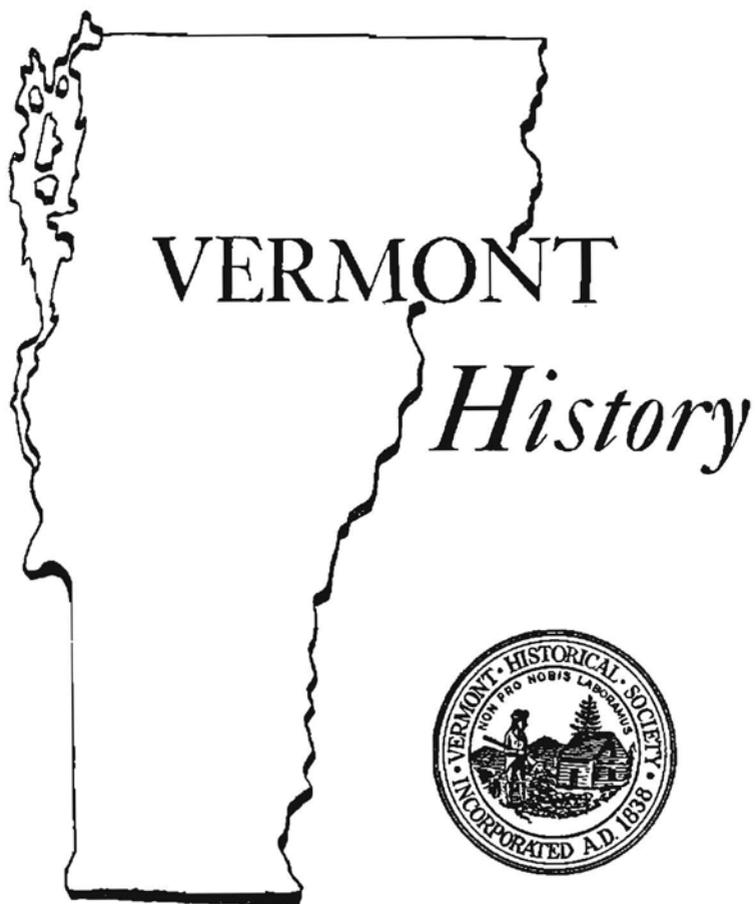


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In 1880 he became Vermont's only presidential candidate . . .

## John Wolcott Phelps: The Civil War General Who Became A Forgotten Presidential Candidate In 1880

By JOHN McCLAUGHRy

DOWN Fifth Avenue and Broadway they came—first the long striding colonel, then the men of the First Vermont Volunteers, each wearing in his cap an evergreen sprig from his beloved Green Mountains. It was May, 1861, and New York City was alive with excitement about the Confederate rebellion. Crowds lined the streets to watch the fine new regiment and to marvel at the unusual size of the Green Mountain Boys. "More formidable troops fought not with Allen, Stark or Cromwell," exulted the *New York Sun*.<sup>1</sup> "Who is that big Vermont colonel?" asked a bystander. Back came the prompt reply, "That? Oh, that is old Ethan Allen resurrected!"<sup>2</sup>

For at the head of this body of "earnest slavery-hating soldiers" marched John Wolcott Phelps. A fellow officer in the Union Army described him as "a tall, middle aged, stooping, awkward looking man, clad in an old half-worn regulation Captain of Artillery uniform complete, including a dilapidated soft felt hat with a well worn and long saved part of a black ostrich feather on one side. The wearer of these signs of former service was about the last man out of that eight hundred

1. Walter H. Crockett, *History of Vermont* (New York: 1921) Vol. III, p. 509.

2. Mary R. Cabot, ed., *Annals of Brattleboro* (Brattleboro: E. L. Hildreth and Co., 1922) Vol. 2, p. 761.

strong an expert would have selected for the splendid soldier that he was. He was the living, marching realization of one of the best of Cromwell's great captains, eager to crush out with his righteous wrath an institution which he hated with his whole soul; full of faith in the success of a good cause, brave, sturdy, serious and true. This man was John Wolcott Phelps, Colonel of the First Vermont Volunteers; a man for the times, but ahead of them; and in advance of others in seeing opportunities to accomplish great results, and with adequate courage for taking advantage of them."<sup>3</sup>

Phelps was one of the most remarkable men produced by a remarkable state: soldier, scholar, lawyer, author, poet, farmer, physicist, paleontologist, educator, and—finally—Vermont's only Presidential candidate.

The last assertion, of course, requires further qualification. Calvin Coolidge and Chester Arthur, sons of Vermont, became Presidents of the United States; but they did not do so as residents of Vermont. Stephen A. Douglas, the Democratic candidate in 1860, had long before migrated from Vermont to Illinois. Other Vermonters, such as George Edmunds, received complimentary delegate votes at party conventions, but never the party nomination. Only John Wolcott Phelps was a candidate for President while a voter and citizen of his native Vermont. That he was nominated in absentia by a virtually nonexistent party, that he apparently campaigned—if at all—only from his front porch in Brattleboro, and that he drew less votes nationally than perhaps any Presidential candidate ever received—these features of his candidacy add interest to the story of his life.<sup>4</sup>

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John Wolcott Phelps was born at Guilford Center, Vermont, November 13, 1813.<sup>5</sup> Charles Phelps, his great-grandfather, was born in North-

3. Rush C. Hawkins, "John W. Phelps," in *Annual Reunion, June 12, 1885*, published by the Association of Graduates, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., pp. 85-86. (Hereinafter cited as "Hawkins.")

4. The writer recognizes that this is a bold assertion; and that 179 years of Vermont's history as a State of the Union may well have produced other minor party candidates, although a number of historians questioned could not recall any. The writer would appreciate communications regarding any other Vermonters who may have run for the Presidency while residents of Vermont.

5. The sketch that follows, through 1859, follows closely the eulogy by Hawkins and a booklet entitled "Life and Public Services of Gen. John Wolcott Phelps," by Cecil Hampden Cutts Howard (Brattleboro: Frank E. Housh and Co., 1887), which booklet is also reprinted in the main in *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, Abby Maria Hemenway, ed. (Brandon: Mrs. Carrie E. Page, 1891) Vol. 5, pp. 68-75. The two sources were obviously penned by the same hand, and Hawkins probably borrowed from Howard for his West Point piece. A brief chronological sketch of Gen. Phelps' life can be found in the *Twentieth Century Dictionary of Notable Americans* (Boston: Biographical Society, 1904), Vol. VIII. A genealogy of the Phelps family is *Family Memoirs*, by John Phelps (father of the General), (Brattleboro: Selleck and David, 1886). This was written in 1847 but not published for 39 years.

ampton, Mass., trained as a lawyer and settled in Hadley, Mass. From there he removed to Marlboro, then a part of Cumberland County, New York, but soon to become a part of Vermont, and was the first lawyer to reside in what is now the State of Vermont. Two of his sons, Solomon and Timothy, came with him; the latter became a prominent citizen and was made sheriff of Cumberland County under the jurisdiction of New York; he fearlessly upheld the authority of that State in the dispute and turmoil which arose about the "New Hampshire Grants." He had two sons, John and Charles, both lawyers; the latter settled in West Townsend, Vermont, and the former in the town of Guilford.

The father of General Phelps had two wives. The first was Lucy Lovell, of Rockingham, by whom he had eight children; of these the General was the last survivor. By the second, Mrs. Almira Lincoln, a notable teacher and author, there were two children—Charles Edward and Elmira.

Like most New England boys of those days, young Phelps' education commenced in the district schools of Guilford and Brattleboro; later he went to a select school in Brattleboro, taught by a Mr. Sanborn, where he prepared for the United States Military Academy at West Point. Entering there in 1832, he graduated in 1836 with the rank of Second Lieutenant, a short time before the beginning of the war with the Creek Indians. For the next two years he participated with conspicuous gallantry in active operations against the Creeks and Seminoles in Florida as Second Lieutenant in the Fourth Artillery.<sup>6</sup>

After the war, he had charge of the Indian emigrants for the west, his headquarters being with the Cherokee Nation. He had not completed this work before another outbreak in Florida recalled him there. For this service he was promoted to First Lieutenant and placed in command of a camp of instruction. This peaceful employment lasted but a few months, when disturbances broke out along the Canadian borders in the autumn of 1839. He was sent to Detroit, where he remained on border duty for about three years. From 1842 to 1846 he was on garrison and recruiting duty.

In 1847 he went to Mexico with the first force sent after the declaration of war. He participated in the battle of Monterey and was in the siege of Vera Cruz. Afterward, under General Williams, he took part in the battles of Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco and Molino del

6. By the time of his Seminole campaigns Phelps had developed an exciting narrative style of writing, reminiscent of James Fenimore Cooper. Some of his lengthy letters describing the Florida swamps, the Seminoles, and the military campaigns are collected and reprinted in "Letters of Lt. J. W. Phelps, 1837-38," VI *Florida Historical Society Quarterly* (1927), pp. 67 ff. Later in the same volume appear letters to Phelps by a Dr. Samuel Forry, army surgeon.

Rey, and also in the assault and capture of the City of Mexico. For gallant conduct at Contreras and Churubosco he was brevetted Captain, but disliking anything that smacked of show without substance, he declined the nominal promotion—"perhaps," in the words of one military historian, "the only man ever to do so." Two and a half years later, apparently feeling he had fully earned it, he accepted a regular promotion to captain. Meanwhile he served in garrison and was a member of the board appointed by order of Congress to devise a complete system of instructions for siege, garrison, sea-coast and mountain artillery.

For eight years thereafter he participated in the roughest kind of service in the troubled West. His first station was Fort Brown, Texas, where military duty consisted of frequent well-planned raids upon outlaws and cutthroats who were seeking to overthrow government authority and hold newly acquired territory under their own rule. In 1855 he marched from Fort Brown to San Antonio to suppress crime and lawlessness along the route and at San Antonio. Soon after he received a respite from active field duty, and was appointed a member of an Artillery Board at Fortress Monroe, Virginia.

In 1857 the Government again ordered him to frontier duty at Fort Leavenworth, and from 1857 to 1859 he became a part of the Utah expedition. At about that time Captain Phelps, probably convinced (rightly) that his sympathy for the Indian, his hatred of slavery, and his Whiggery (in an army dominated by Democrats) had prevented his promotion, submitted his resignation from the service, which took effect in November, 1859. At the age of 46 he returned to Brattleboro where for the next two years he engaged in literary pursuits.

Then came the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in April of 1861. Phelps was among the first to volunteer. Due to his personal qualities and extensive experience he was named colonel of the First Vermont, a 90-day regiment liberally sprinkled with men later to lead other Vermont regiments and to serve the state as governors, judges, and members of Congress.

Mobilizing at Rutland in May of 1861, the First Vermont entrained to New York City for the triumphal march down Broadway. From there it moved to Fortress Monroe, Virginia. Soon after, with his men and other regiments, Colonel Phelps took possession of Newport News, where under his direction an important military post and fortifications were erected.

7. Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 368 (also note 469, p. 650.)

In the summer of 1861, the term of the regiment having expired, the Vermonters were mustered out (the great majority to return, and some to die, as soldiers of other Vermont regiments). Colonel Phelps, however, had distinguished himself as a troop commander, and in July of 1861, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, commanding, recommended him for promotion to Brigadier General in the regular army. In a letter to the War Department, Butler wrote:

Although some of the regular officers will, when applied to, say that he is not in his right mind, the only evidence I have seen of it, is a deep religious enthusiasm upon the subject of slavery, which, in my judgment, does not unfit him to fight the battles of the North. As I had never seen him until he came here, [and] as he differs with me in politics, I have no interest in the recommendation, save a deliberate judgment for the good of the cause after two months' trial.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after the promotion was made, General Butler went to the tent of Colonel Phelps, for the purpose of announcing the promotion, and presenting a pair of Brigadier-General's shoulder-straps. He was received very quietly and kindly by Phelps, made a little speech, and placed the straps upon a table. As soon as he saw them, Phelps asked, "What are these?" General Butler explained that they were a present. Then came this answer: "I am just as much obliged to you, General, as though you had done me a favor, but, you can take them back, I don't want them"; and he brushed them away to the opposite side of his table. He believed in the manly tradition of honest and brave soldiers—that promotions should be earned before they were accepted. He was, at that point, quite certain that he had done nothing during his three months at Newport News to merit the promotion. Not until a few months later, when he was about to be assigned an important command in the Department of the Gulf, did Phelps accept the rank to which he had been promoted.

Of his military accomplishments and leadership qualities nothing but the highest praise can be found. Typical is that of Major General Rush C. Hawkins, who knew Phelps long and well. Writing years afterwards, Hawkins said:

As a soldier he was all that the best authorities demand, and even more, for it might be said of him that he possessed an inner sense of duty which no written formula could prescribe.

It was his faithful care, intelligence and attention to his whole duty as a

8. Hawkins, p. 78.

commanding officer, and above all his example of indefatigable industry, which made his command one of the best disciplined, best drilled, and most efficient in the whole army. He was not much of a believer in the extra-official-off-duty dress parade business which to many officers who were mere *poseurs* seemed to be of so very much importance. Neither was he a martinet. He had the rare good sense to accept the volunteer army for exactly what it was. He weighed its defects and measured its virtues, and governed the performance of his duties accordingly. He knew he could trust its patriotic sense of duty and intelligence to imitate a good example, and its willingness to follow when it could not be driven; and there never was a commanding officer more implicitly obeyed or more confidently trusted.<sup>9</sup>

This opinion of Phelps as an officer was shared by Lt. Roswell Farnham of Bradford, later a Governor of Vermont. "After two months service under him," wrote the junior officer of the First Vermont, "there was not a man who would not have risked his own life to save that of Colonel Phelps."<sup>10</sup>

But aside from his military proficiency and personal qualities, one attribute more than all others marked General Phelps—a deep hatred of human slavery. Even a casual visitor to his camp (Mr. Russell, of the *London Times*), could report that Gen. Phelps had only returned to active service "because he believed he might be instrumental in striking a shrewd blow or two in this great battle of Armageddon—a tall, saturnine, gloomy, angry-eyed, sallow man, soldier-like too, and one who places old John Brown on a level with the great martyrs of the Christian world."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in December 1861, John Wolcott Phelps, eager to strike down the institution of slavery, landed upon the glistening white sands of Ship Island, Mississippi. The long voyage, on the frigate *Constitution*, had not been idly spent. His fellow officers noted that the General spent a great deal of time in his cabin, and when he appeared at mess, seemed more occupied with his own thoughts than the topic of conversation. The reason for his reticence became clear when, upon arrival at Ship Island Roads, General Phelps convened the passengers and officers to read one of the most remarkable documents produced by the War.

The so-called "Phelps' Emancipation Proclamation" was actually not that at all, as it had no legal force and effect, but was rather an essay on the baneful impact of slavery on free institutions and free men.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 85. The excerpt is from a letter sent by Hawkins to the *New York Times* upon General Phelps' death.

10. *Annals of Brattleboro*, p. 799.

11. James Parton, *General Butler In New Orleans* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), p. 164.

Addressed not to rebels but to "the loyal citizens of the Southwest," the Proclamation deserves reproduction in full:

"Without any desire of my own, but contrary to my private inclinations, I again find myself among you as a military officer of the government. A proper respect for my fellow-countrymen renders it not out of place that I should make known to you the motives and principles by which my command will be governed.

"We believe that every state that has been admitted as a slave state into the Union, since the adoption of the constitution, has been so admitted in direct violation of that constitution.

"We believe that the slave states which existed, as such, at the adoption of our constitution, are, by becoming parties to that compact, under the highest obligations of honor and morality to abolish slavery.

"It is our conviction that monopolies are as destructive, as competition is conservative, of the principles and vitalities of republican government; that slave labor is a monopoly which excludes free labor and competition; that slaves are kept in comparative idleness and ease in a fertile half of our arable national territory, while free white laborers, constantly augmenting in numbers from Europe, are confined to the other half, and are often distressed by want; that the free labor of the North has more need of expansion into the southern states, from which it is virtually excluded, than slavery had into Texas in 1846; that free labor is essential to free institutions; that these institutions are naturally better adapted and more congenial to the Anglo-Saxon race, than are the despotic tendencies of slavery; and, finally, that the dominant political principle of this North American continent, so long as the Caucasian race continues to flow in upon us from Europe, must needs be that of free institutions and free government. Any obstructions to the progress of that form of government in the United States must inevitably be attended with discord and war.

"Slavery, from the condition of a universally recognized social and moral evil, has become at length a political institution, demanding political recognition. It demands rights to the exclusion and annihilation of those rights which are insured to us by the constitution; and we must choose between them which we will have, for we can not have both. The constitution was made for freemen, not for slaves. Slavery, as a social evil, might for a time be tolerated and endured; but as a political institution it becomes imperious and exacting, controlling, like a dread necessity, all whom circumstances have compelled to live under its sway, hampering their action and thus impeding our national progress. As a political institution it could exist as a co-ordinate part only of two

Will you permit the free government under which you have thus far lived, and which is so well suited for the development of true manhood, to be altered to a narrow and belittling despotism, in order to adapt it to the necessities of ignorant slaves, and the requirements of their proud and aristocratic owners? Will the laboring men of the south bend their necks to the same yoke that is suited to the slave? We think not. We may safely answer that the time has not yet arrived when our southern brethren, for the mere sake of keeping Africans in slavery, will abandon their long cherished free institutions, and enslave themselves.

"It is the conviction of my command, as a part of the national forces of the United States, that labor—manual labor—is inherently noble; that it cannot be systematically degraded by any nation without ruining its peace, happiness and power; that free labor is the granite basis on which free institutions must rest; that it is the right, the capital, the inheritance, the hope of the poor man everywhere; that it is especially the right of five millions of our fellow-countrymen in the slave states, as well as of the four millions of Africans there, and all our efforts, therefore, however small or great, whether directed against the interference of governments from abroad, or against rebellious combinations at home, shall be for free labor. Our motto and our standard shall be, here and everywhere, and on all occasions, FREE LABOR AND WORKINGMEN'S RIGHTS. It is on this basis, and this basis alone, that our munificent government, the asylum of the nations, can be perpetuated and preserved.

"J. W. Phelps,  
"Brigadier-General of Volunteers Commanding."<sup>12</sup>

The issue of such a proclamation, so much in advance of the times, produced both astonishment and anger. Some officers talked of resigning commissions; one naval commander relieved his mind by tearing a copy in pieces and throwing it overboard. Upon hearing these opinions, General Phelps asked gruffly, "What did these officers come down here for? Was it to sacrifice their ease, to waste their time, and perhaps to lay down their lives in a war, simply that a few persons may hold slaves?"<sup>13</sup>

A copy, according to James Parton, found its way to the Mississippi shore, and was extensively used to fire Southern hearts for battle. General Butler, of abolitionist tendencies himself, read the proclamation with surprise and disavowed it. He could not help but add, however,

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–200.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

that "with that exception (its complete disavowal), I commend the report, and ask attention to its clear and businesslike statements."<sup>14</sup> This was not to be the last time that General Phelps was to put General Butler in a difficult position. "There were very few events during the rebellion which gave rise to more unfavorable comment than the issuing of this manifesto," General Hawkins recalled. "From the democrats of the north and rebels of the south, there came a savage howl of wrath, and from the latter rewards for the head of the inconsiderate, liberty-loving soldier who had written the offending paper."<sup>15</sup>

One evaluation of his action appeared in the Vermont *Phoenix*:

The unnecessary and foolish proclamation of Gen. Phelps is a source of mortification to the many admirers of his military skill and talent in this state, and to none more than to his personal friends who have known him intimately from his early youth. . . .

Gen. Phelps is an earnest and sincere man. He loves integrity and truth, and despises shams, oppression and wrong wherever they may exist. . . . He has a way with him amounting almost to stubbornness of calling things by their right names, and of charging guilt upon evil doers whatever may be their position in society. As a man and as a soldier he stands above reproach, above suspicion. . . . His proclamation is, in our judgment, the fruit of his peculiar views and intense hatred of slavery. It is the result of an erratic tendency that has long existed. In all the practical details of war his peculiarities will only manifest themselves in the ability with which he will serve his country and discomfit her enemies.<sup>16</sup>

No one knew better than General Phelps that he had no authority to commit the United States Government to abolition of negro slavery. He did, however, feel it appropriate to make his sentiments known to the slaveholding citizens to whom the proclamation was addressed, and to inform and inspire his own command. He was, as it turned out, only ten months ahead of his time; but his action caused a later writer to open a superficial sketch by referring to him as one "who seems to have made a career of espousing either the right cause at the wrong time, or the vice versa."<sup>17</sup>

From his arrival at Ship Island through the first of the following

14. *Ibid.*

15. Hawkins, pp. 79-80. Lincoln, in his letter to Reverdy Johnson of July 26, 1862, discusses how Louisiana citizens are upset due to the activities of "General Phelps" in freeing Negroes. In a footnote to the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Roy P. Basler, ed., Rutgers, 1953) this person is identified as Gen. John Smith Phelps of Missouri, then military governor of part of the lower Mississippi. It could well be that Basler is in error, and that Lincoln is referring to Gen. John Wolcott Phelps. In *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (Harcourt Brace, 1939) Vol. II, p. 25, Sandburg erroneously refers to Phelps as "a Massachusetts man" who had been commissioned [sic] to organize black troops.

16. December 26, 1861. (Brattleboro).

17. Warner, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

May, General Phelps and his troops did not take part in other than routine duties of camp life. His command was assigned to garrison the town of Carrollton, a defensive position some seven miles above newly captured New Orleans. There, he wrote:

I found myself in the midst of slave region, where the institution existed in all its pride and gloom, and where its victims needed no inducement from me to seek the protection of our flag—that flag, which now, after a long interval, gleamed once more amid the darkling scene, like the effusion of morning light. Fugitives began to throng to our lines in large numbers. Some came loaded with chains and barbarous irons; some bleeding with birdshot wounds; many had been deeply scored with lashes, and all complained of the extinction of their moral rights.<sup>18</sup>

The existence of these freedmen and escaped slaves quickly became a thorny problem for Phelps, Butler, Secretary of War Stanton, and President Lincoln himself.

General Butler, commanding, was aware of the influx of fugitives, but official government policy treated them as invisible men. To Phelps, however, they were not only highly visible, but also a growing problem. A break in the levee above Carrollton, with the consequent threat of inundation of the fortifications, crystallized the difficulties.

On May 12, 1862, General Butler ordered General Phelps to put the able-bodied Negroes in his camp at the disposal of two local slaveholders for repairing the levee. "You will see," wrote Butler, "the need of giving them every aid in your power to save and protect the levee, even to returning their own negroes and adding others, if need be, to their force."<sup>19</sup> Phelps, however, did not see the need or the morality to return black men to slavery, even temporarily, under trying circumstances. Butler, impatient with his idealistic brigadier, avoided an open clash by sending a force of laborers under a Union captain to complete the work, and ordered Phelps to add his Negroes to the force. This, from Phelps' point of view, was infinitely better than consigning them to their former masters, and he readily complied.

Meanwhile, General Butler was besieged with complaints about the harboring of fugitives in General Phelps' camp, which was quite true. To discourage what was becoming a torrent of humanity, surrounding and subsisting from the largesse of a military outpost, Butler ordered that all "contrabands" be excluded from the lines.<sup>20</sup> Phelps, ringed by

18. Parton, p. 495.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 496. This account is largely adapted from Parton.

20. Butler himself had coined the term "contraband" to refer to Negroes of uncertain status; see Parton, pp. 126-27.

destitute and imploring black men, women and children, his own store-houses bursting with provisions he could not distribute, again composed a poignant and prophetic letter to Butler, addressed to his acting assistant adjutant General. This letter, according to Gen. Hawkins, "immortalized its author, and has no peer in the whole range of rebellion literature. Neither Garrison, Phillips, nor Whittier ever made a more pathetic, eloquent or convincing appeal in the interest of the slave than this."<sup>21</sup>

Camp Parapet, near Carrollton, La. June 16, 1862.  
Capt. R. S. Davis, Acting Assistant Adjutant-General, New Orleans, La.

Sir: I enclose herewith, for the information of the major-general commanding the department, a report of Major Peck, officer of the day, concerning a large number of negroes, of both sexes and all ages, who are lying near our pickets, with bag and baggage, as if they had already commenced an exodus. Many of these negroes have been sent away from one of the neighboring sugar plantations by their owner, a Mr. Babilliard LaBlanche, who tells them, I am informed, that 'the Yankees are king here now, and that they must go to their king for food and shelter.'

They are of that four millions of our colored subjects who have no king or chief, nor in fact any government that can secure to them the simplest natural rights. They can not even be entered into treaty stipulations with and deported to the east, as our Indian tribes have been to the west. They have no right to the mediation of a justice of the peace or jury between them and chains and lashes. They have no right to wages for their labor; no right to the Sabbath; no right to the institution of marriage; no right to letters or to self-defense. A small class of owners, rendered unfeeling, and even unconscionable and unreflecting by habit, and a large part of them ignorant and vicious, stand between them and their government, destroying its sovereignty. This government has not the power even to regulate the number of lashes that its subjects may receive. It can not say that they shall receive thirty-nine instead of forty. To a large and growing class of its subjects it can secure neither justice, moderation, nor the advantages of Christian religion; and if it can not protect *all* its subjects, it can protect none, either black or white. It is nearly a hundred years since our people first declared to the nations of the world that all men are born free; and still we have not made our declaration good. Highly revolutionary measures have since then been adopted by the admission of Missouri and the annexation of Texas in favor of slavery by the barest majorities of votes, while the highly conservative vote of two-thirds has at length been attained against slavery, and still slavery exists—even, moreover, although two-thirds of the blood in the veins of our slaves is fast becoming from our own race. If we wait for a larger vote, or until our slaves' blood becomes more consanguined still with our own, the danger of a violent revolution, over which we can have no control, must become more imminent every day. By a course of undecided action, determined by no policy but the vague will of a war-distracted people, we run the risk of

21. Hawkins, *op. cit.*, p. 81. The text of the letter can be found in Parton, pp. 498-503.

precipitating that very revolutionary violence which we seem seeking to avoid.

\* \* \* \*

The whip, the chains, the stocks, and imprisonment are no mere fancies here; they are used to any extent to which the imagination of civilized man may reach. Many of them are as intelligent as their masters, and far more moral, for while the slave appeals to the moral law as his vindication, clinging to it as to the very horns of the altar of his safety and his hope, the master seldom hesitates to wrest him from it with violence and contempt. The slave, it is true, bears no resentment; he asks for no punishment for his master; he simply claims justice for himself; and it is this feature of his condition that promises more terror to the retribution when it comes.

\* \* \* \*

It is clear that the public good requires slavery to be abolished; but in what manner is it to be done? The more quiet operation of congressional law can not deal with slavery as in its former status before the war, because the spirit of law is right reason, and there is no reason in slavery. A system so unreasonable as slavery can not be regulated by reason. We can hardly expect the several states to adopt laws or measures against their own immediate interests. We have seen that they will rather find arguments for crime than seek measures for abolishing or modifying slavery. But there is one principle which is fully recognized as a necessity in conditions like ours, and that is that the public safety is the supreme law of the state, and that amid the clash of arms the laws of peace are silent. It is then for our president, the commander-in-chief of our armies, to declare the abolition of slavery, leaving it to the wisdom of congress to adopt measures to meet the consequences. This is the usual course pursued by a general or by a military power. That power gives orders affecting complicated interests and millions of property, leaving it to the other functions of government to adjust and regulate the effects produced. Let the president abolish slavery, and it would be an easy matter for congress, through a well regulated system of apprenticeship, to adopt safe measures for effecting a gradual transition from slavery to freedom.

The existing system of labor in Louisiana is unsuited to the age; and by the intrusion of the national forces it seems falling to pieces. It is a system of mutual jealousy and suspicion between the master and the man—a system of violence, immorality and vice. The fugitive negro tells us that our presence renders his condition worse with his master than it was before, and that we offer no alleviation in return. The system is impolitic, because it offers but one stimulant to labor and effort, viz.: the lash, when another, viz.; money, might be added with good effect. Fear, and the other low and bad qualities of the slave, are appealed to, but never the good. The relation, therefore, between capital and labor, which ought to be generous and confiding, is darkling, suspicious, unkindly, full of reproachful threats, and without concord or peace.

\* \* \* \*

In conclusion, I may state that Mr. LaBlanche is, as I am informed, a descendant from one of the oldest families of Louisiana. He is wealthy and a

man of standing, and his act in sending away his negroes to our lines, with their clothes and furniture, appears to indicate the convictions of his own mind as to the proper logical consequences and deductions that should follow from the present relative status of the two contending parties. He seems to be convinced that the proper result of the conflict is the manumission of the slave, and he may be safely regarded in this respect as a representative man of the state. I so regard him myself, and thus do I interpret his action, although my camp now contains some of the highest symbols of secessionism, which have been taken by a party of the Seventh Vermont volunteers from his residence.

Meantime his slaves, old and young, little ones and all, are suffering from exposure and uncertainty as to their future condition. Driven away by their master, with threats of violence if they return, and with no decided welcome or reception from us, what is to be their lot? Considerations of humanity are pressing for an immediate solution of their difficulties; and they are but a small portion of their race who have sought, and are still seeking, our pickets and our military stations, declaring that they can not and will not any longer serve their masters, and that all they want is work and protection from us. In such a state of things, the question occurs as to my own action in the case. I can not return them to their masters, who not unfrequently come in search of them, for I am, fortunately, prohibited by an article of war from doing that, even if my own nature did not revolt at it. I can not receive them, for I have neither work, shelter, nor the means or plan of transporting them to Hayti, or of making suitable arrangements with their masters until they can be provided for.

It is evident that some plan, some policy, or some system is necessary on the part of the government, without which the agent can do nothing, and all his efforts are rendered useless and of no effect. This is no new condition in which I find myself; it is my experience during the some twenty-five years of my public life as a military officer of the government. The new article of war recently adopted by congress, rendering it criminal in an officer of the army to return fugitives from injustice, is the first support that I have ever felt from the government in contending against those slave influences which are opposed to its character and to its interests. But the mere refusal to return fugitives does not now meet the case. A public agent in the present emergency must be invested with wider and more positive powers than this, or his services will prove as valueless to the country as they are unsatisfactory to himself.

Desiring this communication to be laid before the president, and leaving my commission at his disposal.

I have the honor to remain, sir,

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. W. Phelps, Brigadier-General

Butler received this communication just as a mail steamer was about to depart for New York. He detained it while he wrote a dispatch to Stanton in Washington, adding details relating to the character and actions of LaBlanche. Then in conclusion, Butler added:

General Phelps, I believe, intends making this a test case for the policy of the government. I wish it might be so, for the difference of our action upon this subject is a source of trouble. I respect his honest sincerity of opinion, but I am a soldier, bound to carry out the wishes of my government so long as I hold its commission, and I understand that policy to be the one I am pursuing. I do not feel at liberty to pursue any other. If the policy of the government is nearly that I sketched in my report upon this subject and that which I have ordered in this department, then the services of General Phelps are worse than useless here. If the views set forth in his report are to obtain, then he is invaluable, for his whole soul is in it, and he is a good soldier of large experience, and no braver man lives. I beg to leave the whole question with the president, with perhaps the needless assurance that his wishes shall be loyally followed, were they not in accordance with my own, as I have now no right to have any upon the subject.<sup>22</sup>

Six weeks passed, and both Butler and Phelps were unanswered. The question posed was twofold: the abolition of slavery, and the use of colored troops in the Union army.

An initial attempt at the former had been undertaken by General John C. Frémont, the old Pathfinder of the Rockies, commanding the Department of the West. On August 30, 1861, Frémont on his own authority proclaimed martial law in Missouri, confiscated the property of rebels, and freed the slaves. Lincoln, trying desperately to focus the war effort on preserving the Union instead of abolishing slavery, ordered Frémont to rescind his proclamation, making it conform to existing law which freed only slaves used by the rebels for war purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Arming colored men—whether slaves or freedmen—had also received support in high quarters. Lincoln's Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, in his annual report for 1861, deliberately and without Lincoln's knowledge asserted the right and duty of the government to arm slaves and employ them against the rebels. According to Benjamin Quarles,

The report had been printed and advance copies put into the mails before the stunned Lincoln read it. Although it was a Sunday, Lincoln summoned Cameron to the Executive Mansion and laid down the law: the report must be revised, leaving out the passage on arming the slaves. Cameron, like Frémont, sought to justify his action. But, like Frémont, he had no choice but to obey.<sup>24</sup>

Despite such clear evidence of the official view on the matter, General David Hunter, commanding the Department of the South, went one step further. In March of 1862, having arrived at his command in the

22. Parton, pp. 504-05.

23. Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 71.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

Georgia Sea Islands, Hunter began to pass out certificates of freedom to blacks, and within two weeks had issued a proclamation emancipating the slaves at Fort Pulaski and Cockspur Island. Not stopping at that, Hunter then proceeded to organize a black regiment known as the "First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers." Lincoln was doubly furious: first, at having to make a needless and embarrassing decision either to acquiesce in or countermand the actions of his commander, and second, that his commander should have taken so momentous a step upon his own authority. Placing public opinion and preservation of the Union foremost, Lincoln issued a public statement repudiating Hunter's action.<sup>25</sup>

Phelps was undoubtedly aware of the Frémont episode. Whether he knew of the Cameron and Hunter affairs is not clear; but in any case, having received no contrary reply from his superiors, he decided that silence was assent. He thus addressed to Captain Davis at headquarters a short letter requesting arms, ammunition, clothing and equipment for "three regiments of Africans," giving as reasons the need for more fighting men and the importance of enlisting the black man in the Union cause. He also asked that cadet graduates from West Point, and the "more promising noncommissioned officers and privates of the army," be appointed as company officers for the black units.<sup>26</sup>

Before this communication reached Butler, the latter, his hand strengthened by a new act of Congress authorizing the employment of Negro laborers by army units, wrote Phelps to suggest his use of Negroes as laborers, with axes and tents to be furnished by the army. To Phelps this was the last straw. The Vermonter drew on his depths of conscience and conviction to pen this icy response:

In reply, I must state that while I am willing to prepare African regiments for the defense of the government against its assailants, I am not willing to become the mere slave-driver which you propose, having no qualifications in that way. I am, therefore, under the necessity of tendering the resignation of my commission as an officer of the army of the United States, and respectfully request a leave of absence until it is accepted.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile Butler received Phelps' letter requesting arms and equip-

25. *Ibid.*, p. 72; also James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1937), pp. 503-04. The Confederacy was furious at the activities of both Hunter and Phelps. On August 21, 1862, the War Department at Richmond ordered that they be treated as outlaws for their efforts to recruit and arm Negroes; if captured, they were to be held in close confinement for execution as felons (Quarles, p. 173.).

26. Parton, pp. 505-06.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 507. Phelps' resignation, addressed to Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, the Adjutant General, August 2, 1862, may be found in the archives of the War Department (U.S. Archives, Washington) Microcopy 619, Roll 100, frame 307.

ment for the Negro regiments. In reply he pointed out that the President alone had authority to employ Africans in arms; that the President had not indicated his purpose to do such a thing; that the arms and equipment sent to Butler for outfitting Louisiana volunteers were by order of the Secretary of War restricted to white volunteers; and that Phelps must desist from further efforts to form black units.

At this point Phelps' second letter, rejecting the use of black labor and tendering his resignation, apparently arrived. Butler again responded immediately by pointing out that soldiers of the Army of the Potomac had done just such work as was now required at Carrollton. Were the Negroes any better than white Union troops? Had Congress not expressly authorized such activity? Phelps' resignation was refused, and his leave of absence denied. Along with this second letter of August 2, Butler penned a personal letter, in which he paid high tribute to Phelps' abilities, patriotism, and humanity, and implored him to change his course.

Phelps, unfortunately, was immovable. After acknowledging the two official letters of August 2, he wrote;

It can be of but little consequence to me as to what kind of slavery I am to be subjected, whether to African slavery or to that which you thus so offensively propose for me, giving me an order wholly opposed to my convictions of right as well as of the higher scale of public necessities in the case, and insisting upon my complying with it *faithfully* and *diligently*, allowing me no room to escape with my convictions or my principles at any sacrifice that I may make. I can not submit to either kind of slavery, and can not, therefore, for a double reason, comply with your order of the 31st of July; in complying with which I should submit to both kinds—both to African slavery and to that to which you resort in its defense.<sup>28</sup>

Warming up to the subject, Phelps then urged the speedy transmission of his resignation to the President, whom he urgently requested

by a speedy acceptance of my commission, to liberate me from that sense of suffocation, from that darkling sense of bondage and enthrallment which, it appears to me, like the snake around the muscles and sinews of Laocoon, is entangling and deadening the energies of the government and country, when a decisive act might cut the coils and liberate us from their baneful and fascinating influence forever.

But Phelps, despite the conclusive nature of the letter, could not resist one last exhortatory postscript:

P.S. Monday, August 4—The negroes increase rapidly. There are doubtless now six hundred able-bodied men in camp. These, added to those who

28. *Ibid.*, p. 509.

are suffering uselessly in the prisons and jails of New Orleans and vicinity, and feeding from the general stock of provisions, would make a good regiment of one thousand men, who might contribute as much to the preservation of law and good order as a regiment of Caucasians, and probably much more. Now a mere burden, they might become a beneficent element of governmental power.

“J.W.P.”

Butler once again attempted to get the Vermont General to understand the simplicity and logic of the situation, but of necessity posed the question: “Will you or will you not employ a proper portion of the negroes now within your lines in cutting down the trees which afford cover to the enemy in the front and right of your line?”<sup>29</sup> Phelps would not answer yes or no. Instead, his resolution to use the incident to force a dramatic change in national policy seemed to harden. The government, he feared, was so bogged down in the details of fighting a major civil war that it had lost sight of the necessity of affirming the broad principles over which the war was, to Phelps at least, being fought. Phelps was determined to rescue Lincoln and Stanton from the morass of detail and elevate them to the pure air of moral leadership. For their eyes, then, he offered six philosophical propositions, which Butler sent on to Washington to accompany his previous letter of resignation.

While this uneasy state of affairs persisted, Phelps managed to embroil himself in two additional incidents that could only have strained Butler’s patience to the bursting point. First was the unfortunate experience of the 7th Vermont at the Battle of Baton Rouge, August 5, 1862.<sup>30</sup>

In a general order following the battle by twenty days, Butler severely criticized the 7th Vermont (with which Phelps was not connected, save by loyalty to his native state). Alleging that the Seventh had broken in confusion, refused aid to an embattled Indiana regiment nearby, and fired into Union lines during the battle, Butler declared that the Seventh could not inscribe Baton Rouge on its battle flag, and that it could not bear its colors at all until its men showed “whether they are worthy descendants of those who fought beside Allen, and with Stark at Bennington.”

This order naturally caused a vehement public outcry in Vermont and demands for a military investigation. Meanwhile, General Phelps gratuitously wrote Butler to rebuke him for his unmerited criticism of the Seventh, which could scarcely have made a favorable impression on

29. *Ibid.*, p. 511.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 565–74; also Crockett, *op. cit.*, p. 526.

the latter. The investigation subsequently resulted in full vindication of the Vermont regiment and Butler issued a corrected order and restored the regiment to full honors.

Shortly after this affair three slaves from New Orleans ran away and found refuge within Phelps' lines. A Colonel French ordered them returned, but Phelps refused on two grounds:

1. An article of war forbade the return of fugitive slaves;
2. The men had been inhumanly punished.

Aware of the delicacy of the matter among the citizens under his jurisdiction, Butler ordered them to be given up, Phelps notwithstanding.<sup>31</sup>

On September 8, shortly after these affairs, General Phelps received notification from Washington that his resignation was accepted, and he immediately prepared to return to his Vermont farm. Parton gives a touching account of his departure:

All of his command loved him, from the drummer-boys to the colonels, whether they approved or disapproved his course on the negro question. He was such a commander as soldiers love; firm, gentle, courteous; gentlest and most courteous to the lowliest; with a vein of quaint humor that relieved the severity of military rule, and supplied the camp-gossips with anecdotes. His officers gathered about him, before his departure, to say farewell. He was touched with the compliment, for he had been accustomed, for twenty years, to live among his comrades in a lonely minority of one; respected, it is true, and beloved, but beloved rather as a noble lunatic than as a wise and noble man.<sup>32</sup>

With this farewell, General Phelps, aged 48, set out for a life of retirement in Brattleboro. The Vermont Legislature extended an invitation to address a joint session, which he did on October 13, 1862. The theme of his address was uncompromising:

There is one simple law of interpreting the Constitution—the sustaining of liberty; any other interpretation is wrong. . . The sun never looked down upon a greater evil than American slavery. In ruling this great nation of slaves we have to a degree become enslaved ourselves.

With characteristic directness—and Vermont parsimony—the General set forth a three-point plan for the National Government to follow:

1. Destroy slavery;
2. Put down the rebellion;
3. Pay the bills.

He attacked Lincoln—probably not too popular in wartime Vermont—for failing to emancipate the slaves and organize colored troops at the outset of the war. Without taking a position on his urgings, the Legislature adjourned its session by adopting a simple resolution of thanks.<sup>33</sup>

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 513–14.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 514–15.

33. Montpelier *Watchman*, October 17, 1862.

With General Phelps retired to Brattleboro, Lincoln's policy, forced by circumstances, moved inexorably toward freeing and arming the slaves. In a cabinet meeting of July 22, Lincoln presented a proclamation freeing the slaves in rebellious states as of January 1, 1863.<sup>34</sup> (Had General Phelps only known!) The preliminary proclamation was made public on September 22, following the Union victory at Antietam. Its final form, effective on January 1, 1863, contained an inconspicuous paragraph authorizing the enrollment of freed slaves in the army and navy.

Apparently aware of the developing trend toward the use of black troops, and recognizing the potential value of Phelps as a commander, Governor Frederick Holbrook, the General's Brattleboro neighbor, contrived to get Phelps back into the service of the Union.<sup>35</sup> He and other citizens persuaded Phelps to accompany them to Washington to arrange for the establishment of military hospitals in Vermont. The visiting Vermonters met personally with Lincoln and Stanton. After speaking in the highest terms of General Phelps' ability and character, Lincoln directed that a commission be made out in his name as Major General of Volunteers, commanding not a regiment, but all the black troops in the Union army!

Immensely satisfied, Holbrook returned to Brattleboro, only to confront Phelps on the street a few days later. To his incredulous inquiry, Phelps replied that, when it came to working out the details of the commission, the President had not made it retroactive to when Phelps had resigned in protest against Lincoln's policy. Thus, he said, his honor required that he give up the commission, and he had done so and returned home.

With time on his hands, and a scholar's bent, the retired General now turned to literary pursuits, conducted in the study of his quaint old house on Asylum Street. With slavery abolished, his thoughts ran to other subjects. His first endeavor, appearing in 1864, was the anonymous translation of Lucien De la Hodde's *Cradle of Rebellion*, a tract castigating secret societies.<sup>36</sup> He later authored *Good Behavior*, a grammar school text (1881); and *Madagascar* (1884).<sup>37</sup> During this period he

34. Quarles, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

35. The account that follows is drawn from the lengthy sketch in the *Vermont Phoenix* (Brattleboro), February 6, 1885, on the occasion of General Phelps' death.

36. This was published under the title *Secret Societies* (New York: John Bradburn, 1864; Chicago: Ezra Cook, 1873). Phelps had earlier published a book of poems entitled *Sibylline Leaves* (Brattleboro: Joseph Steen, 1858).

37. *Good Behavior* (Brattleboro: Cheyney and Clapp, 1881—7th ed.); *Madagascar* (Cleveland: Philosophical Publishing Company, 1884). The writer has been unable to uncover any evidence that Phelps actually visited Madagascar.

also wrote articles for various journals and a history of Guilford for Miss Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*.<sup>38</sup> During this period he served as a vice president of the Vermont Historical Society and as president of the Vermont Teacher's Association. He was also, in 1863, admitted to the State bar, but there is no evidence that he became a practicing attorney.

His correspondence, such as can be found, covered an amazing range of topics. In early 1864, for example, the *Rutland Herald* printed a long column by him discussing manumission in Bologna in 1257, from Ghirardacci's history.<sup>39</sup> In 1867 he corresponded with the American consul in Moscow, apparently offering to donate his 1567 edition of Molino's Aztec dictionary (for reasons unknown) to the Rumiantov Museum in Moscow.<sup>40</sup> He maintained a lively interest in such things as fossil whales, the conduct of the national census, magnetic behavior (about which he corresponded with the famous scientist Joseph Henry at the Smithsonian Institution), and the metric system.<sup>41</sup> In 1880, over thirty years since Phelps had prepared a much admired artillery manual, General Henry Hunt sought his aid in resolving a debate among artillery officers on a technical military question.<sup>42</sup> And also in 1880 he decided to become a presidential candidate.

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As best as can be determined, General Phelps over his years of public life had played no active part in politics though a professed Whig in his younger days. As a West Pointer and professional military man, he was dismayed at the political manipulations necessary for advancement in the peacetime army. This lesson he learned early. In 1839, just three years out of West Point, he sought a position in the Federal government through his friend Thomas Jefferson Smith. Smith's reply was discouraging: "Unfortunately, in the department you mention, all are Federals at the head—and with them I stand no more chance than a stump't tail bull at mosquito time at Key Biscayne."<sup>43</sup>

Once more Phelps made an attempt at securing an appointment,

38. Hemenway, *op. cit.*, Vol. 5.

39. *Rutland Herald*, February 4, 1864. The writer is indebted to Prof. T. D. Seymour Bassett for this item.

40. Letter, #153, Eugene Schuyler, U.S. Consul in Moscow, to Phelps, November 14, 1867. (Phelps Letters, Vermont Historical Society.)

41. Letter #156, Trowbridge to Phelps, October 9, 1868; also an earlier article by Phelps, "Fossil Remains of Vermont" in *Hours at Home*, September, 1866; Letter #157, Sen. Roscoe Conkling to Phelps, February 8, 1869; Letter #166, Joseph Henry to Phelps, June 22, 1875 (letters in Vt. Historical Society).

42. Letter #171, Gen. Henry Hunt to Phelps, March 10, 1880 (Vt. Historical Society).

43. Letter #5, T. J. Smith to Phelps, June 12, 1839 (Vt. Historical Society).

writing Vermont's Whig Senator Samuel S. Phelps (apparently not a close relative) for his assistance. Senator Phelps' reply was less colorful than Smith's, but equally frank: "I need not perhaps remind you however that in the system of favoritism which characterizes this mercenary administration [Polk's], I and my political friends have little part and I might add little influence."<sup>44</sup>

One might have suspected that his sympathies would lie with the anti-slavery tendencies of the new Republican Party of the 1850s. Its first candidate for President, Frémont, was a strong anti-slavery man, and had failed of reelection to the Senate from California for that reason. Two other leading Republicans, William Seward of New York and Vermont-born Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, were both anti-slavery and anti-Masonic, sentiments dear to Phelps' heart. Whatever hope Phelps, then on frontier duty in Texas, might have entertained for the Republican Party, it did not take long for him to renounce it as well as the older parties. Since 1854, he later wrote, in inscribing his copy of *Cradle of Rebellion* to the Vermont Historical Society library, "the Masonic machinery has been resorted to for forming and operating the republican party."

In November, 1867, however, a movement began which commanded the General's attention for the remainder of his life. This was the National Christian Association, founded in Aurora, Illinois, under the guidance of another remarkable Vermonter, Jonathan Blanchard, the President of Wheaton College. Blanchard, in fact, was a close cousin of General Phelps, their mothers having been daughters in the prolific Lovell family of Rockingham.<sup>45</sup>

The idea for a national association of Christians to fight the alleged iniquity of the Masonic lodge was put into Jonathan Blanchard's head by a Chicago businessman named Philo Carpenter. "When we get along with this slave business we must give our attention to the lodge," said Carpenter;<sup>46</sup> and, with the 13th Amendment in force, the erstwhile anti-

44. Letter #13, Sen. Samuel S. Phelps to J. W. Phelps, January 6, 1845 (Vt. Historical Society).

45. Blanchard is the subject of a most interesting biography: Clyde S. Kilby, *A Minority of One* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). Blanchard was a longtime friend of Vermonter Thaddeus Stevens and shared Stevens' anti-slavery, anti-masonic, and pro-education views. In 1881, he was put forward by the National Christian Association as its candidate for President in the 1884 election, but was forced to withdraw long before the election due to illness (Kilby, p. 190). The National Christian Association is discussed briefly in Alphonse Cerza, *Anti-Masonry* (Missouri (Masonic) Lodge of Research, 1962), pp. 49-50. Cerza does not mention any Presidential candidacies sponsored by the Association, however. A more polemic treatment, by a staunch Mason, can be found in Rob Morris, *William Morgan, or Political Anti-Masonry* (New York: R. Macoy, 1883), Chapter XII, p. 365 f. The 1880 American Party platform is included.

46. Kilby, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

slavery zealots led by Blanchard—who had been an early and fiery abolitionist orator, often at the peril of his life—turned their efforts to the next evil on the list.

The purpose of the National Christian Association was to combat secret lodges, and incidentally to promote Bible reading in the schools, write Christianity into the Constitution, and oppose tobacco, drink, Sunday amusements, the carrying of firearms, cruelty to animals, speculation, socialism and communism. Its organ was the *Christian Cynosure*, which by 1874 had become a 16-page publication, with both weekly and fortnightly editions.<sup>47</sup> Its most celebrated achievement was the discontinuation of ceremonial cornerstone layings on public buildings by representatives of the Masonic order. Emboldened by this victory, Blanchard envisioned the Association as the spearhead of a new political alliance which could hold the balance of political power between the “two decayed parties.”

Beginning in 1876, Blanchard almost singlehandedly formed an entity which he named the “American Party,” not to be confused with the earlier “Know Nothing” party of the same name which had expired by 1860. In the elections of that year its candidate for the Presidency, one James B. Walker of Illinois, tallied an unimpressive 2636 votes,<sup>48</sup> but Blanchard was never one to give up in the face of defeat.

A nominating meeting of the National Christian Association was held on June 17, 1880, in Chicago. The local papers reported the occasion and the expected denunciations of Masonry, but failed to observe any nomination of a Presidential candidate. Apparently some action toward this end was taken, however, for shortly thereafter General Phelps, at home in Brattleboro, received two separate letters informing him that he was the Association’s choice to run for the Presidency on the American ticket.

To the second, from John D. Nutting, secretary of the “nominating meeting,” Phelps replied with his appreciation for the honor conferred. Then, after suggesting that a full convention be held to ratify his acceptance, he told his readers what they wanted to hear:

It must be evident to all attentive observers that but little has been achieved by the political parties now in the ascendancy, since the late war, towards harmonizing the two warring sections of the country; while the best

47. The pages of the *Cynosure* for 1880 would undoubtedly yield much illuminating information about the circumstances of Gen. Phelps’ candidacy. Unfortunately, though isolated copies exist at the Library of Congress, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Grand Lodge of Masons in Boston, the writer has been unable to locate the 1880 volume.

48. *World Almanac and Encyclopedia*, 1899, p. 151.

way, if not the only way, to restore a healthy union between these sections is on the issue which our anti-secret party presents. The North and South must unite in a common opposition to the Masonic lodge in order to restore a national American tone of sentiment to the country. The lodge is an English device, of a barbarous age and of exclusive, aristocratic tendencies, and is wholly out of accord with our Republican institutions; which, however, it sways, controls, and corrupts. Opposition to it presents the best possible grounds for combining the political action of all parts of the Union. The Masonic lodge may be said to be one of the undestroyed seeds of that same foreign disease against which the United States waged the seven years war of the Revolution. It has since become the leading political power among us since the slave power has been overcome, and it is more dangerous to the Republic than was even the slave power itself.

Believing that reform in this direction is the first need of the country, and that all reform is impossible so long as the principal offices of the government are either held by Freemasons or bestowed by them, I am ready to accept the colors which you offer me, and to bear them into action, whether accompanied by few or many, and whatever may be the result of the contest in which we are engaged. Under the Masonized Republican Party, fraud and corruption have almost ceased to be regarded as disqualification for holding office.<sup>49</sup>

Whatever excitement his acceptance might have produced around Chicago, it did not cause much of a stir around Windham County, Vermont. The *Vermont Phoenix* thought it worth friendly mention:

After all, Vermont is not deprived of the honor of presenting the country with a presidential nominee; and the possible (?) occupant of the White House is none other than our venerable and esteemed fellow townsman General John W. Phelps, whose letter of acceptance we publish elsewhere. The Christian Cynosure of Chicago, the organ of the American (Anti-masonic) Party, places the name of General Phelps at the head of its editorial columns, with that of Hon. S. C. Pomeroy of Kansas for Vice President, and the ticket apparently receives hearty endorsement from the "faithful few."<sup>50</sup>

The Burlington *Free Press* noted the event by only one sentence in its miscellany column.<sup>51</sup>

At General Phelps' request—and possibly to gain publicity by juxtaposing itself with the Triennial Templars Conclave, held in Chicago—the National Christian Association reconvened there for a five day meeting in mid-August.<sup>52</sup> The first day saw about 75 in attendance:

49. *Vermont Phoenix*, July 30, 1880.

50. *Ibid.*

51. August 6, 1880, p. 3, col. 2. The *Free Press* later devoted three sentences to the events of the five-day National Christian Association nominating meeting in August (August 27, 1880).

52. The following account is taken from the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*, August 20–25, 1880.

"old men, women and children, with a slight sprinkling of vigorous blood in the person of a few middle aged reformers." The group, said a sardonic account in the *Chicago Tribune* (captioned "The Just Men of Gomorrah Heard From"), engaged in "tumultuous prayer" and ridiculed Masonic rites. The following day, according to the *Tribune*, some forty appeared, "most of them venerable, bespectacled, and severe." General Phelps' letter of acceptance was read and endorsed; whether Pomeroy favored the convention with a similar letter is not recorded.<sup>53</sup> The major event of the fourth day was the report of the Committee on Membership, which determined the total number of members of the organization to be ninety-one. By the fifth morning, attendance had dwindled to "20 aged persons"; this being insufficient, the convention adjourned until the afternoon, when "a general conference and religious love-feast was held." The high point of the convention, however, was the public performance of a mock Masonic investiture, staged by a skillful dramatist and former Mason named Ronayne. Some 2000 attended, and the event gained the plaudits of the *Tribune* as "a screaming farce."

Their candidate thus nominated and endorsed, the "American Party" went forth to capture the White House and put an end to Masonry. The candidates that year were five—and all former Union Generals! There was James A. Garfield, Republican; Winfield Scott Hancock, Democrat; James B. Weaver, Greenback; Neal Dow, Prohibition; and John W. Phelps, American. One historian, assessing the prospects of General Dow, was gloomy; but, he said, "if it was possible for a presidential candidate to have less chance of success than General Dow, then General Phelps was that candidate."<sup>54</sup>

The election was waged furiously—at least by Garfield and Hancock. In Vermont, a cause célèbre was the editorial charge, by a Demo-

53. Samuel Clarke Pomeroy was born in Massachusetts in 1816—served in the General Court of that state (1852–53), and moved to "Bleeding Kansas" in 1854. He became a prominent anti-slavery Republican and served as United States Senator from 1861 to 1873, failing of reelection in 1872. In the Senate he was called "Subsidy Pomeroy" for his penchant for that device. To Pomeroy was attributed the authorship in 1864 of the "Pomeroy Circular," a campaign document arguing that Lincoln's reelection was neither possible nor desirable, and that Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase was the most attractive alternative. After appearing on the American ticket of 1880, Pomeroy was nominated for President by the American Prohibition National Convention at Chicago in 1884, on a platform calling for (among other things) the abolition of secret societies. Apparently no electoral ticket was presented at the polls in support of Pomeroy's candidacy. He died in Massachusetts in 1891. His life is described in *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. 8; *National Cyclopedta of American Biography*, Vol. 12 (1904); and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1961*, p. 1469.

54. Herbert J. Clancy, S. J., *The Presidential Election of 1880* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1958) pp. 165–66.

cratic New York paper, that Republican "repeaters" were to be hauled into New York on election day to save the state for Garfield: "From the slums of the Green Mountains, the unclean alleys and blind lanes of Woodstock, Bethel, and Pompanoosuc, are to come the brawlers who shall terrify the peaceful citizens of Cow Bay and Mackerelville [New York] and vote the Republican ticket early and often."

This attempt to explain an impending Democratic defeat, observed the *Vermont Phoenix*, showed "a touch of real genius."<sup>55</sup> The *Burlington Free Press* was more caustic: "We do not know where the slums of Vermont are; but if we have any, they are undoubtedly peopled by Democrats, and if any repeaters are going to New York from them, they are Democratic repeaters."<sup>56</sup>

The election results offered little consolation to Jonathan Blanchard and the American Party enthusiasts: Garfield, the victor, won 4,449,053 popular votes; Hancock, 4,442,035; Weaver, 307,306; Dow, 10,305; and, a dismal last, General Phelps with 707.<sup>57</sup>

It is not easy to ascertain where General Phelps obtained his modest vote. The *Phoenix*, perhaps out of courtesy for a neighbor, observed that three votes had been cast for Phelps in Windham County: one in Brattleboro, one in Jamaica, and one in Halifax.<sup>58</sup> The *Danville North Star* (a passionately Democratic paper which raised its subscription rates after the election on the grounds that Garfield's victory was the signal for unrestrained and general greed among businessmen) reported 44 Phelps votes from Pennsylvania, and four more from Rhode Island. The *North Star* speculated that the latter might have been cast by the four electors pledged on the ballot to General Phelps' candidacy.<sup>59</sup>

Analyses of the stunning American Party defeat were, not surprisingly, few. The *New York Times*, in an unsigned column, had these thoughts to offer (which the *Phoenix* rather ungenerously chose to reprint):

How it has happened that in spite of such tremendous gains the Anti-Masonic candidates have been defeated? As in the case of all defeated candidates, the explanation is, of course, fraud and corruption, though in

55. *Vermont Phoenix*, October 29, 1880.

56. *Burlington Free Press*, October 30, 1880.

57. *World Almanac and Encyclopedia*, 1899, p. 151. The *Almanac* also lists the candidacies on the American Party ticket of a P. D. Wigginton of California (1884—no vote recorded) and a James L. Curtis of New York (1888—1591 votes). Morris, in *William Morgan* (*op. cit.*, n. 51) lists Phelps as the National Christian Association's candidate for President, and says, with uncertainty, that he thinks the American ticket received nearly 8000 popular votes.

58. *Vermont Phoenix*, November 5, 1880. The official returns filed with the Secretary of State do not attribute 109 "scattered" votes cast in nine counties of the state (15 in Windham County).

59. *The North Star* (Danville), November 19 and 26, 1880.

this especial instance the malign influence of Freemasonry must be considered. It can be proved that vast sums of money were expended both by the Republicans and the Democrats to procure the defeat of Phelps and Pomeroy. In one town in Ohio, the name of which is for obvious reasons withheld, a prominent Democratic politician is known to have had upward of 27 cents in his possession during the week before election, and to have boasted that with this money he could buy the support of three small boys, sons of a worthy widow lady, who were outspoken advocates of the gallant Phelps and the glorious Pomeroy. In another town in Michigan the grossest intimidation was practiced by the physician of a lunatic asylum, who locked an Anti-Masonic patient in his cell, and prevented him from going to the polls in a state of nature—emblematic of purity—and voting the Anti-Masonic ticket. Thus, with the aid of money and violence, the Republicans and Democrats, in unholy alliance, succeeded in nullifying the will of the people and placing a Masonic Administration in power.

The opposition to Phelps and Pomeroy did not hesitate to descend to the use of the basest means to influence the minds of the people against the Anti-Masonic candidates. Not one word or syllable of abuse was hurled at either of them. This studied refusal to extend to them the courtesies to which every candidate is entitled admits of no excuse. It cannot be pretended that either Mr. Phelps or Mr. Pomeroy deserved this brutal neglect. Nothing would have been easier than to have charged Mr. Phelps with congenital lunacy complicated with subsequent idiocy. To the shame of the Democratic and Republican editors, it must be said that they persistently refused to make any such charge. The past public life of Mr. Pomeroy, who was at one time elected Senator from Kansas, and at another time was not, afforded every opportunity to his opponents for vigorous and effective campaign charges; but nevertheless, he was treated with a systematic and silent contempt which must have made the blood of every earnest Anti-Mason approach the boiling point. These men could not have been treated differently had they been quiet, respectable citizens, who had never been convicted of having been candidates for office. The utter refusal of their opponents to aid them by making charges against them was essentially fraudulent and in direct conflict with the spirit of our institutions.<sup>60</sup>

Apparently General Phelps attached as little consequence to his rejection at the polls as he did to his nomination in the first place. Three years later, after a life of bachelorhood, he married Mrs. Anna B. Davis and, at the age of 70, fathered a son by her. He continued to write for periodicals and to maintain a lively interest in new scientific developments. In the week before his death he gave a lecture on the metric system to local school children. On Sunday, February 2, 1885, in his 72nd year, he was seen shovelling snow in his shirtsleeves. The following morning his neighbors at Guilford, where he had removed upon his marriage, noted that he was not engaged in his usual before-light and

60. *New York Times*, November 4, 1880, reprinted in the *Phoenix*, November 12, 1880.

before-breakfast employment of wood sawing. He was found dead of natural causes in his home. A lamp had burned itself out, and in an unsealed letter which he had written were mentioned the occupations of his last day, among them, as was his daily custom, the reading of a portion of the New Testament in the original Greek.<sup>61</sup>

General John Wolcott Phelps, Vermont's only Presidential candidate, was laid to rest after a brief ceremony at Christ Church, Guilford. The speaker, Rev. William H. Collins, rector of St. Michael's Church, Brattleboro, concluded his sermon with the following tribute:

The late General Phelps was a man of strong convictions and of strong prejudices. He was not always fully understood even by those who knew him best. His views of men and affairs differed widely from those by whom he was surrounded; yet no one can deny his honesty and sincerity of purpose. He was a man of unblemished reputation, of remarkable memory, learning and scholarship. While it may be said that he was not wholly in sympathy with his age and generation, it is true that he possessed a high ideal of what man should be and of the height to which he might attain by the right and proper use of his wonderful powers and faculties. His idiosyncrasies were by no means concealed; he never disguised his sentiments, but was ever frank and open in declaring his convictions, and by no means silent in regard to what he considered evil. We should hold him in remembrance as a man of strict honesty and integrity. He attained the age mentioned by the Psalmist as that allotted to man, and, as we believe, passed away calmly and peacefully from this world of sin and sorrow to one of joy and peace.<sup>62</sup>

Upon learning of his death, General Hawkins, who had served under General Phelps at Newport News and had come to admire him over many years, wrote the *New York Times* in his memory, saying in part:

To that kind-hearted, quaint, honest old man, with his perfect sense of justice, the men and officers of my regiment owe a debt of gratitude, which can only be effaced from their memories when the last survivor of that command shall have passed away. This little statement, inadequate as it is, is the tribute I bring to the grave of an honored friend of a quarter of a century. I could not do less. I wish I could do more. Take him for all in all, I have never known a man so free from the hypocrisies, sins and vices which make humanity despicable as was John W. Phelps.<sup>63</sup>

61. *Vermont Phoenix*, February 6, 1885.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Hawkins, pp. 85-86.