

Biography of Nathaniel P. Tallmadge (1795-1864)

After serving for two years on the New York state assembly, Nathaniel P. Tallmadge served 10 years as a United States Senator from New York (1833-44) and then two years as Governor of the Territory of Wisconsin. It was upon hearing of Judge John Edmonds's investigations of spirit communication that Tallmadge took an interest in the subject. Soon thereafter, his daughter began displaying mediumistic abilities and he commenced his own investigation, sitting with a number of mediums and hearing from several distinguished friends in the spirit world, including John C. Calhoun, former Vice-President of the United States; Daniel Webster, a former U.S. Senator from Massachusetts; and Henry Clay, a former U. S. Senator from Kentucky.



"I had heard for a long time of the 'Rochester Knockings,' but had paid no heed to them," he explained his initial interest. "On the contrary, I had considered them a delusion, which would soon pass away. I continued under these impressions till some last spring, when my attention was called to a newspaper attack on

Judge Edmonds for being a believer in these 'Spiritual Manifestations.' I had known Judge Edmonds for thirty years; had practiced law in the same courts; had served in the Senate of New York with him; had been associated with him also as a member of the Court of Correction of Errors, the highest court in the State; had known him since that time as a Justice of the Supreme Court, and more recently as a Judge of the Court of Appeals, where he holds a deservedly high and distinguished rank among his brethren, the able judges of that court of last resort in the State of New York. I also knew him as a gentleman of finished classical education, and as a lawyer of an acute mind, and a decided talent for investigation. And, above all, I knew him to be a man of impeachable integrity. Knowing all these things, I concluded that if he had become a believer in 'Spiritual Manifestations,' it was at least a subject worthy of investigation."¹

Subsequently, Tallmadge's 13-year-old daughter began playing the piano on instruction of the spirits, like an experienced pianist. "She knows nothing of notes or music, and never played the piano before in her life," he wrote in a letter to Edmonds. "The first time she played was Beethoven's Grand Waltz, and then several others with which we were familiar. After that, she played many we had never heard before, and improvised words suited to the airs, beautiful, and of the highest tone of religious and moral sentiment."²

Beginning sometime in 1852, Tallmadge sat with a number of mediums. "I have seen rapping mediums, writing mediums, and speaking mediums, and have received communications through all of them," he wrote. "I have witnessed physical manifestations, such as the movement of

tables, without any visible agency. These physical manifestations are more satisfactory to the mass of mankind, because they appeal directly to the senses. I am better pleased myself with the moral, if I may so call them, than the physical manifestations."³

Tallmadge concluded that the element *od*, or *odic force*, as described by Baron Von Reichenbach a few years earlier accounted for the physical manifestations, but he was at a loss to explain how this force produced them. "And even if this were proved, it still remains to account for the *intelligence* in the communications which are received," Tallmadge went on. "That intelligence does not come from tables, or chairs, or other material objects. It must come from mind, or from a spiritual source. ... Objectors cannot deny that these answers come from an intelligent source; but they sometimes say that they are to be found in the mind of the interrogator. It is true that the interrogator oftentimes knows the answer to the question *mentally* propounded by him; and it is equally true that he frequently does not know what the appropriate answer should be, but ascertains its truth afterward. Neither can he in any way anticipate many communications which are made without any questions being asked. I have frequently received such communications of an elevated character, and far above the capacity of the medium. I conclude, therefore, they do not come from the medium, nor from the mind of the interrogator.

These communications, too, are perfectly characteristic of the individuals from whom they purport to come. I have had frequent communications purporting to come from my old friend, John C. Calhoun, which his intimate friends would pronounce perfectly characteristic of him; and some of them, both in style and sentiment, worthy of him in his palmiest days in the Senate of the United States. I have had similar ones purporting to come from Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, of the same elevated order, and peculiarly characteristic of the individual."⁴

In a letter dated September 12, 1852, Tallmadge informed Edmonds of communication coming from Calhoun, who had died March 31, 1850, through a "Mrs. S." Calhoun informed the circle that because of his inexperience on that side of the veil, he was limited in his ability to communicate. "I deeply feel the barrenness of my soul, the lack of wisdom, the dread of ridicule, the loss of friends, the thought of enemies which debarred me from participating, from being experienced, from a want of knowledge of this holy privilege," Calhoun communicated, going on to say, "How very dim life on earth seems to me now! I look upon it as a troubled dream, wherein were indeed some bright spots, some kind feelings shed around my path to make it brighter. I was but the germ placed in a casket of clay, whose inner unfoldings, whose heaven-sent aspirations, should have begun to develop themselves sooner while placed there."⁵

Calhoun continued to communicate with Tallmadge in succeeding months, and then in April of 1853 he asked Calhoun the purpose of the communications. The question was put to Calhoun *mentally* so that the medium would not know the question (unless, of course, she could read his mind). "My friend," Calhoun replied, "the question is often put to you, 'What good can result from these manifestations?' I will answer it: It is to draw mankind together in harmony, and convince skeptics of the immortality of the soul."⁶

Tallmadge explained that these communications from Calhoun came through a large, heavy, round table, one at which 10-12 people could sit, by the tilting method (the alphabet recited by the sitters and the table would tilt at the correct letter). He observed the table move as much as three to four feet with nobody near it. During all these movements no person touched it, nor was any one near it," Tallmadge explained. After one sitting, he decided to see if he could move the table from a sitting position. Applying as much force as possible, he was unable to budge it. He then asked three women to assist him in

moving the table. "We lifted upon it until the leaf and top began to crack, and did not raise it a particle," he continued. "We then desisted, fearing we should break it. I then said, 'Will the spirits permit me to raise the table?' I took hold alone, and raised it without difficulty!"

Tallmadge then asked the spirits if they could lift the table if he and the three ladies were sitting on it. The spirits assented, but directed them to a square table in another room. The four people climbed on to the table with Tallmadge in the middle. "Two legs of it were then raised about six inches from the floor," Tallmadge went on, "and then the other two legs were raised to a level of the first, so that the whole table was suspended in the air about six inches above the floor. While thus seated on it, I could feel a gentle, vibratory motion, as if floating in the atmosphere. After being thus suspended in the air for a few moments, the table was gently let down again to the floor."⁷

At another sitting, Calhoun asked Tallmadge to place a guitar directly under the table. The guitar soon began to give off beautiful and exquisite music. "It then played a sort of symphony, in much louder and louder tones," Tallmadge related. "And, as it played, these harmonious sounds, becoming soft and sweet and low, began to recede, and grew fainter and fainter, till they died away on the ear to the distance. Then they returned, and grew louder and nearer, till they were heard again, in full and gushing volume as when they commenced.

"I am utterly incapable of giving any adequate idea of the beauty and harmony of this music. I have heard the guitar touched by the most delicate and scientific hands, and heard from it, under such guidance, the most splendid performances. But never did I hear any thing that fastened upon the very soul like these prophetic strains drawn out by an invisible hand from the spirit world."⁸

Sitting with the Fox sisters as mediums, Tallmadge was asked to put paper and pencil on

an overturned drawer directly under the table. He complied and soon heard the sound of pencil on paper, followed by raps instructing him to sharpen the pencil. When he looked under the table, the pencil was gone. He found it lying three or four feet from the table with lead broken from the wood. After sharpening it, he placed it back on top of the paper under the table. Again, he heard the sound of pencil writing on paper, but upon retrieving the paper found no writing. The table then rapped out: "The power is not enough to write a sentence. This will show you that I can write. If you meet on Friday, promptly at seven, I will write a short sentence."

When they met again on Friday, Tallmadge asked Calhoun to make sure to use his own handwriting so that he would recognize it. Calhoun replied, saying that he would but it would require them to have their minds on the spirit of John C. Calhoun. Tallmadge then heard writing and was instructed by the raps to retrieve the paper. At first, it appeared that the paper had disappeared, but upon lifting the drawer he found it underneath. He read, "I'm with you still."

Tallmadge later showed the paper to a number of Calhoun's friends, as well as Calhoun's son, and all found it to be a perfect facsimile of the Calhoun's writing. Moreover, they took special note of the contraction "I'm," which apparently was very unusual at that time, nearly everyone else writing "I am." It was pointed out by several of the friends that Calhoun was in the habit of writing "I'm" for "I am."⁹

Tallmadge was joined by General Waddy Thompson, former Minister to Mexico, and General James Hamilton, former Governor of South Carolina, at one sitting when Calhoun communicated, directing them to place the Bible under the table, which they did. Numerous raps were then heard, beating time to "Hail Columbia." The music faded away as it had with the guitar, and the alphabet was then called for by Calhoun. He told them to retrieve the Bible. Tallmadge went under the table and found it open at St.

John's gospel, chapter ii on the left side and chapter iii on the right side. Tallmadge asked Calhoun if he should look at chapter ii. "No," Calhoun communicated through the table. Tallmadge then asked if they should look at chapter iii and "yes" was the reply, followed by "read." When Tallmadge read verse 8, 11, 19, and 34 the "most vehement" raps were given. These verses read:

Verse 8: "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest its voice, but knowest not whence it cometh or whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the spirit."

Verse 11: "Verily, verily I say unto thee, we speak what we know and testify what we have seen, and ye receive not our testimony."

Verse 19: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil."

Verse 34: "For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God; for God giveth not the spirit by measure."¹⁰

In a letter dated May 6, 1853, Tallmadge wrote to Edmonds that while in Washington, DC, he had sat with an automatic writing medium from Philadelphia, and had received messages purportedly coming from Daniel Webster, who had died the previous October. "He writes with a pen in a bound blank-book, and the communications thus written are as perfect as the most skillful and expert copyist could have recorded them," Tallmadge informed Edmonds. "His handwriting, as a medium, is as different from his ordinary handwriting as night from day."¹¹

Tallmadge further mentioned that the communications coming through the medium, a blacksmith with very little education, were far beyond the medium's intellectual capacities, and even seemed to be beyond the conceptions of Webster, himself, while in the body. Tallmadge said he was conversing about light with other

friends when the medium's hand was moved to write about light, commenting that they are all disciples of light and that light is the great ingredient in the health of the body as well as the perfect light of the spirit. The message was signed "Webster." When Tallmadge and his colleagues began discussing the message, the medium's hand continued: "When we say light, we mean the pure essence of God that the sun reflects into your system," the medium's hand continued. "It is fraught with the life eternal; is the secret of your happiness and the cause of your existence. Remove it, and the channel of communication between you and the Father is cut entirely away, and you must cease. Chaos is darkness, and only that; but darkness is not in the universe. There is light everywhere that life exists. The partial obscuration of light at night is for the resting of spirits that are so constituted that they tire the body, which by a reaction tires the spirit, and thus they both need rest. But there is no place dark else God is not there; and of this you can conceive."

When the medium's hand stopped, the men again began discussing the message, but were again interrupted as the medium's hand wrote that the men were not comprehending what was said. Webster, or whatever intelligence was communicating, went on to say that the cause of light is God alone. "The brain of man is filled with organs, each different because of the different powers of comprehending light, and according as their organization is allowed to receive it," the message continued. "He who would shut his door against the light of day must pale and sicken. He who shuts out the light of conscience must keep his part of God as the diamond in the rough, that cannot give life unto himself or his fellows. Dress up your own diamonds, and see the brilliant luster they give forth..."

Tallmadge said that "Judge R." made some remarks about the beauty of the communications but because it came through as a "bare essence" of Webster, he questioned whether the spirit retains a consciousness of its own identity and wondered

if it was nothing more than the Bramincal doctrine of annihilation. The medium then wrote, "Your own repugnance to such a belief is the proof of its falsity." Judge R. responded by saying that nothing is so repugnant to him as the spirit not existing after death, to which the medium wrote, "The inner light of your existence makes the repugnance. It wars with its opponent, darkness."

The men continued to discuss the future existence of the spirit and its ability to retain its identity after death, receiving more feedback from Webster. Tallmadge said that he regretted not having a complete transcript of the conversation, but that he considered the whole communication as exhibiting the highest order of intellect and that "the style and language will be recognized as perfectly 'Websterian,' from the pure Saxon English which runs throughout the whole of it."¹²

Tallmadge came under attack by a Christian journalist for his "occult" interests. "I have always maintained, and still maintain, that these 'spirit manifestations' go to confirm the great and leading doctrines of Christianity," Tallmadge responded to the attack. "If they differ in any respect from the particular tenets of the denomination to which the write belongs, it is no greater difference than that which he will hear from the pulpits of other denominations every Sunday of his life! And still, all the denominations maintain the great and leading doctrines of Christianity, and all go to the Bible to establish the

particular tenets which constitute the discrepancies between each other. Why does not this writer denounce all other denominations than his own? They differ as much from his as 'spirit manifestations' do."¹³

While preferring to avoid public observation, Tallmadge said that he found it necessary to speak out in his defense and in the defense of others who had the moral courage to make their investigations known. "It seems that when this *monomania* seizes any of these anti-spiritual denouncers, it is accompanied by a sort of proclivity for slander from which their sanity on other subjects is exempt," he wrote. "I do not, therefore, incline to hold the gentleman responsible for this retailed slander on Judge Edmonds, or his libelous charge of 'rank blasphemy' on me ... I can make great allowances for these monomaniacs, and would advise them, in their lucid intervals, to argue this question without denouncing those who investigate it."¹⁴



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¹ Edmonds, John W. and Dexter, George T., *Spiritualism*, Partridge & Brittan, 1853, p. 419.

² _____ p. 35.

³ _____ p. 421.

⁴ _____ p. 420.

⁵ _____ pp. 401-404.

⁶ _____ p. 425.

⁷ _____ p. 427.

⁸ _____ p. 428.

⁹ _____ pp. 429-430.

¹⁰ _____ pp. 428-429.

¹¹ _____ p. 393.

¹² _____ pp. 393-398.

¹³ _____ p. 440.

¹⁴ _____ pp. 441-442.