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Portrait of Thaddeus Stevens by Jacob Eichholtz

Description

When we were approached to do a paper on the hidden history of an object in Gettysburg College, a colleague and I decided to take a weekend afternoon to walk around the campus in order to find an object to write about. After wandering for a while, we entered Penn Hall, and in the Lyceum we looked at the portraits of great contributors to Gettysburg College. One face that struck me was that of Thaddeus Stevens, who I remembered as one of the great Radical Republicans of the Civil War era. Gettysburg is very much a Civil War oriented area. However, I wondered what made Thaddeus Stevens so important as to merit a painting in the Lyceum. I then, embarrassedly realized that Stevens was also the namesake of Stevens Hall, and that clearly he must have been very important to the area. So what exactly warranted his place in Penn Hall and in the name of a building? [*excerpt*]

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- Course Title: *HIST 300: Historical Method*
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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are "hidden in plain sight" around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click "View Photo" to see the image in greater detail.

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Hidden in Plain Sight, Stevens Hall, Thaddeus Stevens, Civil War, abolitionist

Disciplines

Public History | United States History

Campus Location

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
Portrait of Thaddeus Stevens by Jacob Eichholtz

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Axel Kaegler

Spring 2006

When we were approached to do a paper on the hidden history of an object in Gettysburg College, a colleague and I decided to take a weekend afternoon to walk around the campus in order to find an object to write about. After wandering for a while, we entered Penn Hall, and in the Lyceum we looked at the portraits of great contributors to Gettysburg College. One face that struck me was that of Thaddeus Stevens, who I remembered as one of the great Radical Republicans of the Civil War era. Gettysburg is very much a Civil War oriented area. However, I wondered what made Thaddeus Stevens so important as to merit a painting in the Lyceum. I then, embarrassedly realized that Stevens was also the namesake of Stevens Hall, and that clearly he must have been very important to the area. So what exactly warranted his place in Penn Hall and in the name of a building? As I examined the painting I realized something else: It was a very nice painting, which led me to wonder: who is it by? I intend to examine these questions and find out, what is so great about this painting? Why is it here?

Thaddeus Stevens' effect in Gettysburg

Thaddeus Stevens was a Radical Republican and a framer of the 14th Amendment, but that in itself does not explain why he is so prominent in Gettysburg. Gettysburg is filled with heroes from the Civil War era, because so much blood, sweat and tear was shed here for and by them. How did Thaddeus Stevens stand among them? It's a pretty clear answer; really, he was a 20-year resident. Thaddeus Stevens was born in Vermont, however at the age of 25 he moved into Gettysburg to start a law practice. Despite his youth, his ability was unquestionable, and gained repute after a particularly clever defense in a case against James Hunter on account of murder. Despite his loss, Stevens

gained a reputation from this case as a capable attorney.¹ This capability helped him become a major figure in history, and his local influence in Gettysburg alone makes him an important figure to Gettysburg College. Yet, he is much more important than just a local figure.

Gettysburg was also where he first exhibited his abolitionist tendencies, after defending a slave owner in *Butler et al. vs. Delaphane*. In a case he won against attorney James Dobbin, Stevens was responsible for the return of a woman slave and her children to a slave owner. Hoch believes that this is what turned him into a serious abolitionist, as during and after the case, he fought another case for three escaped slaves. Despite having to go through five trials over seventeen months, Stevens freed them. Soon after, on the fourth of July in 1823 he declared himself an abolitionist.² This polarizing stance he took in the name of free American society, and all the work he accomplished for it in Pennsylvania and Gettysburg certainly earns him a position in the Lyceum.

Perhaps one of the most important things Thaddeus Stevens did for Gettysburg College was that he was largely involved with its founding. Thaddeus Stevens was a major asset to Gettysburg College, then Pennsylvania College, by introducing petitions and supporting the college despite his party's disapproval of spending money on higher education.³ Thaddeus Stevens indeed became one of the primary reasons for the current existence of Gettysburg College. While he was a supporter of the Gettysburg Seminary, having defended it in civil law suits, most of his support was on the side of his career. On

¹ Bradley H. Hoch, Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg: The Making of an Abolitionist (Gettysburg: Adams County Historical Society, 2005), 2-6.

² *Ibid.* 17-22.

³ Gary W. Gallagher, ed. Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth Century Egalitarian (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 35-36.

the other hand, when Pennsylvania College was chartered on April 7th 1832, Thaddeus Stevens became one of its primary supporters. He personally sold over twelve and a half acres of land to the new institution between the years of 1835 and 1849 and was a trustee of the college until his death in 1868. One of his notable roles in his position as trustee was administering the final oral examination for graduating seniors.⁴

His devotion to education was not only in Gettysburg, however, he became one of the main proponents of universal education. He made his devotion to this known when in a speech he said, “Knowledge is the only foundation on which Republics can stand.

EDUCATION – UNIVERSAL EDUCATION is the lock of strength in this young Samson of Freedom”.⁵ According to Stevens, education was, in the words author Bradley R. Hoch, a “great equalizer” Thaddeus Stevens’ devotion to public education was even greater than his devotion to the Anti-Masonic movement. For example, while accepting pupils to teach them law, Stevens would frequently choose people who could not afford his 200-dollar charge, and teach them anyway. Also, upon finding a deaf mute boy who he thought behind the disability was really quite clever, he personally funded the boy’s special education in Philadelphia. These are just a few individual examples of his benevolence for the education of all. Throughout Thaddeus Stevens’ career, he made a point of fighting for public education, and risked his very career several times over it. This is because public education was a very controversial issue in the early to mid-1800s. Many people figured that the children of Pennsylvania did not need an education for a future in the fields, while the German-speaking people of the region feared that the children would lose their cultural heritage if they were taught English, others just hated

⁴ Hoch, Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg 101-106.

⁵ Thaddeus Stevens as quoted Ibid. 81.

the idea of more taxation. Finally, the religious communities of the region were afraid of secular religion being countercurrent to their faith in God.⁶ This devotion to the education of all people certainly makes Thaddeus Stevens into a very appropriate figure to be painted in Gettysburg College.

Another important facet of Thaddeus Stevens, and why he is so present in Gettysburg College, was his devotion to the Anti-Mason party. Now, whether or not the Freemasons were sinister is not a part of the question. The Freemasons still exist today as a secret society. However, back in the 19th Century the Masons had a potentially more malevolent effect on society, especially in the mind of Stevens. According to Stevens, the Freemason party perverted democracy due to its enforcement of secret oaths. Due to the strength of the Masons at that time, an entire Party, the Anti-Masonic Party was formed. Its goal was apparent in its title alone, to make membership of secret societies where oaths are made into a crime, as they could influence politics. The Freemasons were the most notable of these organizations, and had many members in the higher elements of society, including President Andrew Jackson and the Governor of Pennsylvania.⁷ This devotion to the cause of democracy again makes Thaddeus Stevens a notable man, and deserving of a portrait in the College.

The Painter

In order to examine the painting, not only should we examine the man it was painted of, we should examine the painter himself. Jacob Eichholtz was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the year 1776. Despite being skilled at artistry from an early

⁶ Hoch, Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg 87, 99, 101, 92.

⁷ Ibid. 63-72.

age, Jacob Eichholtz became an apprentice coppersmith.⁸ Despite having a similar talent and a reasonable amount of success at this field, he decided to begin painting portraits, by advertising

Jacob Eichholtz, VERY respectfully informs the patrons of the Fine Arts, that he executes Profile and Portrait Painting, on very moderate terms, East King Street, Lancaster, where specimens of his performance are to be seen, on application by the public.⁹

Despite early criticisms of his work, Eichholtz continued painting on the side of his coppersmith profession, eventually moving from Lancaster to Philadelphia to perfect his craft. After two decades, he returned to Lancaster, having become a notable portraitist, and spent the remaining ten years of his life traveling between the two cities, creating some 172 portraits. Thaddeus Stevens was one of these figures; as a young lawyer he commissioned Eichholtz to make a portrait of him in 1838. It is believed that Eichholtz was commissioned in part due to Anti-Masonic associations.¹⁰ Thaddeus Stevens was by no means the only notable societal figure to be painted though, in this time frame between 1832 and 1842, Eichholtz painted portraits of: Nicholas Biddle, James Buchanan, Joseph Ritner, Bishop William White, Reverend William Muhlenberg, Bishop Samuel Bowman, Lydia Bailey, Rear Admiral John Montgomery, and Chief Justice John Marshall.

⁸ Thomas R. Ryan, ed. The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic (Lancaster: Lancaster Historical Society, 2003), 1-4.

⁹ Jacob Eichholtz Newspaper Advertisement as quoted in Ibid. 4

¹⁰ W. U. Hensel, Jacob Eichholtz, Painter: Some "Loose Leaves" from the Ledger of an Early Lancaster Artist (Lancaster: The Lancaster County Historical Society and the Iris Club, 1912), 21-22.

The Portrait itself

The painting shows a young Thaddeus Stevens sitting next to a column, in a black coat with a white, puffy shirt holding a manuscript, with a book under his hands. He is looking at the painter. In the background we can see Penn Hall, with presumably four people around it: two climbing the stairs and two next to the windows.¹¹ We can interpret any of the four prominent objects in this painting. First we can look at Penn Hall, which is in the background. This can be seen as Stevens' commitment to Gettysburg College, then Pennsylvania College. He donated the land and was a major earlier supporter (see footnote 4). The manuscript can be seen as representative of his time as a lawyer in Gettysburg, where he was very successful. The book can be seen as his devotion to public education. Finally, the column, which is in Doric style, could be interpreted as his love of the ancient Republics of Greece and Rome, or the philosophic works of Aristotle, which were his primary inspirations for many of his conceptions of democracy and government at its finest.¹²

The painting of Stevens has been in possession of Gettysburg since 1886 when Samuel Shock, esq. donated it. Shock was an old friend of Thaddeus Stevens.¹³ After its donation, though, there was a major mix up as to the authenticity of the painting. There were two similar paintings of Thaddeus Stevens that were hung. One was in the Schmucker building, which then served as a library; the other was located in Stevens

¹¹ Jacob Eichholtz, Portrait of Thaddeus Stevens, circa 1838, Penn Hall, Pennsylvania

¹² Hoch, Thaddeus Stevens in Gettysburg 97.

¹³ Charles Glatfelter, document regarding the authenticity of Thaddeus Stevens portraits, 04/08/1960, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

Hall. In a letter, Charles Glatfelter stated his belief that Jacob Eichholtz completed both paintings.¹⁴

According to the Gettysburg College Special Collections archive, the painting has been restored on three different occasions. In 1954, according to a restoration report by Warren Robinson, who was then Chairman of Gettysburg College's Fine-Arts department, the painting was in notably poor shape, exhibits a crackling pattern, which has since reoccurred several times in the portrait.¹⁵ The painting was again restored in the year 1962 by Bruce Etchison. By this point the surface was discolored and blemished, and continued to have a problem with crackling.¹⁶ Most recently, the painting was restored in 1986, one hundred years following its donation. Archivist David Hedrick at the time noted it was still a very salvageable painting, but needed to be touched up due to a worn out border and crackling in the paint.¹⁷

The portrait has not remained in Gettysburg, though; it has traveled across the region. It was loaned to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission the Spring of 1959, the Pennsylvania Academy of High Arts in November and December of 1969, the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art between October of 1997 and January of 1998, to the Washington County of Fine Arts between March and April of 1998 and to the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster county from February of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Warren F. Robinson, "Report on Restoration in March & April of this painting," D. Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

¹⁶ Bruce Etchison, Hagerstown, Maryland, to [Gettysburg College] "Restoration Report", TLS, May of 1963, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

¹⁷ Timothy Jayne, Oxford, Pennsylvania, to Musselman Library, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, TL, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

2003 to January of 2004. The insurance needed to cover this artwork have reached as high as \$50,000 US.¹⁸ This portrait has been in high demand because it is truly a remarkable portrait by Eichholtz. In this picture of Stevens, we don't only see Stevens, we see objects around him as well, we see Penn Hall behind him, we see a book, we see a manuscript and we see a column. These are symbols of his accomplishments, and even if we don't know exactly what Thaddeus Stevens did in his life, it is in stark contrast to most of his works, many of which have no backdrop, or merely a sky in the background.¹⁹

Conclusion

Thaddeus Stevens did a lot for Gettysburg and a lot for the United States, and he lives on in Pennsylvania's education system, and especially in Gettysburg College. His image still exists in numerous portraits, notably his portrait by Jacob Eichholtz that hangs in the Penn Hall Lyceum. The artwork is very impressive; Eichholtz's portrait shows Stevens as young, competent and intelligent. It shows Stevens busy, planning to take on any opponent to a person's right to an education, an honest and transparent democracy, and freedom from slavery. He has a manuscript in his hand, a book by his side and Penn Hall behind him. Essentially, it reminds me of what an ideal Gettysburg student should be

¹⁸ Earle W. Newton, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to [Friend], TLS, 04/06/59, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College; Gettysburg Lillian H. Smoke, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to William B. Stevens, Jr., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, TLS, 09/26/69, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg; "Certificate of Insurance" between the Gleason Agency, Inc and S. Alleghenies Museum of Art. DS Carolyn M. Ziener, 10/09/97, Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg; "Certificate of Insurance" between J Edward Cochran & Co., Inc. and Washington County Museum of Fine Arts. DS by Edward Cochran, 1/28/98 Special Collections, Gettysburg Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

¹⁹ Ryan The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz Examples of his artwork are seen throughout the book

like upon graduation. With Gettysburg College's symbolic building behind, there's a young academic looking at you, with a breadth of knowledge and great potential. We can only hope to achieve anything near what Thaddeus Stevens accomplished, and that is why this is such an important painting.

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