Biographical/Historical note

The Read family consistently played an important role in American government and politics from the time that George Read, a Delaware resident, signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, the Reads served as lawyers, judges, politicians, generals, consul-generals and foreign ministers.

John Read (1769-1854) was born on July 17, 1796 in New Castle, Delaware to George Read and Gertrude Ross Read. After graduating from the College of New Jersey in 1787 and studying law with his father, John worked as a lawyer; as agent general of the United States under Jay's Treaty, a position for which he was appointed by President John Adams in 1797; city solicitor of Philadelphia; and member of common and select councils. During the War of 1812, John was "active in the defense of the Delaware against British invasion" (Reynolds, page 492). He served as a senator for Pennsylvania from 1816 to 1817 and was appointed, by the Pennsylvania Legislature, as the state director of the Philadelphia Bank. Later, he became president of the Philadelphia Bank. John's brother, William Read, was a Philadelphia merchant who was involved in the China trade.

In 1796, John married Martha Meredith, the daughter of General Samuel Meredith who had served as the first treasurer of the United States. They had five children, three of whom survived infancy: John Meredith Read (1797-1874), Henry Meredith Read (1800-1826), and Margaret Meredith Read (1806-1854).

During the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, John's "humanity and philanthropy were manifest … [when] he contributed most liberally from his purse, and exposed his life throughout the whole course of the epidemic in behalf of his suffering fellowmen" (Reynolds, page 492). He was actively involved in the Protestant Episcopal Church and served as warden of Christ Church, St. Peter's, and St. James. He died on July 13, 1854.

John Read's son, **John Meredith Read** (-1874), was born on July 21, 1796 in Philadelphia. He was educated at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating "at the age of fifteen, was admitted to the bar in 1822, elected to the Pennsylvania legislature in 1822 and again in 1823" (Reynolds, page 493). Other positions held by John Meredith Read include city solicitor of Philadelphia and member of the select council, United States district attorney of the eastern district of Pennsylvania from 1837 to 1841, solicitor general of the treasury department, and attorney general of Pennsylvania from1845 to 1846. Politically, John Meredith Read veered from the family norm of Federalists, and instead participated in the founding of the "Free Soil" Democrats.

John Meredith Read opposed the extension of slavery in new states. As a result, when nominated to serve as judge of the United States Supreme Court, "southern senators opposed his confirmation," (Reynolds, page 493). As the Republican Party formed, Read served as a founder and supporter of the party and in 1856, gave a speech entitled, "Power of Congress over Slavery in our Territories." He was elected judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1858, the same year that the Republican Party gained its first victory in Pennsylvania. He eventually became Chief Justice of Philadelphia.