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## Book Review: Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist

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### **Abstract**

Over a million and a half tourists visit Gettysburg every year, finding the quintessence of American history in the borough and surrounding battlefields. Had the great battle been fought elsewhere, it is likely that Gettysburg's legacy in American history would instead be the town where Thaddeus Stevens spent the formative years of his legal practice and political career. As the subtitle to Dr. Bradley R. Roch's new book, *Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist*, makes abundantly clear, it is also the town where the man often put forward as the most radical of Radical Republicans formulated his views on slavery and race relations. For this alone Dr. Roch's work is an important contribution for those looking for an understanding of the Civil War era. But the first fifty years of Stevens' life - the period covered in depth in this book - presents a microcosm of the time, including a rough and tumble litigious society, splinter political factions, challenges to duels, and the last remnants of frontier-style violence. For this, Dr. Roch's book is worthy of a larger audience. [*excerpt*]

### **Keywords**

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Thaddeus Stevens, Abolition, Abolitionist, Tapeworm Railroad, Anti-Masonic Party, Buckshot War, Fourteenth Amendment

***Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist*, by Bradley R. Hoch (Gettysburg: The Adams County Historical Society, 2005).**

Over a million and a half tourists visit Gettysburg every year, finding the quintessence of American history in the borough and surrounding battlefields. Had the great battle been fought elsewhere, it is likely that Gettysburg's legacy in American history would instead be the town where Thaddeus Stevens spent the formative years of his legal practice and political career. As the subtitle to Dr. Bradley R. Hoch's new book, *Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist*, makes abundantly clear, it is also the town where the man often put forward as the most radical of Radical Republicans formulated his views on slavery and race relations. For this alone Dr. Hoch's work is an important contribution for those looking for an understanding of the Civil War era. But the first fifty years of Stevens' life – the period covered in depth in this book – presents a microcosm of the time, including a rough and tumble litigious society, splinter political factions, challenges to duels, and the last remnants of frontier-style violence. For this, Dr. Hoch's book is worthy of a larger audience.

*Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg* is likely to have appeal to three types of readers: those with an abiding interest in Stevens; those with an interest in the history of Gettysburg; and those with a interest in the history of the legal profession.

Stevens was born in Vermont in 1792. Following graduation from Dartmouth College, he moved to Pennsylvania to teach at the York County Academy. He studied law in his spare time, and was admitted to the bar in 1816, when he moved to Gettysburg. He made Gettysburg his home until he moved to Lancaster in 1842. Hoch provides an in-depth description and analysis of Stevens' twenty-six years in Gettysburg, including his prosperous legal career, tenure on the board of directors of the Bank of Gettysburg, disastrous forays into real estate and iron-making, and, of course, his political career. Hoch maintains that Stevens' career was aided by the "timely deaths of two of his contemporaries," and that Stevens "was not above the exploitation of government for personal financial gain," especially in the case of his notorious "Tapeworm Railroad." The often-confusing intricacies of mid-nineteenth century American politics are laid out for the reader, as Stevens' first political successes came as a member of the Anti-Masonic party. This movement, along with Anti-Jackson politics, the Loco-Focos, and the Buckshot War, are all concisely explained and well documented as to their influence on Stevens's career.

Perhaps the most significant chapter of the book is devoted to Stevens development as an abolitionist. Early in his Gettysburg legal career, Stevens represented slave owners involved in legal proceedings to have their runaway slaves returned to them. Fifty years later, Stevens was the leading proponent of the Fourteenth Amendment. Hoch pinpoints the transformation to events of 1835-1837, which led Stevens to move from personally opposing slavery to becoming an outspoken public opponent and one of the nineteenth-century's most important civil rights advocates.

Hoch documents Stevens' work with Gettysburg-area anti-slavery societies, his advocacy for education for African Americans, and, most intriguing, his insistence of running the Caledonia Iron Works at a loss to provide not only jobs for his African American workers but also perhaps a station for the Underground Railroad.

Throughout the book, Dr. Hoch provides vivid vignettes of the Gettysburg area. Descriptions of the layout of the original courthouse (which stood in the center of the Diamond, now Lincoln Square), the gallows for public executions (in the "Y" formed by Baltimore and Emmitsburg Streets), and the proto-industrial atmosphere of the charcoal facilities at Stevens's Caledonia Iron Works enliven the book and add to its value.

Stevens practiced law for all twenty-six years he resided in Gettysburg, and his legal experiences represent a large chunk of this book. Hoch employs a system of alternating chapters in which a chapter describing a legal case precedes a chapter discussing a particular aspect of Stevens' life – a chapter on Stevens' involvement in the legal cases that arose of the Christiana riots, for example, precedes a discussion of his evolution as an abolitionist. Hoch's ability to capture the essence of the nineteenth-century legal profession provides a rich subtext to the book. Those who worry that American society in the twenty-first century is too litigious will perhaps find comfort in the enormous number of lawsuits in which Stevens was either a plaintiff or a defendant (these are nicely identified in an appendix), let alone those in which he served as counsel.

Dr. Hoch's medical background adds a distinctive value to the book.

Hoch speculates that an early client of Stevens suffered from Korsakoff's psychosis, a vitamin deficiency sometimes found in alcoholics that causes memory lapses and dysfunctional nerves. He utilizes psychological studies to show that Stevens, like other males born into poverty, are "at a greater risk than the general population for the development of hyperactivity and oppositional behavior" and that children with deformities (Stevens had a famous club foot) often had few friendships. These and other examples bring a different perspective to the well-known events of Stevens's life.

Dr. Bradley Hoch's *Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist* will take its place alongside Richard Nelson Current's *Old Thad Stevens* (1942) and Hans L. Trefousse's *Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth Century Egalitarian* (1997) for insight into the life of one of the nineteenth century's political giants. Furthermore, Dr. Hoch has given Gettysburg residents a detailed and lively look into a period of their past which has received scant attention when compared to the events of the Civil War.

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