CHAPTER 1

James Buchanan's Father Slept Here

Lydia O'Neill was born into a youthful United States—a mere thirty-seven years after the Declaration of Independence, the nation's founding document, was written by Thomas Jefferson. The stirring document proclaimed that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Lydia's thoughts about the Declaration of Independence or Thomas Jefferson, if she had any, are lost to history. Records do not indicate whether she ever noticed that the same document that laid claim to the equality of all men also accused the British of "exciting domestic insurrections amongst us"—a reference to England's role in fomenting uprisings by African slaves, on whose backs the South's agrarian economy was built but who had no place in Jefferson's soaring rhetoric of freedom. The great democrat owned many slaves, and his home state of Virginia raised one of the loudest voices demanding the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, the one that reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free *State*, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Modern scholars suggest that Southern slaveowners considered the Second Amendment essential to maintaining armed white slave patrols deputized to beat down the uprisings of outraged slaves who had sought to throw off their chains virtually from the moment they first were dragged ashore in the New World.[1]

It's unlikely, given her lack of formal education, that Lydia knew that Thomas Jefferson, as George Washington's secretary of state, conducted the first US census in 1790. In that enumeration, he was guided by Article

I, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution. That rule, cleverly negotiated by Southern slaveowners, dictated that free white people (including indentured servants) each counted as one person, but the law further directed that census takers, after counting *all* of the slaves, should add only *three-fifths* of that total to the final tally. The process gave white Southerners more representation in Washington, and thus more clout, but it provided no benefit to the enumerated slaves, who remained property and without rights for two-thirds of Lydia's life.

Lydia was only thirteen when Thomas Jefferson died, but that might have been long enough for her to hear the rumors (confirmed in the twentieth century) that, in 1788, the champion of human freedom had taken as his mistress a pretty mixed-race woman—a young woman he owned—named Sally Hemings,[2] with whom he fathered several children. Jefferson was duly condemned by political enemies for crossing the great racial divide to have children with Hemings. Nonetheless, he went on to serve the nation as secretary of state and was elected vice president and president.

Whether she ever thought about Thomas Jefferson or not, the arc of Lydia Hamilton Smith's life with Thaddeus Stevens would resemble that of Hemings and Jefferson—but with significant and unhappy differences. Like Hemings, Lydia was a mixed-race woman. Like Hemings, she would one day find herself at the side of a brilliant, immensely capable, wealthy lawyer and politician. Like Hemings, she would suffer the crass, indecent slurs of Americans possessed of primitive (albeit dominant) attitudes on race. But unlike Hemings, Lydia O'Neill was born free and willingly became the companion and confidante of a free white man. And unfair as it may seem from our vantage point in the twenty-first century, the same America that elevated Jefferson—a man who slept with an enslaved woman whom he owned—to the most prestigious posts in the land would eventually deny Stevens access to those same positions, likely because he chose as his companion a free, mixed-race woman. Such was the nation; such were the benighted attitudes of the age in which Lydia lived her life.

That life began on February 14, 1813—Valentine's Day—in Adams County, Pennsylvania. (There is some debate over the year Lydia was born. We'll examine that in a moment.) By an interesting, and some might say fateful, coincidence, Mrs. Smith died seventy-one years later on February 14, 1884. Admirers today affectionately note that the sum total of Mrs. Smith's existence, all that she was and all that she did, was bounded by a religious feast day cherished in many parts of the world as a "significant

Fig. 1 Russell Tavern, north of Gettysburg, the birthplace of Lydia Hamilton Smith (date unknown). The tavern is in the center of the photograph. Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

cultural, religious, and commercial celebration of romance and romantic love."[3] Some of her modern-day fans refer to her as "a woman of great heart."

Lydia O'Neill was born at Russell Tavern, on Black's Gap Road, about four miles north of Gettysburg. Black's Gap Road, thought to be the second road built in Adams County, was constructed in 1747. It ran through South Mountain and connected York (to the east) with the Cumberland Valley (to the west).[4] Russell Tavern was built by Joshua Russell, an Irish immigrant, in 1780 on a tract of land known as the Manor of Mashe, purchased from William Morrison in 1777.[5] Lydia Hamilton Smith confirmed her birthplace in an interview with a newspaper reporter in 1883 and tacked on a bonus historical note. She told the journalist she "was born in Adams County in the very house to which James Buchanan's father first went when he landed in this country. There he found the friend of his boyhood, Joshua Russell, who had preceded him in the search for home and fortune in the new world."[6]

Mrs. Smith's upbeat account of the Buchanan family's arrival in America, shared with a newsman late in her life, suggests that she bore no ill will toward President James Buchanan, who died in 1868 shortly before her

companion, Thaddeus Stevens. Her positive recounting of the Buchanan saga may be evidence that, despite her devotion to Stevens, she maintained a certain independence in her attitudes toward the people who touched their shared life. (Although Stevens and Buchanan lived near each other in Lancaster for many years, their drastically different views on human and political affairs engendered no neighborly feelings. Suffice it to say, for now, that they never became friends.)

Knowing *where* Lydia was born is helpful in establishing *who* her parents were, and it involves the Russell family tree. Joshua Russell and his wife, Jean, welcomed their only son, Samuel, in 1776. The plan was for Samuel to succeed his father in running the tavern. Samuel Russell married Jane McClure, and the couple added four daughters to the Russell clan before Samuel died in 1806 at the young age of thirty, just a year after his father died. Two years later, in 1808, Samuel's widow, Jane McClure, married another Irishman, Enoch Hamilton, who stepped in to help run the tavern.

Around the time Enoch Hamilton joined the family, the tavern employed a free, mixed-race woman named Mrs. O'Neill. We know little about her, but the fact that she was addressed as Mrs. O'Neill, and not simply by a first name, suggests that she came to the tavern as a free person. We can illustrate the point without leaving Russell Tavern. Seven enslaved people appear on the Russell family tree, but with first names only: Jean, Dinah, Sall, Betsy, Ned, Jane, and Jacob. None of them has a surname, as Mrs. O'Neill does. (She also appears on the family tree, but not as a relative.)

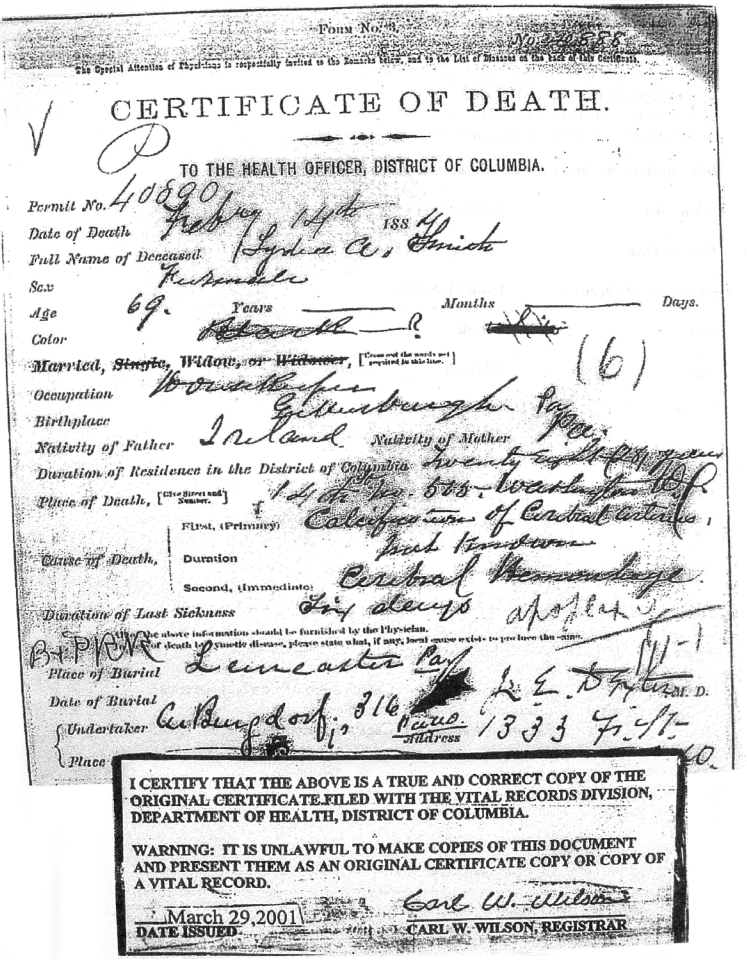
In 1820, Enoch Hamilton and Jane McClure had a daughter they named Harriet. Seven years prior to that, in 1813, while Mrs. O'Neill was employed as a live-in domestic servant at the tavern, she gave birth to a little girl she named Lydia O'Neill. Lydia's mixed heritage was obvious from the moment she arrived. Speculation among those closest to the history of Russell Tavern is that Enoch Hamilton was likely Lydia's father. We don't know under what circumstances, and we don't know for certain. Mrs. O'Neill was employed by Enoch Hamilton. Did she consent to sexual relations with her employer, or did Hamilton force himself on his Black housekeeper? We don't know. What we do know is that Lydia later chose to be known as Lydia Hamilton. Why? Did her mother explain to her, at some point, that Hamilton was, in fact, her father? Again, we do not know. Any official record of Lydia's birth, if one ever existed, has eluded us. Her death certificate identified her as Lydia A. [*sic*] Smith.[7]

Thanks to her diverse genetic heritage, Lydia's physical appearance frustrated attempts to fit her into the discriminatory racial pigeonholes of her time. Long after she had become one of the most talked-about women in the country, gossips and assorted biographers tried to define her. "She is said to have been comely in appearance," one wrote, "light in color."[8] Another observed, "Generally she was looked upon as a Negress, although she said she had a preponderance of Creole blood."[9] Without knowing more about Mrs. O'Neill's background, we can't reject this assertion, especially if we understand the term "Creole" as it was used in Lydia's day: "As an ethnic group, [Creole] ancestry is mainly of Louisiana French, West African, Spanish and Native American origin. . . . New Orleans in particular has retained a significant historical population of Creoles of color, a group mostly consisting of free persons of multiracial European, African, and Native American descent."[10] So at least one side of Lydia's family might well have had roots in the deep South.

Thaddeus Stevens's biographer Fawn Brodie writes of Lydia Hamilton Smith, "She was a very light mulatto, of considerable beauty, and was said to have been the daughter of a white man, a Mr. Oneill [*sic*], from Russell's Tavern."[11] Poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg, born six years before Mrs. Smith died, describes her as "a comely quadroon with Caucasian features and a skin of light-gold tint, a Roman Catholic communicant with Irish eyes, her maiden name Hamilton."[12]

Uncertainty and confusion about Mrs. Smith's ethnicity would persist throughout her life and even into the sad hours immediately following her death. The hand that completed her death certificate obviously struggled with the "race" question. The section for designating the deceased's race is six lines down on the form. The word "Color" appears against the left margin, after which someone wrote the word "Black," then crossed it out. To the right of it we see a question mark, followed by the word "White," which has also been crossed out. Such tentative markings suggest that the writer had little confidence in the answer. Perhaps the clerk was unacquainted with Mrs. Smith, or perhaps there were other individuals in the room—her family and friends—who objected to the clerk's entries.[13]

The apparent uncertainty in completing Mrs. Smith's death certificate brings us back to the question of when she was born. The certificate indicates that she was sixty-nine when she died. Some historians compute back from 1884 and conclude that she was born in 1815. If the person who filled out the form wasn't even aware of Mrs. Smith's racial heritage,



Form No. 8. No. 22,658.

The Special Attention of Physicians is respectfully invited to the Remarks below, and to the List of Diseases on the back of this Certificate.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

TO THE HEALTH OFFICER, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

Permit No. 40890
Date of Death Febry 14th 1884
Full Name of Deceased Lydia A. Smith
Sex Female
Age 69. Years Months Days.
Color
Married, ~~Single~~, Widow, or ~~Widower~~, [Cross out the words not required in this line.]
Occupation Housekeeper
Birthplace Gettysburgh Pa
Nativity of Father Ireland Nativity of Mother
Duration of Residence in the District of Columbia
Place of Death, [Give street and number.]
Cause of Death, First, (Primary) Exhaustion of Cerebral action,
Duration
Second, (Immediate) Cerebral Hemorrhage.
Duration of Last Sickness Dying days
All the above information should be furnished by the Physician.
If death be of a zymotic disease, please state what, if any, local cause exists to produce the same.
Place of Burial Lancaster Pa
Date of Burial
Undertaker C. Burgdorf, 316 Penn. Ave. 1333 F. St.
Place

I CERTIFY THAT THE ABOVE IS A TRUE AND CORRECT COPY OF THE ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE FILED WITH THE VITAL RECORDS DIVISION, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WARNING: IT IS UNLAWFUL TO MAKE COPIES OF THIS DOCUMENT AND PRESENT THEM AS AN ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE COPY OR COPY OF A VITAL RECORD.

March 29,2001
DATE ISSUED

Carl W. Wilson
CARL W. WILSON, REGISTRAR

Fig. 2 Death certificate of Lydia Hamilton Smith. LancasterHistory, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

how accurate can we expect that person to be in noting her age when she died? I have more confidence in the epitaph on her gravestone. The message carved into that stone places primary emphasis on the many years she spent by Thaddeus Stevens's side. She knew that Stevens had composed the message for his monument; might she have chosen to write the epitaph for her own memorial? If she did, she surely would have included

Fig. 3 Thaddeus Stevens (1792–1868), half-length portrait, ca. 1868. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

the year of her birth, leaving only space for insertion of the date of her death. Those favoring 1815 suggest that year had been inscribed on the stone but has simply become less legible over time. I tested that contention by making a rubbing of that portion of the inscription. The rubbing clearly revealed the year 1813. Therefore, pending discovery of more convincing evidence to the contrary, I have chosen to rely on the solid testimony of Lydia Hamilton Smith's gravestone in concluding, here, that she was born in 1813.

Mrs. Smith's death certificate does not name her parents, but it does inform us that her father was born in Ireland and her mother in Pennsylvania.[14] Other sources suggest that her mother was a mixed-race woman.[15] That fits with the other evidence we have for Lydia's origins. The fact that Lydia's mother was known as Mrs. O'Neill strongly suggests that at some point, prior to Lydia's birth, she was involved with a man of Irish descent. Marriage between white and Black people being strictly forbidden in early America (and, sadly, for many, many years afterwards), Mrs. O'Neill may have done exactly what Lydia did, claiming the surname of the man who impregnated *her* mother but assumed no legal responsibility for supporting his offspring. If this scenario is accurate, it made Lydia, in the parlance of her time, a "quadroon," that is, a person with three white grandparents

and one Black grandparent. She was, by her society's ugly arithmetic, only one-quarter Black. But that 25 percent was more than enough to fuel the vitriolic voices of those who came to hate the man with whom she chose to walk through life.

That man, Thaddeus Stevens, who was born into a poor family in Vermont in 1792, turned twenty-one the year Lydia was born. Stevens's father, a noted amateur wrestler but failed farmer, had taken to drink. He abandoned his family, joined the army, and died of wounds he sustained in the War of 1812. Stevens's mother, Sarah Morrill Stevens, moved from Danville, the birthplace of her four sons, to Peacham, Vermont, where she worked as a domestic servant and nurse to earn money to send her two older boys, Joshua and Thaddeus, to school. Joshua was born with clubfoot in both feet, and Thaddeus had a deformed foot as well. Biographer Fawn Brodie salutes Sarah Stevens as "a woman of great energy, strong will, and deep piety" who vowed that "her two eldest [boys] would rise above the merciless handicap of their birth."[16]

Sarah Morrill Stevens's tireless dedication put Thaddeus on a path that led through Dartmouth College to a teaching post in York, Pennsylvania, and on to what would become a very successful law practice in Gettysburg by 1816. Much has been made of Stevens's halting gait, occasioned by his clubfoot. But in his prime, after he arrived in Gettysburg, he apparently cut a fine figure. Historian Bradley R. Hoch tells us that Stevens stood five feet eleven inches tall, was solidly built but not overweight, and had a ruddy, unblemished complexion. His clubfoot was protected by a special left shoe; he did walk with a limp, and he sometimes steadied himself with a cane. In spite of his physical deformity, he was quite athletic, known to be an excellent horseman and swimmer. William M. Hall offers a similar endorsement of Stevens's athletic prowess. Stevens, he writes, was a "man of fine physical proportions . . . and excelled in manly sports. . . . He could throw the 'long bullet' further and kick a hat off a higher peg than any other man in Gettysburg."[17]

Biographers have pondered whether this clubfooted young man had any romantic interludes along the way. Some, perhaps more embarrassed by Stevens's handicap than he was, aver that he remained a confirmed bachelor all his life. But there is at least one report of a "matter of the heart" before Stevens ever left Vermont. Writer James Scovel tells us Thaddeus Stevens was "not yet of age when he became attached to the beautiful daughter of the village clergyman." Speaking for Stevens, Scovel says that his poverty

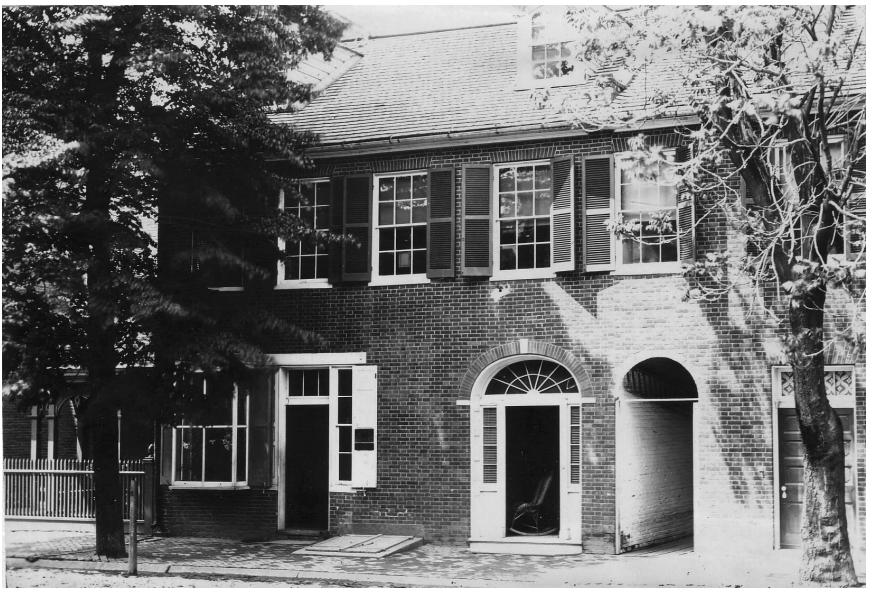


Fig. 4 Thaddeus Stevens's law office and home in Gettysburg.
Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

made him feel "his unfitness for such a match," and never declared his love. Instead, young Thaddeus packed up and headed to Pennsylvania.[18]

Stevens might have kept his feelings for the young woman to himself, but he humorously confirmed his awareness of and interest in romance to his Dartmouth classmate and friend Samuel Merrill, who was already teaching in York, Pennsylvania, while Stevens finished up in New Hampshire. "This place," Stevens wrote Merrill, "is at present greatly alarmed on account of an uncommon epidemic, which it is sincerely hoped will thin the ranks of our old maids and send their withered ghosts . . . to the dominion of that old tyrant Hymen." Stevens informed Merrill that twenty "licensed copulations" had taken place so far, but he was not one of the participants.[19] Had Stevens not decided to follow Merrill to Pennsylvania, he and Lydia Hamilton Smith would not have become part of American history.