

## Prologue

He flared like a comet across the skies of Michigan in the decade 1830–40. The young man who left an enormous imprint on his adopted state was dead already at age thirty-one. As was said at his death, he was “a statesman of enlarged views.”

The year 2011 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Stevens T. Mason. Born in Virginia and raised in Kentucky, he came to full flower in Michigan, one of the last states to be formed from the Northwest Territory. Here this young man helped to transform a frontier territory to statehood, bucking the federal establishment in the process. He lived in a tumultuous environment of continuous, extremely partisan political drama. Possessing a strong character, Mason thrived in this atmosphere, and his generosity of spirit set him apart from his peers.

There is something compelling about a man so ideally suited to his times and who fits our romantic ideal of one who stands as a unique blend of youth, wisdom, and charisma. When he had right on his side, as he believed he did during the Toledo War, it took a former president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, to come out and say so. And if our romantic heroes often tend to die young, Mason was like his contemporary, the great composer Franz Schubert, who also died at thirty-one.

The “Boy Governor” (a label Stevens T. Mason did not particularly like but learned to live with) received a presidential appointment at the tender age of nineteen—a record that will never be broken. He served as acting governor before he could vote for himself. When he was elected governor at age twenty-four, he set another record, for youngest person ever to be elected chief executive of any state.

In one remarkable year, he successfully led the battle for statehood, prosecuted a war against Ohio for possession of the Toledo Strip, and helped to write Michigan's first constitution. Fired from his job by President Andrew Jackson, Mason won vindication by getting himself elected as the new state's first governor. He had the good sense and grace to accept the Upper Peninsula as compensation for the loss of Toledo, all the while exchanging 470 square miles of swamp and farmland for 9,000 square miles of a mineral-rich region that paid for itself many times over.

He was a man of outstanding vision. He saw clearly a great state university that would be "unexcelled in the land" and that would become "an ornament and honor to the West." He was influential in helping to move the University of Michigan to Ann Arbor, where the first classroom of that great institution bears the name "Mason Hall" today. He requested an appropriation for locks at Sault Ste. Marie to bypass the rapids of the St. Marys River, only to be scoffed at by such an eminent statesman as Henry Clay. Years later, the locks Mason envisioned would be instrumental in making Detroit and Michigan the "arsenal of democracy." Mason ended one of his last speeches with a call for a unified nation: "Why do we permit the value of the Union to be questioned? Cling to Michigan, but live and act for your country, your *whole* country." If he had lived to see his country torn apart in the Civil War, Mason may have recalled those words with a certain amount of satisfaction.

He championed a system of free public education, a superintendency of public instruction that was unprecedented for its time, and a state university whose governance would be shielded from political influence. He lobbied for a state geological survey and then had the wisdom to appoint Douglass Houghton as the state's first geologist. Mason was directly or marginally involved in three wars—the Black Hawk, Toledo, and Patriot—and proved to be decisive in each one, making an able administrator for one so young.

There were mistakes, of course. He was in over his head on questions of banking and negotiating loans. The schemes to lace the state with railroads and canals fostered every form of speculation, ultimately plunging Michigan into disastrous debt. It made no difference that Mason often urged caution in internal improvements; in the end, he yielded to a public opinion that demanded easy money and jobs for all. It was Mason's great misfortune to be a principal victim of the nation's first great economic depression.

Still, he has come down to us in the twenty-first century as a man whose faith in the people and concept of public service are models for aspiring politi-

cians. He is a romantic figure from another century in Michigan history—a lightning rod, prophet, and statesman. One way we moderns pay homage to the heroes of the past is to build statues of them, and while Lewis Cass holds the place of honor in Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., Michigan has accorded Stevens T. Mason a worthy second place in downtown Detroit.

In life, he knew disgrace and embarrassment, but today, the Boy Governor still resonates with Michiganians. Is it too much of a stretch to compare him with George Washington, in that the first president set the tone for the Republic and the office of the presidency, while Mason was a precedent setter as Michigan's first chief executive? After two hundred years, Mason has defied obscurity to retain a prominent place in his state's history. The story of his life is worth sharing with another generation of Michiganians.