

Thaddeus Stevens and Slavery

Slavery, an institution strongly entrenched. Thaddeus Stevens, a strong man. A combat to the death occurred when that man battled against that institution.

To the vast store of literature on the Civil War, its causes and its effects, I shall try to add nothing. The fame of Stevens is larger to-day than when he died. I can add no laurels to the mound of wreaths already distinguishing his memory.

No prejudices, for or against slavery, color my vision. No blind worship distorts my view of him who, no matter how we may view him, has achieved a place in history so secure that his fame can not be diminished.

What was slavery? Who was Thaddeus Stevens? And what did he do in the overthrow of slavery?

What was slavery? A calm view of just what was that institution is necessary here.

Although the Chief Justice (Mansfield) of England, in 1772, had decided in the habeas corpus case of James Somerset that slavery was contrary to the laws of England and could not exist there, the Colonial Assemblies, in the face of this decision, continued to enact laws in favor of slavery. The laws regulating the affairs of the Colonies were controlled by provision of charter, or by royal commission, and were required to be "not repugnant to those of England."

Most of the Colonies had, early in their history, recognized slavery as legal. Virginia in 1620, Massachusetts in 1641, Connecticut and Rhode Island

1550, New York 1656, Maryland 1663.
New Jersey 1665.

The King of England, in the eighteenth century, "stood in the path of humanity and made himself the pillar of the colonial slave trade."

As time went on there was a great change in the attitude of the colonists toward slavery. In 1772 the Virginia Assembly earnestly discussed the question, "How shall we get rid of the great evil?" Jefferson, Henry, Lee and other leading men anxiously desired to rid the Colony of "the great evil." The conduct of the English King caused Jefferson in his first draft of the Declaration of Independence to write as follows: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur a miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel Powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep an open market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce." This paragraph was stricken out of the Declaration of Independence before the committee submitted it to a vote of the Congress. A Georgia Convention protested against slavery in 1775, and in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 a strong desire to wipe out slavery was shown, but, by a compromise, provision was made for the abolition of the slave trade. The time fixed by the Constitution was January 1, 1808.

So long as slavery was confined to the holding in bondage of the house servant and the ordinary field hand it

did not present the repulsive features which later characterized it. Wrong in principle it might be, but it was not so terrible in practice.

The seeds of the cotton raised in the United States adhered so firmly to the fiber that it was difficult to separate them from it. By the slow process of picking by human fingers, the seeds were separated from the cotton wool. This work was chiefly done by negro women and children, and the separation of one pound of the wool from the seeds was regarded as a good day's work for one woman. So limited was the production, on account of the labor, that even high prices did not stimulate its cultivation, and the entire cotton crop of the United States in 1791 was only about two million pounds. (The crop in 1861 was about 1,736,600,000 pounds; crop in 1910 was 6,336,000,000 pounds). In 1792 Eli Whitney, a young schoolmaster of Massachusetts, went to Georgia to teach the children of a planter. There Whitney invented the cotton gin, which could do in a day the work of a thousand women.

Instantly the view of slavery changed. That institution was almost dying out when the cotton gin promised wealth to the cotton planter. The increased production of cotton made an enormous demand for slave labor in the preparation of the soil, the gathering of the harvest, and the preparation of the crop for market. Its effects upon the industrial pursuits of nearly one-half of the nation were marvelous. No less were its effects upon the moral and intellectual condition of the people in the cotton-growing States.

Before 1808 enormous numbers of slaves were brought into the country. The institution of slavery, instead of passing away, grew strong and powerful, and cotton, its representative, assumed to be king of the nation.

Thus the economic question supplanted the moral one, as it invariably does. Slave-holding grew very profitable and slave-dealing remunerative, and many a New Englander owned a share in a slave ship.

The attempts to escape of slaves, so long as the fugitive was captured in slave-holding territory, went practically unnoticed. But when a slave had got so far in his flight as to reach a State opposed to slavery his retaking became a matter that stirred the nation.

No matter how blindly indifferent to the evils of slavery in the South the people of the North might seem, their feelings became aroused when slave-hunters came among them. Familiarity with the sight of arrests for crime did not prepare the mind to coolly look on at the capture and return to bondage of a fugitive slave, often lighter in color than his captors.

The political power of the South overawed and overwhelmed the North. The question became one of mixed principle and dollars. A peculiar question. One quite unlike any question that has arisen in the history of any other country.

Now for the man.

Born in Vermont, in 1792, Stevens grew to young manhood amid surroundings adapted to implant and powerfully strengthen in him the hatred of privilege and the idea of democratic equality, which so strongly characterized him in after years.

The influence of a remarkable mother encouraged him in the development of a mind no less vigorous because his body was weak in youth.

The fact that the boy was too much of a weakling to look forward to a life of physical labor, and, therefore, had to rely almost wholly upon his wits for his future, may have been one reason why he reached fame.

A man who passed, as Stevens did, through the Peacham Academy, and who attended Dartmouth College and the University of Vermont, was not an illiterate backwoodsman. He was a well educated man.

He was blessed in his preparation for life. He had a noble mother. He knew the discipline of poverty. He had seen life lived upon a plane of service. Amid surroundings most democratic he had been shown a view of the aristocracy of educated intellect.

When he moved from Vermont to Pennsylvania, coming to York, where he could teach in the Academy, thus supporting himself, and could at the same time read law, he not only gained a broader field for the practice of his profession. That was the least consequence of his moving. What he did was this—he changed from a location near the Northern frontier to one then very near the center of our civilization, and one almost upon that line which, beginning at the Atlantic and stretching to our Western frontier, with a dip southward, formed the line of battle along which was to be fought the great contest for freedom.

The county of York, and the county of Adams, to which he early removed, were bounded upon the south by the slave territory of the State of Maryland.

Keen of mind, eloquent, learned, shrewd and forceful, he grew to manhood and to leadership at the forensic Bar. The culture and democracy of Vermont came to flower through the engrafted stem of anti-slavery feeling.

At the Bar he was ever ready to defend the rights of the fugitive slave. On innumerable occasions he gave ample evidence of the strength of his anti-slavery convictions by the zeal he showed in the trial of slave cases.

Now let us see what happened when

the Man came to battle with the Institution.

The Thirty-first Congress assembled in December, 1849, and Stevens for the first time took his seat as a member of the House of Representatives. Almost fifty-eight years of age, he began his career in the House at a time of life when most men leave public service or have acquired from long service a position of leadership.

Stevens presented himself as a candidate for Speaker of the House, and the vote for him included all the Free-soil members and an equal number of Whigs. Be it remembered that Stevens was already known far and wide for his triumphs at the Bar and in the legislative halls of his home State. As a politician he had few equals and no superior. Although he failed of election, Stevens received a respectable support.

The attitude of the Free-soil Whigs was briefly this: They aimed to force their party to take a more aggressive stand against slavery, or, failing in that, to disrupt the party altogether, and to organize a new party on the ruins of the old.

Stevens was a Whig. His attitude on the slavery question was well known. He had been sent to Congress by a vote of almost two to one for his competitor. There could be no doubt about his instructions.

California had been opened up for settlement, and in an incredibly short time had sufficient population to form a State. Her people would not tolerate slavery.

The citizens of California promptly adopted a free constitution and asked admission as a free State. The most that Congress could do was to refuse admission. The Democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty would not admit of an attempt to establish slavery

there by national law, and, even if the attempt had been made, it would have been an enactment impossible of being enforced.

Slavery in the new Territory was not the only irritating form which the slave problem assumed. The people of the South believed that the Constitution was being violated, that is, as to the return of "persons held to service or labor." Unless an effective law for the return of runaway slaves was enacted and enforced the leaders of the South openly declared their intention to disrupt the Union. Clay in the Senate was for some compromise. Stevens in the House was leader of the extreme Whigs, and was determined not to yield anything. Stevens did not wait for the proposed compromise to reach the House, but on February 20, 1850, made a speech in which he violently attacked the proposition for the return of fugitive slaves, and broadly discussed the slavery question. It was his first set speech in Congress upon the subject, and he was entirely frank in speaking his mind.

"We can say anything," he said, "within these walls or beyond them with impunity unless it be to agitate in favor of human liberty—that is aggression." While unchangeably hostile to slavery in every form and in every place, he declared he felt bound by the constitutional provisions. He disliked some of those compromises, and if they were still open he would never consent to them, but he was precluded from objecting. It was a matter of regret that Congress had no power over slavery in the States, and, if it had, he would, regardless of all threats, support "some safe, just and certain means for its extinction."

He then discussed the wisdom of slavery. He first considered it, to use

his own words, "in the low light of political economy." That nation is the most prosperous which has the most industrious and largest producing classes. "Those who merely consume the fruits of the earth add nothing to the strength or the wealth of a nation." Slave countries cannot have a large number of industrious free men. "When the lash is the only stimulant the spirit of man revolts from labor." Never can such countries have a body of small proprietors of the soil. The poor white laborers are the scorn of the slave himself, and are ranked with him. The soil occupied by slavery, he declared, is much less productive than a similar soil occupied by free men, because negligence and improvidence follow in its train. He illustrated his argument by a reference to Virginia. "She had a delightful climate, a soil naturally fertile. She is intersected, as was well said by the gentleman from Virginia, by the noblest rivers. Her hills and mountains are filled with rich minerals and covered with valuable timber. She has the finest water, I believe, in the nation, in the very heart of her State; and her harbors are among the best in the world. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution she was the most powerful State—her population was double that of New York. It was the boast of her statesmen, that she was 'prima inter pares.' What is she now? The population of New York is more than double, I think the next census will show nearly treble, hers. Her land, cultivated by unwilling hands, is unproductive. Travel through the adjoining States of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and you will see that the land produces more than double as much as the same kind of land in Virginia. In the free States new towns are everywhere springing up and thriving; the land is

becoming more productive; smiling habitations are within hail of each other; the whole country is dotted with schoolhouses and churches almost within sight of each other; and, except under peculiar circumstances, their manufactures and mechanic arts are furnishing lucrative employment to all their people; and their population is steadily and rapidly increasing. Turn again to Virginia. There is scarcely a new town, except at one or two points, within her whole borders. Her ancient villages wear the appearance of mournful decay. Her minerals and timber are unwrought. Her noble water-power is but partially occupied. Her fine harbors are without ships, except from other ports; and her seaport towns are without commerce and falling into decay. Ask yourself the cause, sir, and I will abide the answer."

He thought it was vital to confine slavery to the States in which it then existed, because that course would bring the States themselves to its gradual abolition. Permit the disease to spread and "it will render the whole body leprous and loathsome." He again emphasized his cure for slavery, which long dwelt in the memory of Southern statesmen. "Surround it by a cordon of freemen, so that it cannot spread, and in less than twenty-five years every slave-holding State in this Union will have on its statute books a law for the gradual and final extinction of slavery."

This speech, so far as Stevens was concerned, had a two-fold effect. It not only commanded the admiration of his friends, but it achieved the success of drawing upon him the fire of the opposition. It had strength and directness. It clearly expressed great ideas, which were not dressed up and concealed in any frippery of labored

rhetoric. His trenchant power of argument, his courage, the force of his compact eloquence not merely established his position in the House, but attracted the attention of the country.

When the California question came before the House, he seized the opportunity to state more fully his position with regard to slavery in the Territories as well as to make more emphatic, if possible, his hostility to slavery everywhere. On June 10, 1850, he delivered another philippic, even more forcible and uncompromising than his February speech. He declared that, in his opinion, so far as the constitutional power to admit new States was concerned, Congress had power to admit only such States as were formed out of territory previously belonging to the nation. He again expressed his unwillingness to violate any of the provisions of the Constitution, but displayed a good deal of legal ingenuity in the manner in which he construed some of these provisions. Aside from what he termed "the principle of eternal right," he would never give his consent to the admission of another slave State, unless bound to do so by some compact, "on account of the injustice of slave representation." He would not vote to give five slaves and their master the same voting power as four white men.

From the eulogies which had been pronounced upon slavery he would infer that the institution was a blessing, politically and morally. Comparison had been made between slaves and free working men much to the advantage of the slave. Instances had been cited "where the slave, after having tried his freedom, had voluntarily returned to resume his yoke." If this were true, he could not see any reason for being apprehensive as to the future of slavery. Slave-holders would

never lack bondmen. "Their slaves would remain, and many free men would seek admission into this happy condition." The North would not complain if they would establish in the South "abolition societies to abolish freedom."

He then referred to some of the glowing pictures that had been painted of slavery. "If these Southern gentlemen and their Northern sycophants are sincere and correct, then I must admit that they have just cause of complaint—the only real aggression which the North ever inflicted on them. For it cannot be denied that for two centuries the North has mainly contributed to secure to a particular race the whole advantages of this blissful condition of slavery; and, at the same time, has imposed upon the white race the cares, the troubles, the lean anxieties of freedom. This is a monopoly inconsistent with republican principles, and should be corrected. If it will save the Union, let these gentlemen introduce a 'compromise' by which these races may change conditions; by which the oppressed master may slide into that happy state where he can stretch his limbs on the sunny ground without fear of disarranging his toilet; when he will have no care for to-morrow; another will be bound to find him meat and drink, food and raiment, and provide for the infirmities and helplessness of old age. Impose, if you please, upon the other race, as a compensation for their former blessings, all those cares, and duties and anxieties.....Homer informs us that the moment a man becomes a slave, he loses half the man; and a few short years of apprenticeship will expunge all the rest, except the faint glimmerings of an immortal soul.

"Take your stand, therefore, cour-

ageously in the swamp, spade and mattock in hand, and, uncovered and half-naked, toil beneath the broiling sun. Go home to your hut at night, and sleep on the bare ground, and go forth in the morning unwashed to your daily labor, and a few short years, or a generation or two at the most, will give you a color that will pass muster in the most fastidious and pious slave market in Christendom." There were degrees of slavery, and, having quoted Homer to illustrate its evils, he now cited a later poet. "Dante, by actual observation, makes hell consist of nine circles, the punishment of each increasing in intensity over the preceding. Those doomed to the first circle are much less afflicted than those in the ninth, where are tortured Lucifer and Judas Iscariot—and I trust in the next edition will be added the traitors to liberty. But, notwithstanding this difference in degree, all, from the first circle to the ninth, inclusive, is hell—cruel, desolate, abhorred, horrible hell."

He then referred to the fugitive slave law. The owner of the slave had as effective remedies to recover his property as had the owner of a horse. After citing the provisions of the law, he said: "Is not this sufficient? It is all the right which he would have if he claims property in a horse or other property, which he might allege had strayed over the line. Why should he have any greater right when he claims property in men? Is a man of so much less value than a horse, that he should be deprived of the ordinary protection of the law?"

He then drew a picture of the punishments inflicted upon some citizens of his own State who had harbored fugitive slaves.

He commented with a good deal of asperity upon the course of Webster

and Clay. The sons of the South were faithful, even though its cause was that of human bondage. "But the North, the poor, timid, mercenary, driveling North, has no such united defenders of her cause, although it is the cause of human liberty. Even her own great men have turned her accusers."

He declared his unyielding opposition to the fugitive slave law. "The distinguished Senator from Kentucky (Clay) wishes further to make it the duty of all bystanders to aid in the capture of fugitives; to join in the chase and run down the prey. This is asking more than my constituents will ever grant. They will strictly abide by the Constitution. The slave-holder may pursue his slave among them with his own foreign myrmidons, unmolested, except by their frowning scorn. But no law that tyranny can pass will ever induce them to join the hue and cry after the trembling wretch who has escaped from unjust bondage. Their fair land, made by nature and their own honest toil as fertile and as lovely as the Vale of Tempe, shall never become the hunting-ground on which the bloodhounds of slavery shall course their prey and command them to join the hunt."

McCall says: "The speeches of Stevens upon slavery in the Thirty-first Congress were more rhetorical than those in his later style, and the faculty of wit which he could so successfully employ to provoke laughter and to promote a kindly feeling displayed itself in these speeches in a biting, destructive sarcasm which grew out of his ineradicable hatred of slavery. They will, on the whole, bear comparison with any that were made during the entire history of the agitation." "It should be noted, also, that he did not speak one way and vote another"

....."Stevens voted to the last against the fugitive slave law and against the establishment of the Territories without a prohibition against slavery."

During the latter part of 1851 he appeared as counsel, with others, for the defense of the treason case against Castner Hanway. This case was heard in the United States Court in Philadelphia, and was the first important case, in Pennsylvania, at least, arising under the fugitive slave law of 1850, which Stevens had so vigorously opposed in Congress. "It is rare that any criminal proceeding has ever so thoroughly aroused the country."

This case grew out of the Christiana riot, and the trial ended, after fifteen days' contest, in a verdict of acquittal, based upon the instruction of the Court that the transaction did not rise to "the dignity of treason or the levying of war."

Nearly sixty-eight years of age, in December, 1859, Stevens again appeared in Congress.

The storm cloud of Secession was gathering and already casting its ominous shadow over all the land. The first session of the Thirty-sixth Congress was followed by the momentous Presidential campaign of 1860. The great issue was "Shall slavery be extended or shall it be restrained within the limits it now occupies?"

When the second session of the Thirty-sixth Congress opened the storm was breaking. The secession convention in South Carolina had been called, and her national Senators had resigned their seats. At this time Stevens made a great speech, in which he said there would be, in case secession became effective, "one empire wholly slave-holding and one republic wholly free." While we should faithfully execute the present compact, "yet

if it should be torn to pieces by rebels. our next United States will contain no foot of ground on which a slave can tread, no breath of air which a slave can breathe. Our neighboring slave empire must consider how it will affect their peculiar institutions. They will be surrounded with freedom, with the whole civilized world scowling upon them."

Mr. Dawes, who was a member of Congress at the time, has preserved a striking picture of the effect of this speech. "No one," says Mr. Dawes, "could forget the scene in which it occurred, though all I can say of it and of him seems tame enough without the inspiration of the occasion and of his presence. This speech was delivered in that last session in Mr. Buchanan's Administration, after the election of Mr. Lincoln, when the House was more like a powder magazine than a deliberative assembly. His denunciation of the plotters of treason to their face was terrible, and his expose of the barbarism of the so-called civilization behind them was awful.....Nearly fifty Southern members rose to their feet and rushed towards him with curses and threats of personal violence. As many of his friends gathered around him, and, moving him in a sort of hollow square to the space in front of the speaker, opened before his assailants, and stood guard over him while he arraigned the slaveocracy in an indictment for its crimes against humanity, surpassing in severity even the great arraignment by Mr. Sumner. He was then an old man, approaching seventy, on whose frame and voice time had already made sad inroads, but still standing erect and firm as a man of thirty-five. Calm and self-possessed as a Judge, he lashed them into a fury, and then bade them compose themselves at

their leisure. The excitement aroused by his fiery denunciation and defiant scorn beggars all description, and can only live in the memory of those who witnessed it."

There is a great temptation to here digress and to detail some of the splendid war-time achievements of him, who, as chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, throughout the stress and strain of that terrible conflict, so conducted himself that he has been acclaimed one of the great parliamentary leaders of all history.

The ease, facility and profound skill with which Mr. Stevens solved the innumerable and vexatious problems confronting our Government must excite the wonder and admiration of every student who examines his record.

But the purpose of this paper is limited to "Stevens and Slavery." At one time he refused to say that the war was made for the purpose of freeing the slave. "Ask them who made the war what is its object," he said.

Again he said that, should a brave policy be adopted, we would get the benefit of the anti-slavery feeling in England, which, "among the masses is more intense than the greed for cotton." We ought to announce our purpose to abolish slavery which "the whole civilized world now abhors." Our course had repelled sympathy, because the war had "virtually been made to rivet still stronger the chains of human bondage."

From the beginning of his war-time service Stevens had been ready and willing to accept any policy which would lead to emancipation. In supporting the mild confiscation bill at the July session of 1861, he expressed his opinion that the slaves should be armed if the war continued. On the day of the opening of the very next

session he introduced a resolution declaring that slavery caused the rebellion, that there could be "no solid and permanent peace and union" in the Republic so long as slavery existed within it; that slaves were "used by the rebels as essential means of supporting and prolonging the war," and that by the law of nations it was "right to liberate the slaves of an enemy to weaken his power."

His resolution also provided "that the President be requested to declare free, and to direct all our Generals and officers in command to order freedom to all slaves who shall leave their masters, or who shall aid in quelling the rebellion."

This resolution contained a clause for the compensation of loyal citizens for losses arising from the operation of the resolution.

He spoke in terms of warm commendation upon the course of General Hunter in arming a regiment of black men. Public opinion was not ready for this idea of emancipation, although in point of time not far behind Stevens.

On April 10, 1862, on motion of Stevens, the House proceeded to consider the bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and on the next day the bill passed by a party vote and soon became a law. On May 9 he warmly supported the Lovejoy bill prohibiting slavery in all Territories then existing, or to be thereafter acquired, and also in forts and other public places and ships on the high seas. This bill also passed.

Thus the tendency toward emancipation appeared general and inevitable, and nine months from the day on which Stevens made his speech in support of his resolutions for freedom Lincoln issued his proclamation of conditional emancipation. Undoubted-

ly Lincoln also was a little ahead of public opinion. After a winter and summer spent in futile attempts to secure compensated emancipation in the border States, after the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and the passage of confiscation acts, the President had the wisdom to see that enough had been done to alienate those who were opposed to interference with slavery, but not enough to attract the radical and progressive element who believed that freedom would be a potent war measure, and who saw little to be desired in a Union which retained the ancient source of contention.

In the last session of the Thirty-seventh Congress Stevens continued his fight for the enlistment of negro soldiers. After waiting in vain for action by the military committee, he boldly presented his bill to the House, and secured an assignment for its consideration, without awaiting the report of any committee. This unusual course excited violent opposition, and an attempt was made to prevent a vote upon the measure by repeated roll calls upon motions to adjourn and other dilatory propositions. After an all-night session the House adjourned without action, but the struggle was resumed at its next session and continued for a week. Stevens concluded the debate in a brilliant speech. He did not expect to see the day when in a "Christian land merit shall not counterbalance the crime of color," but he proposed "to give them an equal chance to meet death upon the battlefield. . . . The only place where they can find equality is in the grave. There all God's children are equal." His efforts at last were crowned with success. The bill passed by a vote of 83 to 54, and the thousands of black soldiers who enlisted before the end of

the war refuted by their conduct the predictions that they would be guilty of inhumanity.

On March 28, 1864, Stevens proposed an amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. The amendment thus proposed was very similar in phraseology to the one finally adopted. The Senate gave the necessary two-thirds vote, but the House did not. A motion was made to reconsider, and the subject was postponed until the next session. In the meantime, the Union Army was everywhere successful, and the rebellion was reduced to the point of collapse. Lincoln beat the Democratic candidate, McClellan, by more than ten to one of the electoral vote. Under these circumstances, the amendment was again called up, and, when the vote was taken, it was found that enough Democratic members had patriotically bowed to the inevitable to secure its passage by more than the two-thirds vote. The ratification by the States of this amendment came in due time. Slavery in the United States had become a thing of the past.

“Whether slavery could, within any reasonable period, be blotted out, except by war, is a question which is even now debated; but there can be little doubt that, after war had been entered upon, the rational and conservative course was taken, and instead of sacrificing the Union by a premature attempt at freedom, or delaying freedom until the Union was lost, the time and methods were chosen which made freedom more certain, and made it also an instrumentality for preserving the union. It was fortunate that men like Stevens foresaw the ultimate result and prepared the minds of men to receive it. It was fortunate that Lincoln apparently drifted with public opinion and waited until the

moment was ripe. The immortal event was finally consummated, not by one side or extreme of humanity, but as a result of the combined wisdom of all." (McCall.)

Unalterably opposed to slavery, Stevens was still too great a lawyer not to recognize the binding force of the constitutional provisions blocking the accomplishment of his desire. When war time came his opportunity came, and he saw his life dream come true.

When his strength ebbed away he could console himself for death by realizing that the Union was saved, not half free and half slave, not by any compromise of restricted slavery, but saved entire and free.

A great crisis in the history of his country uncovered his talent. If a like storm comes, may a like man come with it.

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