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A Thaddeus Stevens Musical: A 19th Century Hamilton?

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Abstract

If you read my last post on the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, you've already read my waxing admiration of the show and might also remember that I listen to the soundtrack non-stop. The musical has shown the world the power that music has as a teaching tool. As someone interested in nineteenth century American history, I long for a *Hamilton*-esque musical regarding the Civil War era. One of the reasons *Hamilton* is so successful is its ability to draw connections between past and present issues, and that can be done easily for nineteenth century America. Women's rights, slavery, immigration, emancipation, and workers' rights are all issues that plagued the nineteenth century and, in many ways, we deal with their legacy today. I have thought long and hard about how a musical about the nineteenth century would be executed and on whose life it would focus. The obvious choice would be to focus on Abraham Lincoln. Our sixteenth president's story has equal parts success and personal tragedy. Lincoln, however, does not satisfy me as the protagonist in the way that *Hamilton* does. His story has been told many times over and. Comparatively speaking, retelling Lincoln's story would be a similar choice to telling Washington's story in the context of the Revolutionary War era. [excerpt]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Theater, Hamilton, Broadway, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | Theatre and Performance Studies | United States History

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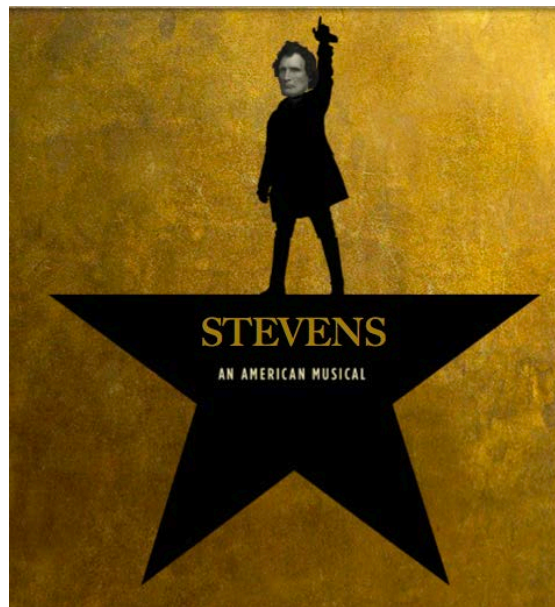
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Thaddeus Stevens Musical: A 19th Century Hamilton?

April 4, 2016

By [Megan McNish '16](#)

If you read [my last post](#) on the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, you've already read my waxing admiration of the show and might also remember that I listen to the soundtrack non-stop. The musical has shown the world the power that music has as a teaching tool. As someone interested in nineteenth century American history, I long for a *Hamilton*-esque musical regarding the Civil War era. One of the reasons *Hamilton* is so successful is its ability to draw connections between past and present issues, and that can be done easily for nineteenth century America. Women's rights, slavery, immigration, emancipation, and workers' rights are all issues that plagued the nineteenth century and, in many ways, we deal with their legacy today. I have thought long and hard about how a musical about the nineteenth century would be executed and on whose life it would focus. The obvious choice would be to focus on Abraham Lincoln. Our sixteenth president's story has equal parts success and personal tragedy. Lincoln, however, does not satisfy me as the protagonist in the way that *Hamilton* does. His story has been told many times over and. Comparatively speaking, retelling Lincoln's story would be a similar choice to telling Washington's story in the context of the Revolutionary War era.



Parody image by author. Original image property of Hamilton: An American Musical.

The figure for my nineteenth century musical needs to be a well-known name, but his story needs to be one that is unfamiliar to most people. Ideally, he would be a prominent figure at the center of political culture in the 1850s and 1860s. His life should be complex, dramatic, and contain hardship. As I sat pondering the question, it came to me: Thaddeus Stevens. He fits all the criteria I have mentioned. Stevens was one of the most progressive politicians of his era, nearly lost his fortune in the early 1840s when his business went sour, almost retired from politics before being elected to Congress, and suffered from a clubbed foot. However, Thaddeus Stevens endured and was elected to Congress in 1848. Early in his Congressional career he was a part of the opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law which was a component of the Compromise of 1850. During the Civil War, he famously introduced the Thirteenth Amendment to Congress on March 28, 1864 and helped write the Fourteenth Amendment. After the death of President Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens pushed President Andrew Johnson to take a hard line on Reconstruction. Stevens later introduced the resolution to impeach Johnson. Steven died shortly after, in August 1868, yet the 8th Pennsylvania District kept his name on the ballot in November as a sign of their respect. In addition to his Congressional work, Thaddeus Stevens was committed to higher education. In 1834, he secured an \$18,000 contribution to Pennsylvania College, now Gettysburg College, to build Pennsylvania Hall, the first and most iconic building on campus.

Undoubtedly, Thaddeus Stevens is a figure that deserves more credit for his life's work and what better way to catapult him into the fame he deserves than to be featured in a musical? Just as Alexander Hamilton struggled to reach his position first in the Continental Army and then in Washington's cabinet, Stevens rose from his failure in Pennsylvania politics to prominence in Congress. Neither man was perfect, creating a compelling narrative of both success and failure. However, what both Hamilton and Steven succeeded at were important things. Like Hamilton, Stevens fought against slavery and attempt to create something that would endure beyond his lifetime.

More specifically for the musical itself, one can imagine Stevens at the beginning of his ascent to Congressional office singing "I'm not going to throw away my shot." Indeed, just as the cabinet debates during Washington's presidency were turned into rap battles, the Congressional debates on the thirteenth amendment in Congress could also be reimaged in this way. The end of Stevens' life has many similarities to the end of "Hamilton" as well. While Thaddeus Stevens was not killed in a duel, like with Alexander Hamilton, questions about Stevens' legacy were still unanswered. How progressive would Reconstruction be? Would African Americans get their 40 acres and a mule? Who would tell Stevens' story? Thaddeus Stevens is not representative of the population in the 1860s and that is what makes him remarkable. His progressive beliefs on race, while not perfect in a 21st century context, make him the kind of historical figure that should be looked up to, but is so often forgotten. So, perhaps for his next birthday, someone should buy Lin Manuel Miranda a Thaddeus Stevens biography.

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