Prosecuting Attorneys

John H. Clifford was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1809. He graduated from Brown University in 1827 and then moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts to study law with Timothy G. Coffin, Esq. He later moved to Dedham, Massachusetts to study with Judge Theron Metcalf and was admitted to the Bar of Bristol County in 1830. He returned to New Bedford and established his practice of law in 1832. That same year he married Sarah Parker Allen.

In 1835, he was elected to the Massachusetts Legislature as a representative from New Bedford where he was on the committee for the Revision of the Statutes of the Commonwealth. The following year he became an aide to Governor Edward Everett a position he retained until 1840. Governor Everett appointed him District Attorney for the Southern District of Massachusetts in 1839; a post he held for ten years.

Clifford was elected to the State Senate by the people of Bristol County in 1845, where he was known for his ability as a debater and for his accomplishments as a legislator. However, his desire was to practice of law, so in 1849 he accepted an offer by then Governor George N. Briggs to become Attorney General of the State of Massachusetts.

The Webster Trial was the first major case that Clifford had prosecuted for the State and was one of the most sensational of the 19th century. In his closing statement, he presented to the jury a 7-hour analysis of 120 witnesses. The prosecution’s circumstantial evidence was overwhelming, they still had the problem of the corpus delicti rule. They had great secondary evidence, but the primary evidence - the body - was missing. In the end, Webster was found guilty but there was much controversy afterward concerning the jury instructions given by Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw.

In 1852 the Whig Party of Massachusetts nominated Clifford for Governor and he was ultimately elected by a majority of the two branches of the State Legislature and inaugurated in 1853. After serving one term, he returned to the office of Attorney General under Governor Emory Washburn which he held until 1858.

Clifford was, politically opposed to the abolitionist movement; he was described by Frederick Douglass as "pro-slavery" and "about the most aristocratic gentleman in Bristol County". In 1862 he helped in the formation of the "People's Party", an anti-abolition party, to oppose the Republicans and support the pro-Union Constitutional Union Party of 1860. However, their efforts failed because of President Abraham Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued in September. Clifford was elected to the State Senate in 1864 where he served as president and supported Lincoln for reelection.

He was one of the electors at large, in giving the vote of Massachusetts to President Grant in 1868.

In 1865 Clifford was chosen to act as one of the special counsels prosecuting former Confederate...