

Michigan Lawyers in History

Stevens Thomson Mason

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

Detroit's Capitol Park, the site of Michigan's first capitol, was renovated in the summer of 2010. The park is also the site of a memorial to Stevens T. Mason, Michigan's first governor. The plan was to remove Mason's remains and hold them in a local funeral home until the renovation was complete. Unfortunately, workers were unable to locate his remains for four days.¹ Thankfully, Mason's tomb was found just a few feet lower than originally expected.

Stevens Thomson Mason—also known as the Boy Governor, the Stripling, and Young Hotspur—was appointed Michigan's territorial governor at age 22. He guided Michigan through the Toledo War and led it into statehood.

But did you know Mason was also a lawyer?

Mason was born October 27, 1811, in Loudon County, Virginia to one of the nation's founding political families; his relatives included the chief justice of the Virginia Supreme Court, two U.S. senators, and a constitutional convention delegate. His father became an attorney and the younger Mason followed in his footsteps, attending Transylvania College.

Through the elder Mason's involvement in Michigan Territory politics, Stevens was appointed secretary of the territory—a position his father held—when he was just 19. The territorial government's annoyance at being headed by such a young man almost caused Mason to be removed from the position. However, Mason proved himself well enough to become governor at age 22 without objection. Instead, the uproar came when Mason was removed from his position in favor of John S. Horner for refusing to give in to Ohio's demands for the Toledo Strip. Mason was re-elected governor three weeks later. Michigan had made its choice.

The territory held its first constitutional convention in 1836. When Michigan was admitted to the Union on January 26, 1837, no one was surprised that Mason was again elected governor.

In 1840, Mason made the decision not to run for reelection and, at age 29, retired from politics and moved to New York. Michigan carried on in his absence, but longed for his eventual return.

As for Mason's legal practice, he applied and was accepted for practice in various Michigan courts during his political career,

but his legal career did not truly begin until he moved to New York.

Mason settled down, marrying Julia Phelps in 1839, but the union was relatively brief. Mason died January 4, 1843. He was survived by his wife and three children: Stevens T. Mason Jr., Dorothea Eliza Mason, and Thaddeus P. Mason.²

In 1905, Michigan got back its first governor. Mason's remains were removed from New York and placed at the newly established Capitol Park in Detroit. Mason's daughter, Dorothea, attended her father's re-interment. Eventually, a statue was placed above Mason's tomb.³

In the 1950s, the park was redesigned, requiring Mason's remains to once again be moved.

On October 26, 2010, Stevens T. Mason, first governor of Michigan, returned to the state capitol in Lansing, where he rested in state before returning to Detroit.⁴ On the 199th anniversary of his birth, Mason was reburied, complete with honor guard, with his great-great-great-grandnephew in attendance.⁵ ■

Photo by Sean Doerr/SNWEB.ORG Photography



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FOOTNOTES

1. Steele, *Boy Governor's Remains Can't Be Found*, Det News, June 29, 2010.
2. Ross, *The Early Bench and Bar of Detroit: From 1805 to the End of 1850* (Detroit: Richard P. Joy and Clarence M. Burton, 1907), pp 133-137.
3. *Id.* at 137.
4. The Associated Press, *Michigan's First Governor Stevens T. Mason to Be Re-Interred in Capitol Park*, Det News, October 27, 2010, available at <http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2010/10/michigans_first_governor_steve.html> (accessed January 9, 2012).
5. The Associated Press, *First Michigan Governor Re-Interred in Detroit Park*, Daily Tribune of Oakland Co, October 27, 2010.

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