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PREVIEW

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*Portrait of Sargent*

THE PUBLIC CAREER OF  
AARON AUGUSTUS SARGENT

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THE PUBLIC CAREER OF  
      
AARON AUGUSTUS SARGENT

A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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In partial fulfillment  
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PREVIEW

## Preface

The major source of material for this paper has been the records of debates in Congress. It is, therefore, well to bear in mind two points Woodrow Wilson made in his book, Congressional Government.<sup>1</sup> First, he demonstrated that public debates are only incidental to the passage of laws, most of the real work being done secretly in the committee rooms. Second, he showed that such legislation as is discussed on the floor of Congress is brought up only after it has been reviewed in Committee and, therefore, may be assumed to have received the Committee stamp of approval.

Nevertheless, public debate on the floor of Congress is a reflection of the private discussion of the Committee Rooms, and the publicly uttered and recorded words of a Congressman are, therefore, a valuable source of information on the legislation of the times. It is true that "deals" were made, logs were rolled, and pork barrels were split. These are not mentioned because no information was available to the author. But such matters are relatively unimportant, if one can believe, as does the author, that the public speeches of Aaron Augustus Sargent reflect accurately his personal beliefs, his committee room work, and his attitudes toward the problems of his times.

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<sup>1</sup>Woodrow Wilson, Congressional Government, A Study in American Politics (Boston: 1890), 80-85.

## Acknowledgments

I could not begin to thank everyone who has helped me gather material to prepare this thesis. I shall, therefore, mention just a few--those who have helped beyond all measure.

First, I should like to thank my husband, Paul Milnarich, Jr., for taking me to California to get material, and for going without his supper as I was writing and typing the manuscript. I should like to thank Dr. Wayne Fuller of the Department of History of Texas Western College who suffered through two years of preparation and who guided me in the writing. I should like to express my appreciation to the staff of the California Section, California State Library, Sacramento, California, for their help in collecting material. And I should like to express my gratitude to Mr. Aaron M. Sargent, Palo Alto, California, for allowing me a day among his grandfather's papers. And lastly, I should like to thank all division and branches of the Library of Congress, and Congressman J. T. Rutherford of Texas, for the material that was sent to me from Washington, D. C.

El Paso, Texas  
May, 1961

R. F. M.

## CHAPTER I

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS

PREVIEW

When the nineteenth century began, Newburyport, a compact little town situated at the mouth of the Merrimac River, was the third largest city in Massachusetts. It was a wealthy town with a diversified economy. Shipbuilding, fishing, West Indian and European trading, distilleries, and goldsmithing brought in the wealth that made the town, in the words of Timothy Dwight, "a place of delightful residence." Wealth produced Society, and Newburyport developed definite social classes and a clear-cut upper class. Although most of the leading families were "but one generation removed from the plough or forecastle," their riches antedated the Revolution, and social matters were conducted "with the grace and dignity of an old regime."<sup>1</sup>

Intellectual development accompanied the economic and social growth of Newburyport. The sons of the wealthy merchants were sent to Harvard and other colleges. Newburyport itself had its own learned core. John Quincy Adams read law in the office of Theophilus Parsons, who was as well versed in literature as in the law.<sup>2</sup> It was not surprising that Newburyport became the rallying center for the Essex Junto-aristocrats who believed in an aristocratic rule.<sup>3</sup>

This was Newburyport in 1800: wealthy, social, and intellectual,

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860 (New York: 1921), 151-154.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy (New York: 1949), 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Claude M. Fuess, The Life of Caleb Cushing (New York: 1923), I, 11.

the Newburyport for which the Embargo Act of 1807 spelled disaster. In 1810, the assessed valuation of the city was over seven million dollars; by 1830, the valuation had shrunk to approximately seven thousand dollars. The effects of the Embargo Act and the War of 1812 on the sea-dependent city of Newburyport were intensified by a fire which swept the town in 1811 and destroyed a large part of the city. A physical and economic deterioration set in from which the town never really recovered.<sup>4</sup> Shipbuilding and allied trades ceased completely; mechanics and master mariners were reduced to frequenting soup kitchens, and many had to leave the area to find work.<sup>5</sup> By 1827, Newburyport was no longer a leading city on the Atlantic Coast. It had already become a place of memories, one of the many small towns on the Atlantic seaboard that offered but limited opportunity to its vigorous and ambitious young men.

In this background, on September 27, 1827, was born Aaron Augustus Sargent.<sup>6</sup> He was descended from William Sargent who settled in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1633.<sup>7</sup> His father was a carpenter. When the young Aaron was sixteen years of age, he left the common school he was attending and was apprenticed to his father's trade. He soon left the carpenter's shop to apprentice himself to a printer because he wanted the education a printer

<sup>4</sup> Fuess, The Life of Caleb Cushing, 50-51.

<sup>5</sup> Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860, 191.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Augustus Sargent, Memorandum dated November 23, 1878, Sargent Papers, Palo Alto, California.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

8  
 got merely by reading what he set in type. Years later he  
 praised this type of education from the floor of the Senate.  
 In the course of defending Washington printers against a pro-  
 posed cut in wages, he said, "There is no profession - doctors,  
 lawyers, or preachers - more intelligent than printers as a  
 class." He went on to say that printers were among the best  
 educated of men because they read what they printed, and the  
 art of printing required "skilled labor, experience, and  
 intelligence."<sup>9</sup>

After he served his apprenticeship, he worked in a printing  
 office in Newburyport. In the same office was Caleb Cushing.<sup>10</sup>  
 Cushing, many years Sargent's senior, was an aristocrat from a  
 well-to-do family. He was Harvard-educated and had already  
 served in public affairs.<sup>11</sup> For an unknown reason, the young man  
 did not get along with the elder, and it has been suggested that  
 Sargent was "practically driven" from Newburyport because of a  
 "scurrilous article" he wrote about Cushing.<sup>12</sup> While he was in  
 Newburyport, Sargent did write descriptions of several persons--  
 probably his first literary efforts.<sup>13</sup> It may well be that the

8  
 Interview with Aaron M. Sargent, grandson of Aaron A. Sar-  
 gent, September 3, 1960, Palo Alto, California. (Hereafter re-  
 ferred to as Interview.)

9  
 U.S., Congressional Record, 44th Cong., 2d Sess., February  
 7, 1877, 1313.

10  
 Fuess, The Life of Caleb Cushing, II, 364.

11  
Ibid., I, 1-36.

12  
Ibid., II, 364.

13  
 Society of California Pioneers, Memorial Record No. 13  
 (San Francisco: n.d.), 297. (Hereafter referred to as Memorial  
Record.)



"scurrilous article" was among them.

The quarrel with Cushing, however, may not have been the only reason he left his home village. Sargent was an ambitious, intelligent young man to whom the town of Newburyport offered but little scope to his desire for success, and, still in his teens, he left home to seek his fortune.

Apparently, he first went to Philadelphia. Although Bancroft states that he walked the streets of Philadelphia penniless and jobless, it is more likely that he worked for an uncle,<sup>14</sup> Joseph Sargent, who lived in that city. In either case, his stay in Philadelphia was not long, and he soon went to Washington, D.C. He was in Washington before the spring of 1848, and here he earned his living "partly as a printer and partly as a writer for newspapers."<sup>15</sup>

In Washington, he boarded at the same house with John L. Slingerland, a Whig Representative from Albany, New York, and Ezra L. Stevens, a newspaperman from Ohio. Sargent thought Slingerland was a "rough, farmerlike man of very limited education, with considerable shrewd sense, wholly unfit for a member of Congress."<sup>16</sup> In spite of this opinion, he went to work for Slingerland. He helped to prepare speeches and debates, and

<sup>14</sup>  
Interview; Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of California, VII (San Francisco: 1890), 331.

<sup>15</sup>  
Aaron Augustus Sargent, ms Statement, May 28, 1881. (Hereafter referred to as Statement.)

<sup>16</sup>  
Ibid.

17  
 did general secretarial work. Undoubtedly, his service with Slingerland determined his future career. As he wrote Slingerland's speeches, he began to think of himself as an orator, and was determined to enter politics and some day come to Washington as a member of Congress.  
 18

His stay in Washington, like his stay in Philadelphia, was brief. In July, 1848, he was in Boston, lamenting the loss of an excellent position, one which had "I retained would have made my fortune." He evidently attributed his misfortune to perfidy, because, he continued, "False fortune we can endure, but false friends---." He went on to say that the subject was too painful to discuss, and said no more about it; therefore,  
 19  
 the misfortune is not known.

In the summer of 1848, he was still looking for his place in the world. He wrote to Stevens and asked him for a job in Washington. In the same letter he also discussed the possibility of moving to Ohio, and asked Stevens about the opportunities for work in the Mid-West.  
 20  
 In short, he was one of the thousands of ambitious, footloose, young men who heard of the discovery of gold in California in the fall of 1848, and to whom this news was the release from a prison of denied ambition.

17  
San Francisco Morning Call, August 24, 1887; Memorial Record, 298.

18  
 Edmund Kinyon, Northern Mines; factual narratives of the counties of Nevada, Placer, Sierra, Yuba, and portions of Plumas and Butte. (Grass Valley: 1949), 160.

19  
 Sargent to Ezra L. Stevens, July 1, 1848. Reprinted in Daily Alta California, July 24, 1876.

20  
Ibid.

Without being asked, his uncle in Philadelphia sent him money for a passage to California, and later, Sargent said, "I paid that debt with the very first money I could scrape together."<sup>21</sup> With his borrowed money, he booked passage and sailed on the SS Xylon, which left Baltimore on February 3, 1849.<sup>22</sup>

The trip was not without incident. Although he spent much of his time reading and studying, he found time to participate in the affairs of the ship.<sup>23</sup> The ship's captain was evidently a rough and overbearing man, without consideration for his passengers. When he put them on short allowance of food and water, the passengers formed a committee to compel the captain to land for water. Sargent was a member of this committee and when the ship landed at Rio de Janeiro, Sargent reported the captain's conduct to the United States Consul. As a result,<sup>24</sup> the captain and the first mate were relieved of duty.

While the ship was in Rio de Janeiro, the Emperor of Brazil gave a reception to which the passengers of the Xylon were invited. Formal dress was required, but young Aaron Sargent had none. Determined to attend the affair, he altered his frock coat with pins, and, suitably attired, he went to the reception.<sup>25</sup> He was presented to the Empress, and evidently had a good time.

<sup>21</sup> Memorial Record, 298.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> A Volume of Memoirs and Geneology of Representative Citizens of Northern California, (Chicago: 1901), 692.

<sup>25</sup> Memorial Record, 299.

The Xylon made port again at Valparaiso. Sargent left the ship there, intending to see if perhaps this was where he could make his fortune. A series of earthquakes, however, made him reconsider and he decided to seek a safer location. His money gone, he sailed as a supercargo on the C Lyon and arrived<sup>26</sup> in San Francisco on December 16, 1849.

He first worked in the freight-carrying trade, running a small scow schooner from San Francisco to Stockton.<sup>27</sup> How long he worked as a freighter is unknown because the few accounts of his activities in this period conflict with each other. It is known, however, that by 1850 he was working on a newspaper, the California Courier, and may have worked on other papers as well<sup>28</sup> before he went to Nevada City.

Nevada City started in 1849 as a mining camp. In 1850 it had its first frame building, "built by Madame Penn," and later that year there was a frame hotel which charged twenty-five<sup>29</sup> dollars per week for room and board. By 1852, the men of

<sup>26</sup> Memorial Record, 299.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> San Francisco Bulletin, August 15, 1887; Grass Valley Nugget, June 19, 1949.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron Augustus Sargent, Brown and Dallison's Nevada Grass Valley and Rough and Ready Directory...1856...with an historical sketch of Nevada County by A. A. Sargent (San Francisco: 1856), 19. (Hereafter referred to as Historical Sketch of Nevada County.)

Nevada City had found that "no sudden accessions of fortune were common," and as the drifters left, the more stable elements of the community became dominant.<sup>30</sup>

Sargent came to Nevada City in 1850. He first went to the mines and was moderately successful.<sup>31</sup> But the work was hard and not to his liking, so he returned to his proved trade, printing, and went to work for the Nevada Journal as a compositor.<sup>32</sup> In 1853, he was the editor and part-owner of the paper, a "weekly journal of Whig politics."<sup>33</sup>

At first he devoted his full energies to the editing of the paper, but before long he began to tire of the hard life of the mining town. He suggested to a friend, N. P. Brown, that they return to Newburyport where they had learned their trade together, and buy the Newburyport Herald. A letter was sent to Massachusetts, but while he was waiting for the answer, Sargent began the study of law. By the time the answer came, he was deep in his law studies, and had already envisioned a career for himself in California.<sup>34</sup> He did not read law in a law office but studied in his rooms. After he was admitted to the bar, in 1854, he divided his time between a law practice

<sup>30</sup> Historical Sketch of Nevada County, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Memorial Record, 299.

<sup>32</sup> Memorial Record, 299; San Francisco Call, August 24, 1887.

<sup>33</sup> Memorial Record, 299; Letter, D. Beldon to George C. Sargent, August 18, 1887, Sargent Papers, Palo Alto, California.

<sup>34</sup> Grass Valley Nugget, June 19, 1949.

and editing the paper. He also entered politics for the first  
<sup>35</sup>  
time.

William M. Stewart, later United States Senator from Nevada, had resigned from his office of District Attorney for Nevada County; Niles Searles had been appointed to fill the vacancy. Stewart's unexpired term as well as the succeeding full term were to be filled in the election of 1854. S. F. Fletcher was elected for the unexpired term, and Aaron A. Sargent was elected for  
<sup>36</sup>  
the full term. He took office in 1855 and served until 1857.

At the end of the term, Sargent's legal practice had so grown that he gave up the editorship of his paper and devoted  
<sup>37</sup>  
himself to the practice of law and politics. His preparation for a political life was excellent. Self-education had taught him to study and to learn; his stay in Washington had taught him much of the practical side of politics; his newspaper work had given him a knowledge of his constituents and their problems.

While the Whig party was in existence, he was an active member. Later, when the party was dissolved, he is said to  
<sup>38</sup>  
have been connected with the American, or Know-Nothing, Party. This is quite possible because early in 1854 the American Party had an organization in almost every mining camp in California;

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<sup>35</sup>  
D. Beldon to George C. Sargent, August 18, 1887.

<sup>36</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>  
Ibid.; San Francisco Call, August 24, 1887.

in 1855 it had won several local elections and had absorbed most of the Whigs. The name of Aaron A. Sargent, however, does not appear on any ticket of the American party.<sup>39</sup> He is said to have broken with the party over the issue of slavery<sup>40</sup> and then joined with the newly formed Republican Party.

He was evidently one of the first members of the Republican party in California. On July 5, 1855, when a call was sent to settlers and miners to form a new party, Sargent was selected for the State Committee.<sup>41</sup> But, when the first state convention of Republicans met in Sacramento, Sargent's name was not recorded.<sup>42</sup> In spite of this omission, he was soon identified with the Republican Party. Appointed to the Committee on Resolutions of the Republican Convention of August, 1858, he helped draft the platform--a platform that included the need for a transcontinental railroad. He continued to serve the Republican Party in varying capacities, and in 1860 was sent to Chicago as a delegate to the National Convention.<sup>43</sup> Here he voted for the nomination of Lincoln, although the California delegation was morally, if not officially, bound to support

<sup>39</sup>

Winfield J. Davis, History of Political Conventions in California, 1849-1892 (Sacramento: 1893), 38-39. (Hereafter referred to as History of Political Conventions.)

<sup>40</sup>

Beldon to Sargent, August 18, 1887.

<sup>41</sup>

Davis, History of Political Conventions, 44.

<sup>42</sup>

Ibid., 59.

<sup>43</sup>

Ibid., 109-110.



Governor Seward.<sup>44</sup> He returned to California and campaigned  
 for Lincoln.<sup>45</sup>

His full-time professional political life began in 1861 when he was elected to the United States House of Representatives as the delegate from Nevada County. He served in the thirty-seventh Congress, but instead of running for re-election in 1863, he campaigned for the nomination of Governor of California. Defeated, he retired to private life until he was again elected to Congress in 1868, again as the representative from Nevada County. He was still in the House when he was elected<sup>46</sup> to the Senate where he served one term, from 1873 to 1879.

His congressional career was distinguished in many ways. He was the author of bills which changed the course of life in the United States: he was the author of the amendment to the Constitution which gave to women the right to vote; he was the author of a bill which authorized the first transcontinental railroad; he was the author of bills that led to the plunder of the public domain; he was the author of a bill that changed the entire philosophy of handling mineral lands in the United States; he wrote an immigration law, the provisions of which became the first policy on immigration in the United States;

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<sup>44</sup> Milton H. Shutes, "Republican Nomination Convention of 1860," California Historical Society Quarterly, XXVII (June, 1948), 100.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, History of Political Conventions, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1949 (Washington: 1950), 1777.