

William Sherman died in 1756, and Roger took on Anthony Carpenter as a partner to run the store, but Carpenter, too, soon died. When Sherman's wife died in 1760, he sold out and relocated to the town of New Haven, which was one of Connecticut's busiest ports and, with Hartford, the cocapital of the colony. It was a place of unbounded commercial and political opportunity for a merchant-lawyer of unlimited energy and ambition. He married Rebecca Prescott in 1763. She was only twenty, half his age, but of a social standing well above that of his first wife. They had eight children. Sherman was elected to represent New Haven in the general assembly three years after he moved there, extraordinary for a man so new to town. In 1765 he was appointed a justice for New Haven County.

The mid-1760s was, of course, a time of great political ferment in all the mainland British colonies. Imperial politics could make and break careers, and Sherman apparently determined to see that his was made. His principal strengths were his unrefined and plain-speaking representativeness, his incisive manner of thought, and his rationality. To these he added a reputation for absolute integrity. His pastor, who knew him well, said, "His abilities were remarkable, not brilliant, but solid, penetrating, and capable of deep and long investigation. In such investigation he was greatly assisted by his patient and unremitting application and perseverance." He was six feet tall, wore his brown hair short, and had steel blue-grey eyes. He claimed to have controlled his passions by the time he was twenty, and none of his contemporaries ever had reason to question the claim.

Sherman's political practice was to listen a lot, hedge his positions, sniff the wind sharply, and join the leading wave as he saw it building. He always managed to stay just a bit ahead of the dominant thrust of public opinion, but it is unlikely that he ever championed a cause he did not think was right for his constituents and right under God.

During the Stamp Act controversy of 1765, Sherman was among Connecticut's moderate radicals, and it was he who wrote the assembly's instructions to the delegates sent to the Stamp Act Congress in New York. His position was antistamp, of course, but he also protested the taxation without representation and trials without juries that the act implied. The instructions, which no doubt reflect a consensus rather than Sherman's own position, were moderate and well short of the desires of the most radical members of the assembly but closer to their views than to those of the conservatives led by Governor [Thomas Fitch](#).

Indeed, the actions of Fitch and other conservative members of the council and house led to their defeat at the next colonywide elections. One of the replacements on the twelve-man council--the upper house--was Sherman. From 1766 on, the Connecticut government, with its popularly elected executive and legislature, was securely in the hands of anti-Parliamentary forces. Thus in 1774, when a call came to send delegates to a Continental Congress, the "patriots" had things their own way. Sherman was sent with two others to represent them.

Sherman's participation in the First Continental Congress marks the beginning of nearly two decades of activity on the national political scene. In the Congress he was, in [John Adams's](#) (1735-1826) words, "one of the soundest and strongest pillars of the Revolution." "I have no expectation that [the British] administration will be reconciled unless the Colonies submit to their arbitrary system," said Sherman in 1775, adding portentously, "or convince them that it is

not in their power to carry it into execution." If the British persist in their military activities, he said just after Lexington and Concord, "I hope every Colony will take Government fully into their own hands."

Sherman early saw that there was no logical way to connect a self-governing people to an imperialist system. The Townshend taxes were "as unconstitutional as the Stamp Act," he had written in 1767, and each colony had "distinct and complete powers of legislation . . . [and are not] in any proper sense subordinate to the Legislature of Great Britain." By 1776 his views were well known, and it made sense to put him on Congress's five-man committee to write a Declaration of Independence. No evidence exists that Sherman made any verbal contribution to the text of that document but that it reflects his views is beyond doubt. Connecticut, where he was a--if not *the*--major figure in shaping intercolonial policy, had voted its own very similar declaration the previous month.

Sherman was consistently reelected to the upper house in Connecticut, a position that carried with it a seat on the state's supreme court. He was also returned as a delegate to the Continental Congress, where he sat on the committee that wrote the Articles of Confederation. The Articles restricted the terms of delegates, but Sherman served as often and as long as permissible and was in attendance about half the time between 1774 and 1789. He actually served in the various national Congresses during that period more days than any other man.

By 1787, when he went as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, no one had more national legislative experience than Sherman. He appeared so wise and so skillful that he developed the reputation of being nearly always successful in carrying out his objectives. "He is an able politician, and extremely [*sic*] artful in accomplishing any particular object," wrote an observer at that convention, "--it is remarked that he seldom fails." He had, said one who knew him well, "acute discernment and sound judgement, but especially . . . knowledge of human nature. He had a happy talent of judging what was feasible and what was not feasible, or what men would bear, and what they would not bear in government. And he had a real talent of prudence, or of timing and adapting his measures to the attainment of his end." Sherman's rule in politics, he once told a young friend, was "minorities talk; majorities vote."

It was natural, then, at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that Sherman--the dominant figure of the state's three-man delegation--should play the role of compromiser. Over and over again he proposed solutions on the floor or engaged in back room negotiations to bring about arrangements satisfactory to his state and acceptable to a majority of the other delegations. One high-flown and wealthy Hartford merchant, who was afraid that Sherman only wanted to "patch up" the old system, warned other delegates that "he is cunning as the Devil, and if you attack him, you ought to know him well; he is not easily managed, but if he suspects you are trying to take him in, you may as well catch an Eel by the tail."

Sherman's basic objectives at Philadelphia were two: strengthen the central government so it could pay its debts, negotiate effectively with foreign governments, and maintain domestic tranquility; and protect state autonomy. "Each state," he said, "had its particular habits, usages and manners, which constituted its happiness." The Constitution should not "give to others a power over this happiness, any more than an individual would do, when it could avoid it."

Thus he brought about the alliance of New Englanders and deep southerners that forced the constitutional prohibition on export duties on the middle states. He was instrumental in giving each state one vote in the presidential election when the electoral college fails to produce a majority. His greatest triumph was, beyond any doubt, his engineering of the famous Connecticut Compromise. As the most effective states' rights delegate at the convention, Sherman was determined to block the Madisonian effort to institute proportionality in both houses of Congress. His political machinations are shadowy, but again he succeeded. The state equality in the Senate is largely his doing.

Sherman participated in all the debates concerning all the great documents of the nation's founding, and he actually signed more of them than any other person: the Declaration and Resolves of 1774, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution.

After working for ratification of the Constitution in Connecticut, Sherman was elected to the House in the First Congress and to the Senate in the second. He joined forces with the economic nationalists but continued to work hard at protecting states' rights. For these efforts and those at the Philadelphia convention, the great states' rights philosopher [John C. Calhoun](#) later listed Sherman as one of three men to whom we are indebted for "a federal government instead of a national government."

As part of this determination to protect the states from federal intrusion and also because he hated quick change, Sherman resisted the development of a national bill of rights. Sherman himself wrote that frequent elections were "a much greater security than a declaration of rights or restraining clauses on paper." He failed, of course, in his effort to prevent the enumeration of rights in the Constitution, but he succeeded--virtually singlehandedly--in having them added at the end instead of inserted piecemeal at appropriate places throughout the document as [James Madison](#) (1751-1836) wanted.

Sherman was an honest politician, not a man easy to like, perhaps, but one easy to respect. "That is Mr. Sherman of Connecticut," [Thomas Jefferson](#) told a young friend at the end of Sherman's career, "a man who never said a foolish thing in his life." At his funeral in New Haven, where he died, the president of Yale College told the dead man's neighbors, Sherman had "that Dignity which arises from doing everything perfectly right. He was an extraordinary man--a venerable uncorrupted patriot."

Bibliography

No corpus of Sherman papers exists. Yale University has the largest collection: one box in Beinecke Library containing a few letters, a couple of account books, and miscellaneous papers; and about 200 items in a single box in the Historical Manuscripts Room at Sterling Memorial Library, the largest group consisting of letters taken from the Baldwin Family Collection

covering only the last five years of Sherman's life. Forty-one papers and a notebook are at the Library of Congress. Several letters and papers are located at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass. Groups of letters can be found at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New Haven Colony History Society (where the collection includes an account book), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Connecticut Historical Society. Dartmouth, Harvard, and Brown Universities also have about a half-dozen letters each. The Litchfield Historical Society has a few writs and orders of Sherman's as a justice of the peace, and the New-York Historical Society has three letters of little significance.

No collection of Sherman's almanacs has been preserved, but Victor Hugo Paltsits published "The Almanacs of Roger Sherman" in the *Proceedings* of the American Antiquarian Society 18 (1907): 213-58. Sherman himself published three pamphlets, *A Caveat against Injustice by Philoenumos* (1752), an argument against paper money; and two religious tracts, *A Short Sermon . . .* (1789) and *A Vindication of Presbyterian Ordination . . .* (1768).

The only scholarly full-length biography is Christopher Collier, *Roger Sherman's Connecticut: Yankee Politics and the American Revolution* (1971), which includes the most complete bibliography of sources. Two older book-length biographies are Lewis Henry Boutell, *Life of Roger Sherman* (1896), which is especially strong on Sherman's legal activities; and Roger Sherman Boardman's more popular *Roger Sherman, Signer and Statesman* (1938). Two shorter works are Collier, *Roger Sherman: Puritan Politician* (1976), and John G. Rommel, *Connecticut's Yankee Patriot: Roger Sherman* (1980). Sources for the study of Connecticut during Sherman's era are discussed in Christopher Collier and Bonnie Collier, *The Literature of Connecticut History* (1982).

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