"The Legacy of Thaddeus Stevens": Introduction

The bicentennial conference on the Legacy of Thaddeus Stevens held at the Brunswick Hotel in Lancaster on October 30 and 31, 1992, provided an opportunity to honor the memory and explore the contributions of one of Pennsylvania's most famous political leaders.* The conference took place in an altogether appropriate setting—a hotel in the community that Thaddeus Stevens forcefully represented in Congress during the Civil War and Reconstruction era and a few blocks from the African-American cemetery in which he is buried. Fittingly, the marker there bears an inscription affirming the equal rights principles for which he battled during his lifetime.

Two centuries after his birth, many of the issues that commanded Stevens's attention during a long public career continue to challenge us, not simply as students of the past but also as citizens in the present. Accordingly, the conference organizers sought to put together a program that would include assessments of Stevens by a diverse group of commentators, including public officials, political analysts, and community leaders as well as professional historians. Conference sessions featured papers and panel discussions focusing on Stevens's biographers and his legacy in the areas of civil rights, education, politics and the law. The gathering encouraged interaction between university-based scholars, public historians, teachers, elected officials (including Representative Robert S. Walker, who currently holds the seat in Congress once occupied by Stevens), and members of the general public who were simply interested in learning more about one of Pennsylvania's best-known—if not best-understood—leaders. We are grateful to all the participants for their contributions and pleased that it has been possible to bring together papers by a number of them in this special issue of Pennsylvania History.

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In the Keynote Address of the conference, which is included in this issue, Eric Foner emphasizes Stevens’s fight against class and race divisions, a struggle that led him to champion free access to education and civil and political rights for all races. Stevens saw education, Foner argues, as a “guarantor of social mobility,” a means of combatting those class distinctions which he abhorred. In his review of Stevens’s early involvement in the struggle for public education in Pennsylvania, Charles Glatfelter endorses the idea that Stevens fought valiantly for a cause in which he deeply believed. However, Glatfelter also reminds us that Stevens did not labor alone and insists that his contributions should be seen against the broader background of Pennsylvania legislative battles of the 1830s.

It was in the 1860s that Stevens achieved greatest prominence—or notoriety—on the national political scene. During the Civil War, he insisted on full emancipation and the enlistment of African-American troops. Moreover, as the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee of the United States House of Representatives, Stevens was regularly involved in the intricacies of economic policy making at a time of dramatically increasing government activity. However, whatever their other disagreements about the accomplishments of the outspoken Pennsylvania Congressman, most historians have agreed that Stevens achieved his greatest influence during Reconstruction. A key element in Stevens’s struggle for equal rights was his plan to confiscate the land of former slaveholders and distribute it to the freedmen. He was, of course, unable to muster sufficient support to win enactment of his proposal. This much is well known, but why was his plan unacceptable? In “Land and the Ballot: Securing the Fruits of Emancipation?” Brooks Simpson analyzes the confiscation plan, offers an explanation of its unpopularity, and raises some tantalizing questions about its prospects for success even if it had been adopted. As both Foner and Simpson note, Stevens’s most detailed exposition of his plan, as well as his philosophy of Reconstruction, appeared in a speech he delivered at Lancaster on September 6, 1865. In order to make this key speech readily available to present-day readers, the full text is included here, edited by Beverly Wilson Palmer and Holly Byers Ochoa.

As Foner points out, Thaddeus Stevens remains “one of the most controversial and enigmatic individuals in the history of American politics.” Certainly this enigmatic quality stands out in Jean Berlin’s survey of the conflicting biographical interpretations of Stevens. Her study provides a useful reminder that biographers have necessarily tended to view Stevens in accordance with their own political
agendas and the prevailing spirit of the time in which they wrote. Notwithstanding their accomplishments, Berlin's review of the previous biographies leaves us with a fascinating and elusive question: "Just what made Thaddeus Stevens tick?" A century and a quarter after his death, Berlin concludes, Stevens still awaits a biographer to "put him in his proper context."

In the case of a figure such as Stevens, whose life was so bound up with his Congressional activities, Raymond W. Smock suggests, that "proper context" should include close attention to his relationship to the House of Representatives. As the present-day House Historian, Smock is especially well situated to remind us that in assessing the influence and accomplishments of a past political figure, it is necessary to be attentive to the institutions and constraints within which they operated. Smock's suggestions about the possibilities of a new political history offer inviting lines of inquiry for future scholars interested in Stevens and his career.

While neither the discussions at the conference nor the papers gathered here can offer a completely tidy or altogether persuasive portrait of Thaddeus Stevens, they do make it clear that, two centuries after his birth, this combative, energetic, and vital man can speak to us. Clearly, the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens is solidly grounded in democratic and egalitarian principles. Clearly, too, this is a legacy that holds important meanings for Americans today, as we continue to wrestle with issues of race, economic and social justice, and relative weight of personality and policy in political leadership, and the role of education in American life. As Eric Foner observes in the conclusion to his Keynote Address, "Stevens's legacy continues to challenge us to live up to our professed ideals, rise above our prejudices, and continue to think, as he did, about the meaning of freedom in a society pervaded by inequality."

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