

# Thaddeus Stevens

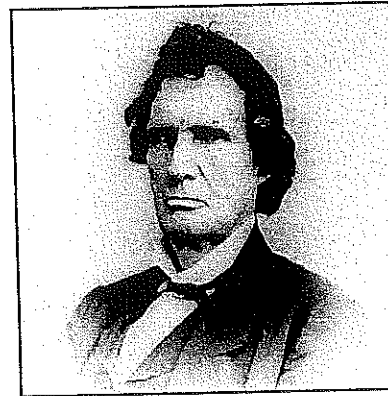
1792–1868



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** A Radical Republican congressional leader, Thaddeus Stevens was a champion of equality. He supported the rights of freed slaves and strict guidelines for Reconstruction.



*As you read the biography below, think about the ways in which Thaddeus Stevens worked to promote equality. Do you think his positions were radical?*



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Once the Civil War was over, the work of rebuilding and reintegrating the southern states began. President Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction offered forgiveness to southerners who pledged their loyalty to the Union and support for emancipation. States could organize a new government once 10 percent of their population had taken this oath. The plan was highly controversial and hotly debated in Congress. Radical Republican and congressional leader Thaddeus Stevens led the opposition to Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan.

Thaddeus Stevens was born into a poor frontier family in Danville, Vermont in 1792. His father abandoned the family when he was young. As a young man, Stevens focused attention on his studies. He completed high school, then graduated from Dartmouth College in 1814. Later he moved to York, Pennsylvania, worked as a teacher, and studied law. After he passed the state bar, he moved to Gettysburg and became a successful businessman, community leader, and lawyer. He defended numbers of fugitive slaves without a fee.

Stevens was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in 1833 where he served until 1841. He was a fierce opponent of slavery. Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1849 as a member of the Whig party, Stevens served until 1853. During that time, he opposed the Compromise of 1850, which allowed for the pursuit and return of fugitive slaves.

Stevens helped form the Pennsylvania Republican Party and was elected again to Congress in 1859. He was, in the words of a fellow member, a "natural leader." As the majority leader of the House, Stevens supported President Lincoln's administration. He pushed bills providing military funding through the House in as little as five minutes. However, Stevens and other more Radical Republicans wanted the president to take stronger

## Reconstruction

## Biography

steps, including emancipation and the extension of civil liberties to free African Americans.

When the war ended, Stevens argued for freedmen's rights. He opposed Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan and believed southern states should be treated as conquered territories. He also believed that southern plantations should be divided among freedmen. As a member of the Committee on Reconstruction, he helped author the Fourteenth Amendment as well as Reconstruction acts. While he viewed most Reconstruction legislation as too moderate, he told fellow Radicals to "take what we can get now and hope for better things in further legislation."

By 1868 Stevens's health was failing. Feeling that President Andrew Johnson was too soft on the South, Stevens pressed for his impeachment. However, he was too sick to play an active role in the impeachment process. In August, Stevens died in his Washington, D.C., home. At his request, he was buried in a small, interracial cemetery. His tombstone was engraved with these words: "I have chosen this that I might illustrate in my death the principles which I advocated through a long life: Equality of man before his Creator."

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** When Stevens was a lawyer, what kinds of cases did he take?

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2. **Interpret** Based on Stevens's legislative record, what central beliefs guided his life and work?

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### ACTIVITY

As a class discuss the pros and cons of Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan for reconstruction. Why did Stevens and other Radicals oppose the plan? What alternatives did they offer? Make a list of goals for Reconstruction. Then work as a class to develop a plan for Reconstruction that would meet those goals.