

First Church History Role Fact Sheet: Fischer Ames

1758: Nathaniel and Deborah Fisher have their fifth child, Fisher. At this time Dedham was a camp for soldiers mobilized to fight the French and Indian War.

1764: Fisher's father Nathaniel died and eldest son (and big brother) Nathaniel Jr. took over the family businesses, publishing the Ames Astronomical Diary and Almanack and serving as a physician for his neighbors. Nathaniel Jr. and Deborah fought over the settlement of Nathaniel Sr.'s will and estate, which was not fully resolved for many years to come.

1770: Fisher is brought up in the Ames Tavern. He went to the Dedham district school and was also tutored in Greek and Latin by First Church minister Reverend Jason Haven. In September 1770 Fisher entered Harvard.

1774: During his time at Harvard Fisher studied the (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) classical literature, logic and philosophy. He also learned science, geography, poetry and rhetoric (speech making). For fun Fisher read plays, history, and epic poems and he joined the Speaking Club where he dramatically resented ancient speeches and wrote and delivered persuasive orations in support of American revolutionary ideals. As a consequence he was appointed as a graduation speaker in 1772.

1777: After graduation Fisher taught school in Roxbury and Newburyport and continued to study ancient and contemporary literature for which he received a Master of Arts degree from Harvard.

1778: Fisher enlisted as a volunteer in the Dedham militia that guarded Boston. He also began to study law in Boston with William Tudor. He was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1782.

1779: Fisher began his political career by being appointed by Dedham Town Meeting as a representative to the Massachusetts convention tasked with regulating prices to prevent war profiteering.

1786: After four years of successful and noteworthy legal practice Fisher entered the political debate about Shay's Rebellion. Farmers in western Massachusetts, many of them Revolutionary War veterans, were losing their farms because of debt and a depressed economy. Led by Daniel Shay, these rebels were taking up arms, preventing courts from meeting in order to stop farm foreclosures. Fisher wrote essays criticizing the lawless riotous behavior of these debtors and calling for a strong national government that could protect public order. Fisher's essays went on to point out the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and of governments with excessive liberty and democracy which, he felt, degenerated into chaos.

1787: Frustrated by brother Nathaniel's 20 years of foot dragging in fully settling their father's estate, Fisher pointed out that he had long asked his brother to either sell out to Fisher or simply give Fisher his own share of his father's farm. "A Brother would have preferred the first; a stranger would have acceded (given in) to the second.... But all have been refused." Although this argument finally resulted in the equitable division of the estate, Fisher complained about the "infinite anxiety, the disgrace, perplexity and expense" of the case which, he felt, initiated a life-long relationship of squabbling and ideological dispute with his brother.

1788: In January Fisher attended the Massachusetts convention to debate ratification of the Constitution as a Dedham delegate and spoke eloquently in favor of the new government plan, at one point besting veteran politician Samuel Adams on the question of frequency of elections. His adroit debating contributed in no small way to convention's approval of the Constitution and to favorable notice of Fisher's intellectual gifts and speaking skills by fellow Federal Constitution supporters who now called themselves Federalists. In May Fisher was elected by Dedham to represent the town in General Court (Massachusetts state legislature) and in December Fisher was elected to the House of Representatives as congressman from Suffolk County.

1789-91: As a member of the 1st Congress Fisher supported establishing a strong central government. With that goal in mind, he became a major spokesman for Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton's national finances plan. He argued in favor of Hamilton's proposals for federal government takeover of state war debts, creation of the funded national debt, a national bank, and a national system of tariffs. The opponents of a strong central government were led by James Madison who debated Hamilton's plans with Fisher, criticizing these policies as favoring rich speculators and undermining the powers of Congress and the states.

1791-93: In the 2nd Congress Fisher again led Hamilton's Federalist supporters in debate about taxes on domestic products like whiskey and using tariffs for economic retaliation against Britain. Again, his opponent in these floor debates was Madison, but Fisher knew that Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson was the actual leader of the anti-centralizing Republican faction. Members of Jefferson's group accused Fisher of unethically abusing his "inside knowledge" about proposed financial legislation to profit from investment in national bonds. In May 1792 Fisher married Frances Worthington and began to build a house on land he owned in Dedham.

1793-95: The 3rd Congress had to deal with fallout from the growing conflict between Britain and revolutionary France. Jefferson and Madison wanted the United States to develop commercial ties with the French Republic, while Hamilton, with Fisher's support, believed that the United States should side with its main trading partner, Britain. The Jeffersonians organized Republican clubs and funded newspapers throughout the states to promote their political goals. Fisher was becoming very concerned about the partisanship of the Jeffersonians, fearing that they were intent on undermining the effectiveness of the central government. He complained that "the faction in the House fomented the discontents without, the clubs are everywhere the echoes of faction in Congress, and Madison is a member. Oh Shame! Where is thy sting?" When Fisher returned to Dedham at the end of the congressional session, he learned that his brother Nathaniel had become a fervent Jeffersonian and the brothers would occasionally conduct boisterous public political arguments.

1795-97: In the 4th Congress Fisher joined the debate about establishing a new trade treaty, negotiated by Ames' friend John Jay, and closer ties, with Britain. To a full and attentive House of Representatives audience, including President John Adams, Fisher dramatically described the danger of not ratifying the treaty, stating "the arguments I am urging would then come to a point. To use force is war. To talk (negotiate) the Treaty again is too absurd. Redress (further British concessions) must come from voluntary good will. Treaty or war!" In part, due to Fisher's eloquence the Jay Treaty was ratified.

However, Ames had been laid low recurrently by a lung ailment (probably tuberculosis), sapping his energy to such an extent that he retired from politics at the end of 1797.

1799: Fisher returned to Dedham to work as a lawyer to support his wife and growing family of two sons. He became involved in town politics, urging prosecution of David Brown who had criticized Ames for profiteering off his wealthy friends and set up an anti-Federalist liberty pole on the church green with a sign calling for "the downfall to the Tyrants of America." Fisher and fellow Federalists cut the offending liberty pole down and pressed to have Brown prosecuted for violating the Sedition Act because of his attack on Federalist president Adams. Brown was duly sentenced to a year and a half in jail. Fisher later financed a couple of local political newspapers for which he wrote pro-Federalist essays

1802: Fisher pushed successfully for the appointment of the conservative Joshua Bates as minister of First Church. Alleging that Fisher had "cram'd the Priest down their throats tail foremost", Nathaniel, along with several other Republican congregants, promptly resigned his church membership.

1804: Fisher heard from some of his former congressional colleagues that they were so unhappy with President Jefferson's policies that they contemplated secession of New England from the Union. Fisher disagreed with this course of action, advising that "Rather than that the Union should be endangered, every sacrifice should be made, every evil submitted to. For my own part, I would stand by the ship to the last-I would pump so long as a single plank could be kept above water."

1808: Fisher finally succumbed to his ailment on July 4th. At his funeral, which brother Nathaniel refused to attend, Fisher was eulogized for the "richness and vividness of his fancy, the fertility of his invention, the abundance of his thoughts were as remarkable as the justness and strength of his understanding."