

An Early Letter by Thaddeus Stevens.

In an address on "Thaddeus Stevens as a Country Lawyer," which I prepared for the Pennsylvania State Bar Association last June, and subsequently elaborated and illustrated for publication in the Lancaster County Historical Society proceedings, I avowed great ignorance of Stevens' early life in Peacham, Vermont, and of the influences which induced him to remove therefrom to York, Pa. A casual meeting, this summer, with Mr. Charles W. Moores, of Indianapolis, Ind., and later most profitable correspondence with him, have enabled me to add a postscript that may be of some value to the future biographer of "The Old Commoner"—for, it is admitted, no complete biography has yet been published of either of the eminent publicists whom Lancaster County contributed to the eventful history of the Nation during the period that saw the Decline and Extinction of Slavery.

It seems there was a family named Merrill resident in Peacham, closely associated with Stevens, whose members had much to do with his later location in life. One of these was Samuel Merrill. He was a native of Peacham, attended the Academy there and subsequently was graduated from

Dartmouth College, likewise the alma mater of Mr. Stevens. He was the senior of Stevens and had taught him either in the Academy or as a tutor in College. He came to Pennsylvania, taught in York and, as I shall later show, induced other noteworthy immigration hither. He removed to Indiana in 1816, the year in which that State was admitted into the Union. He was a member of the Legislature which selected Indianapolis as the capital and chose the name for the capital city. He was elected treasurer of the State about 1820, continuing in that position for twelve years. In 1824 he removed the State archives and property from Corydon, the then capital, to Indianapolis, and lived in Indianapolis until his death, about 1855. After leaving the office of treasurer he helped to organize the State Bank of Indiana, and was its president for many years, and during the later years of his connection with the State Bank, or immediately afterwards, he became president of the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad, the first railroad in Indiana. The State Bank of Indiana was one of the few State institutions of the period that had a successful career. An account of it has been published in a review maintained under the auspices of the Chicago University, and Henry Clay acknowledged that in his efforts to organize a United States bank he drew largely on Merrill's ideas.

It was this Samuel Merrill to whom Thaddeus Stevens, before he had determined to locate in Pennsylvania, wrote the following letter—now published for the first time:

“Peacham, 5th Jan. 1814.
“Preceptor Merrill!

I am little inclined to philosophize but when addressing you under such a sounding title, I cannot forebare re-

flecting on the partiality of Fortune. Some, her peculiar favorites, she leads along an easy road to wealth and eminence; while others she condemns to crawl in the rough paths of indigent obscurity. But I must desist from this bombast. I have too many trifling particulars to relate. I confess, sir, that my so long neglecting to write to you, would be wholly unpardonable, had it not a necessary cause. When I received your letter I was at Hanover, uncertain where I should remain during the winter. I therefore deferred writing untill I should determine; that I might inform you where to direct a letter. This place is at present greatly alarmed on account of an uncommon epidemic, which it is sincerely hoped will thin the ranks of our old maids and send their withered ghosts (for many of them are reduced to *'vox et preterea nihil'*) to the dominion of that old tyrant Hymen. I shall not attempt to give you a catalogue of the newly licensed copulations, which have taken place "more humano" since you left here. Ossian's hundred bards would fail in the description. Loomis, and your good friend 'Snorter,' alias, Samuel Ingham, Esq. have left this place for Connecticut. Mr. Chassell's father is dead, and his mother is now dangerously sick. You probably wish to hear concerning the societies at Hanover, although the news may not be of the best kind. Old Josh Holt is president of the Fraternity. Joseph Tracy, Gent. has been loaded with Phi Betian honours. Kent likewise. Fisk is the Social's orator. Sam Wells hopes to be the Frater's, but is losing popularity. Charles Leverett has entered into the service of the aristocracy, in the capacity of scullion; and it is expected as a reward for his services, he will be Knighted, i. e., elected Phi Betian. Those fawning parasites,

who are grasping at unmerited honors, seem for once to have blundered into the truth, That they must flatter the nobility, or remain in obscurity; that they must degrade themselves by sycophancy, or others will not exalt them. The democracy rule in the Fraternity. The aristocracy make threatening grimaces, but it is only sport for us poor plebeans. Friend Sam, I assure you, you can hardly conceive the anxiety your friends feel for you, in that distant country. (Observe the harmony of the multiplicity of yous, in the foregoing sentence.) Considering you exposed to the invincible charms of those fair Dutch wenches, with their dozen pair of petticoats they are really afraid, that you will loose your heart, or get lost, with Goodie Twiller's ladle, in one corner of their pockets; that filthy lucre will induce you to become the son-in-law to some Ten-Breeches; and then we shall despair of seeing you again; for I suppose it as much impossible to transport thos—'fair lumps of earth' into another climate as it would be to people America with crocodiles, by way of the frozen regions. Unless honored with degradation, I shall graduate next August; and shall, at that time, be under the necessity of entering into a school. If you think I could be sure of employment in Pennsylvania, I should like very well to come into those parts. If you know of any vacancies, and could assist me, without trouble to yourself, you would do me a favour. Be so good as to write me immediately. Inform me whether you intend settling there: Whether you shall continue your studies, et caetera. Present my compliments to your brother and Mr. Blanchard. If they would condescend to write me, I should be highly flattered. I am engaged in the academy during the win-

ter. Mr. Chassell, on account of his health being poor, was not able to attend to it.

“Yours, etc.

“THAD STEVENS.”

“Mr. Samuel Merrill.”

Trifling and inconsequential as this letter might appear, it is of great importance to a complete biography of Thaddeus Stevens, in that it explains the influences which induced him to come to Pennsylvania; it illustrates the tendency in New England nearly a hundred years ago for young men of promise and education to emigrate; it marks Mr. Stevens with the old time disposition toward gossipy letter writing, and gives an insight into college manners and methods not unlike those of modern days; it discloses that he taught in an academy in Vermont before he came to York; it ranges him thus early in life in the attitude he never abandoned of fellowship with the “poor plebeans” against the “aristocracy”; it betokens a lack of sympathy with the “Pennsylvania Dutch” with whom he later made profitable friendship, and altogether manifests an interest in the fair sex which his later career rather belied. Peacham, by the way, like many small towns in New England, had a famous academy, which figures largely in its several copious histories, and the town library has a bust of Stevens to commemorate his many gifts to it.

It remains to notice the persons to whom in this letter he sends his regards—“Your brother and Mr. Blanchard.” Some accounts of Stevens’ entry into Pennsylvania narrate that he came here with James Merrill and John Blanchard. This letter proves that they preceded him; they were undoubtedly his forerunners.

Both these Vermonters achieved local fame. John Blanchard became

a noted lawyer in Central Pennsylvania, and his descendants and namesakes attest and perpetuate his social position and his professional eminence.

James Merrill, who was born in Peacham, May 8, 1790, and graduated from Dartmouth in 1812, two years before Stevens, sojourned briefly in York, and thence went to New Berlin, Union County, Pa., the town next in importance to the county seat. He was with Stevens in the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1836, and, like him, voted to give the negro the electoral franchise. He died in 1841, but his sons, Jesse and Louis, in civic and military life, have added lustre to the family escutcheon; and his later descendant, John Houston Merrill, adorns the profession of his forbears. The Linn family, of much eminence in Central Pennsylvania, had representatives named John B. Linn and James Merrill Linn.

I may add that as the elder of the Merrills moved westward to Indiana, so Thaddeus Stevens' older brother, John, became a resident of Indianapolis. His rather ardent biographers have "pointed with pride" to the fact that he "became a judge in the West," but the facts are that he was a cobbler, not a lawyer. He was, it is true, a "side judge" of the old Circuit Court, chosen as lay judges generally were in those days, not for their knowledge of the law, but rather for their ignorance and disregard of it. He was clubfooted, like his more eminent brother, and his shoes, it is related, were better suited for himself than for his customers.

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