Stevens Thomson Mason

By Patricia J. Baker

Stevens Thomson Mason was instrumental to Michigan's development, leading the territory to statehood in 1837 and serving as the first elected governor. Yet Mason, like so many other early leaders, was not a native Michiganian. He was a Virginian. Born at the family estate "Raspberry Plain" on October 27, 1811, he had a family that was rich, powerful, and well placed. His paternal grandfather, for whom he was named, was a United States Senator and his family counted among its friends and neighbors James Monroe.

Only fate and some misfortune brought Mason to Michigan. If his life had proceeded normally, he would have been an influential Virginian. But that was not his destiny. Early on his father, John T. Mason, developed an overwhelming desire to go West. When the opportunity came in 1812, John moved his family (Elizabeth his wife, Mary, his two-and-a-half year old daughter, and his infant son, Stevens T.) to Lexington, Kentucky. Here was a place with new challenges and new opportunities. Here John T. hoped to make his own fortune. Though the family arrived with little money, John had a William and Mary degree, a large library, and an intense desire to succeed. He soon put that determination to work. By 1815, he had made enough money to buy a three hundred acre estate, naming it "Serenity Hall." Indeed, all seemed safe and serene for the Mason family in Kentucky.

It didn't remain that way for long. While John T. Mason was a successful lawyer, he was inept at business. By 1819, he had lost his fortune in worthless schemes; Serenity Hall was sold. Eight years later he was nearly penniless. The whole family was disrupted by John's financial disasters, particularly so, young Stevens T. Because of his father's financial plight, he was forced to quit his studies at Transylvania, trading his books for a grocer's apron.

Just when the outlook was bleakest, they were rescued. With the aid of an old friend, John Mason secured an appointment from President Andrew Jackson. Mason was to become Secretary of Michigan Territory. Although he did not relish the job, the pay was $1,200 per year, enough for the family to live on comfortably. So packing their bags and bidding farewell to Kentucky, young Stevens T. and his father moved to Detroit the summer of 1830. The rest of the family followed in the fall.

To the Mason family, Detroit was a shock. It was not the genteel, settled atmosphere that they had been used to. It was a bumptious backwoods town.
filled with rough, unfashionable people with an open sewer wending its way through town.

Young Tom was a shock to Detroit, too. He fancied himself as a bit polished, a Cosmopolite who happened to be stranded in a backwoods village. He drew gaping stares as he sallied forth to explore the town, arrayed in his skin-tight black broadcloth trousers and flowing coat with cane in hand.

It was young Stevens, dandy and all, who protected his father from the political schemes and intrigues which whirled about him in Detroit. Unaccustomed to backroom politics, John T. Mason was adrift in unfamiliar waters. Young Stevens protected him, doing his job, and keeping him out of the way of anti-Jackson forces. This period was good for young Stevens. He learned the subtleties of public administration, began to recognize the names of influential people, and gained the favor of Territorial Governor Lewis Cass.

Tiring of his post and longing for something less constraining, John T. Mason looked again to Washington for relief in mid-1831. That relief came in the form of another presidential favor. This time he was sent on a mission to Mexico by President Jackson. Searching about for his replacement, Jackson looked no further than young Stevens T. Mason. At the tender age of nineteen years, eight months, and twenty-eight days, Stevens T. Mason was appointed Territorial Secretary on July 12, 1831.

At the same time, John T. Mason left his post, Lewis Cass, the governor of the Territory, resigned to become secretary of war on the Jackson cabinet. In his place a new governor was appointed. He was a gentleman farmer by the name of George B. Porter. Though he nominally served from August 6, 1831, until his death on July 6, 1834, he was only titular head of the Territory. His long absences, punctuated by infrequent visits, left young Mason in charge as acting governor.

Left to his own devices, Mason matured quickly, as 1832 proved. During that year, with Porter absent, Mason not only galloped throughout the countryside seeing the state through a major cholera epidemic, but helped raise forces to fight in the Black Hawk War.

He also came of legal age in 1832, casting his first ballot as a voter on October 23 for Austin E. Wing. Though his party's candidate lost the election, the campaign produced a slogan which helped bring Stevens T. Mason to America's front pages. The Ann Arbor Emigrant coined the phrase, haughtily referring to Wing as "a protégé of the Boy Governor." Though Mason despised this epithet, it remained with him as long as he held office in Michigan. It so angered him that when he discovered the editor of the Ann Arbor newspaper on a Detroit street,
Mason attacked him and gave him quite a beating with his fists. This story was reprinted widely in New York and Boston and Washington. City editors got it out of the Ann Arbor Argus, a rival paper whose editor chuckled, declaring that the "... stripling, the Boy Governor, if you please, was man enough to give him a sound cuffing."

Mason was man enough for other things too. His star was on the ascendancy in 1833, and, with Governor Porter generally absent, he ran the Territory. Indeed, few people had ever seen Porter. Mason was addressed as "Governor" both publicly and privately. He sent bills to the Territorial Council, signed appointments, and reported to the various bureaus in Washington. Not governor in name, he was governor in fact.

Young Mason expanded his activities outside territorial government. During that time he received several honors. He was elected alderman-at-large in Detroit, was chosen for the very exclusive Detroit Young Men's Society, and was elected to the fire brigade.

It was a good summer too. Cholera, though devastating areas all around Michigan, never arrived in the Territory. The circus, trapped by the outbreak of cholera elsewhere, remained in Detroit. Mason who had diligently read law with a group of friends at the barroom in Uncle Ben's Steamboat Hotel bar, was admitted to practice law on December 11, 1833.

Mason was not alone in changing. Michigan grew also. Her citizens first voted to petition Congress for admission in 1832. When neither House nor Senate acted upon this petition, Mason took matters into his own hands and instigated a territorial census. Completed and communicated to the Territorial Council on September 18, 1834, it determined that 86,000 people lived in the Lower Peninsula, more than the 60,000 required for statehood by the Ordinance of 1787. Mason responded by asking the Council to call for a constitutional convention to institute a state government. They did so, calling for such a meeting in May and June of 1835.

At this point, an old dispute concerning the border between Michigan and Ohio arose. It stretched back to the Ordinance of 1787 which provided for the eventual division of the eastern portion of the Northwest Territory into states to the north and south of "an east and west line drawn through the southerly or extreme of Lake Michigan." In 1803 Ohio had entered the Union with the Ordinance Line of 1787 as her northern border. The difficulty was that Michigan and Ohio interpreted that line differently. Ohio, following the line established by William A. Harris, claimed that this line angled a bit northward, just enough so that it came out on the northern tip of Maumee Bay, This line placed Toledo in Ohio.
Another line going due east from the southern end of Lake Michigan did not take a dip northward. Called the Fulton line after its surveyor, John A. Fulton, Mason supported this survey because it placed Toledo in Michigan.

The truth of the matter was that the Toledo Strip, as this tapering piece of land became known, belonged to Michigan. The southerly end of Lake Michigan did lie to the south of Toledo, but in Washington during the 1830s, political considerations could bend surveyors' quadrants. Ohio had voting legislators in Congress, sympathetic congressmen from Indiana and Illinois, and no intention of relinquishing her control of Toledo.

Mason's call for a constitutional convention produced a series of events culminating in the Toledo War. The first step was taken by Governor Robert Lucas, who appointed a commission in early 1835 to erect prominent marks all along the Harris line. Mason replied with a bill in the Territorial Council making it unlawful for any person not a citizen of Michigan to exercise official functions anywhere within its borders on pain of a $1,000 fine and five years' imprisonment. The bill, signed on February 12, 1835, aroused indignation in Ohio and in Washington. It gave Mason the power of arrest and a whacking penalty which Congress knew he was planning to use against the engineers then at Toledo finishing the locks of the new Maumee Canal.

Though Richard Rush and Benjamin Howard were sent from Washington as mediators, they failed in their mission. Tempers flared, and bloodless battle began in April of 1835 after Michigan learned that Ohio authorities intended to occupy the Toledo Strip and organize it into a new county. Mason called out the Michigan militia and ordered them to arrest all Ohio functionaries who might try to extend this political jurisdiction into the disputed territory. A series of raids on Toledo commenced, prompting both Wolverines and Buckeyes to vote enormous $300,000 defense appropriations.

Neither presidential commissioners nor the intercession of ex-Governor Cass succeeded in cooling off Mason, and the raids continued during the summer of 1835. At last, in August, President Jackson, who could not risk the loss of Ohio's electoral votes, removed Mason from office. But, early in September, before the arrival of his replacement, Mason directed 1,000 Michigan militiamen on a final foray into Toledo, hoping to prevent a scheduled session of the Ohio Court of Common Pleas. They failed in this attempt, for a hasty session of the court, valuing discretion above honor, had held a midnight court and beat a hasty retreat south of the Maumee.

Though Mason had been replaced by John Horner, he was not worried. Mason's popularity was greater than ever. During May and June of 1835, a constitutional convention had met and produced a document giving Michigan a Bill of Rights.
bicameral State Legislature, a State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and suffrage for adult white males. Voters approved this constitution in October of 1835 and elected Mason as governor.

When Michigan's newly chosen representatives and senators arrived in Washington in December, they were not permitted to assume their seats. Congress refused to admit them or Michigan to the Union until the border question was settled. By 1836, Mason was convinced that Michigan would have to yield on the question of the Toledo Strip to be admitted to the Union.

Congress had told him as much when, at the end of June, it had specified that Michigan's constitution would have to be changed. That change would give Toledo and the disputed territory to Ohio. In exchange, a large amount of land, which was the western Upper Peninsula, would be given to Michigan. Though most did not view this Upper Peninsula territory as valuable as Toledo and its potential harbor, Mason accepted his defeat.

He accepted the defeat because he needed money – money to run the state and money to begin his internal improvement program. If Michigan were a state, there would be plenty of money, for every recognized state received a five percent commission on the sale of federal lands. To Michigan, tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, that commission would have been over half a million dollars a year. But Michigan was not a recognized state. Recognition hinged on accepting the western Upper Peninsula and giving up the Toledo Strip. Realizing he had been outmaneuvered, Mason called a convention together in September of 1836 for the purpose of accepting congressional terms. Surprisingly, they failed to accept the required terms. Desperately, Mason called another meeting in December of 1836, which later became known as the Frostbitten Convention. These delegates produced the desired results, and subsequently on January 26, 1837, Michigan was admitted to the Union.

With the bitter defeat swallowed, Mason moved ahead with his plans to develop Michigan. In his first term as governor, he developed several programs including the creation of an educational system, the location of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the passage of a banking law, and the establishment of an internal improvement program.

Shortly after Mason's reelection in 1837, Michigan began to feel the effects of an economic panic that had gripped the entire nation. Caught in a pinch and bereft of eastern funds, the State was unable to finance its ambitious program of internal improvements, and state banking legislation, in large part promoted by Mason, precipitated a disastrous banking crisis.
In accord with the Constitution of 1835, the State Legislature passed an 1837 law providing for the state construction of internal improvements. The act authorized Mason to fund the program by selling bonds for $5,000,000 to eastern creditors. Mason, in part, had helped secure his reelection by negotiating this loan in September of 1837. Less than a year later, the arrangements had fallen apart, and Mason was forced to spend several weeks in 1838 making new arrangements. This time the Michigan certificates were offered at less than their face value. Both institutions, the Morris Canal and Banking Company and the United States Bank, failed, leaving Michigan with a debt of over $2,000,000 for which no returns were received.

Coinciding with the demise of the program to finance internal improvements was the collapse of Michigan's banking system. In 1837 the Legislature under the direction of Mason had passed a free banking law which permitted any twelve men to establish a banking association. Though the original act required specie subscription the Panic of 1837 prompted Mason to suspend the payment of coin for notes. Soon currency became scarce; frauds abounded. Though Mason and the Legislature repealed the act in 1839, the damage had been done.

During his business trips to New York to finance his internal improvement program, Mason had met Julia Phelps. He married her on November 1, 1838. While yet on his honeymoon, Mason received letters which furrowed his brow. The political situation was becoming worse in Michigan; his program was falling apart, and his old political nemesis, William Woodbridge, was on the ascendancy. Not wanting to subject either himself or his bride to the political criticism he knew was coming, Mason desperately looked for a way out. He soon found it. Mason decided that he could make a graceful exit on the reasoning that he had served two terms and that it was contrary to national precedent to serve a third. He decided not to become a candidate for reelection.

Though facing an early retirement from politics, Mason's connections and the fact that he had been governor should have guaranteed him a lucrative law practice. Expecting only the best, he joined with an old friend Kintzing Prichette to form the law firm of Mason and Prichette. Even the election campaign of 1840 buoyed his spirits. Though not running, Mason was received everywhere with open arms and standing ovations.

But the best did not happen. Realizing that a Whig victory was eminent, Mason left Michigan before the 1840 election to handle a client's claims in New York City. Mason had hoped that the smashing Whig tide which propelled his old rival William Woodbridge into the governorship and William Henry Harrison into the White House would spell an end to political allegations in Michigan. It did not.
Not content with his political victory, Woodbridge sought to destroy the credibility of the "Boy Governor." To do this, Woodbridge drummed up a charge that Mason had accepted money from one of the companies handling the Five Million Dollar Loan. So thorough was Woodbridge that he even secured a false confession from an associate of Mason, stating that the ex-had indeed taken a bribe. Though governor Mason returned to defend himself, the task was hopeless. He had no access to official records, and the newspapers, for a large part, ignored his defense. Thus Mason was unable to prove his innocence.

Mason left Michigan in 1841, knowing that he would never return. The only place he could go was New York City where his wealthy father-in-law Thaddeus Phelps lived. Mason had hoped to establish a law practice quickly, but these hopes were dashed. On his first interview at the office of the New York Bar Association, he was told that admission to practice law in Michigan was not good enough. He would have to pass the New York Bar examination.

That winter, Stevens T. Mason, ex-governor of Michigan, spent in poverty bent over his law books. When he finally passed the exam in 1842, Mason hoped for the best. But even that did not help. His cases were few, his clients poor, and he was forced to deliver lectures before Lyceum societies to augment his meager income. Just as it seemed he was about to be introduced to influential clients, he caught cold.

The doctor who tended Mason thought nothing of it. He should have. Stevens T. Mason had contracted pneumonia. By the time his father rushed to his side with adequate aid, it was too late. Stevens T. Mason, late of Michigan, slipped silently away, dying on the morning of January 5, 1843. For a long time even Mason’s body remained in exile. He was laid to rest in Marble Cemetery in New York City, and the simple inscription on his tombstone read:

   Stevens T. Mason  
   died January 5, 1843

It was not until sixty-two years later that Stevens T. Mason returned to Detroit. Pulled from the cold crypt wall in New York City, Mason was carried home in early 1905. There, on the fourth of June, a service was held. With his sister, Emily Mason in attendance, Mason was finally laid to rest. Directly below the spot where his office had been when the little capitol was there, he was buried.