

Timothy Pickering Biography

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Biography

Timothy Pickering (1745-1829) was an American Revolutionary soldier before becoming secretary of war and then secretary of state under President Washington.

Timothy Pickering was born in Salem, Mass., on July 17, 1745, the son of Timothy and Mary Wingate Pickering. He graduated from Harvard College in 1763, studied law in Salem while serving as a clerk in Essex County, and was admitted to the bar in 1768. He became register of deeds in 1774. In 1766 he was commissioned a lieutenant in the county militia. He was a colonel by 1775 and was appointed by George Washington as adjutant general of the U.S. Army in 1777, becoming quartermaster general in 1780.

After the Revolution, Pickering became a merchant in Philadelphia. He moved in 1787 to western Pennsylvania, where he was elected to represent Luzerne County in the state convention that ratified the Federal Constitution. Appointed as postmaster general by President Washington in 1791, he served for over 3 years before becoming secretary of war in January 1795. Washington made him secretary of state late in 1795, and he continued in that post when John Adams became president.

An ardent Federalist and a bitter critic of the French Revolution, Pickering became a leading advocate of the quasi-war with France that followed the "XYZ affair" in 1798. Fearful of "French influence" in American politics, he viewed the Jeffersonian Republicans as subversives, and he supervised the enforcement of the Sedition Law against Jeffersonian critics of the Adams administration. Always more loyal to Alexander Hamilton than to Adams, however, Pickering broke with the President when Adams insisted on negotiating a settlement with France. Adams finally dismissed him from the Cabinet on May 10, 1800.

After a brief return to western Pennsylvania, Pickering moved to Massachusetts, where he became U.S. senator in 1803. A virulent opponent of presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, he urged the establishment of a northern confederacy in 1804, arguing that peaceful secession was the only way to protect New England's commercial interests. Defeated for the Senate in 1811, he served on the Executive Council of Massachusetts in 1812-1813 before winning election to Congress, where he again became Madison's leading opponent from 1813 to 1817. A controversialist to the end, he wrote a polemical pamphlet criticizing John Adams in 1824. Pickering died in Salem on Jan. 29, 1829.