

The Litchfield Law School founded by Tapping Reeve in Litchfield, Connecticut trained roughly 1,000 students from 1784 to 1833. The Law School, in conjunction with the Litchfield Female Academy founded by Sarah Pierce in 1792, produced many future leaders of young America. From United States senators and justices to vice presidents and governors, the Litchfield Law School helped to shape many remarkable Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Junius Smith, who attended the Law School in 1802, fit the typical profile of most students at the Law School. With the steep cost of tuition, room, and board for both of the Litchfield schools, the students who attended these schools were disproportionately from wealthy families.<sup>2</sup> Of those who attended Tapping Reeve's Law School, a majority also attended colleges such as Yale first.<sup>3</sup> Junius fit both of these criteria. He was the son of an American Revolutionary War veteran and successful merchant, Major General David and his wife Ruth Hitchcock Smith. Junius, like two of his siblings before him, attended Yale and graduated in 1802. After attending Yale, Junius went straight to law school in Litchfield and graduated sometime around 1804 when he moved to New Haven, Connecticut to open up a law practice.

As a college graduate and the son of a wealthy family, Junius fit the typical profile of a law student studying under Tapping Reeve. Like hundreds of students before and after him,<sup>4</sup> he would also go on to lead a life that was far from typical. Like the innovative and forward-thinking law curriculum he received from Tapping Reeve and his associate James Gould, Junius

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<sup>1</sup> Boonshoft, Mark. "The Litchfield Network: Education, Social Capital, and the Rise and Fall of a Political Dynasty, 1784–1833," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 4 (2014): 561-595, doi:10.1353/jer.2014.0067.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 562.

soon developed his own progressive vision, not for the American legal system, however, but for the future of American commerce.

The young Junius Smith did not practice law in New Haven for long. A fateful case brought to him by his brother, David Smith, who worked for the British import company Smith, Woodward & Co., took Junius to England where he would remain for the next thirty-eight years.<sup>5</sup> The case regarded an American merchant ship, *Mohawk*, owned by his brother's company which had been seized by the British government.<sup>6</sup> Junius was successful in winning a large sum in damages for the company and, according to his nephew Henry Smith, was "immediately introduced as a representative of American claims in Admiralty which brought him directly into contact with mercantile interests."<sup>7</sup> Such was Junius' introduction into the life of transatlantic trade, which would lead him to discontinue his law practice in New Haven and make the more permanent transition to becoming a London merchant.



Left: Ruth Hancock Smith (c.1790-1800), courtesy of the Litchfield Historical Society.

Right: Major-General David Smith (c.1790-1800), courtesy of the Litchfield Historical Society.

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<sup>5</sup> E. Leroy Pond, *Junius Smith A Biography Of the Father Of The Atlantic Liner* (New York: s.n., 1927), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

For the duration of Junius' time in England, he kept up the business connection with his brother and his company and then with his nephew, Henry, who took over the business after the death of his father in 1825.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Junius, like his brothers, pursued the mercantile instinct passed down to them from their father, General Smith.

While in England, Junius married Sarah Allen of the Allens of Huddersfield, a woman described by the biographer E. Leroy Pond as having been "of a highly respectable family connection."<sup>9</sup> The couple married on April 9, 1812 and had one daughter, Lucinda, who was born in 1814. After a brief hiatus in Liverpool in search of work due to trade restrictions between America and England brought on by the War of 1812, Junius moved back to London with his family in 1829 and remained there until 1842.<sup>10</sup> As a resourceful and opportunistic merchant, and having weathered the trade embargos and made out well financially upon his return to London, Junius decided to completely reinvent transatlantic trade.

The first successful steamship had been built in 1807 by Robert Fulton, who was another early American with an eye for innovation.<sup>11</sup> However, steamboats were still not in wide use during Junius' time in England. In a letter to Henry Smith in 1833, Junius remarks that his recent trip across the Atlantic to New York would have been cut in half had he and his family traveled on a steamship instead: "Thirty-two days from New York to Plymouth and forty to London is no trifle. Any ordinary seagoing steamer would have run it, the weather we had, in fifteen days with ease."<sup>12</sup> Upon expressing a wish to his nephew to establish a line of transatlantic steamers to use

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Bellis, "The History of Steamboats: Before Steam Engine trains There Was The Steamboat," *ThoughtCo.com*, Last Modified December 29, 2017,

<https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-steamboats-405790>

<sup>12</sup> E. Leroy Pond, *Junius Smith A Biography Of the Father Of The Atlantic Liner*, 34

in trade with the company first established by David Smith, Junius ends his letter with a very definitive resolve: “I shall not relinquish this project unless I find it absolutely impracticable.”<sup>13</sup>

Junius followed through with his idea for the company almost immediately, writing a letter to the London and Edinburgh Steam Packet Company less than two weeks later requesting four steamships at £30,000 apiece.<sup>14</sup>

The London and Edinburgh Steam Packet Company responded by declining Junius’ proposal.<sup>15</sup> The rejection, however, did not appear to phase Junius as the next letter to his nephew suggests no hint of defeat: “Steam business hangs, but I do not despair of the thing.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of waiting on the whim of an already-established trading company for the funds and steamships, Junius decided to begin his own. The English Company, as it came to be known, would be Junius’ means of trading via steamship from England to America. He urged his nephew to do the same and establish The American Company to then trade via steamship from America to England.

As he was setting up his English Company, Junius received a great number of people interested in buying shares, including many women such as his daughter Lucinda.<sup>17</sup> The enterprise appeared to be an exciting prospect to many in England. Within about a week, Junius already had applications for over 5,000 shares in his newly-formed company, leaving no doubt that the funding required to build a steamship would be met.<sup>18</sup> Most of these shares were from the English as it was too soon to receive any applications of shares from America. By November

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 40.

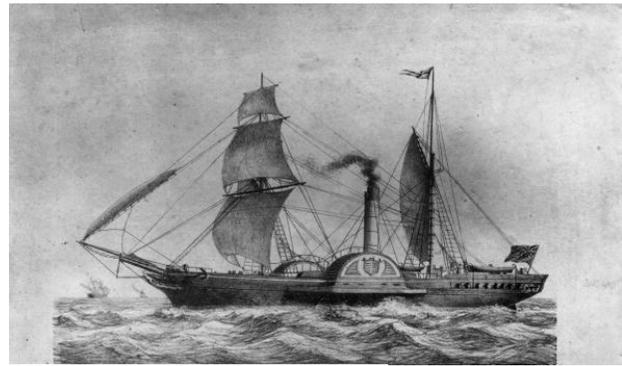
<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

27, 1835, less than one month from its conception, the steam company was fully established thanks to overwhelming public support. Junius beamed to his nephew in a letter dated that same day, “No company in London has a stronger or more respectable direction.”<sup>19</sup> The next day Junius reported that they were at 9,600 shares and counting.<sup>20</sup>

His next task was to help his nephew establish The American Company, which he did through a series of letters containing advice from his own establishment of The English Company.<sup>21</sup> However, the endeavor in America was not nearly as successful as it was in England due to the lack of public support, and The English Company became the primary base of operations for the business.

A proposal for several steamers to be built was laid out almost as soon as the company was established; the first of which to be built was the *British Queen*.<sup>22</sup> It was originally planned that the *British Queen* would be the first of Junius’ ships to be



The Steam Ship *Sirius* circa 1838

launched. However, the bankruptcy of the company that was hired to build it caused considerable delay.<sup>23</sup> Seizing on this setback, a rival company in Bristol formed the Great Western Steamship Company to launch their own steamship, the *Great Western*, before the *British Queen* would be finished.<sup>24</sup> In response, The English Company hired out the newly-built steamer, the *Sirius*, from

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 63-74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 100.

the Cork Steamship Company in Ireland to be used as a passenger ship.<sup>25</sup> The *Sirius* was a small vessel that was not originally intended to be used for transatlantic journeys.

The *Sirius*, however, surpassed all expectations and was the first to arrive in New York harbor on the evening of March 22, 1838, beating out the *Great Western* which arrived on the afternoon of April 23.<sup>26</sup> All of New York went wild. The *New York Express* of April 24 raved:

It was a an exciting moment,- a moment which, in the tame events of life, finds few parallels; it seemed the outpouring congratulations of a whole people...The *Sirius* is the first steam ship which ever arrived here direct from England. She is the first which ever arrived here from any quarter as a regular trader.<sup>27</sup>

Both vessels were met with a similar degree of public approbation upon their return to England.

It was a roaring success.

A series of letters written by Junius between July 30, 1838 and January 21, 1839 were published in *The American Journal of Science and Arts* by Benjamin Sillman, M.D., LL.D., in 1839.<sup>28</sup> The letters detailed the vast economic benefit of the steamship in trade, and even its usefulness in war, explaining in great detail the beliefs Junius had held since the conception of his steamship company.

When the *British Queen* was finally finished in 1839, it was launched on her maiden voyage to New York on August 4. Junius himself sailed with the *British Queen*, an experience which is noted by the biographer E. Leroy Pond as being “the proudest experience of his life.”<sup>29</sup> It was a great success, just as the voyage of the *Sirius* had been not one year prior. In his account of the voyage of the *British Queen* from New York to London, Junius noted that the ship reached

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 104-106.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

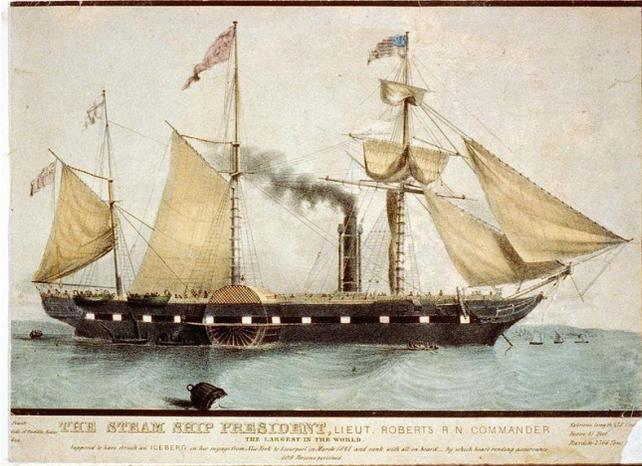
<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 139-159.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 178.

New York in a record 13 days and 11 hours, which was shorter even than the *Sirius*' voyage.<sup>30</sup>

Junius was so awed by his success that he even mused to his nephew in a letter dated August 29, 1839, "I have reason to think that I could now receive the honors of Kighthood, if I pleased."<sup>31</sup>

Though Junius was never knighted, he was given an honorary degree as Doctor of Laws from Yale in 1840.<sup>32</sup>



The Steam Ship *President* Lieut. Roberts R.N. Commander courtesy of Library of Congress

As momentous as the successes of the steamships *Sirius* and the *British Queen* were, they were eclipsed by the even greater failure of the steamship the *President*, the wreck of which ended Junius' career in the steamship trade business and sent him home to America. It was reported in a book

published in 1846 entitled, *Steamboat*

*Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the*

*United States*, that the *President*, while sailing from New York to Liverpool, wrecked

somewhere between Nantucket Shoals and George's Bank.<sup>33</sup> Very few, if any, of the 110 crew and passengers are reported to have survived. An investigation was launched but discovered no

foul play. The ship had been in perfect condition when it departed. It was the fault of a fierce

storm which destroyed the ship and her passengers.<sup>34</sup> Had the wreck not occurred, Junius would

have likely been knighted and continued on in London as a successful merchant.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 219-222.

Poorer and humbler, Junius returned to America in late 1843 to live with his nephew, Henry, in Astoria, Long Island. Before his departure from London, Junius' letters to his nephew, now devoid of steamship business, spoke of his efforts as an abolitionist. In a letter dated July 28, 1843, Junius mentions, "You will find two letters on Slavery, the second suggesting some ideas relative to the means of abolition" and in a letter dated two days later Junius goes on to describe, "When I was in Manchester last month I wrote two letters, under the signature of Timothy Tickler, on the subject of the Anti-Slavery Convention and sent them to Colonel Webb."<sup>35</sup>

Junius was an active member of the American Colonization Society. Founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society was formed in order to assist free blacks in emigrating to Africa, believing that this method would prompt a gradual end to slavery and allow them to "fulfill their potential."<sup>36</sup> A book published in 1841 by the American Colonization Society entitled, *Mission to England, In Behalf Of the American Colonization Society. By Rev. R. R. Gurley* references Junius in a note of thanks, "I have to acknowledge very special obligations to...Junius Smith, L.L.D., are disposed to render me every aid in their power."<sup>37</sup> The book even mentions the name of Henry Smith in conjunction with the society.<sup>38</sup> Although his steamship business was lost, Junius never lost his radical spirit.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>36</sup> "American Colonization Society 1816 – 1865," *PBS Online*, accessed July 31, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1521.html>

<sup>37</sup> Rev. R. R. Gurley, *Mission to England, In Behalf Of The American Colonization Society* (Washington: WM. W Morrison, 1841), [https://books.google.com/books?id=xMBcmbSJP3kC&pg=PA25&lpg=PA25&dq=junius+smith+anti-slavery&source=bl&ots=uhpYQyaw2J&sig=bdB42iHzTIV4eaEcRLuLRqg\\_3uM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjb\\_YPa9sncAhWxr1kKHc8mDXAQ6AEwEXoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=junius%20smith%20anti-slavery&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=xMBcmbSJP3kC&pg=PA25&lpg=PA25&dq=junius+smith+anti-slavery&source=bl&ots=uhpYQyaw2J&sig=bdB42iHzTIV4eaEcRLuLRqg_3uM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjb_YPa9sncAhWxr1kKHc8mDXAQ6AEwEXoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=junius%20smith%20anti-slavery&f=false)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29.

Upon his return to America, Junius immersed himself in horticulture, particularly the potential for growing tea in America. The idea appeared to delight and invigorate Junius much in the same way the idea for transatlantic steamship trade had inspired him ten years prior. After hearing from his daughter, who had relocated to the East Indies with her husband in 1842, that tea could be grown in the Himalayan Mountains, Junius notes that:

No sooner had I perused the letter [from Lucinda] than the idea burst upon me, that if the tea-plant could be successfully cultivated upon the mountains of the Himalaya, there could be nothing in the ordinary course of vegetation to prevent its growth in the United States. I did not seek the employment. It sought me.<sup>39</sup>

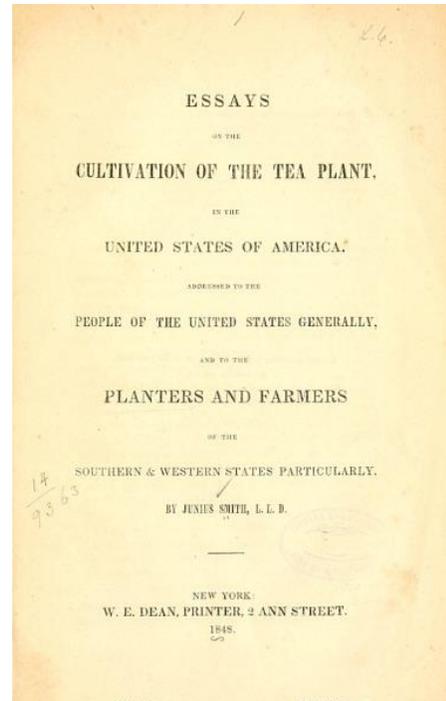
With an unwavering perseverance and a bright optimism, Junius embarked upon this new endeavor with great enthusiasm, even traveling back to England in 1848 to further research tea cultivation.

Upon his return to America, Junius had settled on a plantation in Greenville, South Carolina that he determined was the best climate to grow his tea plants.

His experiment was so ambitious that even the Farmers'

Club of the American Institute of the City of New York reported on it during their January 2 meeting in 1849:

Junius Smith of Astoria returned from London in October last, with several hundred tea plants, which he is placing in such locations in our country as are most favorable for them... We have deemed this event of sufficient importance to be thus distinctly chronicled in our report, as should the attempt not disappoint the expectations of its enterprising projector.<sup>40</sup>



Junius Smith L.L.D. *Essays on The Cultivation Of the Tea Plant In the United States of America Addressed to The People of the*

<sup>39</sup> E. Leroy Pond, *Junius Smith A Biography Of the Father Of The Atlantic Liner*, 235-236.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-259.

For the duration of his tea experiment, Junius kept up correspondence with the Farmers' Club to update them on his progress with the cultivation of his tea plants. In 1848 Junius even wrote and published a series of essays on the cultivation of the tea plant.<sup>41</sup>

Junius never made any specific mention of slaves on his plantation, but did mention that he was assisted by paid laborers. In a letter dated September 18, 1850 Junius mentions: "I plough, harrow and spade the whole deep, a system of cultivation unknown in this part of the country. My laborers prepare the land, and under my direction form the seed beds." In his *Essays on the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*, Junius also mentions the working conditions of his laborers in his section about the gathering of tea plants:

The labor of gathering the leaves is performed chiefly by women and children. They wear a white cloth over their heads to protect them from the heat of the sun. Each person carries a little stool...which is stuck into the ground and serves as a seat...Thus equipped, you will perceive the labor is light and the work agreeable...The women and children, are paid about one-third of a cent, for gathering a pound of green leaves, or ten cents for thirty pounds.<sup>42</sup>

In a letter from February 9, 1852, Junius gives some further details about his workers and his treatment of them in the context of the Christmas holiday:

The Negroes, by custom, have two or three holidays at Christmas, and generally, indeed always, applied to me for a job of some kind...to collect a small sum to pay the fiddler, and support their own amusements; and I have always indulged them.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Junius Smith L.L.D. *Essays on The Cultivation Of the Tea Plant In the United States of America Addressed to The People of the United States Generally, And To the Planters And Farmers Of The Southern and Western States Particularly* (New York: W.E. Dean, Printer, 2 Ann Street, 1848), <https://archive.org/stream/essaysoncultivat00smit#page/n5>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>43</sup> E. Leroy Pond, *Junius Smith A Biography Of the Father Of The Atlantic Liner*, 266.

While there is no definitive evidence of abolitionist efforts by Junius in the South, there is sufficient evidence to surmise that Junius at least paid his workers and considered them fellow human beings, unlike many of his fellow plantation owners.

This abolitionist and unionist sentiment, however, was enough to anger those who disagreed. In 1851, Junius was the victim of a violent assault, from which he never recovered. Junius details the assault in the letter from February 9, 1852 where he describes being terribly beaten in his own home around Christmas by unknown assaulters and left for dead.<sup>44</sup> He went to his neighbor for assistance and ultimately survived. His injuries, however, especially the blow he received to the head, did enough damage to his health to force Junius to abandon his plantation and move in with his nephew in New York.<sup>45</sup> His assaulters were likely members of the local slave patrol who felt threatened by Junius' sentiments regarding abolition and the union. According to a history of Greenville, South Carolina written by Archie Vernon Huff: "There were rumors that Junius Smith, who operated a tea farm on Golden Grove Creek, favored abolition... When he was severely beaten at his home in December 1851... people accused the local slave patrol."<sup>46</sup>

After moving in with his nephew, Junius' mental and physical health deteriorated even further. He died in 1853 after being moved to the Bloomingdale Asylum due to his severe brain injury.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 266-268.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>46</sup> Archie Vernon Huff, Archie Vernon Huff, *Greenville: The History of the City and County in the South Carolina Piedmont*, (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), [https://books.google.com/books?id=LyTPK09CgbgC&pg=PA145&lpg=PA145&dq=junius+smit+h+golden+grove&source=bl&ots=kAIC2gqnOa&sig=MlIM\\_tj3ewOFzWc9tRq6MRuoJ-I&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjN-5jWjMzcAhXxxlkKHUY-CHkQ6AEwCHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=junius%20smith%20golden%20grove&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=LyTPK09CgbgC&pg=PA145&lpg=PA145&dq=junius+smit+h+golden+grove&source=bl&ots=kAIC2gqnOa&sig=MlIM_tj3ewOFzWc9tRq6MRuoJ-I&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjN-5jWjMzcAhXxxlkKHUY-CHkQ6AEwCHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=junius%20smith%20golden%20grove&f=false).

<sup>47</sup> E. Leroy Pond, *Junius Smith A Biography Of the Father Of The Atlantic Liner*, 269.

The legacy of Junius Smith is one filled with optimism and a pioneering spirit unimpeded by failure. An American with all of the advantages of a new country built upon the principles of democracy and freedom, Junius Smith is a prime example of the spirit of the new nation. One of Smith's contemporaries wrote of his death, "Thus perished one of the kindest and most patriotic of men."<sup>48</sup> As a pioneer of the transatlantic steam trade, an abolitionist, and a horticulturist, Junius Smith was as revolutionary in his lifetime as the young nation that raised him.

**"Junius Smith: Pioneer of the Steam Trade, Abolitionist, and Horticulturist"**

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 270.