

A REFUTATION OF THE SLANDEROUS STORIES AGAINST THE
NAME OF THADDEUS STEVENS PLACED BEFORE
THE PUBLIC BY THOMAS DIXON

By Judge Charles I. Landis

As a supplement to a recent letter written by First Deputy Attorney General Keller, in answer to statements made by one, Thomas Dixon, concerning the late Thaddeus Stevens, will you permit me to furnish some facts in detail, chiefly gleaned from records, and, therefore, not open to dispute? Historic lies, as has been recently shown by Prof. Albert Bushnell Hart are, after a time, taken as actual truths, and it would, therefore, seem to be best to expose, if possible, the falsity of Mr. Dixon's claims before the evidence is lost or has been forgotten.

Mr. Stevens was born on April 4, 1792. He came to Pennsylvania about 1815, and he was admitted to the Bar of Adams county on September 24, 1816. While in Gettysburg, he had an office at the southeast corner of Chambersburg and Washington streets. I am informed, and I think reliably, that he did not then keep house, but boarded at the old Washington Hotel. He moved to Lancaster and was admitted to the Lancaster County Bar on August 16, 1842. He was then over fifty years of age. On April 21, 1843, he acquired, by virtue of a Sheriff's sale, the lot and two houses located on the northeast corner of South Queen and East Vine streets, in this city. He made the northernmost of these houses his home, and he resided in it, except when in Washington, until his death, and he was buried from it. He could only have acquired possession of this property under the Sheriff's deed during the summer or fall of 1843.

He never lived with any woman by the name of Lydia Brown. Mr. Dixon, no doubt, refers to Lydia H. Smith, a colored woman, who was, for many years, the trusted housekeeper of Mr. Stevens. She did not come to Lancaster with him. He never married, and, after he purchased the South Queen street property, it was necessary for him to secure a housekeeper. He first endeavored to employ a woman by the name of Anna Sulkey; but this woman, about that time, became the wife of Dennis Martin, a colored barber, who lived in this city, and she, therefore, while declining the position, recommended to him her cousin, Lydia H. Smith, then a widow with two small children. Upon this recommendation, Mr. Stevens engaged Mrs. Smith, who, shortly thereafter, came to Lancaster and remained with him until his death. She occupied, when her children lived with her, a one-story frame house on the rear of Mr. Stevens' lot, fronting on South Christian street and Mr. Stevens and his nephews, Simon Stevens and Major Thaddeus Stevens, Jr., lived, for the most time, in the large house. These gentlemen were also members of the Lancaster County Bar, the former being admitted in 1848 and the latter in 1859. Mr. Stevens died at Washington on August 11, 1868, and he was buried in Shreiner's Cemetery, in Lancaster, on August 15, 1868. He gave no directions in his will as to his place of burial, but it is said that he requested that he should be buried there, because the charters of the Lancaster and Woodward Hill Cemeteries, in which he had lots, restricted interments to white persons. He prepared his own epitaph, which is upon his tomb. True to those principles of equality which he steadfastly maintained in life, and, as Congressman McCall, in his Life of Stevens, declares, "a true democrat," he wished to repose in a plot where no limitations prevailed as to color, race or creed.

Martin Shreiner was in his day one of the prominent and reputable citizens of Lancaster city. Many of his descendants continue to live here, and a number of them are buried in the above-named cemetery. In his lifetime, he laid out, as a place of burial, a plot of ground at the corner of West Chestnut and North Mulberry streets. He called it Concord Ceme-

tery, but it has been generally known as Shreiner's Cemetery. He divided it into 120 lots, and, in his life, he sold and made deeds for some of these lots. The sole restriction contained in the deeds was, that suicides should not be buried there. Mr. Shreiner died about February, 1866, and his will, dated May 2, 1855, was proven February 22, 1866. In it, he provided as follows: "Item—It is my will and I order and direct that the two lots of ground at the corner of Mulberry and Chestnut streets, in the city of Lancaster, which I purchased from Philip Reitzel and wife, shall be used and kept as a cemetery, and laid out in lots or pieces according to the plan thereof, and be sold by my executors at private sale, hereby giving my said executors or the survivors of them full power to make, execute and deliver to the purchasers good and sufficient deeds in fee for the same." He also provided that, after the death of his daughters, the lot-holders of the cemetery should, from time to time, select three suitable persons out of their number to take charge of and to care for the cemetery, and that, after the death of his executors and all of his daughters, these three persons should sell the burial lots then undisposed of and make deeds for the same and pay over the proceeds to his heirs and legal representatives. The present trustees of the cemetery are Henry M. Shreiner, John J. Knight and George W. Gibbs. There are now buried in this plot 856 persons, of whom 850 are white and six are colored. When Mr. Stevens was buried, only one colored man, whose name was John Johnson, was interred in it. Mr. Dixon states that Mr. Stevens and this colored woman were buried in a negro cemetery, side by side, and even an historian of our own State, who evidently made no inquiry into the true facts, has asserted that he was buried in a negro cemetery. The incorrectness of these assertions is obvious from the above and the following facts:

Lydia H. Smith was born in Gettysburg on Saint Valentine's Day, 1813. She was married to Jacob Smith, who was a teamster and musician. They had two children, William, who was born in 1836, and Isaac, who was born in 1844. Jacob Smith died at Gettysburg and he was there buried. As she brought her two boys to Lancaster with her, it follows that they were born before she became Mr. Stevens' housekeeper. Mrs. Smith died in a hospital in Washington on Saint Valentine's Day, 1884. Her remains were brought to Lancaster, taken to the house of the late George Heiss, and her funeral was held. Mr. Heiss was, in his day, a prominent tobacco dealer, and, for several years, represented the Third ward in Common Council, and he at that time was the tenant of the old Stevens mansion. She was, by direction contained in her will, buried in her lot in Saint Mary's Catholic Cemetery, of which church she had long been a member. The following are the inscriptions of her monument and on those erected for her sons in that cemetery:

LYDIA HAMILTON

Relict of

JACOB SMITH

For many years the trusted
housekeeper of

HON. THADDEUS STEVENS.

Born at Gettysburg, Penna.,
on St. Valentine's Day, 1813.

Died at Washington, D. C.,
on St. Valentine's Day, 1884.

ISAAC

Died April 7, 1884,

In the 37th year of his age.

WILLIAM

Died May 10, 1860,

In the 25th year of his age.

SONS OF

JACOB & LYDIA H. SMITH.

The late Walter M. Franklin, Esq., was one of her executors.

I have no recollection personally of Mrs. Smith, but many persons who are still living knew her well. She is said to have been comely in appearance, light in color, and exceedingly intelligent and entertaining. She was a decent and respectable woman; not a particle of evidence to the contrary has ever been produced. Dr. Henry Carpenter, of this city, was Mr. Stevens' and President James Buchanan's physician and also hers. In politics, he was a leading Democrat. Hon. Thomas H. Burrowes, one-time Secretary of State, and the first Superintendent of Common Schools of this State, was a leading Republican and also a close friend of Mr. Stevens. Mrs. Smith was often at the houses of these gentlemen and of others of like social position in the city, and she was on terms of intimacy with their families. In her will she bequeathed to the three daughters of Dr. Carpenter and to his stepson, to one of the daughters of Mr. Burrowes, and to Mr. Kerfoot, the wife of the late Dr. George B. Kerfoot, small legacies, in appreciation of the kindness which she had received from them. If she had been a woman of bad character, is it likely that ladies of this standing would have shown her any regard? To every one to whom these ladies were or are known, for some of them are yet alive, the question answers itself. I very well recall Isaac Smith, who was commonly known as "Little Ike" Smith. For some years he kept a barber shop on South Queen street. He was, like his father, musically inclined, and was the leader of the colored band. He was small in stature and very black, and it was evident, from his appearance, that there was not the slightest trace of Caucasian blood in his veins.

Mr. Stevens cared nothing for social life. He was a lawyer of large practice and the leader of the Lancaster Bar. He was president of the Lancaster Law Library Association, the only organization of lawyers existing in Lancaster county at that time, from 1858 until the time of his death. From 1842, for about twenty years, he appeared before the Supreme Court in 125 cases. In fact, he was concerned in all the important litigation and in almost all the cases appealed from his county to that Court, up to about 1862, when his Congressional duties prevented him from devoting much time to his law practice. On May 9, 1853, on behalf of the Bar of the State, he, at Harrisburg, announced the death of Judge John B. Gibson, before the Supreme Court. I note these activities to show what manner of man he was in his professional life.

He was also a politician of unrivaled acumen. The two pursuits filled the important places in his life. He made no false professions as to his personal or political beliefs. He was a radical Republican, and, as such, was willing to go the limit for his cause. In the great conflict of the Civil War, he was one of the "sheet-anchors" of the Union. The bitter animosities which grew out of it gave rise to these sensational scandals, and, solely upon the idle rumors which his bitter enemies started, has Dixon, in "The Clansman"

and in "The Birth of a Nation," based his slanderous story. Men may differ with Mr. Stevens as to the wisdom of placing at that time the ballot in the hands of the colored race; but none can fail to realize the seriousness of the questions which then confronted the statesman. Mr. Stevens advocated this measure because he deemed it necessary for their protection, and the action, after the war, of the Legislatures elected during the Presidency of Andrew Johnson in some of the Southern States well warranted this conclusion. For many years Mr. Stevens ably represented this district in Congress, and his memory is revered by a large majority of our citizens. I, with others, feel that the lies and misstatements again reiterated concerning him should not go unchallenged. For his mighty efforts in its behalf, he deserves well of his country, and his memory should not be falsified in history.

In conclusion, I ask all fair-minded persons whether Mr. Dixon is entitled to command confidence; in fact, whether he is worthy of any credit, when it is taken into account that he personally can have no knowledge as to the facts which he asserts, and when it is also considered that he has circulated a sensational story chiefly to stir up racial and sectional bitterness, in order that he may thereby put money in his purse.

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