

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

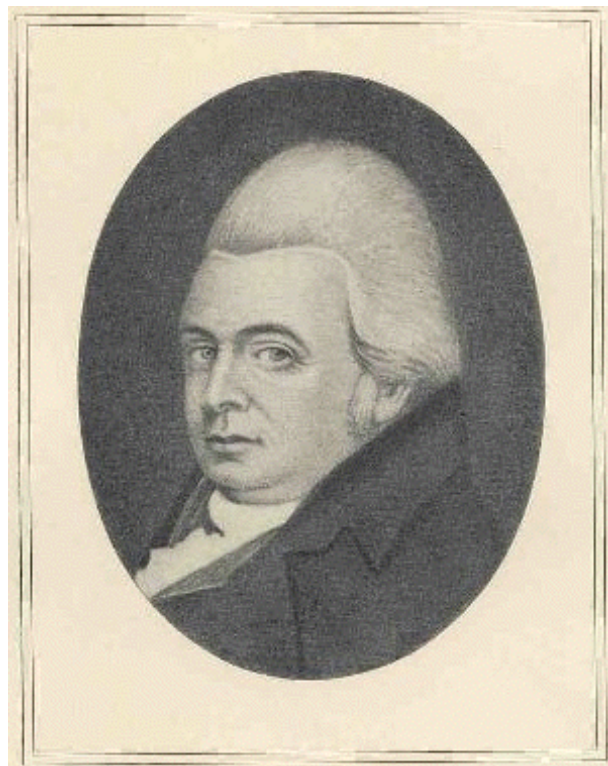
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## Chapter 8: Royall Tyler (1757-1826)

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Famous as the writer of the first American play to be professionally performed, Tyler was also lawyer, a professor, and a Chief Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court.

### Primary Works

*The contrast; a comedy.* (1787) With an introd. by Thomas J. McKee. NY: B. Franklin, 1970. PS855.T7 C6

*The Algerine Captive* (novel), 1797.

*The Yankey in London* (travel book), 1809.

*Four Plays* ("The Island of Barrataria," "The Origin of the Feast of Purim," "Joseph and His Brethren," and "The Judgement of Solomon." Eds. A. W. Peach and G. F. Newbrough, 1941.

*The Verse of Royall Tyler.* Collected and edited by Marius B. Peladeau. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1968. PS855.T7 A6

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(CONTENTS: The contrast / by Royall Tyler -- Metamora / by John Augustus Stone -- The stage-struck Yankee / by Oliver Everett Durivage-- Fashion / by Anna Cora Benjamin A. Baker -- Rip Van Winkle / as acted by Joseph Jefferson -- Under the gaslight / by Augustin Daly -- Young Mrs. Winthrop / by Bronson Howard -- The old homestead / by Denman Thompson -- Margaret Fleming / by James A. Herne -- A trip to Chinatown / by Charles H. Hoyt -- The girl of the golden West / by David Belasco.)

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| [Top](#) | Royall Tyler (1757-1826): A Brief Biography

### A Student Project by Merrily Kelley

Royall Tyler, born William Clark Tyler on July 18, 1757, was the youngest son of Mary Steele and Royall Tyler Sr. "He was named William Clark, but following his father's death the name was changed by an act of the General Court, at his mother's request, to Royall." (3). During his younger years Tyler was thought of as "studious and thoughtful"(3), and entered the South Latin School in Boston in 1765. Tyler was a good student and completed the standard seven years at the Latin school, with marks good enough to get him into Harvard in 1772. Tyler's father died in 1771, leaving his entire estate to Royall, thus providing for his education. (16). All around Tyler were rumors of war and revolutions against the British, only the next few years would provide the answers to the fate of both Tyler and his country.

At Harvard, "the student body was anxious to express its patriotism: one way was to refrain from tea ... but a more direct way was to join the student military company, the Marti-Mercurian Band" (4). Tyler's "classmates at college included future judges, congressman, senators, and governors." (16). Tyler's was rumored to have participated in "serious escapades" (16), but there is no record or details of exactly what Tyler did or did not help in. It is certain, that "studying Latin and Greek and discussing political interests did not occupy all of the student's time." (16). Just after the Declaration of Independence was signed, Tyler received his Bachelor of Arts from Harvard, in July 1776. "In October of the same year, Yale University granted Tyler an honorary Bachelor of Arts degree. Whether this was 'a singular honor' or a 'collegiate courtesy' is uncertain." (16).

Tyler joined the Revolutionary Army December 1776. He did not see much action because of his mother's wishes. Her second husband had died in combat in 1775, and her oldest son had been sent on many spy missions for General Washington. (17). "Despite Royall Tyler's enlistment, after his graduation he read law in Cambridge and Boston, studying with Francis Dana and Benjamin Hichborn" (17). During the time Tyler started law school, Tyler hung around with a group of intellectuals, which included Willaim Eustis, Aaron Dexter, Rufus King, Thomas Dawes, and Christopher Gore. The group gathered in John Trumbull's rooms. "These men, says Trumbell, 'regarded themselves with a cup of tea instead of wine, and discussed subjects of literature, politics, and war.'" (7). Yet Tyler was not always so. "With two friends, Tyler was accused in 1777 of profanity, noises and breaking windows in Cambridge." (17). This "remarkably brilliant" (17), group of men were chosen by General John Sullivan to be his special aides. "Tyler was commissioned Brigade Major of the Light Corps and apparently was present in August 1778 at the unsuccessful attempt by General Sullivan to take Newport, Rhode Island from the British." (17). This battle seems to be Tyler's only service during the war. Tyler was able to finish his studies. He received a Master of Arts degree from Harvard in 1779. On August 19, 1780, Tyler was admitted to the Massachusetts bar. In 1782, Tyler moved to Braintree (now Quincy) just eight miles out of Boston. Tyler "took lodgings with the family of Richard and Mary Cranch and opened an office in their house as well." (10). "In the small community, a lawyer of Tyler's wit and talent soon became prominent." (17). Mary Cranch was the sister of Mrs. John Adams, and through Mrs. Cranch he met Abigail Adams, a seventeen-year old girl nick named "Nabby". (17).

Over the next few months, Nabby and Tyler became close. At first Mrs. Adams was suspicious of Tyler and wrote her husband in Europe about the growing attachment. John Adams response was at first unfavorable. On January 22, 1783,

John Adams wrote his wife, "I positively forbid any connection between my daughter and any youth upon earth who does not totally eradicate every taste for gaiety and expense." (18). For a while the romance was broken off and Nabby went to Boston for the rest of 1783. Tyler prospered in his law business and purchased a farm near Braintree. Tyler's status improved with becoming a landowner, and Tyler tried to impress Mrs. Adams by helping her collect some of her outstanding debts. (18). On January 13, 1784, Tyler wrote John Adams himself asking to marry his daughter. Adams wrote that Tyler was accepted as a son-in-law, but that Nabby and her Mother must spend some time in Europe with John Adams.

Nabby was in Europe for a year, and received only four letters from Tyler. Nabby broke off the engagement and later married William Smith. (18). Tyler went into a depression and neglected his farm. Tyler later sold the farm and moved to Boston to start a new law practice.

| [Top](#) | In 1786, some local farmers started the Shays rebellion and the governor appointed Major General Benjamin Lincoln to suppress the rebellion, Tyler became Lincoln aide-de-camp. Major Tyler helped to defeat the rebels in Massachusetts, and many of them fled to Vermont. In 1787, Tyler went to Vermont to capture the rebels. Tyler met with some success and wrote his friends the Palmers "How I wish you could ... see your old friend the center, the main spring of movements, that he once thought would have crazed his brain-this minute, haranguing the Governor and Council: and the House of Representatives the next, driving 40 miles into the State of New York, at the head of a party to apprehend Shays ... now, closing the passes to Canada: next writing orders to the frontier... Will this not make you laugh? I hope to be home, and bring Shays with me." (21). In early March, Tyler returned home to Boston. On the 12 of March 1787, Tyler was sent to New York. While there, he completed his mission and did something that was forbidden in Boston, he went to the theater. Tyler was so inspired that he wrote his first play, *The Contrast*. "*The Contrast*, which opened at the John Street Theatre on April 16, 1787, was the first American comic drama to be produced professionally in the United States." (21). Soon after he produced *May Day in Town* on May 19, 1787, with the same company and theater as his first play.

Tyler came home from New York, worked at his law practice for the next few years. In 1790, Tyler left his law practice for Vermont with the intention of living there permanently. While in Boston, he found the wife he had been looking for. Tyler set up a new law practice in Vermont and in 1792 asked Mary Palmer to marry him. She accepted him and they were married in 1794. Mary stayed in Boston, and Tyler came to visit her, for the next couple of years. Tyler insisted that he needed to make a home for wife. In 1796, Tyler brought his wife and new child to Guilford, Vermont. (23). In 1793, Tyler published "The Origin of Evil, An Elegy". In 1794, Tyler became State's Attorney for Windham County, Vermont. Tyler also began Colon & Spondee series with Joseph Dennie. This partnership produced "a large number of amusing and satiric essays, sketches, and verses appearing in the *Eagle, or Dartmouth Centinel*, then in *Farmers Weekly Museum*, and later in Dennie's *Port Folio*." (30). In 1797 Tyler wrote four more plays, *The Georgia Spec*, *The Farm House*, *The doctor in Spite of Himself*, and *The Island of Barrataria*. *The Georgia Spec* was produced in Boston on October 30, 1797, and later that year in New York. The other plays have no record of ever being produced. (31). In 1801, Tyler was elected assistant Judge of the Vermont Supreme Court. For the next seven years, Tyler had a prosperous time with his family and in the Supreme Court. In 1807, Tyler was elected Chief Judge of Vermont Supreme Court. (14). In 1808, Tyler published *The Trail of Cyrus B. Dean*. In 1809, Tyler published *The Yankey in London*, and continued to hear cases and enjoyed success as a Chief Judge.

In 1811, Tyler was appointed Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Vermont and taught there until 1814. Tyler continued to serve as Chief justice until 1814. In 1812, Tyler tried unsuccessfully to run for U. S. Senate. In 1815, Tyler was appointed Register of Probate, Windham County, Vermont. Tyler served until 1822. Tyler's health was failing and for the four years, Tyler battled with cancer and wrote. Tyler wrote *The Bay Boy* and "The Chestnut Tree" and "Utile Dulci". Tyler died on August 16, 1826 of cancer.

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