

His Early Years

Alton Brooks Parker was born on May 14, 1852, in a roomy farmhouse situated on the farm that his grandfather settled in Cortland County, New York (see figure 1.1). That farm, which Alton's father purchased from his own father, was located approximately four miles northwest of the village of Cortland, the county seat. His father, John Brooks Parker, was a farmer who barely earned enough to support the family. John Parker's real passion was books, and he passed on to his son a lifelong love of learning and knowledge.¹ His mother, Harriet Stratton Parker, was a devout

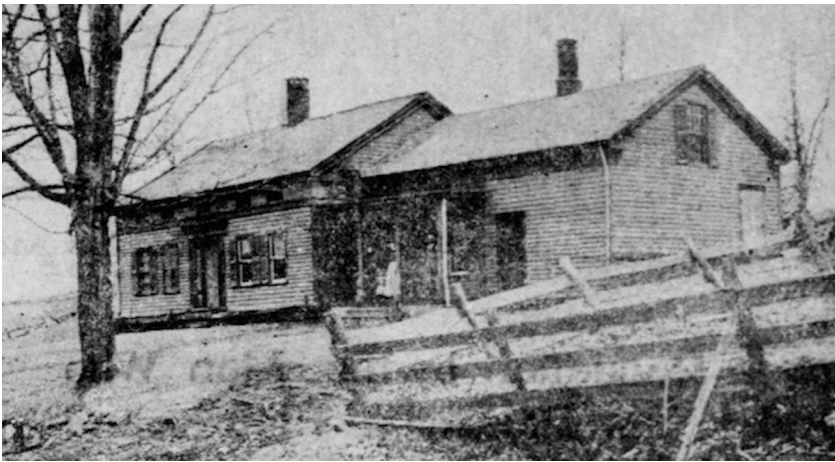


Figure 1.1. Birthplace of Alton B. Parker. From the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sunday Magazine*, April 24, 1904. Public domain.

and intelligent woman, descended from hearty New England stock.² Even before Alton could read, his mother had taught him Bible verses as he sat in his high chair while she sewed. Later, she required him to learn seven Bible verses each week to recite in Sunday school.³

Alton was the oldest of five children. Although two of his siblings, Gilbert and Harriett (“Hattie”), died in early childhood of diphtheria, his sister Mary, and his brother Frederick lived to adulthood.⁴

Parker’s mother described him as “a romping little fellow who loved the field”⁵ (see figure 1.2). According to Mrs. Parker, “after Alton had reached the age of eight it was not necessary once for me to punish him in any way. He kept out of mischief, and was ever ready to please his father and me.”⁶ Even as a small boy Alton accompanied his father and the hands around the farm, “pitching hay, pulling carrots, digging potatoes and doing other work.”⁷ According to his mother, he was “such an athletic lad, always wanting to be on the go, that [she] had to caution him many times not to overtax his strength.”⁸

In his youth Parker had bright red hair. During the 1904 campaign for the presidency he related to a visitor at Rosemount, his fashionable country estate, the trouble his red hair caused him when he was younger.



Figure 1.2. Parker as a baby. From the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sunday Magazine*, April 24, 1904. Public domain.

According to Parker, “when I was your age . . . my hair was redder than yours—it was fiery red, in fact, and, in consequence, my fighting instincts were over-developed while I was in school. In the country district where I learned my ‘three R’s,’ it happened that I was the only red-haired youth. When I first attended school the boys had a good deal of fun shouting ‘sorrel’ and ‘red-top.’ It never failed to rouse my fighting blood, and I lived a strenuous life.”⁹

From a very young age, Parker decided that he wanted to become a lawyer. He never thought about doing anything else long term. As he related to his friends:

It was a little thing that led me into a choice from which I never wavered. Since I made that choice I have never thought for a moment of any other calling as possible for me. My father was a jurymen during a term of court at the county seat. I used to drive him to the Court House in the morning, return to my work on the farm and then go for him with a horse at six in the evening. It happened that a celebrated breach of promise case was up for trial.

The parties were of social prominence and somewhat wealthy. I remember especially that the young man was very handsome. Two distinguished outside counsel were engaged in the case—Albert Charles Sedgwick, of Syracuse, and Milo Goodrich, of Dryden, an old-time circuit rider, whose practice covered several counties. The case interested me so much that on the first day I asked my father if I could not stay and listen instead of going home to work. He consented, and I watched the trial of the case from beginning to end.

The pleas of the lawyers, the examinations and cross-examinations, the speeches on either side, and, finally, the summing up, all impressed me very profoundly with one thought—that I wished to become a lawyer. My mind was made up. I never ceased to pursue this subject from that time on. Of course, it was such a boyish way in which to arrive at such a conclusion; yet it influenced my life, and I do not think that I made a mistake. I would not advise other young men, however, to act upon that sort of impression without greater determining reasons.¹⁰

Although they were modest farmers, Alton's parents valued education. He attended the local district school in Cortland, often going barefoot, until he was twelve years old.¹¹ At the age of twelve he was sent away to the old Cortland Academy for the fall and winter terms (he spent the spring and summer at work on the family farm)¹² (see figure 1.3). After graduating from the Cortland Academy, he attended the State Normal School in Cortland, where he trained to be a teacher.¹³ Once he obtained his teaching certificate, at the age of sixteen, he began teaching school in Virgil, New York (see figure 1.4). Parker began teaching at such a young age for two reasons: to help out with family expenses and to earn money for law school.¹⁴

The story of Parker's first engagement as a school teacher should be told in his own words:

I thought . . . that I ought to go away and teach, and so help out with the family expenses a little. I passed the examination and got a certificate, and then rode off across the country



Figure 1.3. Parker as a young man. From the Cortland County Historical Society. Public domain.



Figure 1.4. Parker at the age of sixteen. From the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sunday Magazine*, April 24, 1904. Public domain.

until I found a school with which the district magnates were willing to entrust me. When I returned I told my father what I had done, and I felt rather proud that I had found a place so promptly. But he was disappointed. He had watched young men all his life, he said, and he had always remarked that when they made a failure of any important thing at the outset they went on making failures all the way through life.

“I think you are very young for what you have undertaken,” he added. “I am sorry, too, because the trustees here in our district want you to teach for them, and the pay is fifty cents a day more than you will get where you have engaged yourself.”

I told my father that I would prefer to teach near home, and suggested that perhaps the other trustees would readily release me. I shall not forget the tone of his answer. “Never, never!” he exclaimed. “When you once put your hand to

the plow, never turn back. But examine thoroughly hereafter anything into which you are about to enter before you do so.”

That was a hard school, that first one. It was fortunate for me that my father had talked to me as he had of the meaning of failure and about never turning back from a duty undertaken. I think what he said strengthened me, prepared me for what was to come, and enabled me to acquit myself better than I would have done. He drove me over to my school. Just as I got out of the wagon at the house of one of the trustees where I was to leave my trunk, the latter came out to meet us and he said to me:

“Well, young man, one of the boys of our school saw you when you were here the other day, and said he didn’t think it would take long to put you out.”

I asked what was meant by this, a question, of course, which should have occurred to me before.

“Why, you see,” answered the trustee, “the boys put three teachers out of the school last winter, and one of them was forty-five years old, and he went out through the window.”

I saw that my father suffered when this was said to me. He had just about all he could do to keep the tears back. He thought that I was going to have a hard time at that school, and that, perhaps, I would fail in what I had set out to do. But his warning to me had given me time to think, and I had made up my mind that I wasn’t going away from there except as master.

My resolution was tested on the second day of my teachership. A trustee’s son was the first to rebel. He was larger than I was, although I was pretty sturdy and agile, as country boys are apt to be, if they indulge, as I had done, in wrestling and other physical sports that are common among them. This boy put an old-fashioned loco-foco match, the kind that smell of sulphur and brimstone, on the hot stove. The result was decidedly disagreeable, and the issue of discipline and order was at once raised. I stepped from the platform, where my desk was, and walked down toward the place where the boy sat, wondering what I was going to do to him.

I didn’t intend anything very savage, but I knew I had to do something, or there was an end forever of all semblance of authority on my part. He solved the question as to what I

was to do by his own act. As I approached, he took hold of the bench with both hands, as if anticipating that I would try to haul him off it by the collar. He had not gotten a firm hold before I leaned over, and, seizing him, stood him up on top of the bench. Then he grabbed me, and we went down together on the floor. But what followed did not last long, and there was no more question of my supremacy.

One of the little fellows came to me just as school was out and said: "Jim (that was the big boy) says he's going to tell his father, and he'll have you attended to." I thought it was about time that I began to attend to that end of the case myself. So I took a different direction from the usual one when I left the schoolhouse, walking toward the house of Jim's father. I met him just as he was crossing the road, and, Jim and several other boys being present, told him the whole story. Jim hung his head with a very hand-dog look, and the father said, "well, I think you have punished him enough; but if you have to do it again, you let me know, and after you have got through, I will do some of it myself!"¹⁵

At the noon recess I [often] played ball with the boys, and in that game I was more skillful than any of them. Good naturedly they were accustomed to wrestle together when not playing ball. After a time when there was snow on the ground they were anxious to wrestle and one of them proposed to wrestle with me, which I said I did not care to do as the ground was frozen hard . . . One day one of the little boys came in and said "Teacher, the boys say they believe you dasn't wrassle with them." I walked out of the school room and said to them "now I do not believe in wrestling on hard frozen ground, but if you are anxious to do it I will wrestle with the man you shall pick for side hold, square hold and back hold, and in that order." They selected Martin Coonrod who was 22 years old for the side hold wrestle. I threw him at once with, what we termed in that country, the grapevine; then with the left and under I threw him from my hips so fiercely that he was unable to come back to school again. I was not asked to wrestle the other two. Even though only sixteen, I always believed that my authority as teacher contributed toward my triumph. I had no further trouble in that school and always regarded it as a most valuable experience.¹⁶

Following a year spent teaching in Virgil (see figure 1.5), Alton spent some time teaching in Binghamton, where he was so successful that in 1871 he was asked by the trustees of the Accord School in Ulster County to become the school's principal.¹⁷ While he was there he met Mary Louise Schoonmaker, the daughter of Moses and Phoebe Schoonmaker of Kingston, New York. After seven months at the Accord School, Alton moved to Kingston and accepted a clerkship at the firm of Schoonmaker & Hardenburgh.¹⁸ The head of the firm was Augustus Schoonmaker Jr., county judge of Ulster County. The other named partner, Jacob Hardenburgh, was a member of the state senate.¹⁹ The Schoonmaker firm enjoyed a stellar reputation in the legal profession and had a large and lucrative practice, being retained in most of the important litigation pending in that part of the state.²⁰ Parker's very first clients were Mr. & Mrs. Sagendorf of Hurley, New York. They hired him to draft their wills.²¹ After working as a clerk for a year, Alton had saved up enough money to enter Albany Law School.²²

Parker graduated from Albany Law School in 1872.²³ In the fall of 1873, Christopher Agar, a Kingston merchant, called upon Parker and asked him if he would accept the clerkship of the Board of Supervisors of Ulster County should he be elected to the position. Parker responded in the affirmative, and on November 11, 1873, he was elected clerk of the



Figure 1.5. The schoolhouse where Parker first taught school. From www.theclio.com. Public domain.

Ulster County Board of Supervisors. He was reelected to that position in 1874 and 1875.²⁴

Soon after graduating from law school, Alton married Mary Louise Schoonmaker in Rochester, New York. The newlyweds lived in Kingston, where Alton, who had been admitted to the New York State Bar, was hired by Judge Schoonmaker to serve as the managing clerk of the firm. Shortly thereafter, Parker entered into a partnership with a law school classmate, William Kenyon, creating the firm of Parker & Kenyon.²⁵ Parker & Kenyon represented Ulster County and other public institutions in a wide variety of cases. In Parker's first big case, he was hired to represent Ulster County in a protracted suit against two local municipalities involving the equalization of assessments. The local press said the following about Parker's involvement in the suit: "The County is to be congratulated upon the fact that Hon. A.B. Parker has been secured as counsel by the committee of the Board of Supervisors, appointed to conduct the equalization suits. Mr. Parker has had a great deal of experience in equalization matters and the committee could not have selected a lawyer better qualified to conduct a case of this kind."²⁶ Parker briefed the case patiently and exhaustively and was ultimately victorious; he earned a fee of thirty-six hundred dollars.²⁷

In 1877, Parker was elected county surrogate in Ulster County by a small majority (the Republican nominees for every other countywide office, including county judge and district attorney, were elected by overwhelming majorities).²⁸ As the surrogate for Ulster County, Parker handled probate matters and the administration of estates within the county. After he was elected surrogate, the firm of Parker & Kenyon was dissolved.²⁹

Some reports in the press indicated that when Parker was starting out on his own in life, John Parker disapproved of his course and refused to offer him any aid. Parker was quick to correct this misconception. "Our home," said Parker, "was a lovely one, and our father did all he possibly could for us. In the later years he procured a piano for my sister. The only person whom he really stinted in any way was himself. His influence over us was very great. I was just as anxious to help with the work on the farm as if it had been my own. He had a way of developing the judgment of each of his children. He consulted me about everything concerning the management of the farm, as, for instance, whether such and such a field ought to be plowed, and to what crop it ought to be put, etc.," Parker continued, "in the same way he strove to develop character

in us. He was never cross with us. He never punished us. When we did anything contrary to his wishes, it was quite enough punishment for us to know that he felt hurt over it.”³⁰

In his attitude toward human nature, Parker was a decided optimist. He invariably looked for the good qualities in people. Even when someone had personally wronged him, he was able to take an entirely impersonal view of the matter. His mind seemed to be incapable of retaining, for any length of time, feelings of ill will.³¹ A story told by Arthur McCausland, Judge Parker’s private secretary (and later law partner), perfectly illustrates this point.

The judge and Mrs. Parker were hosting a reception at Rosemount for many prominent people in the community. Mrs. Parker noticed the name of a man who had wronged the judge some time before on the guest list. She questioned whether the judge was actually going to invite the man to the party given the poor treatment the judge had received from the man. Parker exclaimed that he had forgotten all about the prior transgression and said that he should be allowed to come to the event if he chose to do so. Mrs. Parker remarked that she simply could not be polite to the man if he was invited. Parker told McCausland that the matter worried him. According to Parker, “it would look pretty marked; it would seem as if I were harboring resentment, wouldn’t it . . . if we didn’t invite him?”³² When McCausland stated that he thought it would be petty to not invite the man, Parker insisted that he receive an invitation, noting that if the man showed up, “Mrs. Parker will relent.”³³

As an adult, Parker’s outward physical appearance was described as strong and athletic. He was purported to be “broad-beamed, hard-muscled, indefatigable, weighing two hundred pounds of solid flesh and standing up six feet, in unflinching health and good spirits.”³⁴ The journalists of the day called him a great ruddy engine of vitality.³⁵ He had “a big symmetrical head and a full face, with an aquiline nose, big white teeth and large brown eyes, kindly, sincere and direct in their gaze. His jaw was large and curved; he wore a generous-sized, tawny mustache. His skin was fresh and unwrinkled. Everything about him gave the impression of bigness: his strong body, his easy, straightforward manner, his moral courage.”³⁶

The New York Times described Parker in this way:

In the first place the man who meets the Judge after having seen only the current pictures of him will soon make the discovery that no etching, woodcut, or anything in black and white can

give an adequate idea of what he looks like. In such a likeness his moustache and hair appear to be black. They are far from black. In fact, they are reddish. There is a good deal of color in his face, too, particularly after one of his self-imposed spells of work on his farm. The forehead is high, so high that it will undoubtedly be said that he is slightly bald over the temples. That is not the case.

There is another particular in which the black print portraits of him are misleading. They give him a certain stolidity of expression which is not true to life. Firm and square though the chin is, there is a delicacy in the face—an expression of refinement—that none of the photographers up to now has caught. There never was, never could have been anything so unfair as to depict this man as a sphinx, for instead of being anything like silent or reserved in conversation he is pre-eminently social, fond of good society, fond of taking a goodly share in the conversation, fond of listening to a good story—and telling one, too.³⁷

Yet another set of commentators had this to say about Parker's physical appearance: "to a person who has never seen him before, the first meeting always causes an impression of strength and of indomitable will, expressed by the firm jaws and the formidable round chin. Brown eyes that can be both kindly and lion-like, and a symmetrical brow are other characteristics of Judge Parker to be observed, but above all there is to be seen a look of determination and honesty on his face at all times, which induces confidence on the part of his friends and a feeling among strangers that he is a man to be depended upon."³⁸

Following his nomination for the presidency, the *Los Angeles Herald* provided its readers with the following description of Parker:

Physically, the Democratic candidate is as fine a specimen of manhood as can well be pictured. He stands and sits very erect, and his height of six feet does not impress one, as his body is so well proportioned. His carriage is dignified, but withal easy and not without considerable grace. The eyes are brown and sharp, and bespeak a clear analytical mind and are in excellent keeping with the lower part of the face, which is firm and full of determination.

The jaw is sufficiently square to impress one with the belief that triflers must beware, but still not so square that there is any suggestion of brutality. The head is well poised on a full neck, suggestive of physical strength, a neck perhaps that might have been a trifle longer.³⁹

Although the judge had many acquaintances, and knew many different people from many different walks of life, he had just a few really close, personal friends. To many he appeared to be a little aloof. No one ever saw him exhibit a bad temper. He adhered to the three “C’s”—always stay calm, cool and collected.⁴⁰

Parker was a man instilled with self-confidence. No matter how grim the circumstances, he believed that he could make things turn out all right. In September 1891, the Ulster County Savings Institution was forced to close its doors as a result of the embezzlement of approximately \$400,000 by the bank’s treasurer and assistant treasurer. The attorney general took the unusual step of appointing a temporary receiver to wind up the business and distribute the assets. After the temporary receiver was appointed, he discovered that it was impossible to wind up the affairs of the bank without substantially destroying the market value of the large amounts of farmland that the bank had under mortgage.

Judge Parker was on his farm in Accord when he got word of what was happening with the bank. As one of the trustees of the bank, Parker took the lead in trying to save the depositors from loss. He tried to get an insurance company to take an assignment of the mortgages, with some local banks acting as discount agents, but no institution was willing to take the assignment. Parker then devised a novel plan to try to save the bank. He asked the Equity Court to replace the temporary receiver with twenty-five prominent citizens as trustees. Parker worked day and night to convince the most prominent men in the county—presidents, bank officers, and other businessmen—to sign on as trustees. After the twenty-five trustees were recruited, and Parker’s plan was approved by the court, a decree was issued scaling down the amount due to each depositor to his pro rata share of the bank’s assets and enjoining the depositors from withdrawing more than 25 percent of the deposits without further order of court.

The leading newspaper in Ulster County, in an effort to embarrass the bank and injure some of the original trustees, began to publish a series of articles encouraging a “run” on the bank. The newspaper advised the depositors to draw out their allowable 25 percent as soon as the bank’s doors opened, pointing out that it was likely all they were ever going to get.

As soon as the bank reopened for business, a large, unruly crowd of depositors crowded into the bank and spilled out onto the street demanding their twenty-five percent. Parker pushed past the mob with a bag of money he had obtained in New York. He was determined to prevent a panic. He leaped onto the treasurer's desk and cried, "Come on! We are ready to pay. Come on! Do you think we would waste our time on a broken bank?"⁴¹ The crowd grew quiet, and someone asked how the depositors could be assured they would get their money. Parker answered, "I pledge you my word." The depositors departed with only a handful withdrawing their money.⁴²

Parker was subsequently asked to become the president of the bank. He agreed to serve in that capacity on one condition: he was not to receive a salary. Parker remained as president of the Ulster County Savings Institution until the deposits of the bank were several hundred thousand dollars greater than they were before the doors closed. When the bank was finally solvent, Parker resigned and let the bank's employees regain control.⁴³ Parker resigned as president of the bank on January 23, 1904. He continued to serve as a trustee of the bank until March 31, 1911.⁴⁴

Alton and Mary Parker had two children: John M. Parker and Bertha Schoonmaker Parker. When John was seven years old he was playing Cowboys and Indians with a neighbor boy when he was accidentally struck in the eye with an artichoke stalk. The wound became infected, and several days later he died of tetanus in his father's arms.⁴⁵ Bertha married the Reverend Charles Mercer Hall and had two children: Alton Parker Hall (called Parker) and Mary McAlister Hall.⁴⁶ Parker married Emmeline Grace and they had two children: Penny and Alton Parker III. Mary married Theodore Oxholm and they had three children: Mary Louise, Anne Mercer, and Theodore.⁴⁷

Parker was exceptionally fond of his children. He loved to take his son to see new and unusual things and places, and on one occasion he took him to New York City to see Jumbo the elephant in P.T. Barnum's circus. He often showed a kindhearted nature toward punishing his kids. Once, when John had been disobedient, Bertha begged her father not to punish him. Parker, seated before the Baltimore heater in the back parlor, commended her for thinking of her brother's well-being.⁴⁸

Parker never stopped trying to make his daughter into a proper young lady. He once offered Bertha the opportunity to pocket two brand-new dollar bills—all she had to do was walk properly down the street (as opposed to skipping, running, or hopping) and not look at her image in the big mirror over the mantelpiece every time she went into the dining

room. If she did both of these things for a week, the money was hers. Parker never had to pay her the two dollars.⁴⁹

He also never failed to encourage his children's creativity. In 1892, when Bertha was seventeen years old, she came up with the idea to have a "Cobweb" Dance Party. Bertha, assisted by the judge and his brother, Fred, wound strings from the first floor of the home all the way up to the attic, around the attic railing, back down through every out-of-the-way place possible, over and over again. A quotation had been placed at the end of each string, and each quote was closely associated with every person who was attending the dance. Each of the twenty-five guests who attended the dance unwound the "cobweb" in search of his or her particular quote. Judge Parker joined in the event and even participated in a hilarious square dance that ended the evening.⁵⁰

Parker was close to both of his grandchildren, but he was especially close to his grandson Parker. Throughout the course of his life he kept up a healthy correspondence with both of his grandchildren. They addressed their letters to him "Dearest Baypsy" or "Dearest Baypa," and he often signed his letters "Love, Bayp." When Parker was in college at Princeton, the letters between Parker and "Baypa" often revolved around schoolwork, examinations, football and polo events (Parker was captain of the Princeton University indoor polo team, which captured the intercollegiate championship in 1922), and dating. Parker often visited his grandfather in New York, and the judge would treat him to lunch or dinner and, oftentimes, a show. Whenever Parker needed extra money for sporting equipment, new boots, or new clothes, the judge always sent Parker what he needed.⁵¹

In the late 1870s and the 1880s, Parker supervised and managed the Cortland farm where he was born and another farm that belonged to his wife's family in Accord. In 1898, Parker bought a fifty-acre parcel of land that sloped steeply down to the Hudson River. At the top of the property, which was located near the town of Esopus, stood Rosemount Hall (see figure 1.6). The 7,900-square-foot house was a two-and-a-half-story large square structure built in the Picturesque Italian Villa style. The oldest part of the house was standing when the British fleet anchored directly in front of it in 1777, the night before Kingston, New York, was put to the torch.⁵²

A broad hall, which served as a living room, ran through the center of the house. The walls of this hall were lined with a miscellaneous collection of photos and books. The rest of the first floor contained a kitchen, butler's pantry, dining room, and library. The library occupied nearly the whole southern half of the first floor (see figure 1.7). Floor-to-ceiling bookcases lined the walls, and revolving bookcases on the parquet floor contained



Figure 1.6. Parker's estate, Rosemount, circa 1904. Parker's grandson, Alton Parker Hall, is seated in the foreground. Public domain.



Figure 1.7. Judge Parker's library at Rosemount. From the *New York Herald*. Public domain.

reference books that the judge frequently consulted. A small, flat-top table was located in the bay window of the room, and a large director's table was located in the center of the room.⁵³ The spare wall space was hung with portraits of well-known and distinguished judges.⁵⁴

The second floor of the grand house contained a spacious master bedroom and five smaller bedrooms, as well as several bathrooms. A columned covered porch ran the entire length of the east (river) façade.⁵⁵ It was on this porch that Parker would greet guests who traveled to Rosemount during the presidential campaign. A widow's walk on the roof was used as a place to observe the river.⁵⁶

The house itself was surrounded with majestic trees, and the perfectly manicured lawn was ornamented with beautiful flowerbeds. The property contained a 1,400-square-foot guesthouse, an icehouse, a greenhouse, and multiple buildings for the raising of livestock (see figure 1.8). Judge Parker was particularly fond of his Poland China pigs. He maintained that the intelligence of pigs was superior to that of any other domestic animals and derived great pleasure from training them to answer to the sound of their names, to come to him whenever he was at the farm, and to play certain games that he had taught them. One sow in particular, named Mammy, seemed to be a favorite of Parker's. Although her eyes were almost covered by her ears, she could recognize the judge's voice and would trot up to him on command. She would often stand before him until the judge scratched her back with his cane. This action seemed to soothe her before she would trundle off to wallow in the mud and



Figure 1.8. A portion of the Rosemount outbuildings and grounds. From the Alton B. Parker Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Public domain.

take a nap.⁵⁷ Parker believed that pigs had “an instinctive preference for cleanliness” and had modern conveniences built for them, including two low stone buildings situated close to the main house.⁵⁸

The farm was self-sustaining, producing eggs, milk, chickens, ducks, turkeys, pork, and lamb. Vineyards, peach trees, and apple trees lined the vegetable garden. Parker’s apples achieved a modest amount of fame (those he kept in cold storage and brought out on July 4 tasted as delicious as the ones picked the prior October), and he experimented with new varieties of grapes that he often sent to friends and neighbors.⁵⁹

A trail led down to the river and ended in a jetty that served as a mooring place for the judge’s naphtha launch, christened the *Niobe*.⁶⁰ Judge Parker would often use this boat to ferry his family to Sunday services at the Kingston Episcopal Church, where Parker’s son-in-law was the rector and Parker was a vestryman. Parker decided to serve as the local freight agent for a steamboat company so that his little private dock could be used for the convenience of the community.⁶¹

It was from this very same dock that Parker engaged in a daily morning ritual. Weather permitting, every day he was in residence at Rosemount he would put on a bathing suit, run down the hill from the house, leap off the dock, and go for a swim in the Hudson River. He firmly believed that good health was closely related to swimming in cold water.⁶²

After his daily swim, Parker would saddle Tom, his beautiful, black, free-spirited stallion, and, regardless of the season or the weather, ride for an hour through his vineyards, fields, and orchards (see figure 1.9). During these rides, Parker would often work out the details of his cases and opinions.⁶³ After breakfast, which usually consisted of fruit, oatmeal, porridge, beefsteak or sausages or bacon and eggs, buckwheat cakes, maple syrup, hot cornbread, and two cups of coffee, Parker would formally begin his day’s work, which often did not end before midnight. He would always put on evening dress for dinner, which normally consisted of soup and a roast, such as lamb or beef, followed by a salad and fruit or pie.⁶⁴

Parker was an avid reader of magazines. He seldom read poetry, but he enjoyed reading a good novel. He was particularly fond of Dickens, Thackeray, and Scott. Jefferson was his favorite political writer. Any book or article on farming or animal husbandry was sure to catch his attention. He was fond of music and could often be heard singing old-fashioned ballads or hymns in a sweet tenor voice, accompanied on the piano by his secretary, Arthur McCausland.⁶⁵



Figure 1.9. Parker riding his favorite horse, Tom, on the grounds of Rosemount. From *Harper's Magazine*, 1904. Public domain.

Judge Schoonmaker, Parker's first legal employer, was responsible for his initial entry into politics. When Schoonmaker hired Parker to work at his law firm, Schoonmaker was serving his second term as a county judge. Soon after Parker began working for him, Schoonmaker lost his bid for reelection after a difficult and hard-fought campaign. Schoonmaker was disheartened by the loss and announced to Parker that he was going to retire from politics. Parker felt strongly that his mentor had been unjustly defeated in the election and prevailed upon Schoonmaker to run for state senator in 1875. Parker managed Schoonmaker's campaign, and Schoonmaker was victorious. Schoonmaker's prestige was so well restored that he was elected New York State attorney general in 1877 and served as a member of the New York Civil Service Commission in 1882 and as

one of the first commissioners of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887.⁶⁶

After his success in managing Schoonmaker's campaign, Parker rose quickly in the Democratic Party ranks. As a delegate to the state convention in 1882, Parker was an early supporter of Grover Cleveland's candidacy for governor. He made a number of speeches in different parts of the state in support of Cleveland's gubernatorial campaign.⁶⁷ The next year, Parker declined the nomination to run for New York secretary of state.⁶⁸ When Cleveland ran for president in 1884, Parker was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Following the convention, Parker gave speeches in support of Cleveland all over the state and was largely instrumental in delivering the state into Cleveland's column during the general election. When Cleveland won the election, a lifelong friendship blossomed between Parker and Cleveland.⁶⁹

In 1885, President Cleveland offered Parker the post of first assistant postmaster general. Parker, at only thirty-two years of age, could have been headed to Washington, DC, to work in a popular reform-minded administration. Instead, he headed to the nation's capital to decline the president's generous offer. While he was speaking with the president, the newly appointed postmaster general, William F. Vilas, stopped by for a visit. Cleveland told him, "Parker says he doesn't want the [position], Colonel Vilas." Vilas asked, "May I inquire why?" Parker responded, "I cannot afford to give up a five-thousand dollar a year position, to take a three-thousand dollar position." Vilas retorted, "But I gave up a ten-thousand dollar practice to take an eight-thousand dollar position." "Well, Colonel Vilas," countered Parker, "if I had been making ten thousand a year for ten or twelve years, I too might afford to accept the President's offer." Cleveland was amused at Parker's logic.⁷⁰ Shortly after his encounter with Cleveland and Vilas, Governor Hill offered Parker the lieutenant governorship, which he also declined, prompting the *Ellenville Journal*, a local Republican newspaper, to label him the "great American decliner."⁷¹

In 1902, many of the top political operatives in the New York Democratic party, as well as a number of the state's newspapers, including the *New York World* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, were urging Parker to run for governor. Several attorneys who knew the judge personally also urged him to run, noting that if he was elected governor, "with your wide acquaintance, your nomination for President in 1904 is very much more than probable."⁷² Despite these urgings, Parker was hesitant to run. A writer for the *New York Evening Sun*, in an editorial titled, "The Call to Judge Parker," gave

the reasons for Parker's unwillingness to run for governor: "It is asking a good deal of such a man to expect him to lay down the work of his life and forfeit an assured competence to lead a disorganized party which is short of issues, cash and credit. He is satisfied to be the lawgiver Moses, but the other Moses—no."⁷³ Senator David B. Hill encouraged Parker to run for governor, telling him, "In my judgment if you are nominated at this time for the office of Governor you will be elected. No other man is certain to be elected. In the event of your nomination and election I am confident that you will so discharge the duties of office that you will be nominated by the Democratic Party for the Presidency two years later, and I pledge you now to do everything that I possibly can from now on to accomplish that result."⁷⁴ In the end, Parker declined to be a candidate for governor, and the nomination instead went to Bird S. Coler, who lost to the Republican nominee, William Odell.⁷⁵

Although Parker had a fondness for politics and was a successful political operative, his one true love was the law.