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## Re-Thinking James Buchanan

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## **Abstract**

On Saturday, September 19th, local citizens, historians, Civil War enthusiasts, and the rare college student alike converged at the LancasterHistory.org Campus of History for the second day of the President James Buchanan National Symposium. The theme for the symposium was "The Worlds of Thaddeus Stevens and James Buchanan: Race, Gender, and Politics in the Civil War Era," thus it featured the lives of two of Lancaster, Pennsylvania's most prominent historical residents and two of the most colorful characters of the Civil War era [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, LancasterHistory.org Campus of History, President James Buchanan National Symposium

## **Disciplines**

History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Re-Thinking James Buchanan

*September 23, 2015*

*By Ryan Nadeau '16*

On Saturday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, local citizens, historians, Civil War enthusiasts, and the rare college student alike converged at the LancasterHistory.org Campus of History for the second day of the President James Buchanan National Symposium. The theme for the symposium was “The Worlds of Thaddeus Stevens and James Buchanan: Race, Gender, and Politics in the Civil War Era,” thus it featured the lives of two of Lancaster, Pennsylvania’s most prominent historical residents and two of the most colorful characters of the Civil War era.



*A photo of Wheatland, taken from the back yard. The house served as James Buchanan’s Lancaster home, located just next to the LancasterHistory.org Campus of History. Photograph by author.*

The tone for the day's discussions was perhaps set out from the beginning by Gettysburg College's own Professor Michael Birkner as he introduced the first panel, alleging that the traditional historical narratives of the era, such as the unshakable legend of Buchanan dithering away his presidency as the Union collapsed, are old and tired. Instead, he went on to say, we should make way for a body of new, fresher, and more contentious scholarship – one that shall continue to grow thanks in large part to the scholars on hand at the event.

To summarize the full proceedings of the day's event would be a task far unsuited for a blog post. As such, rather than going through the details of each historian's paper point-by-point, here are what I believe to be the most pertinent themes and topics of the symposium:

### **James Buchanan was complicated**

It is far too easy to generalize Buchanan as an uninspired, uninteresting, and unmotivated politician whose presidency is best glossed over to make way for Lincoln's. Rather, the Buchanan presented was a dynamic politician with goals and aspirations that, admittedly, fell very flat. One such goal was his jingoistic intentions towards Cuba and the Caribbean, fueled by a 'might makes right' philosophy that he clung to after witnessing the unifying effect of a martial spirit of nationalism during the Mexican-American War, even as expansionism fell out of favor. Another goal was to centralize the Democrats' policy and leadership behind him—even if it meant feuding with other leading Democrats such as Stephen Douglas. In an age of notorious party volubility, it isn't a surprise that Buchanan failed, though his failure was not for lack of effort.

Further, Buchanan remains a personally complex and interesting figure. To this day, Buchanan remains the nation's only bachelor president, highly anomalous for his era, which has led to persistent historical rumors that he was homosexual. Buchanan friendly relationships with women was notably positive, however, in an otherwise repressed era. These included a close friendship with future Confederate First Lady Varina Davis, whose own relationship with her husband was often strained by his dominating personality.

### **Networks mattered**

Just as much a buzzword in the past as it is now, political and social networking was incredibly important to the development of historical events and society. As new political movements and social philosophies emerged and clashed, knowing the right people made all the difference, be it in elections or the popularization and spread of new ideas. The fates of political campaigns and social movements of conservatives and reformers alike were made and broken by connecting with allies across the nation. Even in an age without high-speed transportation and lacking extremely efficient communication, the United States remained a very interconnected and personalist nation.

### **Sectional divisions were not absolute**

With the same ease one can caricature Buchanan, one can caricature the United States itself, starkly and absolutely divided between the North and the South, and all that they each stood for.

In reality, things were not quite so clean. Northerners with Southern interests existed, both supporting Southern slaveholders and politicians themselves as well as, paradoxically, abolitionists—free workers who supported the cause not out of altruism, but to ensure that they did not have to compete with unpaid, forced labor. In many cases, while they wanted the slaves freed, they also wanted to see them out of the United States altogether. Non-sectional issues, such as women’s rights, also showed distinct regionalist character, with women often coming to radically different conclusions born out of the distinctness of the two societies, but with similar overall tones. Women of the educated, wealthy class in both halves of the country who could participate in the women’s rights movement believed that they should be a legitimized part of the political conversation . . . but only they, and not women of lower status than them (black and working class women, in the South and North, respectively).

### **The Civil War was not a complete revolution**

For all the progress clearly made for the nation as a result of the Civil War, there remain clear signs that it could have gone further. Thaddeus Stevens proposed radical plans for the redistribution of wealth and property of the Southern planter class to the newly freed slaves up until his death in 1868 that would have radically rebalanced Southern society: proposals that never came to fruition, allowing the social domination of that same class over the new freedmen. Meanwhile, even in the North, the abolition of slavery led to social backlash among citizens who feared migration of black citizens. Debates brewed from the local to national level over the definition and sanctity of marriage, as scared as many were by the prospect of interracial marriages—debates that seem to echo into the present day.

A fifth point that would encompass all the others could perhaps be stated very plainly: history is complicated. It’s full of complicated people who make complicated decisions, triggering complicated results. Digging down and uncovering those complications, as the historians did at the symposium, is what makes for really good and interesting history.

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