

Joseph G. Cannon and John Sharp Williams

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On November 9, 1903, the names of Joseph G. Cannon and John Sharp Williams were placed before the House of Representatives as candidates for the Speakership. Since the Republicans were in the majority, their candidate was chosen Speaker by a majority of thirty-one votes and Williams automatically became the leader of the Democratic minority. The two men were fast friends although it is hardly possible to imagine more widely divergent backgrounds than these two leaders had experienced.

Cannon was born in Guilford County, North Carolina on May 7, 1836, the son of a Quaker doctor.¹ His ancestors had come to the frontier section of North Carolina to escape religious persecution in the Puritan colonies to the north.² The Cannons in accordance with their Quaker faith did not believe in slavery. When little Joseph was only four years old, his family set out to find a country where the sight of slaves would not destroy the youngster's inherited opposition to this ancient institution.³ A haven was found near Bloomingdale in Park County, Indiana, and here Joseph spent his youth. He gained what schooling he could in the community until he was thirteen years of age when the drowning of his father in a swollen stream made it necessary for him, though but a lad, to start working to help support the family. After diligent searching, employment was secured as a clerk in a small grocery store.

Near the close of a five year tenure in the grocery store the Cannon family moved into Bloomingdale, and shortly thereafter to Terre Haute.⁴ Young Cannon's ambition to study law was fulfilled by reading law in John P. Usher's law office in the latter town and by a six month's attendance at the Cincinnati Law School. In 1858, he was admitted to the bar and began his law practice in Shelbyville, Illinois.⁵ Cannon's mother had trekked across the state line to Tuscola, Illinois, while he was studying law. Here, in 1861, Cannon

¹ *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928).

² George Fitch, "A Survey and Diagnosis of Uncle Joe Cannon," *American Magazine* (December, 1907), LXV, 185-192.

³ "Uncle Joe Cannon," *Current Literature* (August, 1900), XXIX, 162, Summary of an article that had recently appeared in the *New York Evening Post*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William McDonald, "Joseph Gurney Cannon," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

was elected State's attorney for the twenty-seventh judicial district, a position he continued to hold until 1868⁶

About the time that Cannon began his career as a lawyer, he was married to Mary P. Reed of Canfield, Ohio,⁷ a lovely cultured woman who did much to help her husband overcome the disadvantages of his lack of formal education and whose memory Cannon cherished during the more than forty years that intervened between her death and his.⁸ His marriage created quite a stir in the community because his bride was not of the Quaker faith. Perhaps no story was more frequently told about Cannon than the account of how the young bridegroom informed the elders of the church in a very stormy interview that he was not sorry he had married Mary Reed.⁹ The Quaker mother, apparently, did not lend her support to the cold reception of the newcomer in her family. She complacently said to her son: "Joseph, now thee is married. Thee must get thee a cow, a pig and a hive of bees."¹⁰

When Cannon was leaving the grocery store and getting started in the law profession, John Sharp Williams was born at Memphis, Tennessee, on July 31, 1854. The Williams family had come to Tennessee from North Carolina but they were from an entirely different type than were the Cannons. The Williams family was one of wealth and belonged to the slaveholding aristocracy of the old South. Left an orphan by the death of his father who was killed in action at the battle of Shiloh, young Williams was reared at Cedar Grove Plantation near Yazoo City, Mississippi, by his maternal grandmother. John Sharp was taught by tutors at the plantation during the early years of his life. He entered the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, in 1870, and, a few months later, entered the University of Virginia. He did not prove a brilliant student and the fact soon became evident that he had interests far deeper than the courses in which he happened to be enrolled at the time. He decided during his college days to enter public life. After his graduation from the University of Virginia in 1873, Williams

⁶ *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress*.

⁷ Charles S. Snyder, "John Sharp Williams," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁸ James Watson, *As I Knew Them* (Indianapolis, 1936), 97.

⁹ Alfred H. Lewis, "What Is 'Joe' Cannon?" *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (April, 1910), XLVIII, 569-575.

¹⁰ North Overton Messenger, "The Speaker Prospective of the Next House," *Independent*, February 5, 1903. Messenger was a journalist who knew Cannon intimately for years.

spent two years abroad studying at the University of Heidelberg and at the College of Dijon. After returning from Europe he decided to enter his chosen field by way of the law. In accordance with that decision he returned to Charlottesville in 1876 and began his work toward the professional degree, which he received the following year.

Williams practiced law in Memphis for a brief time, but, after his marriage to Betty Dial Webb of Livingston, Alabama, on October 2, 1877, he moved to the old plantation home, Cedar Grove. There he managed the plantation and soon opened a law office in Yazoo City, a small but growing metropolis twelve miles west of his plantation. He had a long time to wait before he realized his ambition to embark on a political career. He tried for the nomination from the fifth congressional district in 1890. In this initial effort, he was defeated just as Cannon had failed in his first attempt in 1870. In the second attempt in 1892, Williams met with success and, in the special session of the fifty-third Congress, he began his career in Washington.¹¹

When Williams entered the House on August 7, 1893, he found among those present Joe Cannon from Illinois. Cannon was not a new comer like the Representative from Mississippi. The former, indeed, had begun his service in the House exactly twenty years earlier and was already an old hand at the job.¹² He had been away from Washington, however, for two years just previous to the entrance of Williams, having shared the fate of many other Republicans who had been members of the first "billion dollar" Congress in 1890. This Congress had enacted the unpopular McKinley Tariff. Cannon's defeat of 1890 was reversed in 1892 and, thus, he was taking anew his place in the House at the time that Williams entered for the first time.

Ten years later when Cannon became Speaker of the House and Williams became the Minority Leader, both men received the applause of Democrats and Republicans alike.¹³ They were already mutual friends. In spite of his aristocratic upbringing Williams was, in the truest sense of the word, a democrat. A vast store of knowledge had been

¹¹ For information concerning John Sharp Williams in early life, see George C. Osborn, "John Sharp Williams, Planter Statesman of the South," doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1938, 1-49. Copy in Indiana University Library.

¹² *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1927*.

¹³ *Congressional Record*, 58 Cong., 1 Sess., 147-148.

acquired in the leading universities of the South and of Europe and through extensive travels. This accomplishment did not in any degree prevent the Mississippian from making the individual qualities of a man the sole standard of his friendships. Both he and Cannon were simple in their tastes, direct and honest in their dealings, and, most fortunate of all, each was possessed with a keen sense of humor. They were able at anyrate to keep their friendship above their political battles.

The first speech of Williams as Minority Leader was his presentation of Cannon as Speaker. He then expressed his firm conviction that the Republican House had chosen a most effective leader. As soon as the presentation ceremonies were over Williams immediately launched into a speech that gave evidence of the fact that he was going to take his job as Minority Leader as seriously as Cannon was to take the Speakership. Because of the added strength of the Democrats as a result of the elections of 1902, Williams stated that fairness demanded an increased minority representation on all important committees.¹⁴

Congressman James E. Watson of Indiana, a Republican crony of Cannon, "induced Uncle Joe to confer on the minority leader the right to name the minority members of the various committees of the House."¹⁵ It was no easy task to convince the Speaker of the wisdom of giving any of his powers to any one and especially to the political enemy. However, when Watson insisted that the new power would only increase the difficulties of the Minority Leader, Uncle Joe consented to grant Williams the power. In delegating this power to the minority, Uncle Joe created a precedent in House procedure. Regarding this practice, Speaker Cannon afterwards said:

It was well understood between Representative Williams and the Speaker of the House that he should have his way about minority appointments, and as I recollect now there were not to exceed four cases where the minority leader did not have his way and in those cases the limitation placed upon him was where the organization of the minority for geographic reasons, or as a matter of policy, interfered with the organization of the majority.¹⁶

The new prerogative of the Minority Leader did cause trou-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁵ Watson, *op. cit.*, 284.

¹⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 62 Cong., 2 Sess., 857.

ble because of "the pressure for good places by his Democratic friends."¹⁷ Watson recalled later that during the time that Williams was making his appointments, Uncle Joe came home each night to say with a chuckle: "Well, Jim, you certainly proposed a 'hot one' when you recommended that Williams be permitted to name the Democratic members of the committees."¹⁸

It was a difficult task to organize the minority into a unit that could make its influence felt, but almost from the first, Williams was given credit for having "breathed into the Democrats of the House a spirit of discipline and of common intention."¹⁹ He had accomplished this difficult task through persuasion rather than through domination as did the Speaker in relation to his party. Democratic colleagues could often go to the little room in the library wing of the Capitol, determined to have some problem out with Williams, but would "go forth pleased and flattered and inclined to help him out."²⁰ Cannon, perhaps, more often than Williams, removed the iron hand for the velvet glove and showed authority. The spirit of amiable harmony that prevailed during the first Congress in which Cannon and Williams were the leaders has been attributed to the warm personal friendship which they developed for each other. It was said that "The mutual admiration and esteem between the two has ever been the subject of comment in the House."²¹

Near the close of the first session of their leadership, Williams took the floor and eulogized Cannon for the latter's genial humor. During the speech he recounted a conversation between them in which Williams had said: "Mr. Speaker, I will always think you are as fair as I believe you will be." Cannon had immediately replied: "John, I'm going to be as fair as I can consistent with the exigencies of American politics."²² On one occasion when the two men were in heated argument, Williams remarked with a dry smile: "We are just reasoning together in brotherly love."²³ One observer remarked that no matter how hot the partisan

¹⁷ Orlando Oscar Stealey, *Twenty Years in the Press Gallery* (New York, 1906), 159.

¹⁸ Watson, *op. cit.*, 284-285.

¹⁹ Edward M. Kingsbury, "John Sharp Williams, Leader," *Bookman* (April, 1904).

²⁰ *New York Times*, March 14, 1904.

²¹ C. Arthur Williams, "John Sharp Williams," quoted in Stealey, *op. cit.*, 471.

²² *New York Times*, April 29, 1904.

²³ *Cong. Rec.*, 58 Cong., 2 Sess., 5035.

encounter between the two men waxed "an occasional smile dissipated the thought that superheated zeal had buried friendship."²⁴

A favorite Williams joke on Cannon was that, one day when he walked into the Speaker's private conference room, Cannon absent-mindedly thought Williams was a Republican and began in strictest confidence to discuss committee appointments with him. About five minutes later when "Uncle Joe" realized what was happening, he laughed heartily as did Williams.²⁵ Cannon appreciated Williams sense of humor and later remarked that the latter was "never more entertaining than when he was attending a meeting of the Rules Committee when he always had a new story that he had kept to tell us."²⁶

At the adjournment of Congress on March 4, 1905, the customary House resolution of appreciation relating to the Speaker was reinforced by the presentation of a magnificent loving cup. Williams was selected to make the presentation speech. In the course of his remarks, the Minority Leader stated that he wished "the mere spontaneous thought and intent of friends, without the intervention of money could originate things beautiful." He told the Speaker that the cup would be a pleasure to him because it was an expression of appreciation and because it would remind him of the truth of the saying—"He that showeth himself friendly hath friends."²⁷

When the Speaker concluded the few remarks of acceptance, amid the tremendous applause of the House and the galleries, Champ Clark gained the floor and made a similar presentation to the Minority Leader.²⁸ In reply to this display of confidence on the part of the men he had been trying to lead, Williams said that he would derive increasing pleasure from the knowledge that he had "measurably well succeeded" in doing the will of the minority. Proceeding, he stated that the world was too broad to forget that a man was not measured by his professional, religious, or political occupation, but "by his heart and good will, by his sincere efforts to do right."²⁹ An observer in the press

²⁴ Da Alva Stanwood Alexander, *History and Procedure of the House of Representatives* (New York, 1916), 209.

²⁵ Williams to J. Sloat Fassett, July 5, 1918.

²⁶ L. White Busbey, *Uncle Joe Cannon* (New York, 1927), 244.

²⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 58 Cong., 3 Sess., 4039.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4040.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4040-4041.

gallery noticed that members from both sides of the House crowded around "Uncle Joe" to bid him farewell and that there was a little procession of Republicans who went over to Williams and paid him the "homage of praise for a brave, honest, and manly foe. 'We are proud of you,' one of them said. And the object of this tribute of manliness to manliness bent his head and blushed like a school girl."³⁰

Before becoming Minority Leader, Williams had determined to use his influence to change the general attitude of the Democratic Party. He thought that too much emphasis had been given to destructive criticism of the Republican Party. That the Democratic Party should no longer remain merely a party of negation was the decision of Williams. He wanted to aid his party in formulating a constructive and progressive program in order to present an attractive platform to the independent voter. During the spring of 1906, the House minority began to demand reforms. At times, the minority was more in tune with the program of President Roosevelt than the controlling element in the Republican majority.³¹

In order to focus national attention on Congressional inactivity, in the regular session of 1907-1908, Williams began demanding roll calls "on every affirmative matter of legislation" and refusing unanimous consent.³² As Alexander correctly asserted in his *History and Procedure of the House of Representatives*, Williams "did not expect to break the Reed rules, but he sought to create a campaign issue and he hoped to arouse national attention and interest."³³ As might have been expected, the majority party lost no time in throttling the aggressive movements of the minority. Having sufficient strength, stringent special rules were adopted that completely tied the hands of the Democrats.³⁴ In reality, the rules increased the Speaker's powers at the expense of both majority and minority members of the House. Williams commented: "We have gotten to the point where the procedures of this House lie within the secret conscience of the Speaker. There is no duty anymore for him to communicate his reasons, his motives, or his feelings

³⁰ Robert H. Watkins, *Harper's Weekly*, June 25, 1907.

³¹ John Sharp Williams, "The Democratic Party and the Railroad Question," *Independent*, March 1, 1906. An excellent example.

³² *Cong. Rec.*, 60 Cong., 3 Sess., 3314.

³³ Stealey, *op. cit.*, 208.

³⁴ *New York Times*, April 5, 1908.

to the House.”³⁵ Caucus procedure and rules for both groups had eliminated individual initiative and therefore the freedom of the House to legislate. The Williams lock-step system was about as effective as that of Cannon.

At least once during this struggle, the friendship between Williams and Cannon suffered a temporary collapse. One day the Speaker declared the House adjourned when Williams was on his feet clamoring for recognition.³⁶ The Speaker then “made his way down and offered John Sharp Williams his outstretched hand,” but “Williams ignored it, turned his back and left the floor.” The angered Minority Leader declared that “the Speaker exceeded his constitutional authority by declaring the House in recess” in such a manner, and further that he resented such treatment from the Speaker and would insist on his right as a member of the House, both for himself and for his colleagues.³⁷ During this period Williams and Cannon were at swords points at each daily session from the fall of the gavel to the motion to adjourn, but the temporary coolness in their personal relations was soon forgotten. Champ Clark remarked that Cannon and Williams “kissed and made up at the close of that Congress. Williams offered the usual vote of thanks to the Speaker.”³⁸

In 1907, Williams made a successful campaign for the United States Senate and although he was not to take his place in the Senate until 1911 he refused to be a candidate for his seat in the House in 1908. In the summer of 1908, Williams wrote Clark that he was going to resign as Minority Leader and suggested that the Missourian take steps to become his successor. Williams aided Clark in every way that he could and made certain the latter’s unanimous election.

Before Williams left the House a fight began that was to end in the stripping of the autocratic powers of the Speaker from Cannon in 1910. As early as 1907, Mark Sullivan began to urge in *Collier’s Weekly* the overthrow of this despotic parliamentary system.³⁹ Signs of the revolt appeared in 1907 and again in 1909. It is impossible to

³⁵ *Cong. Rec.*, 60 Cong., 1 Sess., 4976.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4947.

³⁷ *Jackson Daily News*, April 19, 1908.

³⁸ Champ Clark, *My Quarter Century of American Politics* (New York, 1920), II, 345.

³⁹ Files of *Collier’s Weekly*, 1907-1910; Mark Sullivan, *Education of An American* (New York, 1938), 244-262.

estimate just how much influence Williams had on this movement. Although Cannon was not shorn of his power until after Williams left the House, beyond a doubt the latter's work in molding the minority into a compact group which contested every foot of parliamentary ground was an important factor in the victory for the House. Williams had constantly pointed out the undemocratic features of the system under which one man completely controlled all the activities of the House. In February, 1909, "speaking as one who is going to retire from the House in less than a week," Williams talked at length concerning the faults of the rules of procedure in the House that throttled all freedom.⁴⁰

The fight against the Speaker was soon made a national issue.⁴¹ The combination of Democrats and insurgent Republicans outweighed the regular Republicans and the latter group was overpowered. The real revolution came in March, 1910, when the Reed-Cannon Rules were overthrown. Cannon was retained as Speaker, the latter fact being a clear indication that the fight was not against Cannon personally but against the system which he had felt it his duty to uphold. When Williams learned of the overthrow of Cannonism, he shouted "Hurrah for us;" After reviewing his more than five years in opposition to the House Rules while he had served as leader of the Democrats, the Mississippiian concluded: "A good start has been made but more remains to be accomplished before the lower house of Congress will be a truly representative body."⁴²

The friendship of Cannon and Williams did not stop when Williams left the House in 1909. On March 4, 1911, Williams took up his work in the Senate and the contacts of the two friends continued. "Uncle Joe" was not re-elected in 1912, going down to defeat with many of the other members of the thoroughly divided Republican party. In 1914 however, his district returned the seventy-eight year old legislative veteran to the House. Cannon's attitude toward the Wilson administration was one of complete distrust and

⁴⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 60 Cong., 3 Sess., 3314.

⁴¹ Edward G. Lowry, "In the 'Insurgent Camp'," *Harper's Weekly*, April 2, 1910; Edward J. Wheeler, editorial, *Current Literature* (February, 1910), XLVIII, 127; other articles in the periodicals and papers of the period.

⁴² Watson, *op. cit.*, 114-124. An interesting account of the dramatic fight by one of Cannon's most intimate friends.

⁴³ *Jackson Daily News*, March 21, 1910. Williams was at the time residing at his plantation. Here he awaited the opening of his career in the Senate in 1911.

the League of Nations "evoked his ridicule and scorn,"⁴⁴ but the intimacy between Wilson and Williams and their ardent support of the League did not affect the personal relations between Cannon and Senator Williams.⁴⁵

Both Cannon and Williams voluntarily retired from public life in 1923. Near the end of their careers, while chatting with a group of congressmen in a cloak room, Uncle Joe paid a great tribute to his former adversary in the House: "I have known and heard every great debater in both houses of Congress since the Civil War; I have read and studied the great orations and debates of every super orator of this nation from its inception to the Civil War; I have studied carefully the greatest debates and orations of all nations from Demosthenes to John Sharp Williams and I say frankly that I have never known, heard, or read about a greater debater than the senior Senator from Mississippi."⁴⁶

In 1921, Williams wrote to one of his friends of Cannon: "Speaking seriously, he is one of the straightest men I ever knew, although he is a 'damned Republican' "⁴⁷ When the invitations to Cannon's annual birthday dinner were sent out in February, 1923, Williams accepted with a feeling of sadness, saying: "I expect it will be the last opportunity for Uncle Joe and me to swap jokes across the table."⁴⁸

Cannon was given a splendid demonstration on the last day that he was in the House. Upon reaching his home in Danville, Illinois, he found that every school and every place of business in the county was closed. Led by brass bands thousands joined in a procession which filed past his home. Senator Jim Watson had been invited by Miss Cannon, Uncle Joe's daughter, to make the speech of the occasion.⁴⁹ Cannon retired at the age of eighty-seven after having served in the House of Representatives for almost fifty years, a record that has never been approached in our history.

The colleagues of Senator Williams planned a farewell demonstration for him, and the people of Mississippi were eager to extend a rousing welcome. Somehow the retiring

⁴⁴ McDonald, "Joseph G. Cannon," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁴⁵ For Williams' intimate relations with Wilson see George C. Osborn, "The Friendship of John Sharp Williams and Woodrow Wilson," *Journal of Mississippi History* (January, 1939), I, 3-13.

⁴⁶ *Jackson Daily News*, October 5, 1921.

⁴⁷ Williams to Charles H. Drake, October 19, 1921.

⁴⁸ Williams to John Wilbur Dwight, February 2, 1913.

⁴⁹ Watson, *op. cit.*, 126.

Senator did not feel that he could face the ceremonies and the publicity so he slipped quietly out of Washington before the session was quite over and was at home at Cedar Grove before his friends knew what had happened. He expressed his farewell to his people through a public letter addressed "To the People of Mississippi." In this, he indicated his love for them and his gratitude for their support throughout his thirty years of service.⁵⁰

The names of Cannon and Williams were linked in many editorials that were written to lament their passing from the national stage. One was spoken of as the man whose going was the greatest loss to the house and the other was accorded the same place in regard to the Senate. One editor in speaking of their departure spoke of "John Sharp" as Uncle Joe's "old friend and foe."⁵¹

Cannon spent his three remaining years of life in his home in Danville. Now as always his "lair was in his library." There he was surrounded by the pictures of the statesmen with whom he had worked during his half century of public life. The library was wainscoted with books of every kind although Cannon was not a "great reader."⁵² As his life drew to its close, the nation became conscious all over again of the traits that had made him powerful. His chief characteristics were "absolute integrity, fearlessness, and frankness."⁵³ In addition he had a reputation for friendliness and sharp wit. He was simple and unaffected.⁵⁴ He was not a product of extensive educational training, but of the school of hard experience.⁵⁵ and was in every way an example of the "self-made American" of his time.⁵⁶ Quite in contrast with Williams, Cannon was born in poverty and died a millionaire, whereas Williams, born to wealth, died much poorer.

The nine years that Williams lived after his retirement from the Senate brought him all that he had hoped of peace and happiness. His life was just as he had dreamed it would be while spending those last months in Washington

⁵⁰ Jackson *Daily News*, March 3, 1923.

⁵¹ A. S. Ochs, *New York Times*, March 6, 1923.

⁵² George Fitch, "A Survey and Diagnosis of Uncle Joe Cannon," *loc. cit.*, 191.

⁵³ Messenger, "The Speaker Prospective of the Next House," *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴ Otto Carmichael, "'Uncle Joe' Cannon As Speaker," *World's Work* (December, 1903), VII, 4195-4199.

⁵⁵ Richard Weightman, "Speaker Cannon," *Appleton's Magazine* (July, 1906), V.

⁵⁶ Henry S. Boutwell, "Speaker Cannon and the Presidency," *Independent*, April 23, 1908.

when he was so impatient to get away from it all—away to his ancestral home, his children, his grandchildren, and his books. The twilight years were full of peace for him as he grew old “in love with Mississippi, and with humanity.”⁵⁷ Life and philosophy became his major interests. He had always held a firm belief in the common people—“the rough common sense and common conscience of the common people.”⁵⁸ Although he was “the embodiment of the old cultural traditions of the aristocracy of the south,”⁵⁹ he was one of the plainest of men—“as easy as an old shoe.” Men believed him to be wrong sometimes, but they admired “the honesty of his conviction, the purity of his purpose and his sincerity in any position he took.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Jackson *Daily Clarion Ledger*, October 13, 1929.

⁵⁸ *Cong. Rec.*, 55 Cong., 1 Sess., 222.

⁵⁹ Denis Tilden Lynch, *Grover Cleveland* (New York, 1932), 523.

⁶⁰ James T. Lloyd to Author, December 3, 1928. Lloyd was a Missouri Democrat who served with Williams in the House from 1897-1909.