
Introduction to the Microfilm Edition

Thaddeus Stevens has been called “the greatest dictator Congress ever had,” a man who in 1867 “held more political power than any man in the nation” including the president. A recent study of the Ways and Means Committee describes him as “the most important congressman in the House of Representatives during the Civil War.”¹

During the crucial Civil War and the Reconstruction period, Stevens stood at the center of the national debate over Congress’s authority to conduct the war, to determine the re-admission of Confederate states, and to establish the political and economic status of freed blacks. He already had served as a catalyst for reform in Pennsylvania’s tangled antebellum politics. His legacy holds important meanings for Americans today as we continue to wrestle with issues of race, economic and social justice, the relative weight of personality and policy in political leadership, and the role of education in American life. This microfilm edition makes available for the first time the correspondence, speeches, legal arguments, and business papers of one of the most prominent congressional leaders of the nineteenth century.

THADDEUS STEVENS AS CORRESPONDENT AND ORATOR

Stevens’s private writings differ greatly from his public pronouncements. Indifferent, not to his subject but its written expression, he dashed off brief and businesslike letters with few rhetorical flourishes. A great many of them simply recommended a constituent, or commented caustically on the current political situation. Occasionally, in the early years of his career, Stevens grew expansive; to Thomas Elder on the prospective appointments of William Henry Harrison he wrote: “Our friends who mounted the breach with us must be aided, and if possible succeed—To do this I will go to Washington—Clothe my face with the smoothest smiles of sycophancy, and try what can be done for our honest fellows” (18 February 1841, Reel 1, frame 295, hereafter reel and frame numbers will appear in abbreviated format, e.g., 1/295). As the years passed, however, his letters became more terse, so that by the 1860s most consisted of no more than two or three sentences. Their chief topics were politics—whether it was asking Abraham Lincoln to give a constituent a job or urging Senator William Pitt Fessenden to speed up a Reconstruction measure

(29 January <1868>, 7/430). Throughout his political life, these private letters, in their frank and matter-of-fact tone, reflected his personality.

The letters that Stevens received provide an important gauge of the nation's response to the crises of the 1860s. Letters from former colleagues such as Amos Tuck, and Union soldiers such as James S. Brisbin, from loyalist Southerners such as E. J. Pretlow, and from private citizens such as John Binny poured into his homes in both Washington, DC, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Besides the pleas from pension-seeking widows and job-hunting constituents, incoming letters contained advice for the congressman, most notably in 1865–66, when he became cochairman of the Joint Select Committee on Reconstruction, and a major architect of Congress's Reconstruction program. These writers also sought Stevens's help. A group calling themselves the Freedmen of New Berne wrote from North Carolina to protest harassment from whites and to urge continuance of the Freedmen's Bureau (7 May 1866, 5/220). Yet, surprisingly, given Stevens's lifelong efforts to grant freedom and civil rights to America's slaves, only about twenty letters from African Americans are in the Stevens Papers.

Stevens also saved letters criticizing his programs. An unreconstructed Southerner from Virginia asked, "Which feeling is strongest & uppermost in your Abrahamic bosom—*love* of the *negro* or *hatred* of the *white man* of the South?" (Thompson Powell to TS, 22 February 1866, 4/994). The Ku Klux Klan warned that "thy end is nigh" (10 April 1868, 6/1109). Unfortunately, there is little evidence as to whether and how Stevens responded to these letters. He regularly endorsed incoming letters, but few replies have been recovered. Occasionally, he referred to his letters in his speeches; e.g., in a 17 February 1865 speech on taxing the sale of gold, he cited a letter from Henry G. Stebbins written two days previously (4/116).

Incoming letters preserved in the records of the Ways and Means and the Appropriations committees at the National Archives (as well as in the Stevens Papers at the Library of Congress) allow readers to trace, when they look at the corresponding congressional action in Series II, how Stevens and these two committees he chaired reacted to lobbyists' pressure. Citizens from all over the country pressured Stevens's committee about financial policy in 1861–62. When the Ways and Means Committee of the 37th Congress espoused an income tax, representatives of various groups, e.g., farmers and tailors, opposed it (2/160, 191). The committee's proposal of the Legal Tender Act, a matter of monetary policy, evoked similar intense response, but bankers disagreed as to whether the United States should abandon the domestic gold standard (2/156, 174, 178, 211, 228). Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase wrote Stevens on 3 February 1862 urging passage of the Legal Tender Act: "The means at the command of the Department are almost exhausted" (2/209).

At times Stevens used correspondence to send important messages to the public. His private correspondence with David McConaughy and M. D. G. Pfeiffer shows how he contrived to have them pose an apparently unprovoked question so that he could reply publicly. Ostensibly to Pfeiffer but really to the public at large, Stevens argued that the Constitution, as now amended, guaranteed universal manhood suffrage (6/524, 525, 528, 537–40); to McConaughy, he insisted on the necessity of confiscation (6/386, 387, 380). Stevens pursued a similar strategy with John Gyger, Samuel Shoch, and Harry White in other widely published exchanges in 1866 and 1867 (see to Gyger, 5/596, 603, 6/542, 548; to Shoch 6/498, 499; to White, 5/899, 918).

In contrast to the private ones, Stevens's public letters often contained the rhetorical features of his speeches. Following the Buckshot War of 1838–39,² in detailed and outraged letters published in the Gettysburg papers (and reprinted elsewhere in Pennsylvania and the United States), he defended his role in that crisis with oratorical flourishes (1/232, 235, 247, 250, 256, 260). About the same time, Stevens published a letter declining an invitation to attend the dedication of Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia. He could simply have written: "I fear to promise as my time is so consistently occupied by professional engagements," as he would to Oliver Johnson on a similar occasion years later (29 July 1854, 1/936). His public reply, however, went far beyond a curt refusal: "Your object *should* meet with the approbation of every freeman. It will meet with the approbation of every man, who respects the rights of others, as much as he loves his own. Interest, fashion, false religion, and tyranny may triumph for a while, and rob man of his inalienable rights; but the people cannot always be deceived, and will not always be oppressed" (to Samuel Webb et al., 4 May 1838, *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 1/200). The use of the Declaration of Independence's phrase "inalienable rights" and the antithetical wording of the last sentence are both hallmarks of Stevens's oratory.

It is as orator that Stevens best communicated with the public. From successive drafts of his Reconstruction speech of 18 December 1865 we can learn something about his methods of composition. As the first presentation of his Reconstruction program to his colleagues in the newly convened 39th Congress, this speech was extremely important to him. The drafts show the attention that he lavished on the language and on the arrangement of his points. An early draft (10/882–887) contains the main ideas and even some of the language of the published speech. Frame 888 seems to be the final draft for the first paragraph of the speech, to which he apparently made some last-minute corrections (e.g., in the opening sentence, "President's Message" is replaced by the broader "Reconstruction"). The pages that should have followed are missing, but what have been preserved are two drafts of the last part of the speech, where Stevens denounces the "white man's government" principle. In the second draft, he replaced the mild "some even higher in authority have delivered the same sentiment in some of their oracular disclosures" (fr. 889) with the euphonious and colorful "the whole copperhead party pandering to the lowest prejudices of the ignorant repeat the cuckoo cry 'this is a white man's government' " (fr. 892, 904). To this, the draft he most probably held as he delivered the speech, Stevens added four crucial sentences outlining the role universal suffrage must play in Reconstruction legislation (compare fr. 891 with fr. 897, 900, 905), ending with "if it [suffrage] is ever to come it must be by constitutional amendment and indirect congressional action" (the printed text reads "it must be constitutional amendment or congressional action in the Territories, and in enabling acts"). He also moved a paragraph alluding to Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney (fr. 891) to the close of his speech so that it ends not with a rhetorical question about the influence of the "white man's government" but with the more resounding "damned . . . to . . . everlasting fire" (fr. 900, 905). Words and phrases that Stevens underlined in the manuscript indicate his emphasis as he spoke, e.g., "This is not a white man's government. . . . This is *man's* government" (fr. 896). Newspaper versions of his speeches regularly included the italicized or capitalized words that he underlined.

Besides the partial draft for his initial congressional speech on Reconstruction, a number of other drafts of Stevens's speeches have been preserved. Comparing versions of the major speeches of 27 September 1860, 4 April 1863, and 2 October 1865, we find that the

final printed text rarely departs from the draft. Early in his political career Stevens claimed that his remarks at the Pennsylvania constitutional convention were “badly taken by the stenographers (as I never write out)” (to U. V. Pennypacker, 12 June 1837, 1/170). He evidently began to “write out” so that newspaper and *Congressional Globe* reporters could obtain the manuscript. For example, only a few differences in capitalization and two or three word changes appear between the manuscript and the newspaper version of a speech given to the Union League of Lancaster, 4 April 1863 (9/1047, 1087). Garry Wills has made clear the difficulties in determining the definitive text of a speech as brief as the Gettysburg Address³; Charles Sumner often complained about the corrupt versions of his orations. Yet, from the above comparisons we can tentatively generalize that other printed versions of Stevens’s speeches are similarly accurate. Occasionally, as in his well-known 6 September 1865 Reconstruction speech, he asked that copies be distributed to key members of Congress (see to Edward McPherson, 4/338). But, especially in his later years, little record exists of Stevens’s concern about either the text or the impact of any of his speeches, passionate and powerful as most of them were. He delivered one and moved on to the next.

In his last few years in the House of Representatives, Stevens frequently referred to his faltering voice (e.g., 14 May 1868, 11/899). During President Andrew Johnson’s impeachment, for instance, Benjamin Butler had to finish reading Stevens’s indictment of the president for him (27 April 1868, 11/869). But in his prime, according to a contemporary, Stevens spoke like a professional performer. At first mumbling, wrote J. W. Binckley, he “sharpens every hearer’s sense of the grotesque. . . . During this time he is looking about his immediate place, as if hunting mislaid notes or a dropped handkerchief with the dull solicitude of dotage. The House, meantime, are cracking furtive jokes at his expense.” Proceeding into the heart of his speech, however, Stevens “lifts his long right arm with a wide sweep . . . contracts his beetling brows, throws up and back his towering head, and with a sudden straight thrust of his long, yellow finger, followed by the whole outstretch of his arm, he sends forth, in a thundering tone, the iron bolt of his argument.”⁴

Stevens’s speeches bear the conventional references to Mark Anthony and Cicero, to Moses and Jehovah. They contain both biblical references and Shakespearean quotations. They also refer to historical precedent and, especially during Reconstruction, quote citations and precedents from legal scholars such as Laurent-Basile Hautefeuille, Henry W. Halleck, and Emmerich de Vattel. In a day when speeches were listened to intently, Stevens well understood the power of rhetoric, and he knew how to use it to achieve his goals.

He also clearly understood the power of pungent language. In an early speech defending the Bank of the United States, he mobilized biblical phraseology and alliteration to paint the bank’s opponents as demons: “If in another world, the JUST JUDGE, instead of assigning them the hot[t]est place in his retributive wrath, should allow them to choose a paradise for themselves . . . you would see these human vipers crawling up close to the verge, and looking down into the pit of perdition, where, through all eternity, they could regale their jaundiced eyes, and delighted ears, and gratify their cankered hearts, by beholding the ascending torments, and listening to the groans of the damned!” (18 December 1837, 8/606). Known throughout his career for his biting wit, Stevens evoked frequent laughter from his colleagues, as the pages of the *Congressional Globe* indicate. Appropriately, a recent study, *Congressional Anecdotes*,⁵ includes frequent references to his humor and sarcasm in the House of Representatives.

We find such potency throughout Stevens's utterances. After the Civil War he repeatedly waved the bloody shirt as he referred to our "maimed, halting, crippled patriots," the widows and orphans, victims of "rebel perfidy," and emblematic of "patriotic suffering" (19 March 1867, 11/694, 6 September 1865, 10/792). He also could wave the American flag. In a speech opposing the extension of the Texas boundary, he referred to America's "gallant Commodore" Stephen Decatur as well as to the famous slogan every schoolchild then knew: "Submission! Purchase our peace! What has become of the spirit of our fathers which exclaimed, 'Millions for defence, but not a cent for tribute!' " (14 August 1850, 8/985).

Stevens's speechmaking, however, stands apart in one key aspect from most orators of his day. His colleagues could regularly count on him to make his point quickly and efficiently. Agreeing to yield to Stevens, Representative Emerson Etheridge once stated, "The gentleman from Pennsylvania is a brief and pertinent man" (25 January 1860, 9/42). The gentleman from Pennsylvania gave speeches that were straightforward, logical (at times his own brand of logic), and concise. Supporting General David Hunter's order to free fugitive slaves within his military jurisdiction, Stevens declared in July 1862 that "I am no sycophant, no parasite. What I think I say" (9/759).

In his younger days as a delegate to the convention formed to revise Pennsylvania's constitution, Stevens distinguished between the "ornate language" appropriate to that document and its substance, which was his priority. Let us adopt the principles, he said, and adapt the language later (8/477). During the Civil War, he argued against "abstract propositions," such as preserving "the integrity of the Union," which his colleagues introduced; such resolutions consumed too much valuable time. He even withdrew one of his own when he thought that it impeded the progress of important business (see 9/256, 824). Responding to John A. Kasson about funding a Mississippi River levee, he said, "If we all indulge in such platitudes as my friend has we will never get through this bill during this session" (27 July 1866, 11/348).

In lean, simple prose Stevens communicated his passion for equality. When Congress debated the admission of Nebraska, he argued that this body had a second chance "to build a perfect republic," for the Founding Fathers had "enjoined upon their posterity to complete their labor." Abruptly he then asked, "Are we that posterity or are we bastards?" (15 January 1867, 11/459). In another congressional speech on Reconstruction, he repeated the key term *law* effectively and used the concept to show justice toward the black race: "The same law which condemns or acquits an African should condemn or acquit a white man. The same law which gives a verdict in a white man's favor should give a verdict in a black man's favor on the same state of facts. Such is the law of God and such ought to be the law of man" (3 January 1867, 11/431).

Like most of his congressional colleagues, Stevens intended his speeches to resound beyond the U.S. Capitol, and his mail was often filled with requests for copies of a recent speech. He used everyday, concrete, frequently monosyllabic words and balanced construction as in the following defense of his life's struggle for racial equality: "Every man in this Republic, whether he be black or white or mixed, whether he comes from the East or from the West, from the North or from the South, from the rising sun or from the setting sun, is as free and as much his own governor as . . . myself. . . . Let it never again be heard in these Halls that we object to institutions because they allow beings, allow all beings

with immortal souls in their bodies, to take part in the Government under which they are to serve, under which they are to live, under which they are to rear their children, and under which they are to die” (14 May 1868, 11/899).

In a letter to Stevens, an Alabama lawyer criticized a speech by Senator Charles Sumner: “Not one in a hundred can understand it or what he is driving at.” The lawyer asked Stevens for “some plain practical documents, something a common man can understand” (F. L. Cramer to Stevens, 16 June 1866, 5/379). Stevens delivered. His impact on Congress and the country came, of course, from his control of debate. That impact was powered by his ideals, ideals that he conveyed effectively, not only to Congress but also to the whole country.

SEARCH FOR STEVENS DOCUMENTS

According to Stevens’s biographer, Fawn Brodie, Stevens (hereafter referred to as TS) destroyed much of his correspondence and other papers. Certainly, from 1852 to 1860 there remain only a few incoming letters.⁶ The letters that TS endorsed and saved became the property of Edward McPherson, one of the executors of his estate. This correspondence now resides in the Thaddeus Stevens Papers in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, where guides to these papers indicate that they were purchased by the library in 1907 and 1941 as part of the total McPherson collection. The Thaddeus Stevens Papers also contain letters as a gift of Elsie Singmaster Lewars, who wrote the biography *I Speak for Thaddeus Stevens* (1947). However, a few TS letters, checks, receipts, and other business records still remain in the McPherson collection.

Our search for and acquisition of TS documents thus began at the Library of Congress. Many other collections there, e.g., the papers of Benjamin F. Butler, Salmon P. Chase, and John Sherman, were researched. We placed notices in Lancaster County newspapers, as well as other archivist publications. Approximately five hundred repositories were contacted, including major research libraries in the United States and all the historical societies in Pennsylvania. Many of the letters uncovered are, naturally, the ones referred to in the two most recent TS biographies, those by Fawn Brodie and Richard Nelson Current. However, we also located a number of apparently hitherto unknown letters. From the records at the National Archives—both the Ways and Means and the Appropriations committees, the Select Committee on Reconstruction, and the Records of Impeachment Proceedings (the latter two containing few documents)—we gathered correspondence, petitions, and committee minutes. Research in other repositories produced additional letters, including one to Lydia Hamilton Smith at the Huntington Library, several at the University of Chicago Library, as well as those from historical societies in Pennsylvania. In addition, a number of individuals in and around Lancaster came forward with TS letters in their possession. These people are identified in both the acknowledgments and list of repositories.

Because the TS correspondence is scant in some years, we have made a concerted effort to research local newspapers in Gettysburg and Lancaster for published versions of TS letters. Some already were identified in the biographies; others are new. In cases where the original letter is still unrecovered, we have included printed copies. We also used photo-

copies of letters (now unlocated) published in the biography of TS by Thomas Woodley (*Thaddeus Stevens*, 1936), which he presumably owned when he wrote his biography.

The source for most of TS's speeches, resolutions, and remarks is obviously the *Congressional Globe*. Researchers, using the indexes to these volumes, noted every instance of a TS remark. All but the most routine (e.g., "I didn't hear what the gentleman was saying") are included. Given TS's reputation for shrewd parliamentary maneuvering, we decided to include all of TS's motions to table or calls for the question. The text of all legislation introduced by TS is also available here.

Researchers in California and Pennsylvania searched the *Pennsylvania House Journal* for all instances of TS's role in the legislature during the years he served in that state's legislature. We have included the major resolutions he offered and the bills he introduced. Also published here are petitions TS introduced relating to substantive issues such as the annexation of Texas (8/627). Omitted are bills and petitions pertaining to local matters, such as the appointment of a high constable for the borough of Gettysburg and divorce petitions from individuals.

In addition, we have included summaries from all TS speeches and resolutions from the *Proceedings and Debates: Pennsylvania Convention, 1837*, which chronicles the effort to revise Pennsylvania's constitution. We examined Pennsylvania newspapers to determine if TS had spoken at county and state political conventions and, if so, what speeches had been published. This search yielded texts, summaries, and extracts of TS's speeches. As he became a national figure, his major speeches, such as the Reconstruction speech of 6 September 1865, were reprinted widely.

Another, but relatively disappointing, search for TS's legal arguments took place in the law libraries and courthouses in Pennsylvania. Beginning with a list of cases in which TS participated, we located the ones that were appealed to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and thus printed. However, these cases contain only summaries, not verbatim versions, of his arguments.

The editors welcome suggestions on locating additional TS material from any user of this edition.

NOTES

1. Richard N. Current, *Old Thad Stevens* (Madison, WI, 1942), iii; Fawn Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South* (New York, 1959), 18; Donald R. Kennon and Rebecca M. Rogers, *The Committee on Ways and Means* (Washington, DC, 1989), 144.

2. In the dispute over Pennsylvania's 1838 election, commonly known as the Buckshot War, Stevens claimed that the election of the legislature was fraudulent and denounced its support of the Democratic candidate (see **Chronology**, p. 22).

3. See Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York, 1992), Appendix I.

4. J. W. Binckley, "The Leader of the House," *Galaxy* 1 (July 1866): 495.

5. Paul Boller, ed., *Congressional Anecdotes* (New York, 1991).

6. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 13.