

Science and Art.

The Late Commissioner of Patents.

The readers of the SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN have been made so familiar, through our columns, with the name and official acts of the Honorable Charles Mason, late Commissioner of Patents, that we have thought they would be interested in knowing something of his personal appearance and history.

We accordingly present herewith an engraved portrait of the distinguished gentleman, together with a few facts concerning his public life and his administration as Commissioner. The likeness is an excellent one.

Judge Mason is a native of the State of New York, having been born in Onondaga county. During his early life he spent four years at the Military Academy at West Point, where he graduated in 1829, with considerable honor, receiving immediately afterwards an appointment as Professor in the same institution, which he held for about three years. After this he engaged in the study of the law, and for some time resided in the village of Newburg, N. Y., where he carried on the duties of his profession.

After this he removed to New York, and for a time took editorial charge of the *Evening Post*, during Mr. Bryant's absence. It is generally allowed that he discharged the duties of an editor with that same thoroughness, earnestness and excellence which has characterized his life in every situation in which he has been placed. Subsequent to this he removed to Iowa, and in 1838 was appointed Chief Justice of that Territory, which office he filled for nearly ten years, with great credit, and to the manifest advantage of the public good. It was in this manner that he obtained the title of Judge Mason. During the period of his employment as Commissioner of Patents, he was engaged as Law Commissioner to prepare a code of laws for Iowa, which has received the unqualified approbation of all who have examined its various requirements.

Judge Mason was appointed to the office of Commissioner of Patents in March, 1853, and held the post for a little more than four years.

The Patent Office was in a state of great confusion when Judge Mason assumed its administration. This was due, in part, to incongruity in its rules and regulations, and also to a want of numerical force in its employees. Applicants for patents were compelled to wait from six to twelve months before their cases received examination. One of the earliest acts of the new Commissioner was to double the examining corps, and to augment the help in other departments. New and efficient rules were adopted, and the workings of the entire business were made better to harmonize. Under the new regime, the previous confusion and delays wholly disappeared, and the Patent Office became distinguished for the promptness and regularity of its transactions.

Appeals, formerly heard by examiners, after long delays, were now listened to by the Commissioner in person, at a moment's notice. The ease with which he penetrated the mysteries of chemical inventions, or unraveled the complexities of difficult mechanical improvements, astonished every one. He was prompt and fearless in his decisions. He believed that the Patent laws were instituted for the benefit and encouragement of inventors, and he interpreted them accordingly. If he was uncertain as to the novelty of an invention, he gave the benefit of his doubt to the inventor, and ordered the patent to issue. The inventor, sensitive and smarting under the sting of some ill-judged decision of an examiner, found a soothing balm for all his woes when he came into the presence of Judge Mason. He was as a father to inventors. He never knowingly allowed an unjust rejection to stand. Much of his time was devoted to the repeal of decisions by illiberal examiners. He paid no attention to office hours. Many a midnight

hour has found him industriously engaged in the examination of appeals, solicited, perhaps, by some humble, unpretending applicant. To him all applicants for patents were alike. If he manifested any partiality at all, it was in favor of the poor and helpless.

The number of applications for patents made during the year preceding Judge Mason's appointment was 2,639. The number of applications for the present year is estimated at 6,000. This remarkable increase may be attributed, to a great extent, to the wise government of the affairs of the department by the Commissioner.

The annual Patent Reports were formerly

meagre, uninteresting volumes. Judge Mason caused them to be illustrated with diagrams of all the inventions patented during the year. His report to Congress for 1856 will consist of four handsome volumes. It was his desire to see all the patents, with their drawings, published in full by the government. But he did not remain long enough in office to carry out this gigantic enterprise.

The following extract from a cotemporary gives a correct idea of Judge Mason's personal appearance:—

"In person, Judge Mason is tall and erect, with strong, thick, brown hair, a countenance highly expressive of rapid and energetic



HON. CHARLES MASON.

thought, cheerfulness, benevolence and lofty feelings; his frame indicates considerable power of physical endurance; his carriage is easy and graceful, and his whole appearance at once prepossessing and calculated to inspire feelings of respect. In his conversation he is frank, plain, concise and methodical, seeming always to be self-possessed, and seldom hesitating in a reply. His perceptions are remarkably quick, and, like Mr. Calhoun, he seems to come to conclusions almost instinctively. All accord to him great powers of perception, quick, close and powerful reason-

The Inventor of the Safety Lamp.

Dr. Smiles, of England, has recently published a very interesting life of George Stephenson, the eminent English engineer. Inch by inch he worked his way upward, from his position as foreman to the pumping engine at Wylam Colliery to that of the "father" of the universal and magnificent system of railroads. It is said of him that one of the chief pleasures of his latter days was to hold out a helping hand to poor inventors who deserved assistance. In 1812, while engaged as an "engine-wright" at Killingworth, he made an invention which would probably at once have made his merits known over Britain, but for his having a competitor in the field in a man already distinguished as Sir Humphrey Davy. This was that of the "Geordy" safety lamp—a lamp identical with the "Davy" in principle, though different in practical detail. A very interesting account of the tentative process by which Stephenson arrived at his safety

lamp, as also of the controversy relative to priority of invention which ensued between Stephenson's friends and the friends of Sir Humphrey, is given in the work referred to. Suffice it to say, that, though at the time the fame of "Geordy" was eclipsed by that of the "Davy," and the unknown engine-wright of Killingworth had no chance with the public against the brilliant poet-philosopher of the metropolis, and was even denounced most unhandsonely by Sir Humphrey and his friends as an impostor, the evidence adduced by Dr. Smiles proves not only that the "Geordy" was a better practical safety lamp than the "Davy," but also that it was independently constructed and tried by its inventor (October 21, 1815,) before anything was publicly known of Sir Humphrey's experiments. Stephenson felt the injustice done him by the accusation of fraud in the matter of his "Geordy," but he behaved manfully and modestly in the affair; did not refuse the 100 guineas which

the coal owners of the North had voted him, when they voted 2,000 guineas to his rival, but waited his time when another invention, which was then occupying him, should give him an undisputed title to larger rewards and a wider celebrity. This was the invention of the railway locomotive, or, as Stephenson in his simpler style called it, the "traveling engine."

Death of an Eminent Physician.

Marshall Hall, F. R. S., the well-known English physician, died at Brighton on the 11th of August. The deceased was one of the most eminent members of the medical profession, widely known as a lecturer, author and gentleman of high scientific attainments. He visited this country, accompanied by his son, in 1853-4, and was received with much consideration in all parts of the Union.

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