Good-by "Charle": The Lee-Adams Interest and The Political Demise of Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, 1774-1789

When death finally rescued Charles Thomson from senility, almost fifty years to the day after the meeting of the First Continental Congress, we lost forever the intimate knowledge of the scholar who had been "the graphic faculty of the old Congress, the hand and pen of that body" during its fifteen-year life. Even before the definitive treaty of peace between the United States of America and Great Britain had been signed, John Jay urged Thomson to devote at least one hour of each four and twenty to a political history of the Revolution. It "will be most liable to misrepresentation, and future relations of it will probably be replete with both intentional and accidental errors. Such a work would be highly advantageous to your reputation, as well as highly important to the Cause of Truth with posterity."

By 1785, Thomson had prepared more than a 1,000 pages based on everything omitted from the Journals; as John Adams and other students of the Revolution have complained, that included much of the business as well as the politics of Congress. But sometime after 1789 Thomson destroyed his history and the appeals of historians who promised to stress his role in exchange for what he knew elicited only brief, unrevealing replies. Why the reticence? "I

1 Part of the research for this article was conducted with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Charles A. Beard, ed., The Journal of William Maclay (New York, 1927), entry for July 13, 1789; Jay to Thomson, July 19, 1783, New-York Historical Society Collections for the Year 1878 (New York, 1879), hereinafter cited as NYHSC, 175; Marbois to Vergennes, Feb. 25, 1785, George Bancroft, History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States of America (New York, 1882), I, 414; David Ramsay to Thomson, Sept. 20, 1809, James P. Wilson to Thomson, Mar. 1, 1813, Thomson Papers, Library of Congress, hereinafter DLC.
should contradict all the histories of the great events of the Revolution,” he once told some friends. “Let the world admire the supposed wisdom and valor of our great men. Perhaps they may adopt the qualities that have been ascribed to them, and thus good may be done. I shall not undeceive future generations.”2 From a man with Thomson’s knowledge of the politics of the Revolution—and there were few who equaled it in depth and none in breadth—this was no small loss to the future. Two hundred years later fog still shrouds congressional politics during the Revolution. Although it never will be dispersed, historians have cleared patches here and there. This essay reaffirms the importance of personal loyalties in the Revolutionary congresses. It focuses on Thomson’s neglected political career, particularly its abrupt demise, and suggests personal reasons for the loss of his written history. The facts and factions can be ascertained, an interpretation emerges, but Thomson’s feelings are not as easily uncovered, the relevant pages of his letter book having been torn away.

Charles Thomson, like his benefactor Benjamin Franklin, is historical proof of the early American success story. Within twenty years after the ten-year-old orphan reached America he had established himself as a Philadelphia merchant and intellectual leader with good political connections. His business interests pulled him into the Revolutionary movement during the 1760s, and by 1774, when John Adams arrived for the First Continental Congress, Thomson was known as the Sam Adams of Philadelphia.3 Four days after his marriage to wealthy Hannah Harrison, cousin of John Dickinson’s wife, Congress elected Thomson its secretary. The friends of England agreed it was futile to offer opposition albeit they despised the choice, and Thomson recorded the election as


unanimous.4 Historians have accepted this unanimity as real and written as if Charles Thomson conducted his office to everyone's satisfaction for fifteen years, as some sort of impartial cipher above politics, lacking both personality and influence. Such was of course not the case.

By his political connections, his long tenure of office, and his executive and legislative functions, Thomson influenced the course of congressional and Revolutionary affairs. "Secretary" was the title given by the British to their executive department heads and Thomson was Secretary in that sense and not in the sense of a record keeper or file clerk, which a cursory review of his duties as officially regulated in 1782, as a capstone to Congress' executive reforms, and again in 1785, might imply. The Secretary of Congress ranked just behind the President and members of Congress and before the department heads in precedence. He combined in one office what were to become in 1789 the domestic duties of the Department of State as well as the duties of the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Senate. After John Hancock's resignation as President of Congress, and at least on one other occasion, Thomson acted briefly in that capacity. In 1781 some men, and undoubtedly the ambitious Hannah Harrison Thomson, wanted to make him Secretary for Foreign Affairs as well as Secretary of Congress; during part of 1783 and 1784 he performed some duties of that office without the title. And from August, 1784, when the Committee of States dissolved, until November he was Congress.

Thomson, who always sat below and to the right of the President facing the delegates, selected what to include in the Journals he kept, saw to their printing and distribution, attended sessions regularly, took the roll, and occasionally made special reports to Con-

Adams of Philadelphia," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XL (1958), 464-480, is excellent on Thomson prior to 1774. James Hendricks, "Charles Thomson and the American Enlightenment" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1961), which establishes Thomson's reputation as an intellectual leader, is the best biography, but it too separates Thomson from the politics of Congress. Thus, treatment of Thomson's career from 1774 to 1789 remains only a skeleton; the information to flesh it out is widely scattered among the papers of his contemporaries.

gress or served on its committees. He attested commissions, issued letters of marque and reprisal, read official communications and documents to Congress, kept and affixed the Seals of the United States to all official papers, and performed miscellaneous housekeeping duties essential to protocol and the smooth functioning of Congress. Beyond this, he controlled the use and disposition of all secret and most public papers connected with the operation of the central government in its domestic, military, and foreign capacities. He received them, filed them, authenticated them, transmitted them, replied to them, loaned them, and arranged for their transportation as Congress wandered about the Middle States. Thomson linked the United States government to the States, and for fifteen years devoted all of his energy to the central government. The delegates knew him to be a fount of knowledge which he could make available to them when and if he chose. A majority remained satisfied that he did not abuse his immense power to forward either his personal views, or those of friends, of Philadelphia, of Pennsylvania, of the Middle States, or of France. A minority felt adamantly otherwise.

As the members of the First Federal Congress gathered in New York City during March and April, 1789, Secretary Thomson, the only officeholder to serve Congress continuously from its dynamic birth to its anticlimactic demise, symbolized to articulate Americans central government under the Articles of Confederation. What was to be his role under the new Constitution which he had so eagerly embraced? "It rests with them. If they have no farther use for me, I shall retire to my farm. . . ." The proud man would not accept an office of less dignity than the one he had held so long. He might become the first Secretary of the Senate, a place of prestige and possible power because the Senate, like the old Congress, performed both legislative and executive functions. But friends in Philadelphia,

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6 Thomson to James Lovell, Mar. 11, 1789, Fogg Autograph Collection, Maine Historical Society.
from whose interest Thomson had never wavered, thought that his long and faithful services entitled him to a more prestigious office. There was rumour of the vice-presidency. Thomson himself determined as early as October, 1788, that he wanted to be Secretary of State, an office which had nothing to do with foreign affairs as Americans understood it prior to September, 1789. His "affectionate ancient friend" Benjamin Franklin warned him, however, of the "reproach thrown on Republicks, that they are apt to be ungrateful."  

Thomson's desire for an office of more importance than the secretarship of the Senate and his threatened retirement if he did not get one, left the competition for that office open to others. John R. Livingston of New York, the brother of the former Secretary for Foreign Affairs Robert R. Livingston, believed himself well qualified for the position because of his services as private secretary to the Presidents of Congress since 1786 and because of his influential family connections. He turned to New Englanders for support, but they had their own man in mind and Livingston's campaign never got far. Major William Jackson, raised in South Carolina but a Philadelphia resident, sought the office by virtue of his service as secretary to the Federal Convention of 1787, and he appealed to men he had known at the Convention, to Vice-President-elect John Adams, and through mutual acquaintances to other members of the new Congress. John Dickinson recommended him to Delaware's Senator George Read if their good friend Thomson did not desire the place.  

8 Franklin to Thomson, Dec. 29, 1788, NYHSC, 248-249.  
10 Dickinson to Read, Jan. 27, 1789, Read Papers, Historical Society of Delaware. Letters by Jackson and his supporters can also be found in Elwyn, 88; Jeremiah Wadsworth Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; Otho H. Williams Papers, Maryland Historical Society; William Livingston and Adams Family Papers, MHi; and Read Papers, HSP. Arthur Lee informed Thomas Lee Shippen on May 2, 1787 (Lee Transcripts, IV, Virginia Historical Society) that Jackson won the secretarship of the Federal Convention over William Temple Franklin with the aid of the "Lee Interest."
The most aggressive candidate by far was Samuel Allyn Otis, former Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and a brother of the early Revolutionary hero James, Jr. In Boston's first congressional election, Otis ran a poor third against Federalist Fisher Ames and Antifederalist Samuel Adams, and on election day he sent off the first of many letters seeking support from all sections of the country. He wrote directly to James Madison of Virginia and to several New England members of Congress, and requested his friend John Adams to mention him to Senators Ralph Izard of South Carolina and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, both of whom "will be as heretofore much with you in politics, in the choice of men, and in the adoption of measures." Otis insisted in his lengthy letters that he was better qualified than any of his competitors who "altho' they never held any very important post of employment under Congress, hold their pretensions very high." His sense of pride, unlike Thomson's, was magnified by a self-congratulatory and often vindictive pen. A month before the Senate filled the post, Pennsylvania Senator William Maclay observed that Otis had already interested many men in his behalf.

The Senate formed a quorum on April 6 and chose New Hampshire's John Langdon President Pro-tempore over Robert Morris and the reluctant Revolutionary William Samuel Johnson, both friends of Thomson. It looked as if Otis would be chosen Secretary over Jackson and Roger Alden. Last-minute candidate Alden, Thomson's deputy and Senator Johnson's son-in-law, had both their support. Then, abruptly, in an effort to stop Otis, Thomson yielded to the "earnest desire" of those who wished him to remain in public life and informed Robert Morris that he would accept the secretaryship of the Senate after all, but only on certain conditions. Thomson insisted upon retaining control of the Great Seal (the obverse of which he had designed), the duties annexed to it, and the custody of the Papers of the old Congress. An appropriate title would be

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11 Otis to Adams, Jan. 31, 1789, from the microfilm edition of the Adams Papers, by permission of MHi. Letters from Otis seeking the job can also be found in Elwyn, 89-90; LMCC, VIII, 814-815; Gratz Collection, HSP; Madison Papers, DLC; and Thomson Autograph Collection, Hartford [Connecticut] Seminary Foundation.

12 Otis to John Langdon, Mar. 5, 1789, Elwyn, 89; William Maclay to Benjamin Rush, Mar. 6, 1789, Rush Papers, DLC.
“Secretary of the Senate and of the United States or Congress.” He wanted a deputy to conduct routine business so that he need only attend on ceremonial occasions. The sudden possibility that Thomson might win the office moved his inveterate enemy, Representative Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, to seek out Senator Richard Henry Lee to discuss the importance of “our friend” Otis obtaining the job; everyone knew Thomson would treat the office with contempt insisted Gerry. Both Pennsylvania Senators gave their support to Thomson but it was too late. On April 7 the Senate twice divided six to six between Otis and Thomson, and then postponed the unrecorded balloting until the next day. Had Thomson’s schoolmate Senator George Read acted on the Secretary’s personal appeal for him to attend the Senate, Thomson would have had the necessary votes. Otis supporters held firm during several votes, even after the reluctant substitution of the popular William Jackson in the place of Thomson. Finally, Otis, who had been “kept in torture,” picked up the winning vote; Jackson received three, and Alden, two. Senator Maclay concluded that Thomson aided his enemies by not coming forward earlier and more heartily.13

Thomson was not in New York to witness Otis’ triumph because it had been determined even before Congress had a quorum that he would be the person to inform George Washington of his unanimous election as President. The honor went to Thomson, he told Washington, because of “my having been long in the confidence of the late Congress and charged with the duties of one of the principal civil departments of Government.”14 It was an apt symbol, the

13 John R. to Robert R. Livingston, Feb. 3, 1789, Livingston Papers, New-York Historical Society; Thomson to Morris, Apr. 7, 1789, *LMCC*, VIII, 829–830; Gerry to Lee, Feb. 9, Apr. 6, 1789, Lee Family Papers, University of Virginia Microfilm Publication; Maclay to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 7, 1789, Rush Papers, DLC; Thomson to Read, Mar. 21, 1789, William T. Read, *Life and Correspondence of George Read...* (Philadelphia, 1870), 474; Maclay Journal, entry for July 13, 1789; Otis to Jonathan Dayton, Apr. 9, 1789, National Park Service, Morristown National Historical Park. My reconstruction of the April 7 vote shows heavy Middle States support for Thomson from Maclay, Morris, Elmer, Johnson, Bassett and probably Ellsworth. Otis’ support came from the North and South (the old Lee-Adams axis): Langdon, Wingate, Strong, Paterson, Lee and probably Few. The crucial switch on April 8 was probably Elmer. Alden had the support of the Connecticut Senators, and the remainder of Thomson’s support went to Jackson.

Secretary of the old Congress passing the torch to the executive head of the new government. “Charle ridiculously enough has gotten himself chosen . . .” to be “Express rider of the Union,” Otis mocked. During a week on the road to Mt. Vernon Thomson had plenty of time and much reason to think about his future with the government, a future that was intimately bound to his fifteen-year career as the supposedly nonpartisan Secretary of Congress.

If he reflected on his political fortunes, he surely regretted that several of his bitterest enemies, supporters of the old Lee-Adams interest, were once again, after several years of separation, together at the seat of government. That influential and strange alliance which formed around certain dedicated southern and northern Revolutionaries traced back to London and Arthur Lee’s attempt two decades earlier to merge the British reform movement of John Wilkes with the American resistance spearheaded by Massachusetts and, to a lesser degree, Virginia. Benjamin Franklin interfered with Lee’s plan and Lee criticized to his new friends in Massachusetts the manner in which Franklin represented their colony’s interests at Court. The antipathy between the Lee-Adams interest and Thomson’s mentor Franklin thus went back to the roots of that alliance.

In 1775, after Joseph Galloway and other Loyalists left Congress, the Patriots divided amongst themselves. On one side were New England and southern men like John Adams, Elbridge Gerry, and Richard Henry Lee, who quietly sought independence as rapidly as possible, and on the other side were Middle States moderates like John Dickinson, George Read, and Robert Morris, who preferred reconciliation on terms favorable to America. In rebellious Massachusetts, Samuel Osgood, Tristram Dalton, and Samuel A. Otis were avid supporters of the Lee-Adams position. Disgraced in London and in search of a new political base, Benjamin Franklin supported independence for a few months prior to the Declaration and then characteristically set about to mend fences, this time with

15 Otis to Nathan Dane, Mar. 28, 1789, LMCC, VIII, 829; Otis to Jonathan Dayton, Apr. 9, 1789, loc. cit. The Otis to Dayton letters are especially informative on Thomson’s demise; some which remain in private hands will shed more light on the subject.

16 On the politics of the pre-1789 congresses see H. James Henderson, Party Politics in the Continental Congress (New York, 1974) and Joseph L. Davis, “Sections, Factions, and Political Centralism in Confederation America, 1774-1787” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1972). Davis has generously shared his knowledge of congressional politics with me.
those who held the moderate Dickinson-Read-Morris position. Dickinson was tied to Thomson by marriage; Read was a friend from youth; Morris was a fellow merchant and confidant; and Franklin was a surrogate father. Thus the Secretary of Congress found his connections solidly in the less fervent part of the Revolutionary movement. John Adams considered Dickinson a "piddling Genius," his contempt for Franklin was cemented when they served together in France, and he accused Thomson of using his office and the *Journals of Congress* to support the moderates. He still felt so strongly in 1805 that he complained that Dickinson, Thomson, and their supporters had been his constant enemies since 1775.17

Between 1777 and 1779 the power of the Lee-Adams interest in Congress faded. The decline of the "revolutionary party," as it was sometimes called, coincided with the many faceted Lee-Deane affair. Writing to his brother Richard Henry, Arthur Lee complained in 1776 that the congressional committee of which he was an agent in Europe was too much under the influence of Franklin and John Jay. "They must be left out, and the L[ee]s or the A[dam]s put in their places," he insisted. Franklin did leave the committee but only to be sent to France to join Lee and Silas Deane as the American commissioners at Paris. He quickly allied himself with Deane against Lee, and the details of their feudings reached Congress in 1777. Congress recalled Thomson's friend Deane in December; Lee lost his commission two years later. The politics of the intervening months split Congress profoundly. In 1777 Lee focused his attack on Deane rather than on his old, influential enemy Franklin, writing to members of the Lee-Adams interest that Deane was a profiteer. Ralph Izard, reporting from France to his friend Henry Laurens, the President of Congress and a Lee-Adams supporter, condemned both Deane and Franklin. To the New England dominated Lee-Adams interest with its anti-French bias and paranoia about possible French control over the North Atlantic fisheries, Lee and Izard's charges about the notoriously pro-French Deane and Franklin

17 Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), II, 174, III, 316–318, 375. The continuing friendship among Thomson, Morris, Dickinson and Franklin (the latter two were never as close as the others) is documented in their correspondence. In discussing the Lee-Adams interest I am only mentioning members who were at New York in 1789.
carried great weight. Deane was not without support, however; it centered in such moderates as Dickinson, Morris, and Secretary Thomson. The latter, with Morris’ agreement, suppressed at least one of Deane’s letters to Congress, and Richard Henry Lee believed such behavior rendered him “unfit to be the Secretary of Congress.” Another Arthur Lee supporter privately accused Thomson of purposely garbling letters he read to Congress which were favorable to Lee. Deane himself considered the Secretary enough of a confidant to “rely much on his judgement” as far as his problems with Congress were concerned.¹⁸

In August, 1779, as the Lee-Deane affair approached its climax, a bitter feud between President Laurens and Secretary Thomson almost came to blows. In a written defense of his conduct, Laurens accused Thomson of gross partiality, arbitrary conduct, and abuse of power by denying access to congressional documents. Perhaps Laurens even knew that the Secretary had provided the President of Pennsylvania with secret documents, and that he “opened up frankly” to the French Minister. To Thomson, Laurens had “a premeditated and long concocted plan to lessen me in the opinion of Congress.” Tensions remained high and a few months later, the Secretary and a congressional partisan of Lee’s attacked each other with canes.¹⁹

The early 1780s were less trying times for Secretary Thomson. Many of the Lee-Adams interest were no longer delegates. The Philadelphia-based, pro-Deane interest gained control of Congress.


¹⁹ Laurens to Congress, Sept. 1, 1779, Thomson to Congress, Sept. 6, 1779, LMCC, IV, 379-399, 401-408, V, 101; Marbois to Vergennes, Feb. 28, 1785, Correspondance Politique, Etats-Unis, Vol. 29, Microfilm, DLC; Thomas P. Abernethy, Western Lands and the American Revolution (New York, 1959), 279. Rolater, page 72, has further detail on Thomson’s transmission of documents to the President of Pennsylvania.
Robert Morris, now Superintendent of Finance, supported by Thomson and several new members of Congress who sought a stronger central government, guided congressional politics toward centralist goals. It was probably the centralists who attempted to delegate to Thomson the powerful role of deciding if a question needed seven or nine state votes for passage. Delegates from the Middle States, which dominated Congress, knew they had a partisan in him. The Connecticut members in an official letter to their Governor described Thomson in 1782 as “our Pennsylvania Secretary.” But the situation changed abruptly following Congress’ overly dramatic removal from Philadelphia in June, 1783, and the next twenty months saw a series of events which culminated in an unsuccessful move to oust Thomson from office. Men such as Arthur Lee and Elbridge Gerry, who viewed the influence of Morris, Thomson, and others in Philadelphia as a threat to their concept of a legislatively dominated, decentralized republic, were delighted with the removal. Attempts to return, actively supported by Thomson, failed.20

With Congress away from Philadelphia, Morris’ political influence declined rapidly. Thomson, the most prominent reminder of the clique which the Lee-Adams interest had opposed since 1775, almost resigned at the end of 1784 when Congress elected Richard Henry Lee its President, accepted Morris’ resignation, and chose New York City as its temporary residence. He decided instead to accept the challenge and face the wrath of the Lee-Adams men. Elbridge Gerry had initiated a campaign early in 1784 to trim the Secretary’s powers, and, if possible, remove him from office under the guise of an annual secretarial election. Gerry had not been successful then, but early in 1785 he and his associates moved to change Thomson’s title to “Secretary for Congress and for the Home Department.” Not an attempt to enlarge his office, but instead, as Charles reported to Hannah, a poorly disguised “plan

20 Ford, Journals, XXV, 918; Connecticut Delegates to Governor, July 1, 1782, LMCC, VI, 376; Arthur Lee to St. George Tucker, July 21, 1783, Tucker-Coleman Papers, William and Mary College. Alexander Hamilton told Washington that Robert Morris’ threatened resignation in 1783 was due to the “old leaven of Deane and Lee” [Apr. 9, 1783], LMCC, VII, 131.

21 See for examples Thomson to Dickinson, July 11, 1783, June 30, 1788, Dickinson Papers, HSP; Thomson to George Clymer, Apr. 3, 1784, Thomson Papers, DLC.
... deep laid” and “prosecuted with ... persevering cunning and malice” to oust him from office. It failed and the Lee-Adams interest did not have another opportunity to get at Thomson until after the adoption of the Constitution of 1787.

The year 1785 brought important transition in congressional affairs. Commercial growth and westward expansion rather than the nature of the central government became the dominant theme of its politics. Arthur Lee was elected to the Board of Treasury which replaced Morris, and Gerry went home to Massachusetts. New members who had not been directly involved in the old struggles gained influence in Congress. The question of the nature of central government had not been forgotten however. It was a major theme outside Congress, and Thomson, along with his friends Morris, Read, Dickinson and Franklin, supported the constitutional revolution of 1787. Ironically, however, the creation of the new government made Thomson vulnerable to his enemies once again. Samuel A. Otis, Senators Richard Henry Lee, Tristram Dalton, and Ralph Izard, Representative Elbridge Gerry, Commissioners of the Board of Treasury Arthur Lee and Samuel Osgood, and Vice-President John Adams had combined to deny him the secretaryship of the Senate. Politically sophisticated, Thomson must have suspected as he rode toward Mt. Vernon that his enemies remained unsatisfied.

About noon on Tuesday April 14, 1789, having overcome “tempestuous weather, bad roads, and many large rivers,” Thomson reached Mt. Vernon on the eighth day out of New York. He delivered a short speech and the President-elect read a response conveniently waiting in his pocket. The two men soon left for the seat of government, arriving on April 23. Thomson sent Washington a draft of the letter he planned to submit to the Senate briefly describing the journey and the historic moment at which Washington once again returned to the service of his country. Amended at Washington’s suggestion, Thomson read the letter to the Senate and requested that it be printed in its Journal. “Charle has met a


23 American State Papers, Miscellaneous, I, 5; Thomson to Washington, Apr. 24, 1789, LMCC, VIII, 830.
second rebuff,” Otis informed a friend, before entering on the Journal merely, “A letter from Charles Thomson . . . purporting his having delivered to General Washington the certificate of his being elected . . . was read, and ordered to be filed.”24 One can attribute Thomson’s loss of the secretaryship of the Senate in some part to his own aloofness, but the second rebuff was more clearly aimed at him personally. A third rebuff was also personal, and, because it was public, pained the proud and ceremony conscious Thomson most of all.

The joint congressional committee for the inauguration of George Washington provided seats at the official proceedings for the late President of Congress, the Governor of the Western Territory, the five persons heading the three departments (Board of Treasury, Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and Secretary at War), the chaplains of Congress, the officers of the state and city of New York, and the foreign ministers. George Read complained to the Senate about the omission of his old friend the Secretary of Congress just as Representatives arrived outside the chamber to be admitted for the ceremony. Amid the tension and noise, Richard Henry Lee defended the absence of Thomson on the grounds that he was no longer in office.25

Deeply hurt, Thomson drafted a bitter resignation statement apparently meant for Congress but never submitted. Why had he, he who had escorted Washington to the capital “under an idea suggested to me that this was required of me as being still in the service of the United States,” been omitted? It was his public reputation for which he feared most and he requested that something be done to save it from the effects of Congress’ action. He possessed the Papers of Congress and the Great Seal of the United States which he felt were documentary proofs that his office had not expired with the old government in March. He wondered what authority the inaugural committee used to distinguish which officers of the old government were or were not in office. And, indeed, he

25 Report of the Joint Committee on the Inaugural, Apr. 29, 1789, Rare Book Room, DLC; Maclay Journal, entry for Apr. 30, 1789. The Representatives on the committee were Fisher Ames of Massachusetts, Egbert Benson of New York, and Daniel Carroll of Maryland.
might have asked why the last President of Congress was invited since he was clearly not in office. Although Thomson had heard "no other reason . . . for this arbitrary arrangement," he must have been aware of one—the membership of the committee itself. Chaired by Richard Henry Lee, the other Senators on the Committee were Ralph Izard, whose dislike of the Secretary and his friends was almost as long standing as Lee's, and Tristram Dalton of Massachusetts, close to both Adams and Otis. If it was necessary, the Senators convinced at least one of the Representatives on the committee of the wisdom of their position. Thomson gained some consolation from the fact that he had been informed that the omission had given "general dissatisfaction and that the circumstance of the houses not knowing it in time alone prevented its being rectified."26

Within a week of the inauguration the wound had healed enough that Thomson was again seeking a government job. He had returned to the idea of becoming Secretary of State for a Home Department. The British government had created a Home Department in 1782 to perform miscellaneous housekeeping functions for the government and to maintain peace and order within Britain. As noted above, an attempt had been made in 1785 to include "Home Department" in Thomson's title. A few months before the meeting of the First Federal Congress, an admirer of James Madison and the British constitutional system indicated that several Federalists believed the Virginian could best serve his country as Secretary of State for a Home Department.27

26 Thomson to [Congress?], [Apr. 29–30?], 1789, LMCC, VIII, 833–834. The editors describe the document as a "Statement" "written shortly after the ceremony of Apr. 30" and "to one of his friends, possibly Robert Morris." My evidence for asserting that the item is a draft of a resignation statement to Congress written at the end of April is: (1) its tone is that of a hurt and bitter man who had just seen the April 29 inaugural committee report, heard about it, or, having failed to get it changed, had suffered the insult of exclusion from the ceremony; (2) that he asks to be relieved of the Papers and Seals of the late Congress "as soon as convenient"; (3) that he uses the same phrases as in his July resignation letter to Washington; (4) that he mentions Washington in such a way as to indicate that he is not the recipient, and Thomson would not have resigned to a peer such as John Jay; and (5) that he refers to the inaugural committee as merely the committee because it was understood to be part of the body he addressed.

In 1789, Arthur Lee feared Thomson’s hopes for the office were related to an attempt by Robert Morris to re-establish a power base. Secretary Otis, lining up opposition, was furious: “How Charle will succeed in the home department [I] am not able to say. He is artful, industrious and ambitious and will leave no Stone unturned.” To John Adams, the threatened Otis insisted that there was no need for a Home Department; it was a waste of money and a show of pomosity that would result in its Secretary assuming “dictatorial airs of superiority” and hurting “the feelings and depress another officer, who by virtue of his appointment seems to be Secretary of State [for the Home Department] as the business of the Senate is legislative, executive, and judicial.” The Home Department proposal was merely “a Sine Cure for a Man passed the meridian of life, of ample fortune and childless.” Each of the duties proposed for the Home Department could best be carried out by the Secretary of the Senate or by the Secretaries of the Departments of Treasury, War, or Foreign Affairs. To the argument that “no man can turn to the papers of the former Congress except Mr. Thomson,” Otis complained that “there are millions of old papers to which no human eye will ever have occasion again to turn, and turning to such as may be wanted is a simple business indeed provided the papers are in due arrangement.”

In mid-May, while the Committee of the Whole debated general policy for the creation of the executive departments, Representative John Vining of Delaware moved that a Domestic Department be created in addition to War, Treasury, and Foreign Affairs. “The territorial possessions of the United States, and the domestic affairs, would be objects of the greatest magnitude . . . . the present and increasing duties of such a department will oblige” its creation. Vining withdrew his motion after a member declared he would rather decide on the question of a Home or Domestic Department when he saw what responsibilities were attached to the three other departments. Vining wrote to Thomson the next day to ascertain his ideas of what a Home Department ought to do. Thomson re-

28 Arthur to Richard H. Lee, May 9, 1789, Lee Family Papers, University of Virginia Microfilm Publication; Otis to Jonathan Dayton, May 19, 1789, Emmet Collection (No. 536), Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library; Otis to Adams, May 11, 1789, from the microfilm edition of the Adams Papers, by permission of MHi.
plied immediately, but, "for obvious reasons," in no great detail. The complex nature of the general government, its diverse interests, the relationships among the states and between the states and the general government, and the rights and claims of the Indians, explained Thomson, "cannot fail to suggest . . . that the care of our domestic affairs and the preserving peace and harmony at home is of as much importance and may require as much time, attention and abilities as any of the departments" already proposed.  

Two months later, with the three executive department bills off the floor and into the Senate, Vining renewed his motion. The unassigned duties which Vining believed should be given to the Home Department were to keep and affix the Seals of the United States on public papers; to keep copies of all acts of the United States and to see to their execution (this was prior to the creation of the office of Attorney-General); to correspond with the states, to obtain copies of their acts, and to report any that were in violation of federal law; to take over the archives of the late Congress; to report to the President plans for the improvement of manufacturing, agriculture, and commerce; to obtain a geographical account of the several states, their rivers, towns, and roads; to record the census; to report where post roads should be established; to obtain reports on the western territory; to receive models and specimens presented by inventors and authors and issue patents; and in general to undertake all matters assigned to it by the President. It was an impressive list which reflected familiarity with the functioning of the Confederation government and the potentials of the new government; it was certainly the product of more minds than just the freshman congressman who presented it.

The members responding to Vining's resolution argued primarily for economy of government. The duties he proposed could be distributed among the Judiciary, the Postmaster General, Congress, and the three executive departments, most particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs which did not appear to be overburdened with work. Vining reminded his colleagues that the executive department bills had been sent to the Senate with none of the duties

attached to them; he could not understand why the members thought the office was unnecessary if they were forced to admit that the duties were essential. A major point to consider, he protested, was whether these duties were best performed by one officer or several. He believed one could do the job better and more economically and thus the expense of which his colleagues complained was actually a savings. “All that is to be wished for, is to have a confidential person employed, let his salary be what you please. . . . But it would be better to have a principal to manage the business than to have it consigned to clerks in other departments.” Gerry was of course the most outspoken opponent. “The people . . . will be apt to think we are providing sinecures for men whom we favor . . . . They will suppose that we contemplate the establishment of a monarchy, by raising round the Executive a phalanx of such men as must be inclined to favor those of whom they hold their places.”

The resolution lost by an unrecorded but considerable majority, yet time proved the wisdom of what Vining had urged for Thomson’s benefit. Vining, Thomson, and the unknown others who supported a Home Department in 1789 were in a sense visionaries. Their belief that the central government should be concerned with the encouragement of geography, science, technology, internal improvements, and land use clearly tied them to the ideas later expressed by John Quincy Adams and George Perkins Marsh among others. Thomson’s view that Indian affairs should be removed from the War Department was far in advance of its time. It further confirms “Wegh-wu-law-mo-end” (the man who speaks the truth), as Thomson was known to the Delawares who had adopted him into their tribe, as the Founding Father most committed to humane treatment for the Indian.

The duties proposed for the Home Department were instead scattered throughout the government but most were indeed attached to the Department of Foreign Affairs. In September Congress changed its name to the Department of State and for decades

30 Annals, I, 666–669. Leonard White, The Federalists, A Study in Administrative History (New York, 1959), 132, describes Vining as “endowed with a deep sense of administration” and his proposal as a “coherent mass of duties certainly . . . the stuff out of which an active department could have been made.” I think the credit must be shared with Thomson who probably had conversations, if not drafting sessions, with Vining.
dumped domestic functions on it that would not fit elsewhere. Thus began its dual nature. At one time or another it had responsibility for the census; the mint; the patent, copyright, and general land offices; territorial affairs; and the archives of the United States. Thomas Jefferson was shocked that Congress had united foreign affairs and all of the domestic functions of the government except war and finance into one department, and accepted the secretaryship of state reluctantly and only after obtaining from Washington an implied promise to support a division of the functions if they proved too much for one person. At the end of the Thirtieth Congress in March, 1849, after ignoring the recommendations of several Presidents, an act to establish a "Home Department to be called The Department of the Interior" finally passed. Transferred to it were many of the domestic functions of State as well as such other responsibilities as Indian and mining affairs. It was to be many decades before the Department of the Interior became known as the natural resources department instead of the general housekeeper for the national government.

Thomson had been denied not only the secretaryship of the Senate, but also a statement in the Senate Journal describing the historic and symbolic moment when he informed Washington of the news of his election as President, a seat at Washington's inaugural, and the secretaryship of a Home Department. The final insult was left to the Board of Treasury. Two of the three-man Board had been members of the Lee-Adams interest. Samuel Osgood was one and the other was Arthur Lee himself, one of the focii of the unforgettable Lee-Deane fracas. In July, one of its clerks wrote an internal memo rejecting payment of Thomson's salary for the months of April through June, 1789, on the grounds that "he hath not been recognised by the present Congress." Thomson saw the memo and drafted a protest to the Board. It was the same argument the inaugural committee had made. That the Secretary performed official duties after April 1 is clear. He had not been relieved of the

Papers or Seals of Congress, he had corresponded with the States and others about various matters delegated to him by his commission, he had gone to Mt. Vernon at the Senate’s official request, and both Washington and Secretary for Foreign Affairs John Jay (who also continued to serve without recognition by Congress) sought his opinion on various issues. Thomson was later paid through arrangements made by Alexander Hamilton.

For almost four months the Lee-Adams interest had tormented their detested foe. Thomson’s pride and a lack of interest among most Federalists, fixed as they were on the bright future and desiring no reminders of the past, worked against him too. The day on which the House defeated Vining’s motion for a Home Department, July 23, Charles Thomson, ready at last to accept fate, submitted a resignation. He chose now to resign to the President and not to Congress, a body which was the same only in name to that which had elected him in 1774. The Secretary’s decision to resign to the President, and his political demise, itself, symbolize as well as anything the constitutional revolution which occurred in the United States between 1787 and 1789.

An internationally respected public servant who had devoted more than anyone else to the success of central government in America prior to 1789 had been humiliated and neglected, but other vestiges of the past were also disappearing. Samuel Otis was wrong in assuming that the Lee-Adams interest would remain much together in politics, measures, and the choice of men. The debate over the Constitution of 1787 had destroyed any possible unity on legislative or constitutional questions. Several members became Anti-federalists and remained at home in 1789, either by personal choice or by the choice of the voters. Those who were at New York were evenly divided between Federalists and Anti-federalists. The only thing left to unite it after 1788 was an old enemy. What it did to Charles Thomson in 1789 was repeated a year later when it prevented the Senate from officially mourning Benjamin Franklin. But the Lee-Adams interest was dead too, its end perhaps best symbolized by Washington’s refusal to appoint Arthur Lee to an office.

“What can I do with A—— L——,” he asked Madison a few weeks after Thomson left New York. “The opinion entertained of him by those with whom I am most conversant is unpropitious and yet few men have received more marks of public favor and confidence. . . . These contradictions are embarrassing.”

“I have to regret that the period of my coming again into public life, should be exactly that, in which you are about to retire from it. The present age does so much justice to the unsullied reputation with which you have always conducted yourself . . . ,” asserted Washington in accepting Thomson’s resignation. “I cannot withhold any just testimonial in favor of so old, so faithful, and so able a public officer, which might tend to soothe his mind in the shade of retirement . . . .” To one who revered Washington as the “Saviour and father” of the United States, the magnificent letter was a balm to wounded pride. So moved by it was Thomson that he wrote back affectionately, confessing how “highly gratified” he would have been to be a public servant under Washington’s administration, but that by “attentively observing and weighing circumstances and occurrences it appeared to me to be the will of God that I should return to private life.” Thomson’s major concern however was that “the world must be convinced and know that my retiring does not spring from your disapproval of my past conduct nor my unwillingness to serve under you.”

Yet, knowing how desperately Thomson sought to retain his connection to the nation he had so long nurtured, Washington answered an English correspondent’s query by stating that it was Thomson’s “earnest wish to retire from the bustle of public life, and enjoy the evening of his days in domestic tranquility.” Thus came to an end the congressional career of the “meager figure” of “furrowed countenance” and “hollow, sparkling eyes” whose “white, straight hair . . . did not hang quite so low as his ears.”

In retrospect it seems that Washington made a mistake in not

35 Washington to Sir Edward Newenham, Jan. 15, 1790, Fitzpatrick, XXX, 505.
36 Sanders, 172.
providing more for Thomson than a letter, no matter how soothing. Many offices were available, Thomson clearly wanted an office, and Washington knew it. The President asserted leadership and sought to influence Congress in several areas; a Home Department reflected Washington's view of America and even though it was politically unpopular he could have given it his support. Or, granted the proper title, Thomson would have made an excellent presidential assistant, far more experienced than those Washington chose. This would have kept his detailed knowledge of domestic and foreign affairs available to the nation. Washington indicated his pleasure with the condition of the Papers of Congress when Thomson relinquished them, and a title such as "Keeper of the Archives of the Confederation," even without a salary, would probably have satisfied and kept Thomson busy. The sense of responsibility associated with such an office might have prevented him from destroying his political history of the American Revolution. Why did Washington, much more a friend to Robert Morris, John Jay, and Henry Knox, who liked the Secretary, than he was to the Lees, John Adams, and Elbridge Gerry, allow Thomson to be lost to government service? Likely it was because, as the living symbol of the old government which the Federalists disdained and wished forgotten, Thomson was too indelibly marked by its internal politics. Too much so for the politically conscious Washington to take a risk.

Back at Harriton near Philadelphia, the Thomsons assured everyone how happy the Secretary was in retirement. "He can leave posts and places to be scrambled for by those who will," Hannah maintained. Charles informed Benjamin Rush that "he had enjoyed more health, peace, and happiness within nine months on his farm than he had enjoyed in the last 20 years of his life." Beneath the exterior disinterest, however, it was apparent to acquaintances that Thomson was chagrined at his fate; Senator Maclay, who had observed Thomson closely during those trying months, believed he had wished to die in an eminent office. There would be no history.

37 Hannah Thomson to Miss Van Horn, July, 1790, Independence Hall National Historical Park; Corner, 183; Timothy Pickering to Mrs. Pickering, Dec. 16, 1789, Charles Upham, Life of Timothy Pickering (Boston, 1867-1873), II, 437; Maclay Journal, entry for July 13, 1789; Thomson to Henry Knox, Dec. 25, 1789, Knox Papers, MHi; Thomson to Alexander Thomson, July 26, 1792, Thomson Section, Gratz Collection, HSP.
published after that death, as he once had dreamed. Thomson's knowledge of the "secret springs of actions" and "of the intrigues and several altercations or quarrels" which he declared to be essential to understanding Congress would not be shared. The deep bitterness in the spring of 1789, when all of his intimates were celebrating and optimistically looking to the future, contributed strongly, I surmise, to the eventual destruction of the history and to the mutilation of the letter book.

Thomson was an intellectual, however, and so instead of history he retreated to biblical scholarship. Almost immediately from his arrival home at Harriton until its completion in 1808, Thomson devoted himself to translating the Greek Septuagint into English. Few people recognized it for the outstanding piece of work that it was, and after his death most of the copies were sold as wastepaper. Rumors of his candidacy for Congress and Governor of Pennsylvania led nowhere. He even refused on grounds of poor health and old age Washington's request to serve as an Indian Commissioner in 1793. To the public at large in 1789, and historians since, "the venerable patriot," retired by choice; but in reality it was a retirement forced upon him by politics, politics of personal loyalty in particular. Animosities first generated in 1775 leapt across the constitutional divide of 1787 and dealt Charles Thomson a mortal blow not only to his pride and prominence but also to his place in political history.

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38 Thomson to W. H. Drayton, n.d., Thomson Papers, DLC; Political Notes, Timothy Pickering Papers, XLVI, 179, MHi; Harley, Ch. 8; James Hutchinson to Albert Gallatin, June 11, 1790, Gallatin Papers, New-York Historical Society; Macay Journal, entries for Feb. 4, and Dec. 6, 1790; Thomson to Washington, Jan 31, 1793, RG 59, National Archives; Gazette of the United States, July 23, 1789.