

For an example of active citation, consider the recent Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln,* in which the abolitionist Representative Thaddeus Stevens (played by Tommy Lee Jones) returns home immediately after the House of Representatives passed the Thirteenth Amendment (banning slavery). He utters to his mulatto common law wife, referring to Lincoln’s role in the passage of the amendment, the following striking phrase: “The greatest measure of the nineteenth century [was] passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America.” The historians among us may wonder about the historical accuracy of this episode. Did Stevens actually say this at home to his companion? Indeed, did he actually say this at all? As it happens, the answer to the first question is likely no, and the answer to the second is open to debate. The earliest known reference and “master source” for this quotation is a short recollection by the evangelist, popular lecturer and former politician James Scovel, written in 1898, more than thirty years after the fact. For an example of an annotated active footnote to Scovel’s recollection, which makes use of both the optional link and scans, click on footnote 1 below (or, in hard copy, turn to Appendix I).[[1]](#footnote-1) Readers may make up their own minds whether Scovel is a reliable source and whether this text supports the conjecture that Stevens did utter this statement and, if so, did so to his common-law wife.

**TRANSPARENCY APPENDIX**

**NUMBER 1**

**ANNOTATION:**

The first published reference to Steven’s “added and abetted” statement was some thirty-three years after the fact, in 1898, by James M. Scovel, a former New Jersey politician and lawyer. Scovel was, at the time of writing, making a living in retirement as a traveling evangelist and a popular writer and lecturer on Lincoln and his times. Is he reliable on this point? On the positive side, Scovel qualifies as a potential eyewitness, since he was a Washington insider at the time, He worked under Lincoln as a Commissioner, was a confidant of the President’s, and was likely acquainted with Stevens. His account contains specific local detail about this period, including a story he claims Stevens told him about the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and an anecdote about witnessing Stevens gamble. On the negative side, Scovel did not publish this quotation until 1898, at the age of 65, after having been driven out of practicing law and engaging in politics, reportedly because of a reputation for shady dealing and rhetorical excess. He had a reputation as an extraordinary raconteur and orator, but not for being entirely truthful. Certainly Scovel’s account neither implies the existence of any connection between the quotation and Lydia Smith, nor suggests how Scovel would know if Stevens had said it only to her. Some subsequent historians cite the quotation without comment; others ignore it or question its authenticity.

**EXCERPT:**

To the writer of this sketch Mr. Stevens told the story of the legislation which gave to the black man his right to vote: … [548]

His favorite amusement was…to spend the evening at Hall and Pemberton's Faro Bank…and over canvas-back and Veuve Clicquot champagne woo unmolested the goddess of fortune.…Stevens was never a heavy player, although I have seen him win fourteen hundred dollars on a twenty-dollar gold-piece as his only stake… [549]

Influence from the White House secured votes against a favorite measure of Mr. Stevens for an air-line railway from Washington to New York, and…these same votes helped Mr. Lincoln's great amendment for emancipation. Of this legislative bargain Stevens said, ‘The greatest measure of the nineteenth century was passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America.’

During the last thirty years of his life its unwritten romance was the unselfish and tender devotion with which Stevens was attended by Lydia Smith, a mulatto, who in her youth had great beauty of person. [550]

**CITATION:**

James Scovel, “Thaddeus Stevens,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (April 1898), pp. 548-550.

**LINK:** <http://books.google.com/books?id=h_AzAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA550>

**SCANS:**

p. 548

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1. [James Scovel, “Thaddeus Stevens,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (April 1898), pp. 548-550](#Stevens). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)