STEVENS, THADDEUS

Old Thad Stevens

"One of the strongest men of the nation"

by Hans L. Trefousse

In a small cemetery on Chestnut Street, not far from the main square of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, there is a well preserved monument. An attractive tombstone, it contains a plaque with the words,

I Repose In This Quiet And Secluded Spot
Not From Any Natural Preference For Solitude,
But Finding Other Cemeteries Limited As To Race,
By Charter Rules,
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

It marks the grave of Thaddeus Stevens, the only member of Congress ever to be called the "Commoner," who more than a century ago led the fight for justice for black Americans.

In this struggle Stevens' life was a perfect illustration of the role of the radicals of his day. Generally controversial from the very beginning, by goading their colleagues to ever bolder positions, they acted as the spark plug of the Republican party. As long as Abraham Lincoln lived, radicals were able to achieve success, largely because of his agreement with many of their aims. Once he was gone they ran into trouble, for Andrew Johnson sympathized with neither their aims nor their assumptions. But they continued to fight stubbornly for their vision of racial democracy.

More advanced than many of his associates, Stevens not only fits this model but became its outstanding example. Although most radicals led stormy lives, few men in our history have been more controversial than the astonishing representative from Pennsylvania. Long considered the incarnation of everything the South detested, he became the prototype of the archvillain in Thomas Dixon's vitriolic novel, *The Clansmen*, and the source for D.W. Griffith's 1915 motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation* [See AHI, February 1980]. As late as 1942, he still figured as the vicious antagonist of a noble president in the film, *Tennessee Johnson* (Van Heflin played Johnson, and Lionel Barrymore, Stevens). Historians of the old school have heaped obloquy on him, accusing him of vindictiveness and personal motives for imposing black suffrage on a suffering South. While most of them have conceded his talents, not until very recently has the more attractive portrait earlier drawn by his admirers been generally accepted.

Thaddeus Stevens commissioned artist Jacob Eichholz to paint his portrait about the time he first gained prominence as an Anti-Mason leader. In the speech that won recognition for him, he condemned secret orders. He was thirty-eight at the time. Courtesy of the Lancaster County Historical Society.

The controversy surrounding Stevens is easy to explain. His early difficulties and physical misfortunes, as well as rumors about the private life of the persistent bachelor, naturally contributed to

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it; his later radicalism made it inevitable. Born in Danville, Vermont on April 4, 1792, Stevens was handicapped from birth. He had a club foot, a disability which undoubtedly tortured him throughout his career. He tried to compensate for it by excelling in sports—in swimming, horseback riding, and fox hunting—but he could never hide the fact that he walked with a limp. Once as he sat with his bad foot propped up on the edge of a desk, he noticed a small boy looking at it intently. Thrusting it close to the youngster, Stevens snapped, "There, look at it! It won't bite! It's not a snake!" His sense of feeling marked could not have lessened when in his late thirties disease caused him to lose his hair. Thereafter he wore ill-fitting wigs.

To add to Stevens' troubles, his father, a farmer and cobbler, abandoned the family, leaving the mother, whom the boy adored, to bring up their four children. Mrs. Stevens worked hard. An extremely devout woman with hopes of training her most promising son for the ministry, she saved to send him to college. But though he knew what he owed her, after graduation from Dartmouth he studied law instead. Stevens' early legal career was not easy. At first few clients came to the law office he opened in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, but after he earned a reputation for skill in the court room in a difficult murder case, his practice flourished.

Apparently Stevens' club foot kept him from marrying, and local enemies soon accused him of loose living. They even sought to tie him to a murder by spreading rumors involving him in the suspicious death of a pregnant young black girl. He sued for libel and won, yet the unproven accusations of murder and paternity left their scar.

Stevens' persistent bachelorhood gave rise to unending talk. He was handsome, about five feet ten inches tall, large boned and broad shouldered. Clean shaven, with a ruddy complexion, he was, with the exception of his deformed foot, "a perfect physical man." Women found him attractive. But his appeal to the opposite sex merely contributed to rumors of his immorality. These were not dispelled when in 1848 he engaged a widowed mulatto woman, Lydia Hamilton Smith, to become his housekeeper. The arrangement proved to be an excellent one. She remained with him for the rest of his life, managing his household efficiently. Gossip credited her with becoming his lady in all but name, and such unfounded speculation subjected him to more adverse criticism. Outwardly he remained unaffected by it, never addressing the slander directly except to state late in life that he had always employed men and women in his household and, as far as he knew, no child had ever been sired under his roof. He chose to disregard further rumors.

The controversy about Stevens was also fueled by his contradictory character. Unrelenting in the pursuit of his enemies, he could nevertheless show remarkable generosity. In 1822 he managed to buy cheaply at a sheriff's sale the farm and library of a local lawyer, James Dobbins. Charging that Stevens had purchased the property by fraudulently discouraging others from bidding—he had told people that it was not worth much because there was a lien on it—Dobbins sued him and won, only to have the verdict reversed on appeal. But Stevens now offered to return the property at cost and eventually provided for Dobbins in his old age. Of course, people said that he did so only to silence his opponents; of course, he continued to be accused of indecent pursuit of gain. Yet he refused to make use of the bankruptcy laws to save himself from the consequences of the Panic of 1837 in which his iron works had suffered severely.

If he was able to make money quickly, he was also charitable. He handed $5 to a beggar woman who asked for 75¢ she claimed to have mislaid, remarking that he had just found what she had lost. And though he gambled incessantly and distrusted the clergy, he nevertheless gave lavishly to several churches. Once when a Baptist minister asked for a donation, Stevens gave him a crumpled $100 note that he had carelessly stuffed into his pocket after winning at dice. "How inscrutable are the ways of Providence," replied Stevens to the astonished preacher's protests.

Stevens' wit, sarcasm, and ability at repartee made him unpopular with many of his colleagues. Meeting one of his opponents who had especially antagonized him in the Pennsylvania legislature, he asked:

"Mr. B., are you a married man?"

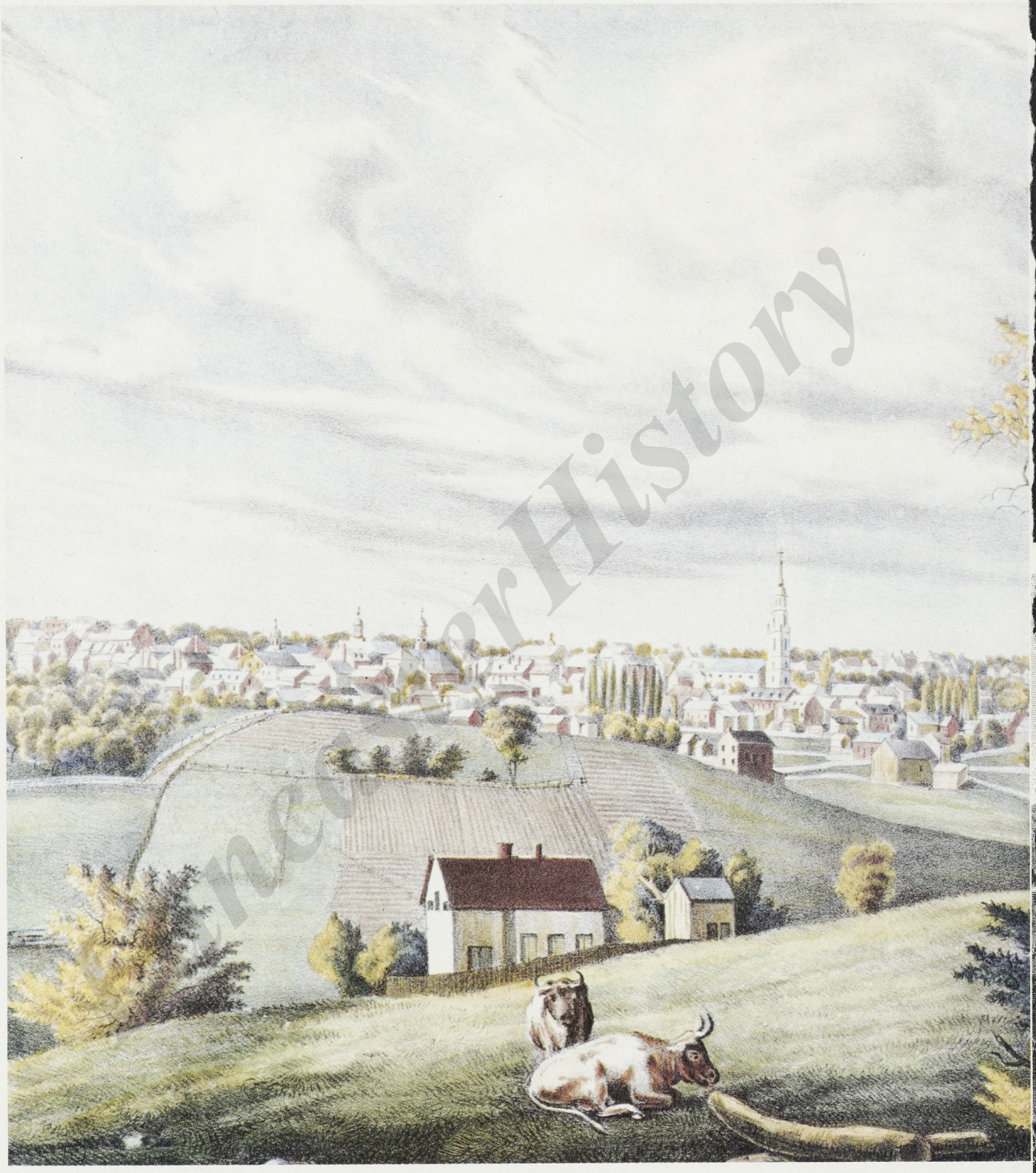
"Yes," was the answer.

"Have you any children?"

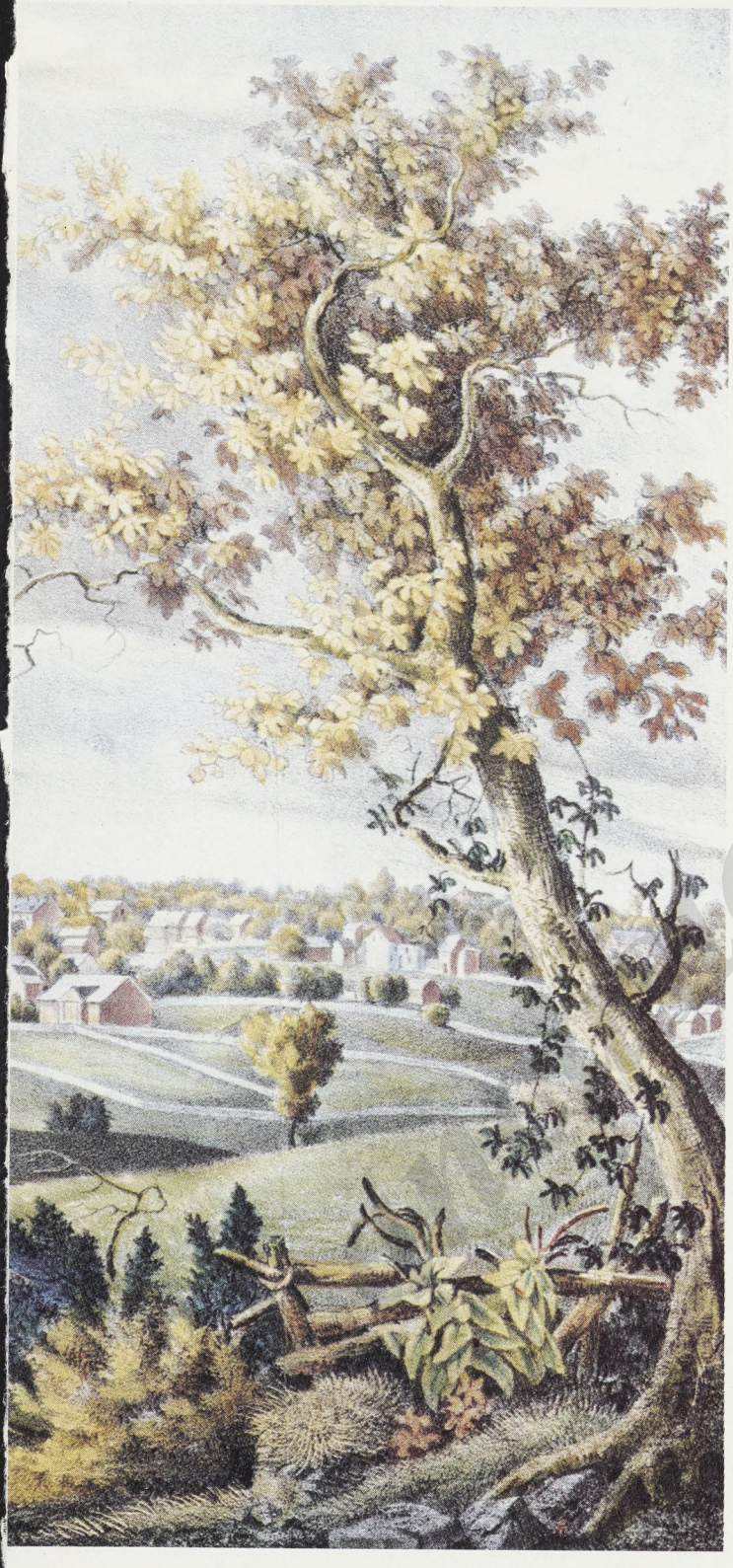
"Yes, several."

"I am sorry to hear that," Stevens replied. "I was in hopes, sir, you were the last of your race."

Once, as an assailant was about to sit down after verbally attacking Stevens in the House, Stevens retorted, "Mr. Speaker, it will not be expected of me to notice a thing which has crawled into this House and adheres to one of the seats by its own slime." In Congress, Representative James Brooks of New York accused him of being a master of Billingsgate. There were several gates, he added, Billingsgate, Newgate, and Cripplegate, only to elicit a cutting response. Stevens admitted knowing all about Billingsgate. His profession had made him familiar with Newgate and the Lord with Cripplegate, but the gentleman from New York had forgotten Hell's Gate, which Stevens



When Stevens left the state legislature in 1841 he retired to Lancaster. He practiced law in the prosperous farm community until his of Lancaster in 1842. Yeager and O'Connor Print Collection.



election to Congress on the Whig ticket in 1848. Southwest view

hoped to avoid but which Brooks was fast approaching. To a lawyer who had disappointed him he said, "You must be a bastard, for I knew your mother's husband, and he was a gentleman and an honest man."

Always biting in his criticism of slavery, in 1850 Stevens suggested that everybody be given a chance to enjoy the institution Southerners insisted was a blessing for blacks. "Let the slaves, who choose, go free," he urged, "and the free, who choose, be slaves."

In spite of his sharp tongue, he retained friendly relations with several of his opponents, but his radicalism inevitably made enemies.

Stevens entered the Pennsylvania legislature in 1833, neither as a Democrat, nor as a National Republican, but as an Anti-Mason. The peculiar movement against the fraternity had started in upstate New York with the sudden disappearance of a citizen who wanted to reveal Masonic secrets. Assuming that the man had been murdered by the Masons, a group of men organized into a party dedicated to eradicating the order's influence. For many, it was principally a vehicle to combat the Jacksonians—Old Hickory was a Mason. Stevens, however, believed wholeheartedly in its tenets. Calling the Free Masons a "feeble band of lowly reptiles," he was convinced that with their secret oaths and rituals they constituted a dire threat to American liberty.

He quickly became the leader of the party in his state. Uncompromising as always, he initiated a rancorous investigation of the Masons that drew hatred from adherents of the fraternity, among whom were some highly respected members of the community. He effectively cooperated with the Whigs in reestablishing the Bank of the United States in Pennsylvania, but again showed his willingness to defy critics by obtaining a charter for a railroad running west from Gettysburg. Unfortunately, its path was so convoluted that it was speedily dubbed the "tapeworm," and brought further epithets against Stevens, since the transportation it provided for his own iron works was not lost on his critics.

The so-called "Buckshot War" highlighted Stevens' radicalism in Pennsylvania politics. Appointed canal commissioner in 1838, he used the office to strengthen his faction in the forthcoming elections. But he failed. The Anti-Masonic governor was defeated. The returns for the House were in dispute, and the anti-Democratic coalition, led by Stevens, determined to seat its members, come what might. The Jacksonians were no less adamant. Two Houses were organized, and Stevens' foes threatened to keep him from taking his seat with physical force. He finally eluded his attackers

by jumping out of a window. In the general disorder that followed, the governor called in the militia, whose guns were loaded with buckshot cartridges, but at last the Democrats prevailed. Declining his seat in a legislature so constituted, Stevens was expelled, only to be re-elected by his outraged constituents.

Stevens' theatrical performances and controversial actions could not hide the fact that his radicalism made him an agent of progress. This was especially true in the field of education, his first great legislative success. Outside of Philadelphia, free schools were unknown in Pennsylvania in the 1830s, so that the poor were generally left without education. Believing that it was the duty of the state to insure the proficiency of every child in "the three R's," in 1834 he strongly supported a successful bill to extend the Philadelphia system throughout the state.

Because it aroused strong opposition, particularly among sects maintaining their own schools, its repeal in the following session seemed certain. But just before the House was ready to vote on the issue Stevens rose to defend it. Pleading the cause of free education in a magnificent speech in which he steadfastly advanced his radical notions, he won over the House, which now voted to strengthen rather than to repeal the bill. Even his bitter critic, Alexander Harris, conceded that enemies as well as friends recognized the "overpowering superiority" of the oration, which "ranked its author, henceforth, as one of the first intellects of Pennsylvania." Stevens, who had helped write the bill, had shown that he knew how to advance an important reform.

He was also interested in other legislation. Protective tariffs, internal improvements, and inflation were close to his heart, and he spoke out on them whenever possible. In the last analysis, however, his fame must rest on his activities in behalf of blacks. Their freedom, their quest for equal rights, their integration into American society became his special concern, as it was that of all radicals, and few legislators did more in their behalf.

Stevens' reasons for devoting himself to black rights are not fully known. Some have speculated that his own disability, his "branding," as Fawn Brodie, his most recent biographer calls it, enabled him to sympathize with others marked in a different way. Others have accused him of being influenced by Lydia Smith, although he hated slavery long before he ever met her. It may simply be that the inherent injustice of involuntary servitude and racial discrimination turned him against it. That the Democrats generally endorsed the institution certainly did not endear it to him.

Lydia Hamilton Smith, the mulatto woman who managed Stevens' household for twenty years, was rumored to be her employer's mistress and the reason for his staunch anti-slavery position. Thomas Dixon dramatized the rumors by portraying her as a sinister influence on Stevens in The Clansman. *Courtesy of the Lancaster County Historical Society.*

Stevens' antislavery career began most strangely. His first public connection with the "peculiar institution" was as an attorney for a Maryland slaveholder trying to recapture a black girl who claimed her freedom on the grounds that she had been living in Pennsylvania for more than six months. Stevens won the case by proving that her stay had not been continuous, but evidently he soon rued his role. At a Fourth of July dinner two years later he proposed a toast, "The next President. May he be a freeman, who never riveted fetters on a human slave."

Before long it became known that the lame Gettysburg lawyer hated slavery. Runaways and black men seeking their freedom sought his help with confidence. Discovering that a Maryland tavern keeper was about to sell a slave who was evidently the owner's son, Stevens bought the young man and set him free. In 1837 he defended the right of an abolitionist to speak in Gettysburg, a town unfriendly to the antislavery cause. He became so convincing an opponent of racial discrimination that in the constitutional convention of 1838 he opposed the Democrats' proposal to deprive Pennsylvania blacks of suffrage. Although he failed, his record was there for all to see.

Salmon P. Chase, the energetic antislavery leader from Ohio, noticed Stevens' courageous stand and in 1842 asked him to support the newly

organized Liberty Party. Although urged on by his friend Jonathan Blanchard, the abolitionist who had "an almost superstitious belief" in his talents, Stevens was not so impractical as to join the miniscule group. Instead, he sought to strengthen the antislavery element among the Whigs. General Winfield Scott had made some antislavery statements; would he not be an excellent candidate for the presidency in 1844? Yet Chase's pleas had not been in vain. When the Whigs nominated Henry Clay instead of Scott, Stevens secretly urged his friends to vote for James G. Birney, the Liberty candidate.

In 1848 Stevens, who had moved to Lancaster, was himself elected to Congress. The Mexican War had just ended, but the struggle between North and South was fiercer than ever. Although Stevens was only one of a small band of opponents of the "peculiar institution," from the very beginning he stood out as a determined antislavery leader. "Stevens of Pennsylvania is himself a host," commented Joshua R. Giddings, the veteran congressional defender of liberty. "He is one of the strong men of the nation." And Stevens, to prove the point, like other radicals actively took part in the debates leading to the Compromise of 1850. Constantly emphasizing his loathing for slavery, he delivered several incisive speeches. He hated it, he said, not only because of its inherent injustice, but also because it divided the population into aristocrats and serfs, a condition incompatible with the survival of a free republic. His barbs aimed at the South infuriated his opponents. "Virginia is now only fit to be the breeder, not the employer of slaves . . .," he scoffed.

When the Compromise passed, a discouraged Stevens warned that the tenets of American freedom were threatened. "Strange as it may sound to American ears, the cause of liberty is hard to sustain in this republic," he complained. Yet he remained confident that eventually the people would realize that "he who is but the tyrant of the African today will be the tyrant of the Anglo-Saxon hereafter." He was re-elected in 1850. In 1852, however, after defending some Quakers charged with treason in connection with the Christiana riot in which a slave catcher was killed, he was defeated. Time for his leadership had not yet come.

As Stevens had foreseen, the excesses of his opponents soon raised up a powerful countermovement. When in 1854 the Democrats repealed the time-honored Missouri Compromise by passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a wave of resentment swept across the North. The Whig party virtually disappeared, and various anti-Nebraska groups attempted to take its place. Among the new parties was the intolerant, anti-Catholic, Know Nothing order, with which Stevens, anxious to oppose the Democrats, briefly flirted. But he never changed his mind about the need for tolerance of all sects and soon found a more congenial home in the newly founded Republican party, working tirelessly to help organize it in Pennsylvania.

Stevens was re-elected to the House in 1858. By that time the Republican party had become a power in the North, and fellow Republicans recognized his potential for leadership. Giddings now thought Stevens would make an excellent speaker of the House, who "would wield the power of the office to the support of our doctrines with more force and greater moral power than any other man." Physically as well as intellectually he stood his ground against Southern attacks. "There is probably no man in the House who has such perfect command of himself as Thad. Stevens," commented the New York *Evening Post*. "This gives him great power and influence." Southerners hardly knew how to deal with him. And no wonder. When he was told John Brown would be hanged, he astonished them by replying, "Damn him, he ought to be hung." Yet he never passed up a chance to denounce chattel slavery.

In 1860 Stevens, who had advocated the nomination of John McLean, a conservative judge from Ohio, loyally supported Lincoln. The Republican victory that year was encouraging. Strongly supporting Chase for a seat in the cabinet, he sought to strengthen radical influence with the incoming administration. He even hoped to be included in the cabinet himself, only to be disappointed. Then, at the opening of Congress, he finally saw his chance. He became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. From that day on, he made certain that the Union was neither without funds nor means to carry on the Civil War.

For more than thirty years the radicals had fought for the restriction of slavery. Stevens had followed this pattern. Now that the South had broken the federal compact, they saw the way clear to complete emancipation. Old Thad was in the forefront of this struggle. And although he was nearly seventy, his greatest years lay ahead. ■

Part two of the Thaddeus Stevens story, covering the post-war and Reconstruction years, will appear in AHI's January issue.

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, Hans Trefousse holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University and is a veteran writer with more than twelve books written or edited and various articles published in a number of magazines and reference works. Among other sources, he consulted for this article several contemporary accounts written for HARPER'S WEEKLY *in 1868.*