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Daniel Webster: First Part

THREE

DANIEL WEBSTER, one of the world's great orators, was so shy as a schoolboy that he found it impossible to stand up and "speak pieces" before his schoolmates. He overcame this timidity, and it is said that passing teamsters would stop and farmers pause in their work to hear him recite passages from the Bible or verses of poetry. Daniel Webster was born at Salisbury (now Franklin), New Hampshire, January 18, 1782. His father was Ebenezer Webster, a sturdy frontiersman, who had served in the Revolution and later had been a member of the New Hampshire Legislature.

Daniel was his second son by his second wife. As a child he seemed so weak and sickly that it was thought he would never live to grow up. He was considered too delicate for hard work on the farm, and was allowed a great deal of time to play. Consequently, he had plenty of leisure, which he spent in hunting, fishing, and particularly in reading. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable; he read every book that came within reach. He was sent to Exeter Academy in 1799, and later went to Dartmouth College, where he graduated in 1801. While there he conquered his boyish shyness, and took great pleasure in public speaking. His eloquence attracted so much notice that in 1800 the townspeople of Hanover, New Hampshire, where Dartmouth is situated, selected this undergraduate to deliver the Fourth of July oration.

Leaving college, Webster began the study of law. First, however, he found it necessary to teach school. After teaching for a few months at Fryeburg, Maine, he returned to his study of the law, and in July, 1804, went to Boston. Christopher Gore, later Governor of Massachusetts and United States Senator, took him into his office. In March, 1805, Webster was admitted to the bar. Two years later he moved to Portsmouth, and in June, 1808, he married Grace Fletcher, of Hopkinton, New Hampshire.

Webster's political career really began at the opening of the War of 1812. He led the opposition in New Hampshire to the policy of President Madison. The Federalists elected him a member of Congress, and he took his seat in May, 1813. He was appointed a member of the Committee on Foreign Relations by Henry Clay.

At this period in his life, Webster was an imposing figure. His form was tall, massive, and commanding; his face was rugged, with overhanging brows, above deep, glowing eyes. His costume at the time has become historic. He wore a dress coat of blue cloth, with brass buttons, trousers of black cloth, and a buff waistcoat, cut low. He was always dignified, and a figure to command respect.

Webster moved to Boston in June, 1816, and at the expiration of his second term in Congress, on March 4, 1817, retired to practice law. His practice was big, and he soon secured an income of more than $20,000 a year. One of the first cases upon which he was engaged was the famous Dartmouth College affair. The case was finally carried to the Supreme Court of the United States, and there Webster, making a powerful appeal to the emotions of the court, won the case for the college and that reputation for himself. Several other important cases added to this, and meanwhile he had come to be recognized as the greatest American orator.

His speech at Plymouth, Massachusetts, on December 22, 1820, on the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, was one of the noblest ever delivered. Five years later, at the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument, he gave what is perhaps the clearest statement to be found anywhere of the principles underlying the War for Independence. His eulogy on Adams and Jefferson, delivered in Faneuil Hall, in Boston, at the time of their death in 1826, was another splendid display of eloquence. It was Webster who placed in Adams' mouth the imaginary reply in the Continental Congress to the arguments against the Declaration of Independence, which began: "Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I give my hand and my heart to this vote." The spirit of these orations is that of the broadest patriotism, and of a keen consciousness of the mighty future of the United States.

In the meantime, in 1822, Webster had been elected to Congress from the Boston district, and he was twice reelected by a popular vote that was almost unanimous. He continued in the House of Representatives until 1827, when he was chosen United States Senator from Massachusetts. His greatest speeches in this period were the "Replies to Hayne," in which he stated imperishly the doctrine of the national Constitution. He was reelected in 1833 and 1839, but retired from the Senate in 1841 to accept the office of Secretary of State under President Harrison.

His first wife having died, Webster married again in 1829. His first wife had left him two sons and a daughter. One son, Edward, a major in the United States army, died while serving in the Mexican War, and the other, Daniel, was killed in the second battle of Bull Run.