

*Installation of
The Hon. Thaddeus Stevens
In the Pennsylvania
Hall of Fame*

*An address by John Ward Willson Loose
16 November 1974 at Founders Hall,
Girard College, Philadelphia*

*L*adies and gentlemen, officers, judges, and guests of the Pennsylvania Hall of Fame's Third Annual Banquet: I am pleased to extend to you the compliments of the Lancaster County Historical Society this evening as we gather to honor those Pennsylvanians who have left their indelible mark upon our commonwealth and nation.

Announcement in the local press that Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was to be inducted into the Pennsylvania Hall of Fame evoked a small storm of protest. Numerous telephone calls and letters—many anonymous—to this speaker is sufficient evidence to demonstrate the effect Stevens had on the history of our nation. Though dead for 106 years, the “Old Commoner” continues to inflame men and create controversy. Perhaps some members present this evening will go away with unsettled feelings.

The Hall of Fame in its third year of existence has chosen to pursue a courageous course in selecting Thaddeus Stevens for inclusion among Pennsylvania's most worthy past citizens. I say "courageous" because even an institution as young as the Pennsylvania Hall of Fame will not be excused for juvenile impetuosity. No, the Hall of Fame has acted with uncommon courage in the face of what most assuredly has been a controversial choice. I commend the judges and directors for exhibiting precisely that virtue possessed in abundance by Thaddeus Stevens.

Who, then, is this man you have elected to stand among our historic figures? A man characterized as a saint by some, as a mad-man by others: an apostle of hate by his enemies, and a being "darkly wise and rudely great" by sympathetic historians. To some critics he was a murderer, an adulterer, and a beast of no morals.

Carl Sandburg described him thus: "Scholar, wit, zealot of liberty, part fanatic, part gambler, at his worst a clubfooted wrangler possessed of endless javelins, at his best a majestic and isolated figure wandering in an ancient wilderness, thick with thorns, seeking to bring justice between man and man—who could read the heart of limping, poker-faced old Thaddeus Stevens?"

An editor from Alabama painted this picture of our hero: "I have no wish to wrong even this wicked man, whose terribly wretchedness gapes frighteningly at him from the hopeless grave upon whose brink he stands—this patricide and murderer—this demon who will soon leave an immortality of hate and infamy for an eternity of unutterable woe . . . this malicious, pitiless, pauseless enemy of an entire nation—this misanthrope, whose curses of mankind shall be written upon his loathed tomb an awful epitaph—this viperous, heartless, adulterous beast, whose horrid life has converted an "image of God" into plagiarism of devils—this living sepulcher of all hideous things, upon whose body in his mother's womb was fixed hades' seal of deformity." [George M. Drake, editor, *Union Springs Times*]

Little Thaddeus was born in 1792 in Vermont to a mother possessed of tremendous ambition and a near-fanatical Calvinist piety. His father could not cope with life when sober; he deserted his family after a few years. Like his brother before him, Thaddeus was born with a deformed foot. In that day such deformities were interpreted as punishment visited upon sinners; indeed, the ugly and misshapen part was considered tangible evidence of the devil's presence. Stevens was stung by his schoolmates' jeers and laughter as he limped among them. Later, he was to be rebuffed by the requirement of the Masonic Order that its members have physical integrity. Although he was not



Thaddeus Stevens

attached to the doctrines of Calvinism—or any other religious system—Stevens would say on occasion—perhaps cynically—“I am one of the devil’s children, and this club foot of mine is proof of my parentage.”

Ugly rumors seemed to follow Thaddeus Stevens throughout his life, from the ridiculous claim that he was the illegitimate son of Count Tallyrand to the more plausible (but probably false) accounts of his relationship to his mulatto housekeeper, Lydia Smith. After his graduation from Dartmouth in 1814, Stevens moved to Pennsylvania where he taught school and taught himself law at York. When he thought himself ready to take the bar examination, the York County Bar hastily passed a resolution which disqualified Stevens. Undaunted, Stevens went to Bel Air, Maryland, about 40 miles south of York, where he passed the examination by answering a few questions on Coke and Blackstone. He also expressed his appreciation to the examining judge by presenting him with several bottles of Madeira.

Having thus thwarted the York County lawyers, he opened an office in Gettysburg. Before his first year of practice was ended, Stevens had earned himself fame by his brilliant defense of a feeble-minded farmer who killed a constable with a scythe. He handled more than fifty murder cases, winning all but one—and frequently using the plea of insanity as the defense. Ironically, Stevens' first victory before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court was in behalf of a slaveholder who was trying to regain possession of his slave who claimed freedom in Pennsylvania. Thirty years later he would attract national attention by his successful defense of the defendants in the Christiana Riot treason trial wherein the roles were reversed.

Stevens came close to marrying a girl, but when she suggested he buy her a ring she admired, he discontinued his courtship, and never married anyone.

His law practice grew, and Stevens invested in property, including the Caledonia Iron Works which the Confederate invaders eventually destroyed. With his entrance into politics the absentee ownership of his properties nearly drove him into bankruptcy. Stevens was a poor businessman and he detested the details of finance.

In 1833 Stevens was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives on the Anti-masonic ticket. His hatred of Freemasonry knew no limits. But if he hated the Masonic Order, he loved with equal vigor the idea of free public education, a cause he supported throughout his life. His speech for an appropriation for Gettysburg College in 1834 was regarded as a masterpiece, second only to his stirring oration to the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1835 when that body was set to repeal the public education law. He succeeded in turning a certain defeat into a stunning victory. Rarely did legislative speeches change votes; Stevens' speech reversed entire voting blocs. Hence his reputation as "Father of the Pennsylvania Free Public Schools." Towards the end of his life Stevens considered this act the most important one of his life, and even his hordes of critics could hardly disagree.

He served in the legislature during the terms 1833-1835, 1837, and 1841, and was a member of the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1838. During that year he also served as canal commissioner.

Stevens moved to Lancaster in 1842 where the skilled lawyer could earn more money. Immediately he became active in Lancaster politics, first as an Anti-Mason, and later as a Whig. His success for a few years in the Anti-Masonic Party must be laid more at the feet of Lancaster Countians who would vote for any alternative to the Demo-

cratic Party—at a time when opposition to the Democracy of Andrew Jackson was feeble and fragmented elsewhere in the nation—than to a dislike for freemasonry. The transition was stormy because Lancaster Whigs tended to be fairly conservative or neutral on the slavery issue. Stevens insisted the Whigs strike out hard against slavery, a position that divided Whigs into the “Silver Grays” (conservative) and the “Woolly Heads” (abolitionists) for a number of years. He was elected as a Whig to the 31st and 32nd Congresses (1849-1853), and as a Republican from the 36th to 41st Congresses, the last election occurring after his death—a mark of respect by Lancastrians as well as an obstacle to any schemes for a Democratic victory.

During his congressional career, Stevens was a bitter foe of slavery and those who owned slaves. His invective was hurled not only at supporters of slavery but also at those who failed to oppose it as vigorously as Stevens did. Stevens never was fond of Lincoln because the President counseled moderation, “with charity for all and malice toward none.” Lincoln’s plans for reconstruction after the Civil War infuriated Stevens who was one of the leaders of the Radical Republican faction. He opposed the moderate measures first proposed by Lincoln and later urged by President Andrew Johnson. Stevens insisted the South must be crushed and those who supported the Confederacy were to have no mercy shown to them. When articles on impeachment against President Johnson were adopted by the dominant Radical Republicans in the House, they turned to Stevens to manage the impeachment process which he did with customary vigor despite approaching death. His cynicism and bitterness made him a man dangerous to oppose and nearly impossible to love as a person. His sarcasm and waspish wit are unparalleled in American history.

The failure of the Senate to convict President Johnson capped the bitterness of the aged congressman. He died in Washington, 11 August 1868.

Back home in Lancaster, he was laid to rest in Shreiner’s Cemetery in a plot purchased by Stevens because the graveyard did not have any restrictions on color. His mulatto housekeeper was buried in St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Cemetery, not beside Stevens as many persons wish to believe. Throughout his life Stevens fought, often against great odds, to gain the civil rights for oppressed minorities, whether they were black or yellow, Gentile or Jew, atheist, agnostic or “born again believer,” rich or poor, or society’s outcasts, misfits, and dispossessed. Mocking society’s conventions seemed to give Stevens grim satisfaction. When Stevens chose to attack a political foe—which was frequent—he used every weapon in his vast arsenal of invective, abusing

the hapless target with insults questioning the man's parentage and legitimacy, the primitive state of his intellectual development, his utter uselessness to civilization, and his moral turpitude. No northerner with the possible exception of General William T. Sherman was more hated by the South than Thaddeus Stevens. When his funeral procession passed through the streets of Lancaster, a violent thunder storm with deafening rolls of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning escorted the cortege to the burial site. Thaddeus would have been pleased immensely.

Too often we regard our political leaders not as human beings with their moments of weakness but as supermen, possessed of inflexible integrity. Even the heroes of Greek tragedy had their fatal flaws. What is most important, I believe, is that we recognize these men were human beings, and that on occasion they rose to great heights of decency, uncommon courage, and intellectual brilliance—flashes of divinity that have become landmarks of our humanity and our civilization. Thaddeus Stevens was such a man, and it is entirely proper that we honor him tonight.

John Ward Willson Loose

President

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