

## THE TAPEWORM RAILROAD

*The story of Thaddeus Stevens' Tape-worm, of Thaddeus Stevens himself, and of the most turbulent state election of 1838, probably the dirtiest and most violent Gubernatorial election in all of Pennsylvania's history.*

The "Tapeworm" was a projected railroad to be built by the state of Pennsylvania, to run south-westward from Gettysburg to Waynesboro, at the summit of the Blue Mountains of the Maryland line. It is 18 miles as the crow flies from Gettysburg to Waynesboro, but it took the Tapeworm 35 miles to cover the same distance. Hence the name.

Thaddeus Stevens was a Pennsylvania politician. He was born in Vermont in 1792 and in spite of bitter poverty and a physical deformity in the shape of a club foot, he graduated from Dartmouth in 1813. That year he moved to York where he taught school and in his spare time read law. Stevens was admitted to the Maryland Bar in 1816 and soon afterwards opened law offices in Gettysburg where, in the next few years, he gradually acquired wide interests in real estate, ore banks, iron furnaces and timber land. He entered politics and was first elected to the State Legislature on the "Anti-Masonic Platform." But as that issue lost popularity he switched over to the Whigs.

In 1842 Stevens moved to Lancaster and in 1848 was elected to one term in Congress. Elected again in 1859 he served until his death in 1868 and was a member of the powerful Ways and Means Committee of Lincoln's cabinet. He is buried in the cemetery at Mulberry and Chestnut Streets, Lancaster.

To Stevens' admirers he is known as the "Great Commoner," the friend of the poor and oppressed, protector of the Negro, the farm boy who, in spite of poverty and a crippled foot, rose to be a leader in Washington. The man who, in spite of violent opposition, established the free Public School System in Pennsylvania in 1851.

I do not number myself amongst the admirers of Thaddeus Stevens. His enemies, and they were legion, described him as a "malignant old man." The Democrats from the South had other names for him: the least virulent being "Negro-lover." Senator Grimes said of Stevens: "a debauchee in morals and politics."

Stevens never married. His housekeeper in Lancaster was Lydia Smith, a mulatto whom he had known in Gettysburg. She was probably a Creole since she was buried from St. Mary's Catholic Church when she died in 1884. She was thirty-five years old when she first moved to Lancaster in 1848 and brought with her two boys, aged twelve and five. Mrs. Smith was said to be very neat and attractive. The Lancaster Intelligencer, October 1860, was concerned with his "peculiar views on the Negro question. The New York World, on June 20, 1867, had a page one story charging the radical leader with "living in open ad----- with a mulatto woman whom he seduced from her husband, a full-blooded Negro. The woman manages his household in both Lancaster and Washington, speaking of Stevens and herself as 'we' ". After Stevens' death, his will of 1867 gave Lydia Smith \$500.00 for life and certain furniture.

Stevens, with other Abolitionists and radicals, forced President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. Many of the Northern newspapers considered it premature. Upon Lincoln's death, Andrew Johnson assumed the Presidency with every intention of continuing Lincoln's conciliatory program. This did not suit Thad Stevens' vindictive spirit and he started impeachment proceedings which very nearly removed Johnson from the Presidency. When the Supreme Court declared President Johnson not guilty, Stevens was carried from the courtroom by his two Negro servants and croaked to the crowd waiting outside: "The country is going to the devil."

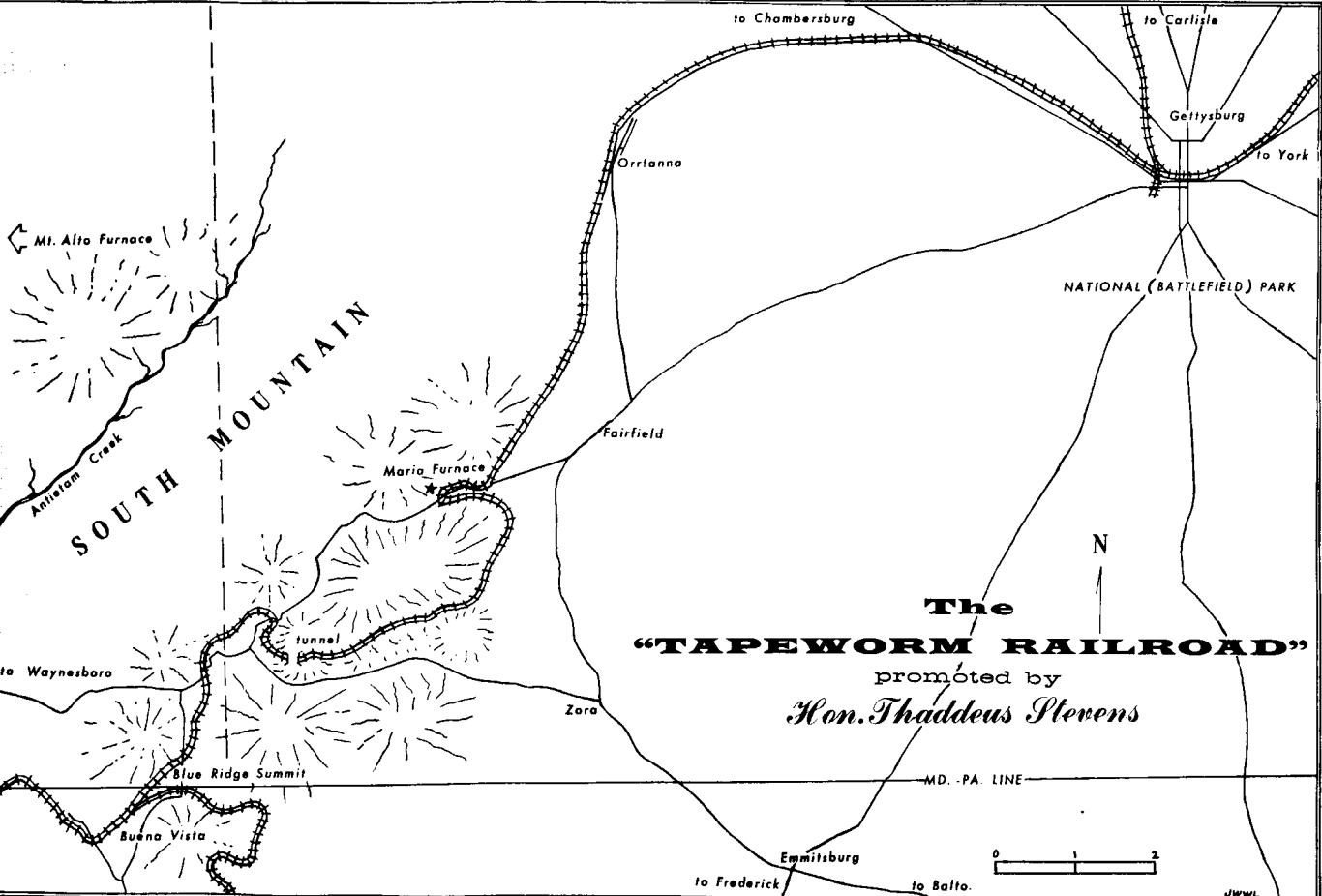
Stevens worked hard for the adoption of the XIII Amendent to the Constitution which prohibited slavery in the States or Territories. It was ratified and adopted December 18, 1865. He was the author of the XIV Amendment which was designed to give the franchise, both National and State, to former slaves. This was not at all popular because at that time only six of the Northern states permitted Negroes to vote. It failed of ratification in 1865 and it did not receive the three-fourth majority until 1868 and only then when the "Carpet Bagger Governments" of the former Southern states were permitted to cast their votes.

Thaddeus Stevens is indeed a controversial figure of American history of 100 years ago and the story of the Tapeworm Railroad adds no lustre to his memory.

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## THE TAPE-WORM RAILROAD

One hundred and twenty-five years ago Pennsylvania was engaged in a gigantic campaign of internal improvement. New York had completed the Erie Canal in 1825 after eight years of work and after spending 7½ millions of dollars. The opening of this new avenue of transportation rerouted a great portion of the western immigration and commerce away from Philadelphia. Until that time Philadelphia had not only been the largest city in North America, but the financial and commercial capital. Other cities on the Atlantic seaboard also suffered. The old established highways from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, from Baltimore to Wheeling and from Richmond to Charleston, West Virginia, lost a large portion of the trade which had once been freighted overland in the great Conestoga wagons. The tide of immigration, which until this time had flowed across



the mountains to the Ohio Valley and had served to populate and enrich the western slope of the Alleghenys and the middle western river banks, was now diverted to the states bordering the Great Lakes.

The opening of the Erie Canal gave New York City a supremacy in trade and commerce which she never lost. The other cities on the Atlantic coast each attempted to regain their lost trade and prestige by improving their communications with the Ohio River. Richmond started the James River Canal, Washington started the Potomac Canal, Baltimore laid the puny rails of the newly invented railroad, Boston started a rail line toward Albany, while Philadelphia constructed a combined system of railroad and canal connecting the Atlantic with the Ohio River at Pittsburgh. The Pennsylvania system was opened in 1834, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad finally reached the Ohio at Wheeling in 1853, but the James River Canal and the Potomac Canals never passed the foot of the mountains.

The "State Works", as the Pennsylvania system was called, was a greater undertaking to the poor and sparsely settled state then, than the Panama Canal was to the Nation, eighty years later. A system of canals and railways was laid out from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. This represented a compromise between those who advocated the canal which New York State had found so successful, and those radicals who believed the new-fangled railroad would be the carrier of the future.

The first ninety miles was of railroad across the rock uplands separating Philadelphia from the Susquehanna River at Columbia. The canal started at Columbia and followed the Susquehanna River and the Juniata River through gaps in three ranges of mountains to its terminus at the foot of the main ridge of the Allegheny mountains. Thirty-six miles of railway were used to portage the canal boats over the thousand-foot barrier. At this state of mechanical development, railroads (either horse or steam-operated) were not considered practical on anything but level grades, so a system of inclined planes was built whereby immense stationary engines pulled the cars up ten per cent grades by means of ropes. There were five inclines on the east side of the mountain to pull the cars up and five on the west slope to lower them down to Johnstown on the Conemaugh River. Here the canal was resumed to follow the Conemaugh Valley to Pittsburgh, then the greatest steamboat city on the Ohio River.

The entire route was opened for traffic in the season of 1834. Philadelphia immediately prospered, Pittsburgh boomed to a great manufacturing and shipping city. Crude blast furnaces sprang up at every ore-bank along the route. The fine hardwood forests were started towards the saw-mills. The farmers found an outlet for their produce.

Times were good, money was plentiful and politicians were in the saddle. Progress was the watchword. The legislature at Harrisburg was besieged by delegations petitioning that the Public Works might have a branch to their particular county, valley or town.

The Cumberland Valley lay between the Blue Mountains and the South Mountains. It runs south-westerly from Harrisburg to Harpers Ferry and continues as the Shenandoah Valley. The soil was fertile, the settlers thrifty, the towns prosperous and there were many valuable iron

deposits in the forest-covered mountains. It was a logical location for a branch canal or railroad. Many petitions were filed and many surveys were made but naught came of them. Finally the people organized their own railroad company, the "Cumberland Valley R.R.," sold the stock to the citizens of the locality, and started work in 1835.

Railroads were at this time quite a novelty. The few that had been constructed had been financed entirely or in great part by the State. None had been operated long enough to get an idea of any possible return. To finance and operate a railroad with private capital was an experiment. Should the first section from Harrisburg to Chambersburg prove successful, the promoters promised to extend the rails to Pittsburgh over the supposedly easier grades of the Potomac Valley; a promise they were never to fulfill, for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad beat them to it. Troubles were many on this little road. The monumental wooden bridge across the Susquehanna, at Harrisburg, built by Theodore Burr in 1812, proved to be inaccessible so a new and expensive bridge had to be built. The approaching panic of 1837 affected the shaky credit of the road, necessitating the issuing of its own currency, or "shinplasters." Finally a dangerous rival raised its head, the state-owned "Tape-Worm."

Thaddeus Stevens was at this time a strong political power in Pennsylvania and the closest advisor of Governor Ritner. Thaddeus Stevens represented Adams County in the lower house of the Pennsylvania Legislature and was the administration leader in the division. He conceived the idea of extending the railroad of the Public Works from the Susquehanna River through York and Gettysburg to intercept the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad on the Maryland line near Hagerstown. The pretended reason for the construction of this road was to divert traffic on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad toward Philadelphia instead of Baltimore. The real reason was to open large timber and ore properties Stevens owned in the southern end of Franklin and Adams counties.<sup>1</sup>

There was much popular opposition to Governor Ritner's Administration because of its extravagance and graft, so when this selfish and expensive proposal was made there was violent outcry, not only by the taxpayers of the State as a whole, but by the residents of the Cumberland Valley who had subscribed to the stock of their own railway to be built down from Harrisburg. But Stevens forced the bill through with his usual persistence and obstinacy. The nick-name "Thaddeus Steven's Tape-Worm" was immediately applied to this project and it was known by this colorful nickname throughout the turbulent political campaign in which it figured.

The Tape-Worm Railroad started at Gettysburg and ran south-westerly to the summit of the South Mountains on the Maryland line. It was proposed to connect this line later with the "State Works" at Columbia, but as there was at this time a privately-owned railroad being built into Gettysburg from the east, work was commenced on the section west of town. The surveyed route followed the Chambersburg Pike (now the Lincoln Highway) to the foot of the mountains where it turned southward and commenced a steady, steep climb to the summit. The line curved in and out to fit the coves or promontories, skirted many precipices or

dodged through short tunnels. Today this section of the line can be seen winding in and out on the forest-covered slope of the mountain. It is a lonely and isolated section today; one hundred years ago it must have been a howling wilderness. The proposed road reached the summit at Waynesboro. From Waynesboro the line was surveyed northward to Chambersburg by way of Mount Alto Furnace, in which Stevens had acquired an interest, with a branch line to his Caledonia Furnace, then building.

The panic of 1837 was upon the country and the people were aroused by the reckless spending of their money at this time, especially for such a bare-faced personal scheme as this. The stockholders of the Cumberland Valley R. R. objected to state competition and added their political power to the demands for economy. In January, 1838, the Senate made an adverse report on the construction of this railroad, saying in no uncertain terms:

“ . . . But on the latter (the Tape-Worm) for about twenty-five miles, the traveler is either ascending or descending, at the grade of fifty feet to the mile, a rugged, solitary, and barren mountain, uninhabited and almost uninhabitable; on one hand he sees perpendicular cliffs, rising like towering steeples over his head, covered with projecting rocks, which seem threatening him with instant death for his temerity; on the other he perceives a frightful precipice, over which he is in imminent danger of being hurled into the abyss below, with the certain prospect of being dashed to pieces by the fall. Now he is whirled over a ravine on an embankment of some fifty or sixty feet in height and now engulfed in an excavation from whence he can scarcely see the sun, or immured in a tunnel where daylight may enter but cannot penetrate. The slightest accident must expose him to danger of life, limb and property from which nothing short of a miracle can save.”

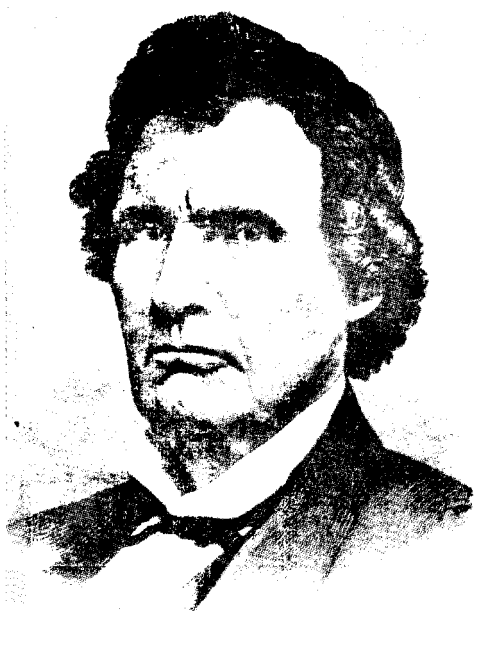
In spite of such growing opposition Stevens persevered in pushing his road. To this end, and to use the great political leverage of the office in the coming elections, Governor Ritner appointed him as President of the Board of Canal Commissioners in May, 1838.<sup>2</sup>

The Presidency of the Canal Commission was the most powerful political office in the State. “The State Works” of which he was the head consisted of 608 miles of canal, built or building, and 118 miles of railroad. It was a riotous opportunity for graft and patronage, which Governor Ritner had not overlooked. Civil Service was fifty years in the future and the checks we now have on public officers in the matter of appointment, expenditures and letting contracts were unknown. On the canals the many lock-tenders and harbor-masters were political appointees. A contractor who was awarded the construction of a new canal was expected to “come across” handsomely. From every state employee, big and little, the paymaster monthly collected a straight ten per cent for “Political Assessment.”

The railroads were built and maintained by the State but all the cars and depots belonged to private “transporters” operating under per-

## THADDEUS STEVENS

Born 4 April 1793 in Vermont, Pa. Assemblyman, Whig and Republican Congressman. Died 11 August 1868.



mits. These transporters either used their own horses for hauling their cars, or paid a wheel-toll to have them moved by state-owned locomotives. Here was another golden opportunity for graft which knocked but once. A transporter who was politically "out" had his shipments delayed, inspectors condemned his cars, weigh-masters charged the highest tolls. If he was a liberal contributor to the campaign funds he could depend on preferred service for his shipments and generous toll rebates.

The numerous employees of the maintenance, operating and shop departments were all political henchmen. On election days "the gravel train" loaded with laborers traveled from town to town stuffing the ballot boxes at the direction of the local partisan boss. Every county official in the entire state received an annual pass over the state railroad. The President of the Canal Commission was the head of as powerful a "machine" as Pennsylvania has ever developed.<sup>3</sup>

It is strange how political expediency will change a man. In 1834 the Canal Board proposed that locomotives should be substituted for horses on all state railroads. Thaddeus Stevens, "The Commoner" as he then styled himself, led the opposition to this progressive measure on the grounds that the power and patronage of the Commissioners would be increased to the detriment of the best interest of the public. It took a great deal of influence to change his views and to get him to accept a compromise whereby locomotives were authorized for use for nine hours only of the twenty-four. Four years later we see him appointed to the Presidency of this Commission with the sole objects of furthering his own

private project and to secure the re-election of the corrupt Governor Ritner and the machine he represented.

The gubernatorial campaign of 1838 was the bitterest which Pennsylvania has known in all her stormy political history. The partisan papers were packed with stories of the most venomous personalities for months. Immense sums of money were spent by both sides to corrupt the election. The "Gettysburg Railroad," or as it was more commonly called, "The Tape-Worm," was the headliner in all the accusations of graft and waste hurled at the Administration. The election was reeking of falsification and stuffing.<sup>4</sup>

The Whigs refused to acknowledge the election of many Democrats so at the opening of the House there were two complete factions, with all their armed rowdies and thugs, crowding into the chambers and trying to make themselves heard. After several riotous hours, the Democrats ejected Stevens' Whigs by force of numbers and took the floor. The rioting lasted for three days until uniformed constables were brought from Philadelphia. (No one dared to call the militia) For three weeks the "Stevens' House" met at an inn while the "Hopkins' House" occupied the chambers. Finally the state Senate ended an intolerable situation by recognizing the Democrats. Stevens, who had been elected indisputedly in his district, refused to attend the meetings of the Democratic House until he was twice threatened with expulsion.<sup>5</sup>

The new Board of Canal Commissioners in their yearly report of January 1839 stated that they considered all the money expended on the Gettysburg Railroad as literally thrown away. By Act of Assembly of February 18, 1839, work was suspended. The state had squandered \$766,127.39 on this folly.

So ended an episode of Pennsylvania history. Though the actors were dispersed, each and every one of them re-appeared a generation later during the Civil War. Thaddeus Stevens left the Pennsylvania House in 1841 to resume a lucrative practice of criminal law. Eight years later he was elected to one term in Congress (1849-1853). Here he gained the undying enmity of the South because of his fiery and outspoken attacks on slavery. In 1851 he was again elected to Congress where he served until his death in 1868. During the war he was a vicious and truculent Abolitionist, an enemy of all who suggested compromise or leniency.

At Mount Alto Furnace was captured Captain Cook, a refugee from John Brown's Army; he was later hanged by Colonel Robert E. Lee at Charles Town. Caledonia Furnace operated fitfully and unprofitably for some years. Just prior to the battle of Gettysburg it was visited by a Confederate division which destroyed Caledonia Furnace, property of the hated abolitionist. Both furnaces are now state parks.

The Cumberland Valley Railroad opened for business amid great rejoicings and speechmaking in the fall of 1837. For twelve years, until an all-rail route was opened to Pittsburgh, there was a brisk stagecoach business from Chambersburg to Pittsburgh. Commercial travelers preferred a night ride from Philadelphia in a crude sleeper and two days spent in rattling over the mountains by stage to the more placid week's trip by



canal that Charles Dickens described. The railroad suffered heavy damage during the two Confederate raids up the valley and during the campaigns which followed. It was the main supply route of the Federal Army during the battle of Antietam. Eventually the line was extended to the Potomac River where, in conjunction with the Potomac Canal, they tried to divert traffic from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The Cumberland Valley is now a prosperous division of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The Tape-Worm was the scene of a bloody fight during the first day's Battle of Gettysburg and it was here that General John F. Reynolds of Lancaster, was killed. For fifty years the grade lay idle. In 1885 the right-of-way was sold to the Western Maryland Railroad which now operates it as a branch, connecting with the main line at Blue Ridge Summit.

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#### NOTES

1. **The York Gazette**, 19 April 1835; 26 July 1835; 9, 16, 18 August 1835; 6, 26, 27 September 1835.
2. Bishop, A. L., **The State Works of Pennsylvania**, 230.
3. **Ibid**, 231.
4. Snyder, C. M., **The Jacksonian Heritage. Pennsylvania Politics: 1833-1848**, 124-129.
5. **Ibid**, 134-135.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert S. Mayo is a civil engineer and graduate of Illinois Institute of Technology. He first came to Lancaster County when he worked on the Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge in 1929, and now he designs and constructs special equipment for underground work, operating under the name of "Mayo Tunnel & Mine Equipment Co." He saw service in both World Wars and is now a retired Colonel, United States Marine Corps Reserve.