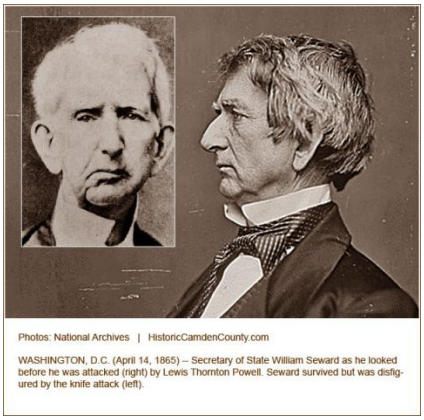
William Seward - Impact of Powell's Attack



It was a stagecoach accident which changed William Henry Seward's life.

Actually ... it was two stagecoach accidents. One happened when he was young; the other happened when he was old. He was barely injured in the first; he was significantly injured in the second.

The first accident, in 1824, occurred in Rochester, New York while Seward (then a young lawyer) was passing through town. An eyewitness, who came to Seward's aid, was Thurlow Weed. A local newsman (who wanted to be a politician), Weed became friends with Seward and helped him win an election to the New York state senate (in 1831).

As Seward built his political career, his mentor grew a political newspaper called the *Evening Journal*. When the *Journal* became the most-circulated political newspaper in America, Weed helped Seward win an election as New York's governor. Lots of positive press coverage was as important in 1838 as it is today.

After four years as governor, Seward went back to Auburn and his law practice. He accepted a no-win case involving a mixed-race man named Willie Freeman. Charged with killing four members of the Van Nest family, at their home, Freeman (son of a former slave and a Native-American mother) was mentally ill.

Long opposed to slavery, and its debilitating effects on society and slave alike, Seward tried the case against Freeman. The whole country followed the trial given its sensational details and overtones. From madness, to racial tensions, to extreme violence, Willie's case was sure to result in a guilty verdict and a death sentence.

During an argument he made on Freeman's behalf, Seward quoted something one of Willie's relatives had told him:

> *They have made Willie Freeman what he is, a brute beast; they don't make anything else of any of our people but brute beasts; but when we violate their laws, then they want to punish us as if we were men.* (Quoted by Andrew W. Arpey in *The William Freeman Murder Trial: Insanity, Politics, and Race* at page 80.)

Seward won Willie a stay of execution and an appeal to New York's high court. The Justices granted the defendant a new trial, but Willie died of tuberculosis in the meantime. The result was widely seen as a kind of victory for Seward and his client.

Deciding to go back into politics, Seward became a U.S. Senator in 1849. The next year, Congress strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act, but not before Seward made a powerful argument against taking that step.

It wasn't just words that Seward and his family used against American slavery. His home in Auburn was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Even Harriet Tubman received help from the Sewards.

When America was on the verge of Civil War, Seward decided to run for President. Seemingly the front-runner for the newly formed Republican Party, Seward left the States for a long trip overseas. His friend, Thurlow Weed, urged him to make that trip to avoid any pre-election blunders.

When he returned home, Seward realized that Abe Lincoln was now the party's favored candidate. When Lincoln won the primaries, Seward did all he could to help Lincoln win the national election. After the new President asked Seward to be his Secretary of State, a growing friendship developed between them.

John M. Taylor, Seward's biographer, tells an interesting story about these very different men with very different backgrounds:

> *...searching for the president in the White House,* [Seward] *once found him polishing his boots. When Seward remonstrated, telling Lincoln sternly that in Washington "we do not blacken our own boots," the president was equal to the occasion, remarking good-humoredly, "Indeed, then whose boots do you blacken, Mr. Secretary?"* (John M. Taylor, *William Henry Seward: Lincoln's Right-Hand Man*, at page 189.)

In April of 1865, Seward had another stagecoach accident. This one produced very interesting consequences.

Sitting outside the carriage, so he could smoke his cigars, Seward was thrown from the vehicle during the

accident. Badly injured, he was resting in bed when the President stopped-by to deliver some news. He wanted to personally tell Seward about General Grant's great victory in Virginia.

Seward's daughter, Frances, tells the story of that meeting:

> *After words of sympathy and condolence, with a countenance beaming with joy and satisfaction, he entered upon an account of his visit to Richmond, and the glorious success of Grant, - throwing himself, in his almost boyish exultation, at full length across the bed, supporting his head upon one hand, and in this manner reciting the story of the collapse of the Rebellion.* (Quoted in *The National Quarterly Review*, Volumes 13-14, at page 388.)

Three days later, John Wilkes Booth fatally shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. On the same night, Lewis Paine tried to kill Seward.

It was a dreadful affair, in the Seward home, as the would-be assassin frantically knifed his way down the stairs after attacking the Secretary of State upstairs. As he made his escape, he left behind a trail of blood. Seward's son, Frederick, summarizes what happened:

> *And now, in swift succession, like the scenes of some hideous dream, came the bloody incidents of the night, – of the pistol missing fire, – of the struggle in the dimly lighted hall, between the armed man and the unarmed one, – of the blow which broke the pistol of the one, and fractured the skull of the other, – of the bursting in of the door, – of the mad rush of the assassin to the bedside, and his savage slashing, with a bowie knife, at the face and throat of the helpless Secretary, instantly reddening the white bandages with streams of blood, – of the screams of the daughter for help, – of the attempt of the invalid soldier nurse to drag the assailant from his victim, receiving sharp wounds himself in return, – of the noise made by the awaking household, inspiring the assassin with hasty impulse to escape, leaving his work done or undone, of his frantic rush down the stair, cutting and slashing at all whom he found in his way, wounding one in the face, and stabbing another in the back, – of his escape through the open doorway, – and his flight on horseback down the avenue.* (See *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State: A Memoir of His Life*, by Frederick William Seward, at pages 276-77.)

Seward's stagecoach injuries helped to save his life. Paine's knife could not fully penetrate the neck protection which Steward was wearing.

Paine's attack, however, left Steward permanently disfigured (although he otherwise made a great recovery). His dentist created a special device, to hold the jaw fragments in place while they healed, but the right side of Seward's face remained permanently scarred.

This photo is rare, since after the attack Seward typically permitted pictures to be taken only from his left side.

Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

Photos of Seward from the National Archives (on the left) and the University of Rochester Library (online, courtesy Camden.com).

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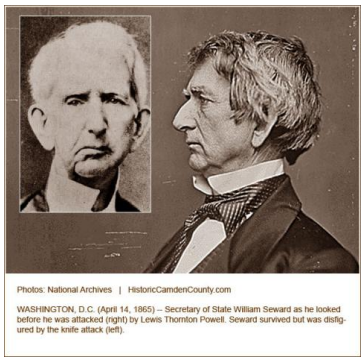

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