

BIOGRAPHY

I

Lysander Spooner came from the flintly farmland of rural New England. He was born January 19, 1808, on his father's farm near Athol, Massachusetts, the second child and second son in a family of six sons and three daughters. Not a single word has survived from Lysander's hand about his father, Asa Spooner (1778–1851); the father evidently was of strong authority. In the tradition of rural New England, he was, according to a family genealogist, "a man of great independence and individuality of character."¹

Asa Spooner was in turn the son of Wing Spooner, a captain in the Revolutionary War, who brought to his family many of the reform impulses of the eighteenth century. Asa was a lone advocate of temperance, which, when first introduced found only one other supporter in the Athol area. Although a favorite reform of religious societies, temperance owed most of its original impetus to the eighteenth century deists.

We can only speculate about Asa's religious opinions generally, but that he was no orthodox Puritan may be seen by the names he chose for his two oldest sons. Instead of a Biblical or a Christian name such as his own, Asa gave to his oldest son the name of Leander, a pagan character, who swam the Hellespont to make love to Hero, a priestess of Sestos. The second son was named Lysander; Lysander was the admiral of Sparta who destroyed the Athenian fleet, ending the Peloponnesian War.

With nine children, Lysander's mother, Dolly (Brown) Spooner (1784–1845), had little time to be anything but a mother. Lysander remembered her as "one of the kindest of mothers and one of the best of women." She seems to have been more orthodox in her religion than her husband; we may imagine that Lysander had his own family in mind when, in *Deist's Reply to the Alleged Supernatural Evidences of Christianity* (1836), he complained that only women were gullible enough to believe the New Testament stories. Lysander's oldest sister, Abigail, served many years as a missionary to the Ojibway Indians for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a largely Congregational group. Although more orthodox in the religious sense, such missionary work was as much an effort toward reform as was temperance and abolition.²

¹ Thomas Spooner, *Records of William Spooner of Plymouth, Mass. and his Descendants* (Cincinnati, 1883), I, 345.

² *Ibid.*; Lysander Spooner to George Bradburn, October 27, 1845. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

Both the men and women of the Spooner family agreed on abolition. Lysander recalled at his mother's death that she and the whole family had been "ardent abolitionists for years." And after rushing sixty miles from Boston to be at her deathbed, Lysander counted it "no slight consolation" that his mother had seen in print his *Unconstitutionality of Slavery* (1845). "During those [last] two days, she was too sick to talk much," Lysander wrote a friend, "but she expressed great pleasure that my book was out and that it was thought likely to do so much good."³

The life and social traditions of the family were in many ways what they had been for two centuries in New England. Hard work, discipline, poverty, and hardship, were a common heritage. Since the seventeenth century, children had often been sent to live with another family so that paternal affection would not weaken the desired rigorous discipline. Lysander's younger brother, William, lived with an uncle in New Hampshire from his seventh to sixteenth year, and then was on his own.

Lysander did not leave the family household and was, consequently, obligated to repay his father for having fed and reared him. From his sixteenth to his twenty-fifth year, Lysander was bound by a formal agreement to work on the family farm and, after the fashion of an apprenticeship, the father was to provide food, lodging, and "good educational advantages." Whatever Lysander learned was sufficient to enable him to teach school for a short time. Later he worked as tutor for a wealthy farmer's children in nearby Winchendon, Massachusetts.

Once his obligations to his father were completed, Lysander was on his own much as his brother William was several years before. William worked as a store clerk in Vermont, and saved enough money to move to Boston where he served in a counting house until he was able to open his own business as a dealer in hides and leather. When William had gone to Boston, he did not have money for clothing, and he was given nothing by his family, }but his temperance and frugality were rewarded with splendid success. William Spooner eventually became one of the largest tanners in the country, and he was the first President of the New England Shoe and Leather Association, a philanthropist, an officer in the Boston Board of Trade, and a completely successful businessman. His was a model life for any New England boy, and Lysander Spooner was always to have a living sermon of success right in his own family.

Lysander intended to be as successful as his brother when he left the family farm and went to nearby Worcester; he too worked in a store, and he too did clerical work — in the office of the Registrar of Deeds in Worcester. His year's service there saw him become a careful and "very reliable"

³ Lysander Spooner to George Bradburn, October 27, 1845. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

examiner and executor of titles. The next step was into the law and, in 1833, Lysander began his legal studies in the offices of John Davis (1787–1854). An eminent politician, Davis was shortly elected governor and served several terms; later, he was a United States Senator (1835–40; 1845–53), and he was long prominent in the national councils of the Whig party. As Davis spent much time out of Worcester, Spooner probably learned most of his law from a distinguished jurist, Charles Allen (1797–1869). Allen was then state senator from Worcester, and he later served many years as Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Davis and Allen must have been impressed with Spooner's ability, as it was a mark of some favor for a lawyer to allow a young man to study in his office.

The influence of Davis and Allen on Spooner was by no means small; they were conservative, judicious, and above all, rigorously logical. In their offices, Spooner mastered the fine art of legal reasoning, ever to mark his own writings. Men of independent judgment, Davis and Allen both were strong foes of slavery long before abolition became a popular cause in Massachusetts. Davis was one of two senators who refused to vote for a declaration of war against Mexico in 1845. Allen became a Free Soil congressman in 1848. Moreover, as Spooner grew older, he came to model his life on that of the older Davis. What an observer said of Davis, might later have been said of Spooner; he was called "a great white bear," possessed of an awkward and impressive dignity.⁴

The rule of Massachusetts courts required a student to study in a lawyer's office before admission to the bar—three years was required of a college graduate; but for a non-graduate, five years were required. In those days a college education was purely classical; it offered a lawyer no advantage other than ornament and polish.

Believing this rule discriminated against the "well-educated poor," Spooner set out to test the legality of the provision. Although Davis had graduated from Yale, and Allen from Harvard, they encouraged their young protege to set up his own practice in defiance of the rules. Spooner printed cards which read: "Lysander Spooner, offers to the public his services in the Profession of the Law. Offices in the Central Exchange. Worcester, April 8, 1835."⁵ To justify this action, Spooner published a petition in the *Worcester Republican*, August 26, 1835, which was sent to each member of the Massachusetts General Court. Inasmuch as John Davis was then Governor and Charles Allen was a state senator, Spooner

⁴ "Charles Allen," *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, IX: 186; "John Davis," *Dictionary of American Biography*; Spooner, *Records*, 581–2; Benjamin Tucker, "Our Nestor Taken From Us," *Liberty*, May 28, 1887.

⁵ *Worcester Republican*. The card appears May 13, 1835, and ran regularly until the Spring of 1836.

already had two important men on his side, and it was no surprise that the restriction was voted down easily in the 1836 legislative session. Spooner's petition, "To the Members of the Legislature of Massachusetts," certainly was not the only force to bring about the change, but it did crystalize the prevailing sentiment. Spooner's principal plea was that every man should be given an equal chance to prove himself. He argued that "no one has yet ever dared advocate, in direct terms, so monstrous a principle as that the rich ought to be protected by law from the competition of the poor."

While mastering the law, Spooner also found time to read general theology and philosophy. From his study he emerged a skeptic and boldly attacked Christianity and the Bible in *The Deist's Immortality, and an Essay on Man's Accountability for his Belief* (1834), and *The Deist's Reply to the Alleged Supernatural Evidences of Christianity* (1836). He showed his legal training in approaching these disputed theological questions: axiomatically, he accepted the proposition that "Our minds are so constituted that they are convinced by evidence." The traditional evidences used to support Christianity are here set down and judged. As a result, Christ is dismissed as a charlatan, and the Bible as an unreliable set of old wives' tales (if not outright lies). Clergymen knew all this, Spooner argued, but they use their offices for prestige and an easy living. His pamphlets were intended to "awaken opposition to the Clergy and Christianity" because they "delude and enslave the imaginations of the young . . . and . . . make men dupes, fools, slaves, cowards, bigots, and fanatics . . ." (In proof of the latter point, he cited contemporary revivalists and Joseph Smith.)

Such outspoken language must have marked Spooner, among his Worcester associates, as the village atheist. True, he was a "deist" — one who believed in God; true, the Unitarians no less than Spooner desupernaturalized Christ. But other critics of traditional dogma were soft and gentlemanly — ever solicitous of their opposition. Spooner was uncompromising and harsh with clergymen and believers. Many men doubtless agreed with Spooner's position, but they would never publicly say so. There was a tacit agreement among gentlemen that religion kept people in their place, and that without restraint they would become virtual wolves. Such arguments must have reinforced Spooner's determination to unmask the hypocrisy.

Spooner's attack on the clergy identified him at once as a radical. Such an identification would not draw clients to his office. In large measure, men in Worcester trusted each other on the basis of mutual respectability, which was measured mainly by church membership; indeed, members of the same church often voted for and traded with one another. Many may have had religious doubts but, in the interest of good business, they said nothing to offend their potential customers.

Business in Worcester, moreover, was only moderate even for the faithful; rural New England was then beginning its long period of decline. The more fertile regions in the West were sending their crops to market through facilities such as the Erie Canal. Consequently, Spooner found no prosperous future in Worcester; in fact, he was not able to make enough money in his first year as a lawyer to pay his living expenses.

In March, 1836, Spooner applied to Albert Gallatin, then president of the National Bank of New York City, for a job as bank clerk. Gallatin obliged, but Spooner did not stay out the year; in a few months he accumulated enough money to leave for the booming promised land of overnight wealth, the American West.