

Thaddeus Stevens: Early Civil Rights Leader

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On April 11, 1835 in the middle of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives a crippled man, sporting an ill-fitting wig to cover his bald head, six foot tall and with a growling voice began his speech simply: “Mr. Speaker: I will briefly give you the reasons why I shall oppose the repeal of the school law.”¹ This man’s speeches were simple and blunt, using his legal reasoning to make his point. His speech continued with the same bluntness, “I will attempt to show that the law is salutary, useful and important.”² Later during the Civil War this same person spoke before the House of Representatives introducing a bill to aid the war effort by bluntly stating,

I think a bill providing for the repeal of all laws creating ports of entry in the rebellious States ought to have been passed at the last Congress. I reported such a bill; but there were too many peace conventions and border State conferences, and too much amiable timidity in this House to allow it to pass—it might offend the rebels.³

This man was Thaddeus Stevens, “The Old Commoner.” During the mid-nineteenth-century Stevens, a prominent abolitionist, fought for the equal rights of millions of Americans. Over the course of his life Stevens defended the underprivileged by combating the Freemasons, bringing free education to Pennsylvania, assisting in the Underground Railroad, pushing legislation to abolish slavery, and promoting assistance for recently freed slaves. Stevens’ advocacy of civil rights during such a transformative period established him as one of the earlier civil rights leaders in American history.

Born in Danville, Vermont in 1792, Stevens was introduced to misfortune and inequality early in life. Stevens was the second of four sons born to Joshua and Sarah Stevens who were Baptists from Massachusetts. His father worked as a farmer and surveyor but was most well-known for his wrestling skills. The family was poor and often struggled to make ends meet.⁴ To go along with these early hardships, Stevens and his older brother were born with club feet. This was disheartening for Stevens’ parents as they followed the Baptist tradition which viewed their sons’ ailments as punishments for their parents’ sins. Unable to deal with his failures in business and in farming, Joshua Stevens eventually abandoned the family who later learned he died during the War of 1812. With her husband gone it was up to Sarah Stevens to make sure her children succeeded. She put forth her whole effort to making sure her sons were educated and able to make something of themselves.⁵

Sarah Stevens played a major role in shaping Thaddeus’ young life. With her husband gone, the responsibility of taking care of the family fell on her shoulders. Along with the

¹ Thaddeus Stevens, “On the School Law,” April 11, 1835,” quoted in Beverly Wilson Palmer and Holly Byers Ochoa, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens Volume 1: January 1814- March 1865* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 19-29.

² Stevens, “On the School of Law,” 19-29.

³ Thaddeus Stevens, “*Speech on the Blockade, December 30, 1861 in Congress*,” quoted in Beverly Wilson Palmer and Holly Byers Ochoa, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens Volume 1: January 1814- March 1865* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 236.

⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 12, 1868, 1.

⁵ Fawn Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens Scourge of the South* (New York, Norton, 1959), 24

abandonment of his father, Stevens dealt with the cruelty of his peers due to his club foot.⁶ One of Stevens' biographers Hans L. Trefousse notes the comfort that Sarah provided to her young child during these difficult years. "Still and quiet, held back by his physical deformity, he could not take part in the other boys' games. They would laugh and mimic his limping walk but she (Sarah) made up for it."⁷ These early struggles are important in understanding the foundation of Stevens's views on inequality. From his earliest days, Stevens saw what it was like to be considered unequal and unnatural. He felt the sting of others viewing him as a lesser human being due to a physical feature he was born with and had no control of. The early lessons of suffering and exclusion helped to shape the young boy's mind and never left him. For the rest of his life he carried the stigma of being excluded and was determined to work hard so that he could assist those he felt were being denied equal rights.

Stevens' mother assisted him in providing the best education possible and giving him the tools to succeed. With Sarah's help he attended the Peacham Academy, and later Dartmouth College and then the University of Vermont, finally graduating in 1814.⁸ While her sons were away, Sarah continued to run the family's farm which provided the family's income. After completion of his college career Stevens moved to Pennsylvania where he spent time teaching at the Academy of York while also studying the law. In August 1816, he was admitted to the bar and moved to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to open a practice.⁹ From that moment onward his home was in Gettysburg as he slowly became a prominent figure in the community. It was here that Stevens' early political career also began starting with his joining of the anti-Masonic and abolition movements. Stevens was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1849 and then again in 1859 where he served until his death in 1868.

As one of the most controversial figures of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, Stevens was regarded by those in the North as being one of the early leaders of the abolitionist movement within the United States. However, many others in the South considered him to be a vindictive dictator, hell-bent on destroying the South.¹⁰ For this reason, Stevens is an extremely complicated figure. He faced controversy throughout most of his life, including attacks on the origins of his birth and even being accused of murder at one point to destroy his reputation. Through the controversy, personal attacks, and political battles Stevens persevered and became a major figure in United States from the 1840s to his death in 1868. Stevens' mission in life was to bring equality before the law to all Americans. In his epitaph, Stevens said; "Here lies one who never rose to any eminence, and who only courted the low ambition to have it said that he had striven to ameliorate the condition of the poor, the lowly, the downtrodden of every race and language and color." Although Stevens is attempting to preserve his image for posterity in this quote, it can still be seen through his actions that he believed his mission was to help those excluded and suffering from misfortune.

Stevens became well-known in his fight for abolition as well as his political efforts in opposition to the Freemasons and as a champion for free public education. So large was his impact on education in Pennsylvania that the *Gettysburg Star and Republican* reported in 1838, "the good citizen will see in this matter nothing but a following out of as noble a course as ever commenced and the name of Thaddeus Stevens and Education will be associated together and

⁶ *Philadelphia Inquirer*. August 12, 1868, 1.

⁷ Hans Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian* (University of North Carolina, 1997), 2.

⁸ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 6.

⁹ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens Scourge of the South* (New York, Norton, 1959), 2.

¹⁰ "Obituary," *New York Times*, August 12, 1868.

honored by Pennsylvanians long after his traducers and its opponents shall sleep in deserved forgetfulness.”¹¹ Not only was Stevens a skilled lawyer and great politician, but also an early civil rights leader. The work he performed as a lawyer and congressman ensured that children in Pennsylvania would have free education, that slavery would finally be abolished, and that all would be considered equal in the eyes of the law.

Early Career

Stevens began his early career into politics by championing two causes he believed fought against the power of the elites. These two causes were the anti-Masonic movement of the late 1820s and early 1830s and his crusade to bring free public education to Pennsylvania. It was with these two issues that Stevens not only began to earn statewide and national fame but also where he learned lessons that became incredibly useful in his later political debates.

The first issue in which Stevens became an advocate was the anti-Masonic movement. The 1820s were an uneven time in American political history. In the past decade, the United States had survived the War of 1812 and American politics were transitioning to the new order. The old Federalist Party from the early days of the republic was beginning to fade away and a new wing within the Democratic Republican Party had appeared. This wing of Democratic Republicans was opposed to the Jacksonian Democrats who were becoming increasingly popular nationwide while the opposition party had little to unite them together. A shift in Stevens occurred with the murder of William Morgan in 1826.¹²

Morgan was a resident of Batavia, New York and a member of the Freemasons but was discovered to be writing a book on their secret practices. People assumed that the Freemasons then murdered him to prevent the sharing of their secrets.¹³ The murder horrified many and soon anti-Masonic parties rose throughout upstate New York and then throughout the country. Trefousse explains the rise of opposition to the Freemasons was built up in part because many of the elites such as businessmen, bankers, political leaders, and legislators were often Masons, which created distrust amongst the common people.¹⁴ This sentiment was justified in the minds of the citizenry when the trial for the murder of Morgan was mishandled.¹⁵ It only encouraged the idea that the Masons would look out for their own.

Understanding this public sentiment against the Masons makes it clear to see how Stevens was attracted to joining the anti-Masonic cause. In his view, they were a threat to the democratic system. They were a group of privileged elites who were usurping the power from the people. The struggle against the aristocracy is the perfect example of the types of causes Stevens would engage in for the rest of his life. It was an idea that the aristocrats within the country held power over the others. There could not be true equality if groups such as the Freemasons held political power over the underprivileged.¹⁶ Trefousse notes a separate reason for Stevens' strong opposition to the Masons: “Deeply conscious of his physical deformity, he must have been furious at the Masons' exclusion of cripples.” He also adds: “It may well be that Stevens's extreme virulence against the Masons had something to do with the fact that just at the

¹¹ “Thaddeus Stevens,” *Gettysburg Star and Republican Banner*, October 2, 1838.

¹² Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 24.

¹³ “Captain Morgan,” *Evening Post*, January 14, 1826, 2.

¹⁴ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 24.

¹⁵ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 38.

¹⁶ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 23.

time of the appearance of the movement he suffered the loss of all his hair. This unfortunate disease... must have been emotionally disturbing to him and a severe blow to his pride.”¹⁷ This argument, however, does not seem to follow the attitude that Stevens had. It was not vanity or that he himself was being excluded from a group but the fact that it was a great deal of people who were excluded, as well as that they represented the elite society which stood against the idea of democracy that Stevens believed in. As for his baldness, Stevens did not seem to care for his appearance as he wore wigs which often did not fit right and was used to the noticeable limp he walked with due to his clubfoot. Although Stevens had felt the pain from his early childhood of being excluded as a cripple, it was less of a personal offense to him that he was excluded from the Masons for being a cripple and more the idea that they could be exempt from the law and take advantage of it. Seeing this injustice, Stevens fervently began his crusade against the Masons.

Stevens fought the power of the Freemasons the best way he knew, which was through the political machine. By the 1830s anti-Jacksonian forces had coalesced into the new Whig Party. The party moved to get candidates into office and Stevens became one of the most vocal opponents of Freemasonry. In an article for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1835 Stevens was referred to as the “High Priest of Anti-Masonry” for the speeches and power with which he gave them.¹⁸ In the subsequent years Stevens worked with the Whigs in helping to nominate William Henry Harrison for the office of President.¹⁹ This was the first step in Stevens’ efforts to combat what he viewed as the elites who had created a tyrannical rule which limited the freedoms of the lower class. In his next political debate, Stevens once again clashed with these elites.

The second political battle that Stevens took part in was over the issue of free education in the state of Pennsylvania. In this struggle, once again Stevens found himself fighting for the underprivileged and those unable to defend themselves, the children of Pennsylvania. The cost of education created a separation between the poor who were unable to afford schooling for their children and the rich who had no trouble in sending their children to school. Stevens believed that education was important for everyone and that they should not be denied it based on their class.

Stevens first spoke on the subject of free education in 1826, when according to the *Gettysburg Sentinel* he gave a toast at a local banquet: “Education. may the film be removed from the eye of Pennsylvania and she learns to dread ignorance more than taxation.”²⁰ Stevens would later go on to say: “If a bill had been introduced to improve the breed of hogs, it would have passed handily but a measure to improve the breed of men was certain to expect nothing but trouble.”²¹ For Stevens an investment in education was also an investment in Pennsylvania and would improve the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians. If all were given equal access to education, then the state would be improved. Instead of a state of illiterate farmers, Stevens was hoping to create a state of learned men that could lead Pennsylvania.

The path to free education was not an easy one for Stevens. There were several groups who opposed passage of the bill. First there were the old aristocratic families who still believed in the idea of social hierarchies and wanted to maintain their position at the top. Second the bill was a threat to the local German communities around Pennsylvania. These German communities

¹⁷ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 25.

¹⁸ Thaddeus Stevens, “The Whigs-the Antimasons-National Policy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 21, 1835.

¹⁹ “General Harrison Nominated by The Anti-Masons,” *Evening Post*, November 16, 1838.

²⁰ Thaddeus Stevens, quoted in Fawn Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens Scourge of the South* (New York, Norton, 1959), 59.

²¹ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 59.

had established their own schools and viewed the idea of free school as a threat to their schools.²² Because of this threat they lobbied Stevens' party to reject the bill. Facing this backlash from their constituents, the party had even threatened to remove Stevens from the party if he continued his crusade.²³ Stevens though was not a man to compromise so easily on his beliefs. He continued his mission and in it found an ally in Governor George Wolf, a Democrat.

Working together Wolf and Stevens pushed the legislature to pass a bill for free schools in the state in 1834. However, once it was passed the legislators found that the citizenry did not welcome this new bill as they thought it was burden on them to support the schools. Fearing the public, the legislature returned to session and passed another law reversing the free school bill.²⁴ It was Stevens who in a speech on April 11, 1835, Stevens gave an impassioned defense of the school law. In it he first began to argue the importance of education in a free society. Democracy could only be sustained if the public is educated and able to maintain it. Second, Stevens dispelled the notion that the creation of free schools cost more, instead explaining that in fact the price of free schools would in fact be cheaper.²⁵ Stevens then said:

This law is often objected to, because its benefits are shared by the children of the profligate spendthrift equally with those of the most industrious and economical habits. It ought to be remembered that the benefit is bestowed, not upon the erring parents, but the innocent children. Carry out this objection and you punish children for the crimes or misfortunes of their parents. You virtually establish castes and grades, founded on no merit of the particular generation, but on the demerits of their ancestors; an aristocracy of the most odious and insolent kind—the aristocracy of wealth and pride.²⁶

In that passage of the speech Stevens shows who exactly he is fighting for. Stevens shows that by rejecting this law, the legislators are bestowing a punishment upon these children for a crime they did not commit. Therefore, the reasoning to vote down this law is illegitimate and had no viable purpose. For Stevens, it was important that everyone was given an equal opportunity to succeed. To live in the free society that was the United States there should not be a development of caste systems or limitations to any persons' ability to rise the social ladder. The speech proved to be extremely effective for Stevens and the assembly reversed itself by passing the School Bill. Using his oratory skills and the art of persuasion Stevens helped to save this bill. For Stevens, this was his proudest action.²⁷ Trefousse argues that it was more the political power from the Governor that helped sway the assembly not Stevens' speech.²⁸ However, according to some in Pennsylvania, they believed the primary mover had been Stevens himself. In an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* the author writes: "We are not disposed to find fault with Gov. Wolf for his course in relation to a general system of education. On the contrary, we award him all due credit for it; but in justice it should be stated that the people of Pennsylvania are more indebted to

²² J.P. Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 319.

²³ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens Scourge of the South* (New York: Norton, 1959), 60

²⁴ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 60.

²⁵ Stevens, "On the School Law," April 11, 1835, quoted in Palmer, et al., *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 19-29.

²⁶ Stevens, "On the School of Law," 19-29.

²⁷ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 62.

²⁸ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 39.

Thaddeus Stevens.”²⁹ Stevens’s success in the battle over education and his anti-Masonic crusade had garnered him national fame. During the early years of his political successes, Stevens championed another cause that he would become most well-known, the abolition of slavery.

One of the questions asked about Stevens and abolition is how he came to be such an ardent abolitionist? Trefousse attributes that part of Steven’s motivation for joining the abolitionist movement to a sense of regret due to the *Butler v. Delaplaine* court case that took place in 1821. The case was filed by a slave woman named Charity Butler who was owned by Norman Bruce from Maryland. Bruce had moved Butler and her two children across the state lines into Pennsylvania several times. Butler had chosen to sue because she was a resident of Pennsylvania, which had abolished slavery in 1780. Stevens served as an attorney for Bruce and argued the case up to the Supreme Court and argued that Butler’s residence in Pennsylvania along with that of her two children was not continuous and therefore did not qualify under the existing Pennsylvania law.³⁰

Stevens won the case, however it was heavily disturbing to him. Trefousse notes Stevens’ reaction following the case: “But apparently, he was not happy with the result of the trial, for shortly afterward, he denounced the “peculiar institution,” and it is possible that remorse for his action was one of the motivations for his anti-slavery crusade, which became increasingly radical as time went on.”³¹ Stevens’ biographer Fawn Brodie, points to this case being not only one of remorse for Stevens but one in which he learned a valuable lesson. She writes: “But this slave, whose hopes of freedom he had smashed apparently taught the twenty-nine-year-old lawyer something he had not learned in books—that the law can be an instrument of terror as well as justice.”

Stevens understood the lesson he learned from the Butler case well. From that point on Stevens attempted to use or shape the law in a way in which it would be beneficial to all people. It is important to note though that although he had been a crusader for equality for education and that Pennsylvania had prided itself on its anti-slavery stance, that Stevens chose to defend the slave owner. This could be considered one of Stevens greatest mistakes, however, he did choose to attempt to redeem himself in the future for the pain he had caused. This case was not the only reason that Stevens began his battle for abolition. Trefousse also states about Stevens: “It is possible that his own physical deformity, his clubfoot had something to do with this concern, but that it was genuine beyond doubt.”³² A final argument for Stevens’s commitment to the abolition of slavery is because of the affair that is believed to have taken place between him and his African-American housekeeper Lydia Hamilton Smith. Although the relationship was never confirmed, Smith maintained Stevens’ household for many years and saw to the care of his grave after his death. Although many letters between the two exist, the ones that do point towards some sort of relationship are difficult to find. One letter from Stevens to Smith from July 24, 1861 reads, “I am glad that you are well—I am no worse than usual...I think Congress will adjourn next week and I shall be home the week after... Give my respects to Mrs. Erle and all the friends. Yours Thaddeus Stevens.”³³ The way Stevens speaks with Smith is a much warmer and

²⁹ “Education and Its Advocates,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. April 25, 1835, 2.

³⁰ Trefousse, Thaddeus Stevens, 14.

³¹ Trefousse, Thaddeus Stevens, 14.

³² Trefousse, Thaddeus Stevens, 46.

³³ Thaddeus Stevens, “To Lydia Hamilton Smith. Washington July 24, 1861,” quoted in Palmer, et al., *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 219.

friendlier tone than seen in letters Stevens wrote to others. There is a great concern for the other's well-being that goes beyond the usual employee and employer conversation. It reads as if a husband writing home to his wife, and even the ending sounds as if they share the same social circle as a couple would.

These theories provide a broad assessment for Stevens' motivations in joining the anti-slavery movement. From his earliest days, Stevens had always been one to support the downtrodden, fight against inequality, and fight against the elites. In his struggles against Freemasonry and passage of the Education Bill he had claimed to be fighting for equality and against elitism. It seems only natural that as Stevens championed different causes to promote equality he would support the anti-slavery movement. Stevens did what he had done with education and anti-Masonry and launched his full efforts behind abolition.

After several years in the Pennsylvania Assembly, Stevens ran for Congress in 1848 and was elected to represent Pennsylvania's eighth Congressional District. At the time of Stevens' election to Congress the United States was at a critical juncture in the expansion of slavery. In 1848 following the end of the Mexican-American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States had received an enormous amount of land that made California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. The problem with the new addition of land was what was to become of the new states created out of this land. Were they to be free or slave states? Since the Missouri Compromise in 1820 there had been a delicate balance between the free and slave states. The Compromise had called for the prohibition of slavery in the former Louisiana Territory north of the parallel 36°30'. The Compromise had simply created a section of the country in the North which was free of slavery, while the South kept their slaves. If incorporated into the union, the new lands would break up this compromise and create an imbalance amongst the Northern free states and the Southern slave states. As Stevens arrived in Washington this was the debate put before Congress and although he was a freshman Congressman, Stevens was ready to announce his arrival to the political elite in Congress.

As Congress considered what to do about the land issue, it was Senator Henry Clay from Kentucky who stepped forward to introduce eight resolutions that were meant to help settle the debate. In his proposals, Clay called for the admission of California as a free state as well as the organization in the areas of New Mexico and Utah without any restriction or condition about slavery. There was also an enactment of a much stronger fugitive slave law which resulted in the return of thousands of escaped slaves³⁴ These proposals were meant to recreate the balance between free and slave states and became known as the Compromise of 1850. While the debates of the Compromise became well-known for the struggle between Clay and Stephen Douglas in the Senate, a battle over the same issue was being fought in the House, in part being led by the freshman Representative from Pennsylvania.

As Holman Hamilton points out in his work *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* Stevens was one of the early leaders in this fight within the House. Hamilton writes, "To do justice to all the House personalities would require a lien on the rest of this study. Three of the most colorful were Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Free-Soiler in principle though elected as a Whig, his cold face rarely lighted up by a sardonic grin..."³⁵ This is

³⁴ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 40.

³⁵ Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

the description always given of Stevens and even shown in his portraits. The stern face not easily pleased but eager to gear up for a fight.

Stevens was concerned over the extension of slavery into the territories and was determined to limit as much of it as possible. In a speech on the House floor on June 10, 1850 Stevens said: "Our Constitution places the legislative power in Congress. Consequently, Congress has exclusive power over the territories newly acquired. The Constitution itself does not extend to them, and can have no influence upon them, except as far as it creates and defines the legislative organ of the sovereign will of the nation."³⁶ In a sense Stevens was saying that Congress had the ability to legislate the territories and abolish slavery, but it could not establish slavery in the territories. Stevens furthered his argument by saying: "By the law of nations, when a nation acquires territory, either by conquest or treaty, it becomes subject to the will of the acquiring power."³⁷ In this argument Stevens attempted to stop slavery from spreading through legal means. If unable to reach those who did not feel that slavery was wrong from a moral sense, he could at least convince them by using a legal argument. It was one of the many tools that Stevens had used throughout his career. Making a clear, rational, and legal argument was what had helped him pass the Education Bill in Pennsylvania and now he was attempting to do so with the slavery issue.

One of the other tools Stevens used to promote halting the extension of slavery, was the emotional and moral argument. In the same speech from June 10 in one of the most powerful statements from his speech Stevens said: "This power demands from Congress "compromises" which shall increase its influence. Sir, this word "compromise," when applied to human rights, and constitutional rights, I abhor. We are not asked, but commanded, to compromise away the Constitution."³⁸ As Stevens says in the speech he is unwilling to compromise his beliefs in the effort to make a compromise with the slave holders. In his mind, there is no compromise when it comes to the idea of human rights. Stevens not only made pleas to those in Congress but also in letters in newspapers around the country and Pennsylvania. He argued with the proponents of slavery as well as supposed opponents of slavery who were willing to compromise on extending it. In a letter to the *Pennsylvania Freeman* in March 1850 Stevens wrote in opposition to those members of Congress who considered themselves opponents of slavery. He wrote: "How is it, dear sir, that in the same breath in which you announce your hostility to slavery in every form and every place, you also avow your determination to stand by all the compromises of the Constitution, and carry them to effect?" Stevens continued: "If you are really hostile to slavery in every form and in every place, must you not be hostile to it in the Constitution! Does the American Constitution possess the wondrous alchemy which can transform a despotism into righteousness?"³⁹ Although Stevens mounted an impressive defense, the Compromise of 1850 passed and set the stage for the impending Civil War. Stevens, however, was still determined to continue his fight for the end of slavery.

The Compromise and its empowerment of the Fugitive Slave Act brought about the stage on which Stevens could prove his loyalty to the anti-slavery movement. In September 1851 Edward Gorsuch, a Maryland slave owner, took five armed men to the house of a free man named William Parker. Parker was hiding four of Gorsuch's freed slaves and when Gorsuch

³⁶ Thaddeus Stevens, "The California Question," June 10, 1850, quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 111.

³⁷ Stevens, "The California Question," 112.

³⁸ Stevens, "The California Question," 122.

³⁹ "For the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Thaddeus Stevens," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, March 7, 1850.

attempted to take them Parker and other African-Americans from the surrounding area resisted with force. They attacked Gorsuch and a U.S. marshall in what became known as the Christiana Riot. This became national news as it was one of the first confrontations resulting from the Fugitive Slave Act. Stevens was chosen to help defend the rioters and in the end the jury ruled that they were not guilty. It was a victory for the anti-slavery cause but it had its consequences in dividing Pennsylvania. As a result, Stevens lost his bid for reelection in 1853 to the House of Representatives.⁴⁰

It was not only in the legal arena or political arena in which Stevens helped enslaved peoples escape to the North. Lancaster County was known to be an active location for the Underground Railroad and a recent archaeological survey of the Thaddeus Stevens and Lydia Hamilton Smith site has revealed a cistern that is hypothesized to have been used to hide runaway slaves.⁴¹ Stevens was a prominent member of abolitionist society especially after the Christiana Riot and supported the Underground Railroad. Stevens' participation in the Underground Railroad is another example in his long crusade to help those facing the injustice of inequality.

Civil War Era

Stevens returned to Pennsylvania in 1853 after losing his bid for reelection. In his time at home, Stevens spent most of it running his legal practice believing that his political career had ended.⁴² As the 1850s progressed, the country became increasingly volatile as the issue of slavery became more violent as events such as Bleeding Kansas and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 broke out across the country.⁴³ With the turbulence of the 1850s, there were not only divisions formed within the country but also within Stevens' party, the Whig Party. As the country further divided, they set upon the path that erupted into civil war.

Since the late 1840s the divisions within both parties had grown as Congress was composed of anti-slavery Democrats, anti-slavery Whigs, pro-slavery Whigs, pro-slavery Democrats, independents, and a new anti-slavery party called the Free-Soilers.⁴⁴ The final straw for these political factions occurred in 1854 with the debates on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Kansas-Nebraska Act gave the new states of Kansas and Nebraska the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they would be free or slave states. This effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had barely helped placate the warring factions over the issue of slavery. With passage of this act, the political structure of the United States was effectively destroyed and a realignment began. The more radical and anti-slavery forces, former Whigs, and Free Soilers coalesced to form the new Republican Party.⁴⁵

Stevens became attracted to the Republican Party as it provided the strongest position in providing a resistance to the proponents of slavery. He joined the party and, although he was not a member of Congress at the time, he spoke at the Republican National Convention on June 18,

⁴⁰ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 117-18.

⁴¹ James A. Delle and Mary Ann Levine, "Excavations at the Thaddeus Stevens and Lydia Hamilton Smith Site, Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Archaeological Evidence for the Underground Railroad," *Northeast Historical Archaeology* 33: no. 1 (2004): 148-149.

⁴² Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 120

⁴³ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 133-134.

⁴⁴ Hans Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York, Knopf, 1969), 36-37.

⁴⁵ Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans*, 67-68.

1856. In this speech, Stevens argued that the Republican Party must unite the fragmented opposition forces that had sprouted up if they were to succeed in the general election.⁴⁶ The Republicans did not win the election in 1856, but the Republicans had come in second and proved that they were a major party to be reckoned with. Stevens for his part proved that he was a dominant voice within the party as he helped campaign and get other Republicans elected.⁴⁷ In 1859 his efforts were rewarded and the citizens of Pennsylvania sent him back to Congress where he became a committee member on the Ways and Means Committee. The Republicans would continue their fight and in 1860 their nominee Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States, but the wounds in the country had been cut deep and there was no longer any recourse but war. Stevens, Lincoln, Congress, and the United States now faced an even larger task.

As the country shifted towards the coming war, tensions in the Congress were incredibly high. Following the example of South Carolina, which had seceded on December 20, 1860, five more states joined the early Confederacy. While the United States government reeled from these shocking events, Stevens came before the House on January 29, 1861 to speak on the “State of the Union.” In this speech, Stevens railed against the members from the Southern states in their hypocrisy in asking for compromise from Northern members while offering no compromises of their own. An example Stevens gives of this lack of compromise is the admission of Kansas to the Union, which is voted down by the Southern members. Stevens says:

I saw the contribution toward compromise which slaveholding States are willing to make to the North.... Immediately after the bill came up to admit Kansas into the Union; I am sorry to say almost every southern man, men who had just been appealing to us to furnish them ground to stand upon—almost in a solid body the southern men voted against even the consideration of the question of admitting Kansas, that source of all our woes.⁴⁸

In this speech, Stevens places the blame clearly on the Southern states, they are unwilling to compromise while they ask for the North to submit to their demands. Stevens asserted that it was the Southern states who were unreasonable. If only they were willing to work with the North, then perhaps this tragedy could be avoided but because of their stubbornness it is the South that is responsible.

In his address to Congress, Stevens not only placed the blame for the turmoil on the South but also answered the question of whether the government was in fact able to halt secession. Stevens’ answer was simple: “If, on the other hand, it should be decided that we are ONE PEOPLE, and that the Government possess sufficient power to coerce obedience, the public mind will be quieted, plotters of disunion will be regarded as traitors, and we shall long remain a united and happy people.”⁴⁹ This speech is important in showing the attitude that Stevens would take from the very onset of the Civil War and one he kept with him until the very end. For Stevens, the Southerners were traitors who had caused this war because of their desire

⁴⁶Thaddeus Stevens, “Remarks at the Republican National Convention, June 18, 1856, in Philadelphia,” quoted in Palmer, et al., *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 150.

⁴⁷ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 129.

⁴⁸ Thaddeus Stevens, “State of the Union, January 29, 1861, in Congress,” quoted in Palmer, et al., *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 181.

⁴⁹ Stevens, “State of the Union,” 183.

to keep slavery. Not only were they wrong in Stevens' eyes because of their views on slavery but by seceding they had betrayed the United States and had to be punished. Another group that Stevens had to fight with were those called the "Appeasers." These government officials did not want war and advocated that the federal government should appease the South to reconcile. As Stevens' biographer Elizabeth Lawson shows, Stevens was not for the idea of appeasement. She writes, "Stevens called for the immediate and forcible suppression of the traitors; he demanded that the national government collect the Federal revenue from the South as usual, and hold all Federal fortifications."⁵⁰

As the first year of the Civil War progressed, Stevens was appointed as the Chairman for the Committee on Ways and Means. This was an extremely important position as Stevens was in part responsible for the funding of the war. As he noted in his speech to Congress the requirements needed to fund this war were unpleasant but unfortunately necessary.⁵¹ Trefousse mentions the importance of Stevens' contribution to the war effort, especially the ability he possessed in being able to navigate bills through Congress. Stevens guided many of the tariffs and taxation bills required to fund the war through the House.⁵² Trefousse is correct in that the role Stevens played as Chairman of Ways and Means was crucial to the war effort. This responsibility proved that Stevens possessed skills outside of his oratory talents. While his primary focus was always on the abolition of slavery, Stevens' time on the Committee of Ways and Means proved what an effective politician he could be regardless of what the issue was.

Throughout the Civil War, Stevens never lost sight of his most important goal, the end of slavery. In the first years of the Civil War as the country focused on the war effort, Stevens made sure to always keep the idea of abolition in the back of the Congressmen's minds. First in a speech given in 1860, Stevens made the legal argument once again for abolition. Stevens argued that it was the government's responsibility to ensure the personal liberties of all people, just as the First Amendment does with free speech. Using this logic Stevens further argued that abolition could not be a state issue but was inherently the responsibility of the federal government. In another speech on August 2, 1861, Stevens spoke to Congress on the issue of confiscating slaves in the South as property and then freeing them.⁵³ Stevens argued that not only is it right to free these slaves but moreover it weakened the South economically and thus militarily. Just as he did in his past arguments, Stevens not only appealed to the morality of his colleagues but if he was unable to sway them that way, he would then appeal to another sense. If they were against the abolition of slavery, perhaps they could be convinced that ending slavery would secure their goal in defeating the Southern Rebellion.

President Lincoln adopted the tactic that abolition could help end the war. While Stevens fought the battles in the House and kept the anti-slavery movement going, Lincoln slowly began to make pushes for freeing slaves. In a message to the representatives from the border states shortly before Congress adjourned, Lincoln made an appeal to these representatives to begin looking at the issue of emancipation. In Lincoln's statement, he says:

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Lawson, *Thaddeus Stevens* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 15.

⁵¹ Thaddeus Stevens, "Speech on War Financing, July 24, 1861, in Congress," quoted in Palmer, et al., *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 215.

⁵² Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 112-121.

⁵³ Thaddeus Stevens. "Speech on Emancipation and Confiscation, August 2, 1861, in Congress," quoted in Palmer et al., *Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 221-224.

Believing that you of the Border States hold more power for good than any other equal number of members, I feel it a duty which I cannot justifiably waive to make this appeal to you. I intend no reproach or complaint when I assure you that, in my opinion, if you all had voted for the resolution in the gradual-emancipation message of last March, the war would now be substantially ended.⁵⁴

This quote demonstrates Lincoln's appeal to representatives to approve of emancipation, not because it is right but because what everyone had wanted was an end to the war. Lincoln made this appeal but eventually decided to take executive action and passed the Emancipation Proclamation. On September 22, 1862 Lincoln declared: "That on the 1st day of January, A. D. 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."⁵⁵ For Stevens this was a huge step in the right direction, however, it was only a wartime policy and the war had yet to be decided. As the war dragged on Stevens continued his efforts to advance the rights of minorities.

On January 27, 1863 Stevens proposed a bill in Congress that authorized the use of black soldiers in the Union Army. He was forced to make amendments to the bill so that black officers could not supervise their white counterparts as well as limiting the privates' pay to ten dollars a month.⁵⁶ Although 70 years old at the time and with signs of failing health, Stevens was still able to argue before Congress the need for black soldiers. For Stevens, it was unequal that only white soldiers could fight. If African-Americans were to ever sit equally as he so desired, they must be allowed to join in the fighting as well. This fight over black equality in the military would continue through the Civil War and Stevens was always there to defend it. In a speech to Congress on April 30, 1864, Stevens said:

Sir, the question now is whether the soldiers of the United States, who wear the livery of the Union, who march under the banner of the Union, who, in common with the armies of the Union, expose themselves in the battle and to death, shall be placed on an equality, or whether in that position and under that glorious flag we are to keep up the distinctions which have been the infamy and disgrace of the Union....⁵⁷

In late 1864, the divisions of race were still incredibly prevalent in the North. Although there had been great leaps made with the inclusion of the black soldiers and the Emancipation Proclamation, the rights of every freedmen and slave were still in jeopardy as the bloody war crept closer to completion. Stevens understood this threat was still alive and therefore, along with

⁵⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Message of Appeal to Border-State Representatives in Favor of Compensated Emancipation," quoted in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=584>.

⁵⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation 95—Regarding the Status of Slaves in States Engaged in Rebellion Against the United States [Emancipation Proclamation]," quoted in Peters and Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=69880>.

⁵⁶ Thaddeus Stevens, "Bill to Authorize Black Soldiers, January 27, 1873, in Congress," quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 354.

⁵⁷ Thaddeus Stevens, "Remarks on Black Soldiers, April 30, 1864, in Congress," quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 457.

the other Radical Republicans within Congress, began pushing for a constitutional amendment that would end the terrible crime of slavery forever.

As the war neared its end the next question, after how would the rebellious states be reinstated, was what was to be done about slavery? While some on the Democratic side were opposed to the idea of slavery, the Radical Republicans knew this would be their greatest opportunity to abolish it. On March 28, 1864 Stevens introduced a resolution in the House calling for a constitutional amendment that would abolish slavery, however, this measure would be defeated 38-69.⁵⁸ The measure was raised again and following the election of 1864 the Republicans had won the White House again and gained a larger majority within the House, but they still were a few votes short of gaining passage of the amendment. Now the Republicans aimed to make a larger push for its passage. President Lincoln gave a speech urging the passage of the bill. As the New Year began, Stevens would rise to Congress once again to give a final speech on the Thirteenth Amendment. With his clubbed leg and red-brown wig covering his bald head, “the Old Commoner” rose to do battle again in the name of abolition. In his speech, he spoke of his history in defense of abolition and that the matter now lay before the Congress whether they would receive the power to end slavery once and for all. In one of the more memorable lines from his speech, Stevens said,

And yet, sir, I did not hesitate, in the midst of bowie-knives and revolvers and howling demons upon the other side of the House, to stand here and denounce this infamous institution in language which possibly, on looking at it, I might deem intemperate, but which I then deemed necessary to rouse the public attention and cast odium upon the worst institution upon earth one which is a disgrace to man and would be an annoyance to the infernal spirits.⁵⁹

In this one speech Stevens, had laid out the struggle for abolition and the intensity with which this battle was fought. It was not just words, but threats with weapons were made and here was Stevens still fighting.

On January 31, 1865 with many still unsure as to how the vote would go many people gathered within the gallery to watch the proceedings.⁶⁰ As the votes began, the Republicans voted for the amendment but it would become clear once the first Democrats had begun voting along with the Republicans that the bill had passed. After decades of work by the abolitionists and Radical Republicans, along with the years of torture and imprisonment, finally the death of slavery rang throughout the Capitol. The next step would be to ensure that this freedom would be kept for posterity.

Reconstruction

The Civil War caused a profound transformation in the United States. As Eric Foner states: “Like a massive earthquake, the Civil War and the destruction of slavery permanently altered the landscape of Southern life, exposing and widening fault lines that had lain barely

⁵⁸ Thaddeus Stevens, “Resolution on Emancipation, March 28, 1864, in Congress,” quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 448.

⁵⁹ Thaddeus Stevens, “Abolition of Slavery, January 13, 1865, in Congress,” quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 522.

⁶⁰ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 204.

visible just beneath the surface.”⁶¹ The war had cut deep wounds in the country and the success of the war was not being determined merely on the battlefield but on how the country moved forward following the war. There were important questions on how the country should move forward. How should the south be reintegrated and who should be responsible for establishing Reconstruction: the President, or the Congress? This was the task of Thaddeus Stevens and his fellow Congressman as well as President Lincoln—to figure out what the next step for the wounded country should be.

Before the war had ended, Stevens was preparing himself by planning for what would happen next. As the leading advocate for the anti-slavery wing of the Republican Party, Stevens’ main goal was to help ensure that the institution of slavery was wiped from the face of the United States. However, Stevens understood that even with freedom the recently freed slaves still faced an incredible danger from their ex-masters who would make every attempt to either enslave them once again or create a system which was as equally close. Brodie says of Stevens, “Stevens wanted the freedmen to have not only personal liberty but also suffrage, free schools, and forty acres.”⁶² For this reason Stevens made it his mission that the new freedmen were guaranteed the full protection of the law by ensuring that his plans were approved and fighting the efforts of those he disagreed with.

In this struggle, one of the main figures who both worked with and opposed Stevens at times was President Lincoln. Lincoln was given the difficult task of sewing the wounds between the North and South. On the one hand, many in the North, like Stevens, were seeking the punishment and restructuring of the South. On the other hand, while in the South, Southerners feared the repercussions of their rebellion and of the vengeance that might be brought forth upon them. Lincoln in an effort to help bring the South back into the fold looked for the easiest transition for the South. On December 8, 1863 Lincoln issued his “*Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction*.” This proclamation granted a full pardon and return of their property to the people living in the Confederacy who had not been previous members of Congress or who had served the Confederacy, but agreed to swear an oath to the United States and to follow certain provisions. These provisions included the creation of a new state government contingent on ten percent of the eligible voters in the states of rebellion swearing an oath of allegiance to the United States. Second, it encouraged the states to create laws for the protection of freedmen that would not be objected to by the President. And finally, it ensured that the state boundaries that had existed before the war would be reinstated.⁶³ As can be seen in this proclamation, Lincoln attempted to create a system in which the Southern states could easily be readmitted to the Union.

Stevens took a complicated view of the plan that Lincoln had presented. In one sense, he was against the idea of the “Ten Percent Plan,” as it became known. Stating in the House of Representatives, “If ten men fit to save Sodom can elect a Governor and State officers for and against the eleven hundred thousand sodomites in Virginia, then the democratic doctrine that the majority shall rule is discarded and dangerously ignored.” Stevens added, “When the doctrine that the quality and not the number of voters is to decide the right to govern, then we have no longer a republic, but the worst form of despotism.”⁶⁴ For Stevens this not only was an easy way out for the Confederacy but also betrayed his ideals of a democratic government. Stevens did

⁶¹ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 5.

⁶² Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 207.

⁶³ Abraham Lincoln, *Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction*, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/procamn.htm>.

⁶⁴ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 207.

give praise to the proclamation because he viewed it as the military rule he was advocating for. In his estimation, the establishment of a military government that set the rules for the state was the way a conqueror was supposed to act. He believed, though, that this power was being underutilized and could be more effective in punishing the South. This same reasoning was used in his reservations of the Wade-Davis Bill. In 1864, Radical Republicans Ben Wade and Henry Winter Davis proposed a bill for reconstruction that, like Lincoln's proclamation, included an oath of loyalty, but the loyalty oath from the Wade-Davis bill stated that those who swore they had not voluntarily borne arms against the United States nor given aide to those who had. It also prohibited slavery, disavowed Confederated debts, and barred Confederate officeholders from holding any post in the new governments. When Lincoln saw the bill, he was deeply opposed to this stricter oath as it caused problems with Southerners. Meanwhile, Stevens was against the bill as he was hoping for more stringent penalties on the Southern States, and most importantly, a measure that would include severe confiscation of property from the Southern States. In a letter to President Lincoln in 1864, Stevens quickly made sure that the rumors he had heard of friendly terms with the South were not true. Stevens wrote, "This twaddle about new peace propositions, promulgated by Butler, and others is as unwise, and near as injurious as those made three or four months ago, ... I am happy in believing that you will give no countenance to such superficial suggestions."⁶⁵ Stevens was adamant on the need for the punishment of the South. With multiple plans at work, and with rumors of generous terms for the South, he found it necessary to make sure his intentions were understood and that there would be no amiable terms for the traitors.

The early debates over Reconstruction demonstrate how complex the issue was for many of these leaders. Each one, in a sense, tried to bring the Union back together, but also with different penalties. For Lincoln, the quicker the Union was reunited, the better. And, the less harsh the penalties were, the easier it was for wounds to heal. Stevens opposed this measure strongly. As a champion of the antislavery movement he believed that the states must be punished and freedmen protected. Through the laws passed by Congress, Stevens hoped to punish and rebuild the South so that the scourge of slavery was never seen again.

Reconstruction hit a roadblock on its way to implementation immediately after the end of the Civil War. Lincoln was assassinated on April 15th, 1865, which meant the Vice-President Andrew Johnson would now lead Reconstruction. From the beginning, Johnson became a problem for Stevens and his Radical Republican allies. In a conference with Stevens concerning his selection of a vice president, Lincoln asked Stevens why Johnson was not a suitable candidate for Vice President. Stevens' reply: "Mr. President, Andrew Johnson is a rank demagogue, and at heart a damned scoundrel."⁶⁶ This characterization of Johnson by Stevens shows that early on Stevens was concerned for the future of Reconstruction. He did believe Johnson to be a man that could be trusted in applying the measures that Stevens wanted. For that matter, Lincoln was also not in line with Stevens on his plans for Reconstruction. Lincoln viewed Reconstruction as part of the effort to win the war and secure emancipation. His aim was to weaken the Confederacy by establishing state governments that attracted broad southern support. To the Radicals, Reconstruction implied a far-reaching transformation in Southern society; thus, they wished to delay the process until after the war and to limit participation to a

⁶⁵ Thaddeus Stevens, "Thaddeus Stevens to Abraham Lincoln, Sunday, November 20, 1864," *The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/385/3853400/malpage.db&recNum=0>.

⁶⁶ Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 217.

smaller number of “iron-clad loyalists.”⁶⁷ In this idea of the Radicals’ Reconstruction, the only way that the slaves’ freedom was protected was through the destruction of the southern way of life. The South would have to be reconfigured in a way that former slaves could not be coerced into a similar system of slavery. With the death of President Lincoln, this would prove to be even more difficult as President Andrew Johnson would have different objectives.

The first major concern that Stevens and his radical allies had about Johnson’s plans dealt with the idea of black suffrage. According to Foner, “In the weeks following Lincoln’s assassination, leading Radicals met frequently with the new President to press the issue of black suffrage. Yet Johnson shared neither the Radicals’ expansive conception of federal power nor their commitment to political equality for blacks,”⁶⁸ Johnson thought that his version of Reconstruction could be passed but what was concerning was the influence from Stevens. One article in the *Richmond Examiner* in December of 1865 noted, “The President expressed the belief that Congress and the Executive could harmonize on a plan of reconstruction. He expressed fears that, under the lead of Thaddeus Stevens, the House took a position which it could not hold.”⁶⁹ Johnson would be blunter in a speech given on February 22, 1866. In this speech, Johnson said, “I am free to mention to you the names of those whom I look upon as being opposed to the fundamental principles of this Government and who are baring to pervert and destroy it. I say they are Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Mr. Sumner of the Senate, and Mr. Phillips.”⁷⁰ Stevens and Lincoln, although not always in accordance with each other, held a mutual respect for the other and were useful in accomplishing numerous goals throughout the war. This relationship did not extend with Johnson. The bad blood between these two leaders culminated in a standoff that shook the entire country.

The problems between Johnson and Stevens erupted when the President implemented the process of admitting the former Confederate states into the Union. As Stevens wrote to his friend in the Senate Charles Sumner: “I see the President is precipitating things. Virginia is recognized! I fear before Congress meets he will have so be-deviled matters as to render them incurable....”⁷¹ For the Radicals in Congress, the South was being readmitted to the Union too leniently. This point was further exacerbated by President Johnson’s North Carolina Proclamation on May 29, 1865. In this Proclamation, Johnson had appointed William H. Holden as provisional governor of North Carolina and requested that he organize a convention preparatory to North Carolina’s reentry into the Union. The North Carolina Proclamation stipulated that voter qualifications remain as they had been before the war.⁷² Thus, what appeared to the Radicals was that the South would reassert the political power it had during the Antebellum era, and all the work that had gone into abolishing slavery would be lost. Stevens expressed this fear in a letter to his friend William Kelley: “I see our worthy president fancies himself a sovereign power- His North Carolina proclamations sicken me. He to order how the government shall be remodeled with his Arty genl. to back him; but I fear all his cabinet! By the time, Congress meets all will be passed

⁶⁷ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 29.

⁶⁸ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 83.

⁶⁹ *Richmond Examiner*, December 12, 1865.

⁷⁰ *Weekly Patriot and Union*, March 1, 1866, Harrisburg, PA, 2.

⁷¹ Thaddeus Stevens, “To Charles Sumner; May 10, 1865,” quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 4.

⁷² Andrew Johnson, “Proclamation 135—Reorganizing a Constitutional Government in North Carolina May 29, 1865,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72403>.

remedy I fear.”⁷³ The idea that the Radicals could work with the President was gone, now the Radicals with a new majority in Congress following the midterm elections of 1866, saw a new path.

As the Johnson Presidency went on it became increasingly clear that the Radicals would not see their goals accomplished if President Johnson was in office. The goal for them would then be that they would need a reason in which they could impeach Johnson for Congress to retake control of Reconstruction. While Congress was searching for avenues in which they could circumvent the President’s authority, the President himself became wary of the advisers that surrounded him. He felt the pressure that he was facing not only Congress but also some within his administration such as Edwin Stanton the Secretary of War. Stanton had refused to resign when the President asked him, and if he would not resign then Johnson had to fire him. To prevent his removal, Congress passed the Tenure of Office Act. On August 12, 1867 Johnson gave an Executive Order which suspended Stanton from his office.⁷⁴ With this firing, the Congress now had its reasoning and passed a Resolution of Impeachment against President Johnson on charges for high crimes and misdemeanors. Thaddeus Stevens sponsored the Bill.⁷⁵

When the Impeachment trials began, Stevens had entered his late seventies, and was suffering from several illnesses. After years of battling in the Congress, he was beginning to show signs of his failing health. However, Stevens found the strength to continue his efforts, and became the lead opponent within the Johnson trial. Trefousse noted, “That Stevens was able to function at all that winter was astonishing. Suffering from various, diseases, he looked deathly pale, and was often unable to meet his obligations, and took medicines for his liver and stomach to counteract the dropsy.”⁷⁶ Regardless of his limitations, Stevens still took the floor of Congress and railed against the President and the crimes he had committed. Unfortunately for Stevens and the Radicals, Johnson escaped conviction by one mere vote.⁷⁷ Following the failure of the impeachment proceedings, Stevens became ill and unable to travel. He stayed in his home in Washington with his longtime house-keeper Ms. Smith and on August 11-12, 1868 he passed away.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Thaddeus Stevens spent decades of his life to secure the freedoms of millions of Americans. Always a champion of the underclass, Stevens helped gain the freedom of education for all of Pennsylvania’s children. In Congress, Stevens fought against the spread of slavery and then for the abolition of it completely. If Stevens was in Congress, there was a discussion over slavery and how it must be ended. Even in the brutal years of the Civil War, Stevens did not allow the country to become distracted and lose sight over the issue of slavery. He continued to push for it and although he was not always successful in his efforts for Reconstruction, he did

⁷³ Thaddeus Stevens, “To William D. Kelley; May 30th 1865,” quoted in Palmer et al, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, 6-7.

⁷⁴ Andrew Johnson, “Executive Order—Suspending from Office Edwin M. Stanton as Secretary of War August 12, 1867,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=72131>.

⁷⁵ Chester Hearn, *The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company ,1993), 131.

⁷⁶ Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 222.

⁷⁷ Hearn, *Impeachment of Andrew Johnson*, 1.

⁷⁸ “The Death of Thaddeus Stevens, The Last Hours of the Veteran Statesman,” *Commercial Advertiser*, August 13, 1868, New York, 1.

help to secure the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed the end of that terrible institution. Over the course of the mid-nineteenth century Stevens became a giant amongst political figures advocating for the equality of races. His life's work helped to transform the lives of millions of people across the United States. Whether it was gaining free education for the children of Pennsylvania or pushing for equal rights, Stevens gave his entire spirit in the purpose of seeking liberty and justice for all.

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