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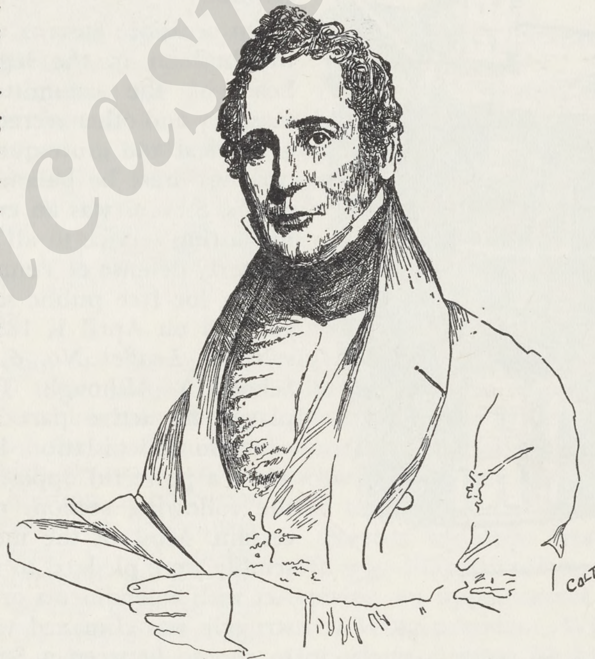
Thaddeus Stevens: Champion of Freedom

THADDEUS STEVENS, son of a poor Vermont shoemaker, was one of Pennsylvania's strangest and most baffling personalities. He was a man strongly liked or disliked. To some he was the "Old Commoner" or "Great Leveler," who fought for the poor, the oppressed, and the underprivileged; by others he was held in great contempt as a clubfooted, evil, vengeful politician who climbed to power by shrewdly supporting the issues that were popular with the lowest class of voters of his day. Even today with new information at hand there remain sharp differences of opinion about him. Thus he still stands, a controversial figure, inspiring either admiration or hatred.

Thaddeus Stevens was a Pennsylvanian by choice. Born at Danville, Vermont, April 4, 1792, the sacrifices of his widowed mother enabled him to get a good education based on the classics and mathematics at Peacham Academy, Dartmouth College, and the University of Vermont. Headstrong, diligent, and independent, at some point in his youth Stevens became ambitious to gain great wealth. At the same time he developed a strong dislike for aristocracy and anything suggesting class distinction and special privilege. This latter attitude may have been provoked because he was once rejected for membership in the scholarship fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa. This created a deep dislike toward all secret organizations, markedly displayed in his later denunciations of Freemasonry as a secret, fraternal order with special membership qualifications.



Thaddeus Stevens as a young man.

After graduating from Dartmouth he taught for a short time at Peacham Academy and began the reading of law in the office of "Judge" John Mattocks. But a larger world than a small Vermont village beckoned, and in 1815 Stevens moved to southern Pennsylvania where he became an instructor in the York County Academy, employing his leisure time in studying law under the tutelage of David Casset, York's leading lawyer. Prevented from taking his examination in less than a year by local bar rules, he skirted this obstacle by crossing the Mason-Dixon Line into Bel Air, Maryland, where, after listing the legal works he had read and going through other formalities, he was admitted to practice.

Stevens hung out his shingle in Gettysburg, then a town of about a thousand people and the seat of Adams County, and waited for business. As a young lawyer he got along on a meager income for several years. After his skilful defense of a murderer for whom he pleaded insanity, a most unusual plea at that time, he quickly acquired a lucrative practice and earned recognition as the leading figure of the Adams County bar. By shrewd purchase and by taking full advantage of sheriff's sales, Stevens became the owner of so much property that by 1830 he was the largest taxpayer in the borough of Gettysburg. With James D. Paxton as partner he went into the iron business at Maria Furnace at the western end of the county, and at Caledonia Forge near Chambersburg. These ventures absorbed much of his fortune during the depressed years of

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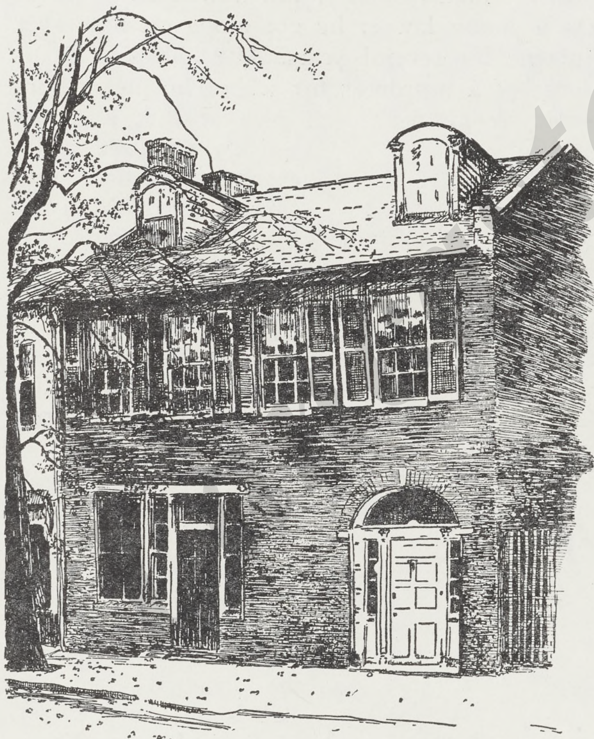
the 1830's, a situation that made him an advocate of the protective tariff. In his pursuit of fortune, he made some enemies who claimed he used sharp methods in buying up properties. On the other hand, he was commended for keeping his ironworks in operation despite losses in order to furnish a livelihood for his employees. In these years he became an avowed enemy of slavery, and without fee defended many runaway slaves fleeing north. A Negro woman, Lydia Smith, was a faithful housekeeper for the bachelor Stevens for many years.

The beginning of his long and stormy career in public life dates from 1829. His bitter attacks on Freemasonry as a secret conspiracy monopolizing all positions of high profit and honor in the State and nation, marked him as "the great luminary of anti-masonry in Adams County."

Politically, Stevens developed from Federalist to Anti-Mason, to Whig, to Republican, political groups that emerged in opposition to the dominating power of the Democratic party. In 1833



Law office and residence of Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg.

he was elected on the Anti-Masonic ticket to the lower house of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, where he served intermittently until 1842. Fiercely partisan and aggressive, Stevens rose to leadership by introducing legislation designed to curb secret societies, particularly Freemasonry, seeking larger appropriations for Pennsylvania's colleges, advocating a constitutional limit to the State debt, offering a resolution favoring the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and defending the protective tariff and the United States Bank. He refused to sign the new State constitution of 1838 because it allowed only white citizens to vote. The State works program of canal and railroad construction was extended during these years, and for a time Stevens was chairman of the canal commissioners, a position that allowed for the wielding of patronage which he skilfully used to strengthen and keep in power the Anti-Masons. He sponsored the building of the Gettysburg or "Tapeworm" Railroad, a deliberately circuitous and useless line planned to enrich contractors, make jobs, and produce votes. In a struggle between the Anti-Masons and Whigs on one side and the Democrats on the other for control of the lower house, the "Buckshot War" of 1838, he escaped a mob by jumping from a window of the Capitol.

On occasion, Stevens was charged with acting the buffoon in the legislature. His antics as head of the committee investigating Freemasonry and other secret societies were regarded as farcical and grotesque. However, these shortcomings must be balanced against his achievements. Stevens was an enemy of ignorance, and his lasting service to all Pennsylvanians was his masterly defense of Pennsylvania's new law providing for free public schools, which had been adopted on April 1, 1834. (See *Historic Pennsylvania Leaflet No. 6,* "The Fight for Free Schools.") Although Thaddeus Stevens had played no active part in the passage of this educational legislation, he sprang to its defense when a powerful opposition arose against it in the following session, making its death seem certain. Most of the members of the new Assembly were pledged to weaken the Free School Act with amendments or repeal it outright. The struggle was climaxed when the legislators had to choose between a Senate bill repealing the act, and a House bill preserving the system with

but a few changes. It seemed certain that the Senate bill would triumph.

At this point Thaddeus Stevens, re-elected to the House with instructions from his constituents to favor repeal, marshalled his great powers of intense persuasiveness and trenchant oratory in a speech that routed the opposition and earned for him the title of "savior" of Pennsylvania's public school system. His conviction that education produced and preserved a happier and democratic society is evident in his earlier criticism of his colleagues for favoring without question measures that would improve the breed of *hogs*, but economizing on measures to improve the breed of *men!* In this caustic mood he now chided them for wanting to kill the school law before it had actually gone into effect:

> It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the nineteenth century, of entering into a formal argument to prove the utility, and to free governments, the absolute necessity of education. . . . Such necessity would be degrading to a Christian age and a free republic.
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> If an elective republic is to endure for any great length of time, every elector must have sufficient information, not only to accumulate wealth and take care of his pecuniary concerns, but to direct wisely the Legislatures, the Ambassadors, and the Executive of the nation; for some part of all these things, some agency in approving or disapproving of them, falls to every freeman. If, then, the permanency of our government depends upon such knowledge, it is the duty of government to see that the means of information be diffused to every citizen. This is a sufficient answer to those who deem education a private and not a public duty—who argue that they are willing to educate their own children, but not their neighbor's children.
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> I trust that when we come to act on this question, we shall take lofty ground—look beyond the narrow space which now circumscribes our vision—beyond the passing, fleeting point of time on which we stand—and so cast our votes that the blessing of education shall be conferred on every son of Pennsylvania—shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freedom, and lay on earth a broad and solid foundation for that enduring knowledge which goes on increasing through increasing eternity.

Stevens in his seventies when a leader in Congress.

This great speech won the day for free schools. The House version of the education bill was adopted and Pennsylvania's public school system went into operation. For his masterly action in turning opposition into support, Stevens' talents were acclaimed even by a hostile political press as "never exerted in a nobler cause or with greater effect than on this occasion, and we feel assured that a more powerful effort of oratory was never listened to within the walls of this or any other legislative hall." More enduring is his assured position in the annals of Pennsylvania education, and the many schools that bear his name are monuments in his honor.

Stevens withdrew from public life in 1842. He was disappointed and embittered at not receiving an appointment to the cabinet of the new Whig president, William Henry Harrison, for whose election he had strenuously labored. But his failing iron business and his law prac-

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tice now required his personal attention, and in 1842 he removed to Lancaster where he quickly attained eminence as a lawyer with considerable income. To pay off the heavy debts of his Caledonia Iron Works he found it necessary to sell much of his property in the Gettysburg area, including the site of the buildings and campus of Gettysburg College, which he deeded to the College trustees.

Sitting on the sidelines of a political arena in turbulence, however necessary, was galling to a man of Stevens' ambition and temperament. His positive convictions on the matters of the tariff, the treasury system, and the extension of slavery into the new territories had to find outlet. By shrewd maneuverings he won election to Congress in 1848 as a Whig from the Lancaster district. Predicting his role as no frail politician content to drawl out a sleepy "Aye" or "No," the local Democrats bade him farewell with these prophetic words: "He goes into Congress the predetermined agitator of sectional jealousies and divisions. . . . His mission is to be one of Strife, of Division, and of Hatred, and surely there is no one so well qualified to fulfill it."

With the coming of secession and civil war, and with Congress controlled by the Republicans, Stevens was made chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee that handled all financial measures concerned with the war. Legislation to float loans, raise revenue, impose new taxes, and issue paper money was steered through the House under his leadership. Toward the South there was possibly no one more severe. He demanded the confiscation of property, arming the slaves, emancipating slaves in conquered areas by military fiat, and enforcing submission by "desolating" the South, exterminating the "rebels," abolishing state lines, and recolonizing the region. This extreme position may have stemmed from his own ardent spirit of democracy and equalitarianism, and was probably intensified by the wanton burning and confiscation of all movable items of his own Caledonia Iron Works by Confederate General Early's raiding forces that pushed into Pennsylvania late in June, 1863, preceding the Battle of Gettysburg. Informed of the destruction, which amounted to about $90,000, his angry feelings were followed with the comment, "I know not what the poor families will do. I must provide for their present relief." This he did, caring for some families for the next three years.

Stevens' concern for the victims of war did not extend to the southerners who were being relentlessly hammered, starved, and blockaded into defeat after the Battle of Gettysburg. Stubborn radicalism of this sort, a policy of revenge, and assurance of Republican supremacy contrasted darkly with President Lincoln's and President Johnson's policies of moderation and conciliation designed to reunite and reconstruct the South as speedily and easily as possible. As the leading figure of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction set up by Congress in 1865, Stevens was the most radical of the "Radical Republicans" responsible for the Freedmen's Bureau Bill, the Civil Rights Bill, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, all measures designed to aid the Negro. They were climaxed by the imposition of military rule and Negro-carpetbagger government over the South for the next ten years. The legacy was an "age of hate" that sharpened racial antagonism, unified the southern whites into the Democratic party, embittered political life, and delayed the social and economic revival of the southern states.

In failing health, just a month before his death at the age of seventy-six, Stevens' final act was to introduce a bill in Congress asking that free schools be established in the District of Columbia, a fitting return to the cause that had first won him fame as a fighter for freedom of the mind and a champion of equal rights. The epitaph of his own composition inscribed on his tombstone in Shreiner's cemetery in Lancaster epitomizes his belief in equality: "I repose in this quiet and secluded spot, not from any natural preference for solitude, but finding other cemeteries limited by charter rules as to race, I have chosen this that I might illustrate in my death the principles which I advocated through a long life, equality of man before his Creator."

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