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Searching for Stevens

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Searching for Stevens

Abstract

You haven't seen much from me yet this semester. For this I apologize. I have been knee-deep in preliminary research for a special project I'm working on for the blog – one that can't be completed until the weather breaks. I originally meant to learn just enough about the topic of this project to share a brief overview with you all, but, as sometimes happens during the research process, I've become a little obsessed with the central figure of my research: one Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Searching for Stevens

March 13, 2015

by Kevin Lavery '16

You haven't seen much from me yet this semester. For this I apologize. I have been knee-deep in preliminary research for a special project I'm working on for the blog – one that can't be completed until the weather breaks. I originally meant to learn just enough about the topic of this project to share a brief overview with you all, but, as sometimes happens during the research process, I've become a little obsessed with the central figure of my research: one Congressman Thaddeus Stevens.

To call the great politician polarizing in his own time would be a grave understatement. Frankly, it's a testament to his willpower and political savvy that he managed to accomplish as much as he did considering how many enemies he made along the way. When I was in high school, we didn't really learn much about Stevens except that he was one of the Radical Republicans who favored a hardline policy against the South during and after the Civil War. I knew his name, but I had no idea of the man behind it.

Then, as a first-year student, I saw Spielberg's *Lincoln* with my friends from our Civil War Club. I was delighted by Daniel Day Lewis's performance as the titular character, but I was blown away by Tommy Lee Jones's brilliant portrayal of Thaddeus Stevens. I still think that he had many of the best lines in the film, and although few if any of them were actual quotes, they were certainly in keeping with Stevens's well-documented sense of caustic wit.

During that semester, there was an exhibit about Stevens on display in the reading room of Gettysburg College Special Collections. I distinctly recall that they had one of Stevens's curly brown wigs, and I thought that it was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen, especially after having watched *Lincoln*.

Around the same time, Gettysburg College celebrated the 175th anniversary of our beloved Pennsylvania Hall. All students, faculty, and staff were invited, but, oddly, I was the only student to attend. Regardless, I remember enjoying a piece of cake as the speaker discussed the history of Penn Hall and mentioned the critical role Stevens played in supporting the college in its formative years. The college honors him today with Stevens Hall, a residence hall named in his honor, and with [a painting that hangs in the Penn Hall Lyceum](#) alongside those of celebrated Gettysburg College presidents.



Portrait of Thaddeus Stevens by Jacob Eichholtz, 1838. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

Although Stevens was born and raised in Vermont, as a lifelong resident of central Pennsylvania I feel a certain local connection to him, for he spent much of his life practicing law in Gettysburg and Lancaster. He helped establish the public education system in Pennsylvania and then defended it when it came under attack. His support for education cost him politically, however, and isolated him from his party. How can I not admire him for choosing principles over politics? Although it has seen extensive change and reform since Stevens defended it, this is the same public education system that served me so well during my high school years.

Now that I reside in Gettysburg for most of the year, I feel even closer to Stevens. For a number of years he rented a room in the Gettysburg Hotel, eventually establishing an office and a residence on Chambersburg Street just around the corner from the building where I lived last year.



Site of Stevens' residence and office in Gettysburg. Photo by author.

Then, last semester, a friend and I went hiking on the Appalachian Trail from Caledonia State Park about 20 minutes west of Gettysburg. I had hiked this section once before when I was in high school, but on that occasion we had only be passing through on our way to Pine Grove Furnace. I had assumed that Caledonia was named in reference to Scotland, but when I searched online for park information and a list of the trailheads for our hike, I learned that it was the site of an iron forge owned by Thaddeus Stevens himself. Since then, I've been working to learn as much about Caledonia Iron Works as

possible and you can expect to hear more about it from me before the semester is through.

Like any man, Stevens had his share of faults. I can easily imagine how his curious blend of cynicism and idealism, which I find rather delightful, could rankle his contemporaries and modern audiences alike. At times, he could be harsh, suspicious, and hateful. Even still, I can't help but admire this man for his unshakeable commitment to his convictions.

If I happened to spark your curiosity about Thaddeus Stevens's relationship with the college, you should check out this essay by President Janet Morgan Riggs about the painting I mention above. [Follow this link and click "Link to Full Text" to read it.](#)

Sources:

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