

NEW ENGLAND YOUTH

In the northeastern corner of Vermont, about ten miles east of St. Johnsbury, lies the small village of Danville. Named after the French geographer Jean Baptiste D'Anville, in 1789 it boasted of 200 families. It was located in the middle of pleasant farming country, in an elevated region, with a broken range known as Cow Hill and Walden Mountain to the west and beautifully diversified hills and valleys to the east. By 1795 it had become the county seat of Caledonia County and prided itself on a courthouse, a jail, and grist and saw mills. Its Yankee inhabitants were mostly farmers—hardworking, religious, and devoted to their Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational churches.¹

It was to this village that Joshua Stevens and his wife Sarah Morrill had come a few years earlier from Methuen, Massachusetts. A shoemaker and surveyor, Stevens had made a new survey of the township, which was considered authoritative. He had the reputation of being an excellent wrestler, able to throw any man in the county. He and his wife had four children: Joshua, born in 1790; Thaddeus, on April 4, 1792; Abner Morrill in 1794; and Alanson in 1797. Joshua later moved to Indianapolis, became a judge, and raised a family; Abner stayed in Vermont, married, had three children, and practiced medicine in St. Johnsbury; Alanson, remaining unmarried, farmed at home. It was Thaddeus, the second son, who was to become famous. Born with a clubfoot, he was marked for life with a handicap of which he was deeply conscious. His name honored the Polish patriot, Thaddeus Kościuszko.²

Controversy surrounded Thaddeus Stevens all his life. Even the date of his birth was to become controversial, because some detractors, in an attempt to prove that he was the illegitimate son of Count Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, claimed that he was born in 1793 rather than in 1792. Talleyrand was also lame and visited the United States in the 1790s. The falsity of the assertion is easily proven, however, as the Danville town records specify 1792 as the year of

day. He did well at the academy, where he joined one of the two parties, one scholastic and the other political. It did not take him long to become the leader, presumably of the latter, competing with the rival group led by Wilbur Fisk, later the president of Wesleyan University and a famous Methodist minister. But Thad's career was not free from trouble. Contrary to the rules of the academy, he took part in the performance of a tragedy, a transgression he committed in the evening of September 4, 1811, after having refused to give the required exhibition in the daytime while the trustees were waiting. For this breaking of the rules, he and twelve fellow students were reprimanded by the Board of Trustees, which required them to sign an apology. "We, the Subscribers, students in the Academy at Peacham," it was worded, "having been concerned in the exhibition of a tragedy in the evening of the 4th of September, 1811, contrary to the known rules of the Board of Trustees on reflection are convinced that we have done wrong in not paying a suitable respect to the authority of the board and hereby promise that as long as we continue students at this Academy we will observe such rules as the Board may prescribe." Willful and headstrong as he reputedly was, he yielded only after he had no other recourse.¹¹

After Peacham Academy, in 1811, young Stevens enrolled in the sophomore class at Dartmouth College. For some reason, however, he did not stay, and spent his junior year at the University of Vermont. This university, situated on a hill overlooking Lake Champlain at Burlington, took pride in its central building, University Hall, a structure 165 feet long by 75 feet wide at the middle, topped by a tower rising 40 feet above the roof. It contained forty-six students' rooms, a chapel, various halls for recitations and other purposes, as well as a library and museum. The admission requirements of the university included "good moral character" as well as an examination by the president and tutors in Latin and Greek, particularly in the six books of the *Aeneid*, four of Cicero's orations against Catiline, and four gospels in the original Greek. Chapel attendance on Sunday mornings and evenings was obligatory.¹²

Stevens seems to have done well again at the university. He even wrote a tragedy in three acts, "The Fall of Helvetic Liberty," which was performed prior to commencement in 1813, and in which Napoleon, French generals, and their Swiss counterparts constituted the *dramatis personae*. But again he managed to get into trouble. It so happened that neighboring farmers' cows used the unenclosed campus as a pasture. Prior to commencement, their owners were warned to keep them away. One of these refused to comply, and when Stevens and a fellow student were walking under the trees a week before graduation and saw the cow, they decided to kill it. Procuring an axe from a

fellow student, they did so, and when, on the following day the owner complained to the president, the innocent owner of the now bloody axe fell under suspicion and was about to be expelled on the day of graduation. This possible outcome horrified Stevens and his friend. Throwing themselves upon the mercy of the owner, they promised to pay him twice the value of the cow if he would help them. The farmer agreed, told the college authorities that soldiers had killed the animal, and the accused student was cleared and allowed to graduate. Stevens later did pay the farmer, who sent him a hogshead of Vermont cider in return. It was obvious that Thad was basically too decent to let an innocent man suffer.

The story that Stevens watched the Battle of Lake Champlain from campus and saw Thomas McDonough defeat the British at Plattsburg Bay is probably apocryphal, as in September 1814 he was no longer in attendance at Burlington. At any rate, the university's buildings were taken over by the federal government because of the war; the institution had to close, and Stevens returned to Dartmouth for his senior year.¹³

The young man who set out for Dartmouth, was, with the exception of his deformed foot, "a perfect physical man, commanding in appearance." Reddish chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and a finely proportioned face gave him the aspect of a well-formed youth. He was athletic, an excellent swimmer and horseman, and knew how to keep his weight down. After carrying an inebriated companion home in Peacham and witnessing his death within a short time, he became very abstemious in the use of alcoholic beverages. As he wrote many years later, "Man can enjoy no happiness, unless his body, and his mind, are free from disease. . . . Intemperance, never in a single instance, fails to deprive its victim of some portion of his bodily or mental health, and generally of both." And while he never became a complete teetotaler—at times, he ordered good wines—he always favored temperance movements.¹⁴

His new college at Hanover, New Hampshire, was justly famous. Its central hall, three stories high, with a cupola, was located in the middle of an enclosed green, flanked by several additional buildings. By 1811, it already had 124 students. As at Vermont, an entrance examination was required, prospective students being tested in Virgil, Cicero's orations, the Greek New Testament, Latin, and arithmetic. Tuition was £80 a year, but the cost of living was not high; Amos Kendall, later a member of Andrew Jackson's kitchen cabinet, spent only \$570 for his college course at Dartmouth. For the first three years, two thirds of the instruction was devoted to Greek and Latin, the remainder to English grammar, logic, geography, mathematics, surveying, philosophy, and astronomy. In the senior year, when Stevens entered, the emphasis was on

metaphysics, theology, and "political law." The administration also furthered composition and public speaking, with declamations in chapel every Wednesday. The regimen was strict; chapel was at five o'clock in the morning in an unheated building, then came a recitation, then breakfast, study, a second recitation at eleven, and another period of study. Afternoon classes met at three or four, with evening prayers at six. On Saturday afternoons there were no classes except evening prayers, and on Sundays there were chapel services in both the morning and afternoon.¹⁵

No matter how difficult this course of studies may have been, Stevens was graduated in 1814 after taking part in a conference on the topic "Which has been more deleterious to society—war, luxury, or party spirit?" He defended luxury as the greater ill, as against party spirit, and left the college with a good education, which he always enhanced by assiduous reading.¹⁶

At Dartmouth as well as elsewhere, Stevens made enemies. After his death, one of his former roommates professed to remember that Thad "was then inordinately ambitious, bitterly envious of all who outranked him as scholars, and utterly unprincipled." According to this biased observer, he showed "no uncommon mental power, except in extemporaneous debate. He indulged in no expensive vices, because he could not afford them, and because his ambition so absorbed him that he had little taste for anything that did not promise to gratify it. He was not popular enough with the class to get into Phi Beta Kappa, or even to be nominated for membership. This was a source of great vexation for him, though he was very careful not to express his vexation. Yet it burst out once, in our room, in an unguarded moment."¹⁷

The patent exaggeration of this account is clear. In later life, no matter how hostile many observers were, they never denied Stevens's great intelligence, and he was popular enough with his fellow students to correspond with them in the most informal manner. The story about his failure to be nominated or initiated into Phi Beta Kappa may be true; yet it was written many years afterward, when Stevens had long been accused of hostility to the Freemasons because of his alleged rejection by the secret fraternity at college. In reality, his fanatical opposition to the order can be explained much more simply. The Masons by charter refused admission to "cripples," a restriction that could not but infuriate the young man handicapped by his clubfoot.¹⁸

Perhaps his roommate's recollections also gave rise to another canard, the story of Stevens's having been expelled from college. Repeated by the distinguished writer Ralph Korngold as recently as 1955, it rests on a confusion between Thad and his nephew with the same name, who many years later wrote a letter detailing the story about himself. Not only was the elder Stevens

never expelled, but he bore the college no ill will; in fact, in 1819, five years after his graduation, he wrote to the Dartmouth authorities that he still owed them some money which he was now happy to forward to them. And he is mentioned with pride in the *Sketches of the Alumni of Dartmouth College*.¹⁹

Although Stevens never married, he was not oblivious to the opposite sex. To his Dartmouth acquaintance Samuel Merrill, who had gone to Pennsylvania, he reported from college that "this place is at present greatly alarmed on account of an uncommon epidemic, which is sincerely hoped will thin the ranks of our old maids and their withered ghosts . . . to the dominion of that old tyrant, Hymen." According to Stevens, "twenty licenced copulations" had taken place, although he was not one of the participants. Because of his deformity, he may have hesitated to form a serious relationship. He had, however, fallen in love with the daughter of one of the clergymen in Danville, but poor and diffident as he still was, he had not pursued his suit before he left New England for good.²⁰

After graduation in August 1814, Stevens went back to Peacham. He had been there before, when, like many young American collegiates, he had taught school at the Academy, as he had also done previously at Calais, Maine, but teaching was not his goal. The law was what drew him, and he began to study the intricacies of jurisprudence with Judge John Mattocks in Danville, who had lived across the street from him in Peacham.

But Stevens was looking for opportunities elsewhere. His friend Merrill had established himself in York, Pennsylvania, and Thad asked him what prospects there were in the Keystone State. Apparently, the answer was encouraging, for in February 1815, young Stevens left home to settle in York.²¹

Prior to leaving Vermont, Stevens had already formed some of the lasting, firmly held opinions for which he was to become widely known. Hating aristocracy, he exhibited throughout life a concern for the poor and disadvantaged. To what extent his own physical handicap influenced his character, as has been asserted, is open to question. No doubt it predisposed him to sympathy for the unfortunate and, as has been seen, induced his hatred for the Masons. He was certainly never unaware of his deformity. In later life, while in the legislature, he once rested his foot on the edge of his seat. A child looked at him and he, thrusting the deformed limb close to the young boy, said, "There, look at it! It won't bite! It's not a snake."²² His legendary sarcasm owed much to his infirmity, but to what extent it determined his way of doing things can no longer be ascertained.

Thad's sarcasm is perhaps best illustrated by his dealing with his later affliction, alopecia, which causes a loss of body hair. After becoming bald, he habit-

ally wore a wig, and according to tradition, when a lady asked him for a lock of his hair, he handed her the entire wig. The story may well be true, as is the report of a snide remark, allegedly made to Halbert E. Paine of Wisconsin, who told him that in a contested election case both contestants were rascals, only to be asked, "Well, which is our rascal?"²³

His extreme cynicism is so well documented that it clearly developed early in life. He thought all men were mercenary and all women unchaste, although of course he made an exception in the case of his mother. While his failure to join a sect was well known, he was not hostile to religion, nor devoid of all faith. His mother's fervent Baptist principles made a great impression on him, and he never openly scoffed at the devout. In fact, he was so well versed in theology that a friend asked him whether he had ever studied with a view to the pulpit. The only answer was, "Umph, I have read the books." Yet no matter how persistently his friend, the Reverend Jonathan Blanchard, tried to convert him, the clergyman was unsuccessful. An avid reader—he founded a library at the age of fifteen—Stevens was familiar with the higher criticism of the Bible and kept abreast of the latest developments in science and philosophy.²⁴

Another character trait that he evidently acquired when young was an uncompromising honesty. "He was a man of truth," wrote Edward McPherson. "His worst enemy never charged him with uttering a falsehood. His word was as good as his bond." It is therefore unlikely that William H. Seward's charge that a bribe induced Stevens's vote for an appropriation to carry out the treaty in which Russia ceded Alaska is anything more than a belated effort to harm the administration's most outspoken opponent. At the time the alleged bribery took place, Stevens was dying, and it is most unlikely that he changed his lifelong habits as he was approaching the end of his life.²⁵

Thad was a true son of New England. That region in general and Vermont in particular disliked the Jeffersonian Republican party; Stevens fitted well into the mold, and afterward always cooperated with the opponents of the Democratic party. And even his enemies admitted that he was not the man to change his principles for the sake of success. As John Sherman, the influential senator from Ohio, wrote: "Mr. Stevens was a brave man. He always fought his fights to a finish and never asked or gave quarter." Henry Ward Beecher, the Brooklyn clergyman who did not always agree with him, paid him a singular compliment: "When other men were afraid to speak, and when other men were afraid to be unpopular, he was not afraid to be unpopular, and did not hold his life dear."²⁶

All these characteristics were evident at an early time. Yet so was another one, which was to dog him throughout his life—his acerbity, which created

enemies wherever he went and frustrated many of his plans. He annoyed the trustees of Peacham Academy, estranged fellow students at Dartmouth, and in the long run, because of his contentiousness, propensity for making sharp remarks about his opponents, and biting sarcasm, would often come to grief. His career would not be an easy one.