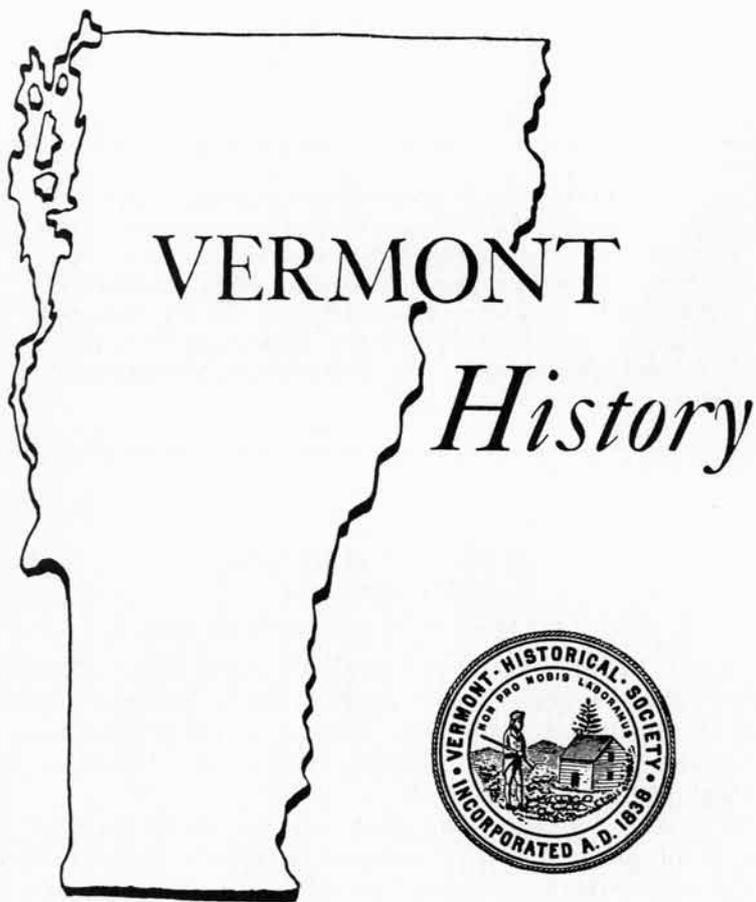


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General Butler declared Phelps "mad as a March Hare on the 'nigger question.'"

General John Wolcott Phelps and Conservative Reform in Nineteenth Century America

By WILLIAM F. MESSNER

The story of General John Wolcott Phelps of Guilford, Vermont, occupies a small and generally unnoticed place in the social history of nineteenth century America. Born in Windham County, Vermont, in 1813, Phelps labored in relative obscurity as a career army officer prior to the Civil War. During the war his determined stance on slavery and the treatment of blacks, which went beyond political realities and even contrary to direct orders, made him a general nuisance to his superior officers and to President Lincoln. Phelps emerged from the Civil War an embittered and increasingly eccentric reformer and social critic until his death in 1884. During his lifetime he enjoyed only two brief periods of public attention: the first as a result of his conflict with the Lincoln administration in 1862 over the emancipation of Southern blacks, and the second stemming from his presidential campaign in 1880 as a third party candidate.¹

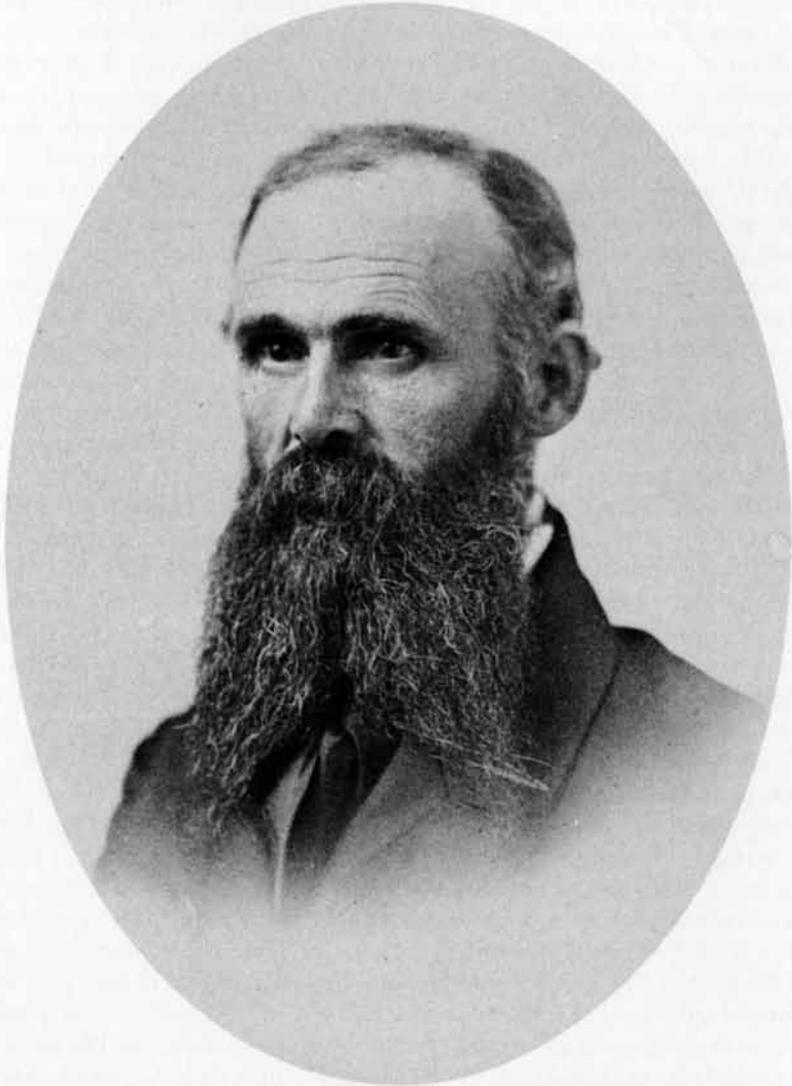
Despite Phelps' lack of notoriety, his career illustrates the persistence of a conservative mode of thought in nineteenth century American reform movements. Phelps' Vermont background provided him with the foundation for his conservative outlook, and the rapid social and economic change which marked his home state and nation deepened and confirmed his conservative critique of American society. Passionately devoted to the conservative dream of an orderly, disciplined, hierarchical society, Phelps' life brings into sharp focus the fears which impelled many nineteenth century Americans to espouse a variety of reform movements designed to recapture an earlier and more stable time in the nation's history.²

The town of Guilford, Vermont, where Phelps began life in 1813 provided, in Phelps' own estimate, "the cradle of my own personal existence,"

as well as the wellspring of his conservative world view.³ An area of small farms in the early nineteenth century, the southern Vermont towns in the Connecticut River Valley had originally been settled a half century earlier by rather conservative Congregationalists from Connecticut and Massachusetts. Phelps' dogged conservatism had a stubborn, cantankerous quality which may have also been a throwback to his family inheritance. Charles Phelps, the general's great-grandfather and the state's first lawyer, and his sons, became the leading citizens in the southeastern corner of Vermont. Old Charles Phelps and his followers steadily fought the Vermont independence movement and twice led outbreaks of armed resistance in the 1780's. The old man would not compromise even in the face of overwhelming odds.⁴ Over the next fifty years the twin polarities of Congregationalism and Federalism shaped the life of this area of Vermont, set apart physically from the remainder of Vermont by the hills and mountains to the north and west. Although Vermont as a whole began a steady drift away from both Federalism and Congregationalism by 1800, Windham County remained staunchly conservative by comparison. Bitter controversies within Vermont over the War of 1812 only served to intensify regional differences, and by the end of the war the southeast alone supported the separatist call for the Hartford Convention espoused by other New England conservatives. Vermont's failure to send delegates to Hartford reflected the decline in statewide conservative sentiment and gave clear evidence of the isolation which conservatives in the southeast would experience throughout the remainder of the century.⁵

Within this conservative milieu of Windham County John Wolcott Phelps grew to manhood. Guilford, the most populous town in Vermont in 1791, had already begun to suffer the steady exodus which plagued many of the state's rural communities throughout much of the nineteenth century. His father, a prominent lawyer, held a variety of local and state offices over a long public career,⁶ curiously supported the Republican Party, and as a state legislator supported the War of 1812 and opposed Vermont participation in the Hartford Convention. The youngest of eight children, John Wolcott's political sentiments developed along lines more consistent with those of his home region and his great-grandfather than of his father. By the age of nineteen, after completing his elementary education in the schools of Guilford and nearby Brattleboro, young John had sharpened an intellect almost astonishing in its breadth of interest and a conservative ideology which he would continue to build upon, but never deviate from, for the next half century.⁷

In the summer of 1832 John W. Phelps enrolled in the United States Military Academy at West Point. Although Phelps never commented directly upon the precise factors which caused him to choose a career in



General John W. Phelps

the United States Army, his perception of the military combined with the general image of the career army officer which pervaded New England during the Jeffersonian period suggest his motivation. During the Federalist period, the idea of "the military-leader-as-a-patrician" came to dominate the American mind. Americans held a romantic view of the typical army officer as a refined and intelligent military tactician, pure in morals, republican in political outlook, and above all a preeminent example of the American "natural aristocracy." Despite attacks by Jacksonians and others who derided this image as undemocratic, the patrician model of the military gentlemen continued to dominate the American mind until the post-Civil war period.⁸ With young Phelps' conservative background and bias, the patrician image of the army officer may have proved enormously appealing to him. In later years, clearly disillusioned and after having twice resigned from the military, he could still declare that "the army, in all countries, is the highest standard of honor among men. The nature of an army is that subordinates must always seek and desire the approval of their superiors, in the line of their duty."⁹ Manliness, deference, and a devotion to the fundamental institutions of society characterized an army officer in Phelps' mind.

The first segment of Phelps' career in the regular army, which extended from 1836 to 1859, followed a typical pattern of an American army officer during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. He spent his first four years of military service at West Point preparing himself for the engineering and other technical demands which would occupy the majority of his time for the next twenty-four years. During his West Point days Phelps realized that the image of the military which he had constructed did not coincide with the reality of army life. As a plebe, he complained to his family of the drunkenness and whoring prevalent among the cadets, but he reserved his most vocal criticism for the "disrespect for religion and disregard for the Sabbath" which he found rampant among his classmates.¹⁰ Despite these criticisms, Phelps persevered through four years at West Point and in 1836 received a commission as a second lieutenant and an assignment to the Fourth Artillery of the U.S. Army. The next ten years the young lieutenant served at a succession of military posts in Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. With the outbreak of hostilities in Mexico, the Fourth Artillery joined the army of General Winfield Scott in its successful assault on Mexico City. At the end of the war Phelps received a promotion to captain in recognition of the gallantry which he had exhibited in several engagements. For the next five years Captain Phelps served along the Mexican border and took an active role in resisting several filibustering expeditions engaged in by Texans intent upon seizing hold of additional slave territory for the South. After a year in Virginia at For-

tress Monroe, Phelps culminated his regular army career by taking part in the expedition against the Mormons in Utah from 1857 to 1859. With the end of the Mormon campaign, Phelps resigned his commission in the army after twenty-four years of an unnotable career and returned to the Connecticut River valley of Vermont.¹¹

During his years in the army his conservative philosophy, the seeds of which had been planted during his youth in Vermont, began to flower. An inveterate writer, Phelps' developing conservative thought emerges in his correspondence, diaries, and the numerous essays which he penned during long hours at military posts. His belief that the nation's greatest strength resided in its republican traditions formed the central theme of his thinking. The framers of the American constitution had, he believed, carefully structured a political system in which the electorate had initially selected as its representatives those men best fit for positions of leadership. Such men came from the wisest and best educated among the nation's citizenry, and the electorate naturally deferred to their rule. Guided by the precepts of Christian morality, this ruling elite exercised its powers in such a way as to insure both national well-being and social stability. Although these leaders stood at the center of the political processes, Phelps placed them above mere partisan politics as men who governed their decisions by moral, rather than political, considerations. "A well educated man," Phelps confided to his diary, "humane and polished by intercourse with elegant society can govern the uneducated, the unpolished and unrefined with perfect leniency and justice and probably would do so while the rule of an uncultivated man would be tyranny to a large portion of the people of the country."¹²

But good men in positions of authority did not, in the opinion of John Phelps, guarantee good government. Rather, the true worth of a republic ultimately rested upon the virtue of its people, and in his view a virtuous citizenry was synonymous with a society shaped by the precepts of the Protestant Church and the New England school room. These institutions insured the perpetuation of the American republic, for they produced a moral and disciplined people, and throughout his life Phelps placed a particular emphasis upon the necessity of training youth in proper modes of good conduct. "Good manners are peculiarly essential to a self-governing people," he wrote after the Civil War, "for they are the very first elements of such government. They are out-works, as it were, that serve as additional security for the observance of laws." In Phelps' mind the principles of "urbanity, politeness or good breeding" were extremely important for they, rather than the military or police power, stood as a final defense against the reversion of the people to their baser, antisocial instincts.¹³ This conservative philosophy was borrowed from the Federalists, particularly

that branch of the party which had labelled itself the "old federalists." Although Phelps abhorred partisan politics, he used this same term to describe his own political tendencies almost fifty years after the demise of the Federalist Party.¹⁴

By the early 1850s Phelps' conservative outlook had led him to become disillusioned with the army and more broadly with the American democratic social order. For many army officers of the pre-Civil War period the tedious rounds of garrison and fatigue duty of the frontier army, coupled with low pay and slow advancement, led to a sense of frustration. For a man of Phelps' intellectual sensibilities these irritants became doubly annoying. In order to dispel the boredom of army life, Phelps read widely in European and ancient history, wrote poetry and topical essays, and delved extensively into the sciences of botany and meteorology.¹⁵ But even these intellectual pursuits could not dispel his growing unhappiness with a career which consistently failed to measure up to the patrician model he expected. Convinced that in a republic the leadership of the army as well as the government should rest with an educated elite, Phelps became increasingly disgruntled that others less qualified received positions ahead of him. He acidly inscribed in his diary during the Mexican War that "when Democracy has arrived at such a depth as to prefer professional gamblers and boxers above men of education, refinement, moral worth and experience in their profession, it has reached that extreme where it meets with, and in nothing differs from, the tyranny of the Turkish despot who, in the whim of the moment, elevates some barber or coal-heaver to the grand visership."¹⁶ Finally in 1859 he quit the army in disgust after a quarter century of service, convinced that to serve any longer as a mere captain would only further insult his integrity.¹⁷

Phelps' resignation from the military went much deeper than his failure to secure a promotion. The Vermont captain had become increasingly alienated from his fellow officers and the military hierarchy. Southern officers showed little appreciation for the Vermonter's energetic suppression of filibustering expeditions. Unable to relate to these officers, Phelps withdrew completely from social interaction with most of his colleagues and all native Texans during his service on the Mexican border, and he continued this pattern of isolation during the Utah expedition. His service against the Mormons heightened his disdain for the military establishment which he believed to be dominated by those devoted to pacifying the South. The failure of the Buchanan administration to eradicate Mormonism, which he labelled "a horrid, deathly, clammy fungus of despotism," confirmed his opinion that "our military service has ceased to have any national character; it is governed by a spirit of clique, party and faction and made use of too low political ends."¹⁸



One of Phelps' detailed drawings and descriptions of flora in Florida made during his tour of duty there in the late 1830s. It demonstrated a trained and curious mind and considerable artistic talent. Courtesy New York Public Library.

Returning home to Vermont in 1859, Phelps observed developments in his home state which gave him little confidence in the possibility of attaining the stable republican social order which he valued so highly. Even in Windham County Phelps perceived the quickening pace of change, a pace which had accelerated in the captain's twenty-seven year absence. The transformations of Vermont's agricultural economy, the development of factories, and the growing network of the railroad had resulted in the dismantling of old customs, orthodoxies and privileges. Change was particularly evident in Guilford, where the population by 1860 had declined by fifty percent. Faced with change at every hand, Phelps stood ready to do battle with those forces he identified as being responsible for decline.¹⁹

Although at one time or another Phelps attributed the national decline to a myriad of causes ranging from labor agitators to European radicals, he most consistently focused his attention on the destabilizing influence of democracy and the attendant mania of Americans for material gain. With the idealized view of the past which so often inhabits the thinking of conservatives, Phelps held that the United States, once a nation which had governed its affairs within a framework of a deferential republican model, had evolved into a mere democracy in which education and good breeding stood for very little and in which every man was considered capable of administering governmental affairs. Phelps abhorred this transformation, for he believed that the direct placement of political power into the hands of the masses signalled the end of republican government.²⁰ Even the virtuous citizenry on which Phelps thought a republic should base its ultimate strength should not hold the reins of power.

Proof of the destructive effects of democracy was all about, but nowhere were its debilitating effects clearer than in the moral debasement of American society which had occurred as a result of the relentless American pursuit of wealth. "It is money and not principle that has been put foremost in everything," Phelps wrote disgustedly in 1859, "and even in society at large, money has been made our leading motive until its coppery stain has sunk poisonously into our very souls."²¹ Democracy accounted for this national disease, for under such a system "money is the great source of distinction and fount of honor; for, under the sway of democracy all other distinctions have become confounded and are comparatively worthless."²² In such a social order the people gave little credence to the Federalist model of a natural aristocracy. Rather, Phelps sensed that within a democratic system education and learning would soon come to count for very little, and in the place of a natural aristocracy, a plutocracy of wealth would emerge to shape the masses to its greedy design.²³

Although Phelps believed in the emergence of plutocracy of wealth was national in scope, he saw this process clearly advance in the slave holding

South. Throughout the decade of the 1850s Phelps became increasingly virulent in his attacks on slavery and the expansion of slave power, and by 1861 he had convinced himself that only the destruction of slavery could ensure the perpetuation of republicanism. The Federalist tradition which identified the rise of the "peculiar institution" in the South with the development of an "unrestrained aristocracy" provided Phelps with a solid foundation for his dread of slavery. A half-century before, New England Federalists had maintained that while Jeffersonian Democrats gave lip service to the ideals of popular government, that party, based in the South, was in the process of constructing a social order which relied upon the oppression of both whites and blacks for the economic well-being of a slave-based aristocracy.²⁴ Such a thesis appealed to a man of Phelps' world view, for by attacking slavery, he also struck out at the materialism and corruption of a society upon which the slave power had based its ascendancy. Slavery, with its emphasis upon the exploitation of labor for the sake of a monied aristocracy, ran counter to Phelps' belief in the construction of a harmonious and stable social order and served as a convenient target for venting his frustrations concerning the decline of American republicanism.

Although the roots of Phelps' anti-slavery feeling ran deep into his New England heritage, his antipathy toward the "peculiar institution" lay dormant until the 1850s. Prior to this time, although the Vermonter equated slavery with the practices of the "pagan Romans," he declined to become an active participant in the anti-slavery movement, and instead supported efforts to placate sectional antagonisms. An example of Phelps' moderation regarding the issue of slavery occurred in 1850 with the passage of the personal liberty law by the Vermont state legislature. Perennially in the vanguard of anti-slavery sentiment, Vermont became the first state to enact a personal liberty law after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The law provided slaves with a jury trial, the right of habeas corpus, defense counsel, and state payment of all legal fees.²⁵ Reacting to this attack upon law and order, Phelps labelled the legislature's action as "low, mean, and underhanded," and counseled moderation as the most effective mode for doing away with slavery.²⁶

By the end of 1851, however, the Vermont captain had effectively transformed himself into a staunch opponent of slavery and an advocate of its immediate abolition. Central to Phelps' transformation was his involvement while stationed at Fort Brown, Texas, in suppressing several filibustering expeditions. These expeditions, he shortly thereafter explained, were efforts by the South to annex more slave states in order that "the stain and disgrace of slavery might be made more tolerable by giving it the respectability of a majority."²⁷ As Phelps' discontent with army life

increased, so did his criticism of the South and slavery; and by 1858, shortly before his resignation from the army, he described the rising sectional agitation as "a running sore on the body politic—the slave disease broken out and worms wriggling in its rottenness."²⁸

With the firing on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, the federal government provided John Phelps with the opportunity for translating his anti-slavery thought into action, and early the following month he reentered the military as Colonel of the First Vermont Infantry Regiment. Having resigned from the army two years earlier out of frustration and disapproval with a government which he believed increasingly dominated by slaveholders, foreigners, and democrats, Phelps returned to the army with the outbreak of the Civil War determined "that there should be some fixed stable and ruling power, or we should soon fall into anarchy."²⁹ Phelps went with the First Vermont and took possession of Newport News, Virginia, a position which they held for the next five months. During this period the Vermont Colonel began to give indications that his command might be somewhat out of the ordinary. As a commanding officer, Phelps lived in a most Spartan style and quickly won the admiration of his troops for his fairness and lack of pretention. Among his fellow officers, however, resentment against Phelps quickly began to build as a result of both his plebian manner and his violent anti-slavery views which he made no attempt to hide.³⁰ The belief that the Vermonter was "not in his right mind" gained added substantiation when Phelps refused a brevet promotion to the rank of brigadier-general and only relented a few months later when he received a command in the Gulf expedition. Such behavior on Phelps' part led to the view that the Vermont officer "had been accustomed . . . 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 a wise and noble man."³¹

If Phelps' eccentric behavior in Virginia had not convinced his military colleagues of his "lunacy," the new brigadier-general's anti-slavery rhetoric and actions in the Southwest would soon confirm this notion. No sooner had Phelps arrived off the coast of Louisiana in December of 1861 in preparation for the Union assault on New Orleans than he drew attention to himself with his "Proclamation to the Loyal Citizens of the Southwest." Designed to elucidate "the motives and principles" by which Phelps would govern his command, the proclamation denounced the institution of slavery and advocated the spread of free labor throughout the Southwest. Declaring that "free labor is essential to free institutions," and republican institutions "are naturally better adapted and more congenial to the Anglo-Saxon race, than are the despotic tendencies of slavery," Phelps called for the abolition of the peculiar institution and the opening of the entire nation

to the invigorating winds of true republican rule. To allow slavery to endure, the General concluded, would be to restrict the constantly growing free labor population of the North to those areas devoid of slavery, which ultimately would result in growing class agitation and turmoil, and even national "discord and war."³²

Reaction to the extraordinary proclamation was mixed. Many officers agreed with Admiral David D. Porter that "Phelps is a crazy man."³³ Most of Phelps' troops apparently accepted his speech as just another eccentricity of their commander, although a few of the General's commissioned officers resigned in disgust over his proclamation.³⁴ Phelps' commander, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, was impressed with the logic, if not the politics, of the proclamation. Disclaiming any prior knowledge of the document, he forwarded it to Washington with a notation calling attention "to its clear and businesslike statements."³⁵ Phelps himself gave little notice to the clamor which his proclamation had evoked. "The time has come when distinct lines must be drawn, and I am willing to set the example," he declared soon after his address. "I wish neither to serve under or with men who favor a compromise, or any settlement of slavery short of its early abolition."³⁶

The General soon received an opportunity to act on his rhetoric. Five months after delivering his much publicized address, he arrived in New Orleans with the victorious Union Army and took command of Camp Parapet in the suburb of Carrollton just north of the city. Phelps could have chosen no more propitious site to act on his anti-slavery beliefs, for all fugitive slaves attempting to enter New Orleans from the north naturally gravitated to his camp. The General did not let this opportunity pass. Opposed to army policy excluding blacks from Union lines, he decided to bring the issue to a head, even if it meant risking his own dismissal. By the early summer of 1862 Camp Parapet had become known as a haven for runaway slaves, and despite assurances from General Butler that their property rights would be protected, slaveowners found it impossible to retrieve their fugitive chattel from General Phelps. Even more alarming to white Louisianans was the fact that Phelps by July of 1862 had begun to group his fugitives into regiments. At the end of the month he had 300 black men under arms.³⁷ By enlisting fugitive slaves Phelps embarked on a direct collision course with Benjamin Butler who had come to Louisiana in the summer of 1862 determined to build Unionist sentiment by placating those slaveholders who declared their loyalty to the Union. His letter to Butler in late July requesting provisions for his black troops precipitated a confrontation with his commander. As justification for enlisting slaves, Phelps argued that his program was "the best way of preventing the African from becoming instrumental in a general state of anar-

chy.”³⁸ Butler reacted heatedly to his subordinate’s suggestion. He wrote to his wife that Phelps had “gone crazy He is mad as a March Hare on the ‘nigger question’.”³⁹ Not even deigning to address himself to Phelps’ proposition, Butler directed his subordinate to employ the “contrabands” in cutting down the trees around his camp. Regarding Butler’s orders as an affront and unwilling to perform the functions of a “slavedriver,” Phelps tendered his resignation on August 2, and by the end of the summer he had returned home to Vermont.

Phelps’ controversy with the federal military hierarchy over the “contraband” question brought him a brief flurry of public notoriety. Both *The Liberator* and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* lauded the General for his anti-slavery activities in Louisiana, and Wendell Phillips labelled Phelps as “the only abolitionist in the regular army.”⁴¹ Anxious to blunt the radical criticism which the Phelps situation had attracted, in February of 1863 Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton offered Phelps a commission as major general in the newly formed United States Colored Infantry. Phelps, however, declined the offer, stating that he would only consider rejoining the war effort if the federal government admitted that “every slave State which had been admitted to our Union since the adoption of the Constitution, has been so admitted in violation of the Constitution.”⁴²

His declining Stanton’s offer was symptomatic of his disillusionment with the politics of the Lincoln administration. As early as 1864, Phelps wrote that “the government has let the mass of heterogeneous elements seethe and boil, without skimming, hoping that something democratic would come of it.”⁴³ In a particularly vitriolic letter to Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts Phelps unburdened himself of his contempt for the government’s position. “The Constitution was framed for a homogeneous people,” he proclaimed, “for an American nation, and not for a conglomerate of beer-guzzling, Sunday-desecrating, infidel Germans, whiskey-drinking, pope-worshipping, governless Irishmen, idle, ease-loving Africans, and cunning, pagan Chinamen. The great fault of the war administration was the subordination of policy to the ignorance and superstition of the foreign elements, instead of the spirit and tenor of our American Constitution.”⁴⁴ Phelps particularly objected to the acclaim which the public heaped upon politicians such as Lincoln and Andrew Johnson who had risen from humble origins to positions of power. To the general such toadying to the masses was simply antithetical to a republic which ruled itself not by a plutocracy of the rich or poor, but rather by a natural aristocracy of an educated elite.⁴⁵

By the time of Appomatox the conservative predilections of the man only recently hailed by radicals as “the abolitionist general” had led him to become a staunch opponent of black suffrage. Late in 1864 Phelps warned

Charles Sumner that "by extending the right of voting to the African we shall draw on our future safety and well-being to meet a present emergency."⁴⁶ Phelps' opposition to black voting rights signalled his feelings concerning racial issues. The general believed that the former slaves could never be integrated into American society on a par with whites, and that any attempt to do so would result in bloodshed and racial warfare. Republican efforts at enfranchising blacks, in his view, placed a fearful strain on republican institutions already overburdened by the weight of white immigrants, and threatened to plunge the nation into democratic demagoguery and outright tyranny.⁴⁷

Convinced of the incompatibility of blacks and republican institutions, Phelps became a firm proponent of African colonization and spent the decade following the Civil War working to this end. In 1863 he began his active involvement in the colonization movement by framing legislation to establish a national college for training black leaders of a back-to-Africa movement and for the development of a packet line between Philadelphia and Liberia.⁴⁸ At the conclusion of the war he became an active member of the American Colonization Society. He unsuccessfully pressured the Vermont legislature and Congress to subsidize a national colonization effort.⁴⁹ Despite this failure, Phelps remained convinced that a wholesale colonization of blacks to Africa would not only secure republicanism at home, but also would serve to civilize and Christianize the African continent.⁵⁰

Although a firm opponent of black political rights, Phelps remained a staunch proponent of a strict, even harsh, reconstruction of the South. Much of his disillusionment with the Republican administrations of Presidents Lincoln and Johnson stemmed from what he perceived as their temporizing stance toward the South. Phelps' reconstruction tendencies, similar as they may have been to Republican radicals, originated instead from a conservative bias. He equated Southerners with "barbarians, as it might be inferred from the fact that a large portion of them consists of ignorant, degraded Africans, and the rest of perverted whites whose condition has been adapted to that of the Africans."⁵¹ Further, Southerners had been "educated to despotism — they have been taught to despise republicanism for thirty years; and it will take a long time, under strong military tutelage to turn them back upon their steps, and train them to republicanism."⁵² Given these sentiments, Phelps argued for the deportation of Confederate leaders, the military occupation of Southern states, and the establishment of a northern pattern of townships throughout the South.⁵³

Consistently conservative in his critique of Republican reconstruction, Phelps was disappointed in the drift of post war events. African coloniza-

tion failed to develop any significant momentum, black and white immigrants continued to make their presence felt on a national scale, and the federal government allowed an unrepentant South to reclaim its place in the Union. But Phelps found these only manifestations of a more fundamental national malaise, and he lamented the accelerating decline of the hill country and single family farms which he associated with the traditional American values. Phelps perceived the change at every hand, particularly in southeastern Vermont. "I witnessed not only the death of an old friend," he wrote shortly after attending a funeral in Guilford, "but also the death of a town. I have seen and felt—deeply and sorrowfully felt this dying out of an old, beautiful, patriarchal state of society, ever since I have been here, now twenty years. . . . All my feelings and hopes have been delusions."⁵⁴ For Phelps the changes signalled the loss of public, political responsibility, and a corresponding rise in private materialism provided the most obvious signs of social deterioration. "Mammon-worship," he declared, "has become the religion of the land," while "the decay of public sentiment, as well as of religious sentiment, since the war, is manifest."⁵⁵

Utterly chagrined at the social deterioration which he saw all about, by the mid-1870s the general became increasingly hostile to the various "foreign" elements in American society which he held responsible for the nation's ills. Phelps' nativist tendencies, evident as early as the 1840s, had rooted and taken firm hold in the fears evinced by his Federalist forebears regarding the polluting effects of French and Irish immigrants on the young republic.⁵⁶ During his years in the army he railed against "the stolid stupidity of the foreigners" who comprised the majority of the troops whom he commanded on the frontier.⁵⁷ At the other times he directed his prejudice at groups such as Mormons, Mexicans, Jews, and others who did not meet his criteria for inclusion in the virtuous citizenry of the American republic.⁵⁸ But despite Phelps' prejudices, until the Civil War he subordinated his dislike for foreigners to his conservative critique of American society. By the end of the war, however, Phelps had settled on the membership of the Masonic Lodge as the cause of the nation's ills, and until his death in 1885 he led a sad effort to alert the nation to the Masonic conspiracy.

Phelps' choice of the Masons as a target for his frustration may appear curious at first glance, but a clear path connected the general's conservative ideology and his descent into the paranoia of anti-Masonry. The Federalist party had decried the influence of the Masonic Lodge which it thought threatened the overthrow of early American political and religious institutions. Phelps' home state of Vermont had proved fertile ground for the anti-Masonic movement of the Jacksonian period.⁵⁹ Phelps, exposed

at an early age to New England's anti-Masonic fervor, had found appealing the movement's simplistic explanation of the chaotic course of American history in terms of a conspiracy of secret societies.⁶⁰ His uneasiness over the growth of bourgeois democracy, his concern for what he regarded as the demise of traditional American institutions, and his fear of the destabilizing effects of foreign elements on American life all joined in his discovery of a secret conspiracy of Masons responsible for the otherwise baffling state of the nation. Evidence of a conspiratorial mind set had been evident in Phelps' thinking regarding Mormons, Catholics, and slaveowners, and by the 1870s the general reverted to the prejudices of his Federalist forefathers in identifying a source of his, and the nation's, ills as the membership of the Masonic Lodge.⁶¹ Phelps' writings and actions during the last ten years of his life provide ample evidence of his anti-Masonic paranoia. In 1877 he charged that Masons had control of "the Church, the press, the pulpit, and the ballot box." Indeed, so pervasive had the invidious influence of the secret organization become that Phelps claimed "it is impossible to accomplish a reform without abolishing masonry. Masonry is the standing army of the Invisible Empire; and it stands bolder and stronger today than ever before. It is much more dangerous to our liberties than slavery ever was."⁶²

Phelps' opposition to the threat of Masonry grew to such proportions that he broke with a life-long tradition of non-involvement in politics in order to counteract its influence. During the 1870s the general became the prime mover in the establishment and perpetuation of a local Antimasonic Society in Windham County, Vermont. Ignored by local and state politicians, the Society could not generate sufficient support for its efforts, and by the close of the decade the organization dissolved, with Phelps noting in the Society's last set of minutes that "so little interest is manifested in our meetings, that none was called this year."⁶³ At this juncture Phelps received one final opportunity to act on his anti-Masonic beliefs when he won in 1880 the nomination of the National Christian Association as the presidential candidate of the American Party. An insignificant political movement even by third-party standards, the American Party emanated from the efforts of a small group of Protestant clerics opposed to the menace of secret societies. Nominated primarily because of his brief bout with public notoriety during the Civil War, Phelps found himself ignored by the American press and public, a fact attested to by his grand total of 707 popular votes in the national election.⁶⁴ Phelps' pathetic electoral showing reflected his state of mind. "My opposition to Masonry has left me almost alone in the world," he lamented shortly before the election. "To feel that one is engaged in a work of the first importance to the interests of mankind, and yet to have mankind either hating your or ig-

norant entirely of your work and character, is about as desolate a state of existence as it would be if cast adrift at sea upon a plank."⁶⁵

In 1885 at the age of 72, John Phelps died, disillusioned to the end with the drift of American history.⁶⁶ Phelps' deep-rooted conservatism had led to extreme reactions against the process of social-economic change which swept American society during the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, Phelps' scapegoating of groups ranging from immigrants to Mormons to slaveholders to Masons provides a prime example of what Richard Hofstadter has labelled "the paranoid style of American politics," and his life provides a clear, albeit extreme, example of the pressures which modernity came to exert upon Americans, and the varied reactions which Americans manifested in working out their fears and anxieties.

Sad as Phelps' final years may have been, his career does provide a demonstration of the conservative roots of nineteenth century reform. Phelps' New England background, firmly based in Puritan theology and Federalist orthodoxy, paralleled the personal history of many of the leading lights of the abolitionist movement. Similar to William Lloyd Garrison and others, Phelps' conservative predilections led him to identify slavery as the cause of many of the nation's social ills. Phelps parted company with Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and other New England abolitionists in his inability to accept the drift of antebellum reform toward the notions of anti-institutionalism and the perfectability of man. Phelps, rather, continued to cling to a world view stressing order, harmony, and organic unity, a view increasingly at odds with the dynamics of nineteenth century America.

John Phelps' conservative roots also provide a link between the anti-slavery movement and many of the other national reform movements prior to the Civil War. A firm proponent of temperance, nativism, sabbatarianism, anti-Masonry, and African colonization, Phelps' involvement in all these efforts emanated from the conservative soil of southeastern Vermont and had as its ultimate goal the protection of a republican society from the baleful influence of slaveowners, immigrants, Masons, and others who threatened what he regarded as the foundations of the virtuous republic. In this regard Phelps' views were prototypical of a major strain of nineteenth century American thought. Phelps differed from many Americans, not in his basic conservative inclinations, but rather in the consistency with which he adhered to these views and the intensity with which he felt his beliefs conflicted with the course of the nation's development. Unable to effect an intellectual compromise with the forces of democratic capitalism, Phelps persevered in his conservative reform efforts long after most Americans had despaired of making significant social change. Prejudiced and paranoid as the man may have been, John Wolcott

Phelps deserves the recognition of the historical community as an exemplar of the persistence of a conservative mode of thought during the mid-nineteenth century.

NOTES

¹ Historical treatment of Phelps' conflict with the national administration over slaves in Louisiana can be found in Herman Belz, *Emancipation and Equal Rights: Politics and Constitutionalism in the Civil War Era* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 96-7; Mark M. Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: McKay, 1959), p. 650; Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Peter Smith, 1956), pp. 56-57; and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: Little, 1953), p. 133. Treatment of Phelps' presidential campaign is in John McClaughry, "John Wolcott Phelps: The Civil War General Who Became a Forgotten Presidential Candidate in 1880," *Vermont History*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Autumn, 1970), 263-90.

² Allan C. Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 175.

³ John W. Phelps to John Hickman, Dec. 26, 1859, John W. Phelps Papers, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y. An extensive collection of Phelps' correspondence, diaries, and writing are included in this collection at the New York Public Library. A much smaller collection of Phelps' papers can be found at the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier, Vermont.

⁴ Charles M. Thompson, *Independent Vermont* (Boston: Thomas Allen, 1942), pp. 498-512; and John Phelps, *Family Memoirs* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1886), pp. 30-40.

⁵ David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1938), pp. 11-13, 16; William A. Robinson, *Jeffersonian Democracy in New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), p. 167; Chilton M. Williamson, *Vermont In Quandry, 1763-1825* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1949), pp. 259-60; and Harold R. Burroughs, "Vermont and the Sectional Movement in New England, 1800-1815: The State's Isolation from Regional Unity," unpublished honor's thesis, Middlebury College, 1982.

⁶ Phelps, *Family Memoirs*, pp. 61-64. Phelps' father served as a state legislator in 1814 and 1818. He also served as a Register of Probate (1809-12), on the Council of Censors (1820 and 1834), governor's Council (1831 and 1832), and College of Electors (1828).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 61-64; Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington and Brandon: Vt. A.M. Hemenway, 1867-1891), V., p. 47, 69.

⁸ Charles R. Kemble, *The Image of the Army Officer in America: Background for Current Views* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 14, 28, 52, 87.

⁹ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to "Lawrence," July 22, 1864. See also, *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, October 9, 1843.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, March 17, 1833.

¹¹ John H. Brown, ed., *Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (Boston: Federal Book Company, 1903), VI, p. 238-39.

¹² Phelps Papers, NYPL, John W. Phelps MS Diary, 1859.

¹³ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to J. B. Pratt, Oct. 6, 1870; Phelps MS Diary, 1868; J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, May 17, 1839; and J. Phelps to H. E. Paine, Sept. 13, 1870.

¹⁴ David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1965), pp. 2-5, 17, and 49; and Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to John Hickman, Jan. 4, 1865.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Fayette Tower to J. Phelps, Sept. 13, 1841. Phelps' papers at the New York Public Library include a collection of his miscellaneous writings which range over the natural and physical sciences, as well as the history and culture of various foreign peoples.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps MS Diary, Jan. 13, 1848. See also J. Phelps to James Phelps, August 19, 1849, April 22, 1851, James Phelps Papers, Vermont Historical Society.

¹⁷ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps MS Diary, Oct. 31, 1859; and Phelps Papers, VHS, Adjutant General Samuel Cooper to J. Phelps, Nov. 3, 1859.

¹⁸ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, Nov. 23, 1857; J. Phelps to Charles Phelps, Dec. 29, 1857; J. Phelps to J. W. DePeyster, July 29, 1858; J. Phelps to John Hickman, June 28, 1859; and Mary Cutts to Henry Burnham, March 27, 1971.

¹⁹ For an analysis of the destabilizing effects of modernization on American life in the nineteenth century see Rowland Berthoff, "The American Social Order: A Conservative Hypothesis," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (April, 1960), 495-514. For an analysis of social change in Vermont during this period, see Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, pp. 201-72; Hemenway, *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, V., 40; Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt.: Stacy & Jameson, for the author, 1853), pp. 84-5.

- ²⁰ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps MS Diary, Jan. 16, 1852; and J. Phelps to J. Watts DePeyster, April 14, 1856.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Jacob DePeyster, May 10, 1859.
- ²² *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, Feb. 28, 1866.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps MS Diary, Sept. 26, 1841, Nov. 4, 1859; J. Phelps to Jacob DePeyster, Nov. 5, 1857, Nov. 4, 1859.
- ²⁴ Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 23-66.
- ²⁵ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps MS Diary, Nov. 11, 1840; and Norman L. Rosenberg, "Personal Liberty Laws and Sectional Crisis: 1850-1861," *Civil War History*, Vol. 17 (March, 1971), 30.
- ²⁶ James Phelps Papers. Phelps to James Phelps, Dec. 22, 1850. See also Phelps Papers, NYPL, J.W. Phelps MS Diary, May 20, 1840, Oct. 23, Nov. 17, 1850; J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, Dec. 16, 1841, Aug. 30, 1842. James Phelps Papers, J.W. Phelps to James Phelps, Feb. 11, April 22, 1851.
- ²⁷ Phelps Papers, NYPL, Phelps MS Diary, July 25, 1853.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, Dec. 23, 1858.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps MS Diary; and J. Phelps to John Hickman, Nov. 22, 1859.
- ³⁰ Brown *Annual Cyclopaedia*, I, 291-92; John Cleaveland to the *Evening Advertiser*, March 5, 1862, John P. Cleaveland Papers, Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.; Phelps Papers, NYPL, "John W. Phelps;" and Mary Cutts to J. Phelps, Aug. 13, 1862; *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1862; and *New York Tribune*, Sept. 26, 1862.
- ³¹ Phelps Papers, NYPL, "John W. Phelps."
- ³² *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, 1894-1922), Series I, 17, 18-20.
- ³³ David Porter to Gustavus Fox, March 28, 1862, in Robert M. Thompson and Richard Wainright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus v. Fox* (New York, 1920), II, p. 94. See also *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Dec. 28, 1861.
- ³⁴ James Parton, *General Butler in New Orleans* (New York: Masons, 1864), pp. 200-201; Brown, *Annual Cyclopaedia*, I, 291-92.
- ³⁵ Parton, *General Butler*, pp. 200-201.
- ³⁶ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to John Hickman, Jan. 13, 1862.
- ³⁷ Parton, *General Butler*, pp. 496-514; Benjamin Butler Papers, Polycarpe Fortier to Benjamin Butler, May 22, 1862, W. Mitthoff to B. Butler, May 28, 1862, V. Kruttschmidt to George Shepley, June 2, 1862, and A. Lavifson to B. Butler, July 15, 1862, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1862; and George Denison Papers, George Denison to Dudley Denison, July 29, 1862, Library of Congress.
- ³⁸ J. Phelps to R. S. Davis, July 30, 1862 in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C., 1880-1902), Ser. I, XV, pp. 534-35. Cited hereafter as *O.R.*
- ³⁹ B. Butler to his wife, Aug. 25, 1862 in *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin Butler* (Norwood, Mass., 1917), II, p. 148.
- ⁴⁰ R. S. Davis to J. Phelps, July 31, 1862, *O.R.*, Ser. I, XV, 535; J. Phelps to R. S. Davis, July 31, 1862, *Ibid.*; J. Phelps to Lorenzo Thomas, Aug. 2, 1862, *Butler Correspondence*, II, pp. 146-47; and Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps MS Diary, Sept. 8, 1862.
- ⁴¹ *The Liberator*, Aug. 1, 1862; and *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 21, 1864.
- ⁴² Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to Edwin Stanton, Feb. 10, 1863. Phelps did consider running for a seat in the House of Representatives as a Republican in the winter of 1862. Republican party officials in Vermont, however, gave the nomination to Justin Morrill on the presumption that Phelps would accept Stanton's offer to rejoin the war effort. *Ibid.*, D.H. Rainey to J. Phelps, Oct. 1, 1862; J.W. Colburn to J. Phelps, Dec. 15, 1862; and James Phelps to J. Phelps, May 14, 1863.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to John Hickman, July 24, 1864.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, Dec. 18, 1867.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to John Hickman, Jan. 8, 1865; and J. Phelps to Alfred Brooks, May 10, 1865.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, Dec. 30, 1864, and Jan. 2, 7, 1865.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, Jan. 7, 1865; J. Phelps to John Hickman, July 24, Nov. 9, 1864 Nov. 17, 1867, and Feb. 13, 1868.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to John Hubbard, Nov. 26, 1863.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, J. K. Converse to J. Phelps, May 15, 1867, Feb. 18, 1868; and J. Phelps to J. K. Converse, Dec. 19, 1869.
- ⁵⁰ Phelps' ideas on African colonization are most rigorously outlined in two unpublished manuscripts, one written in 1869 and the other in 1881. Both are in the Phelps Papers, NYPL.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, Dec. 12, 1864.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to John Hubbard, Feb. 22, 1864.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Charles Sumner, April 27, 29, 1865; and J. Phelps to John Hickman, May 2, 1866.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Phelps MS Diary, March 3, 1878.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Feb. 8, 1877 and April 2, 1879.

⁵⁶ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Times Books, 1963), p. 23; and Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, Jan. 27, 1848, and Phelps MS Diary, Aug. 24, 1857. See Francis P. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet: The Role of the United States Army in the Development of the Northwest, 1815-1860* (Madison: Peter Smith, 1953), pp. 41-45, and Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 39-40, for a discussion of European immigrants in United States Army in the mid-19th century.

⁵⁸ Phelps Papers, NYPL, Phelps MS Diary, July 8, Oct. 7, 1846, Sept. 10, Oct. 1, 1847, June 10, 1857, Aug. 7, 1862; J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, Nov. 20, 1846, Nov. 23, 1857; J. Phelps to J.W. DePeyster, July 3, Aug. 2, 1858; J. Phelps to Lily DePeyster, Jan. 17, 1858; and J. Phelps to John Hickman, Jan. 18, 1858, Dec. 15, 1864, Sept. 27, 1865, Dec. 3, 1868. Despite Phelps' nativism, he maintained sympathetic feelings toward native American Indians, especially in the light of federal policy toward Indians which he labelled "inhuman, unjust, and therefore unwise." See *Ibid.*, J. Phelps to Helen Phelps, May 30, 1841, Nov. 11, 1858; J. Phelps to J. DePeyster, June 28, 1859; and Phelps MS Diary, May 20, 1850, Sept. 30, Oct. 2, Nov. 3, 1859.

⁵⁹ Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*, pp. 110-12; Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York: Russell Publications, 1918), pp. 9-12; and Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, p. 89.

⁶⁰ Phelps' first mention of anti-Masonic bias occurred in 1851, long after the anti-Masonic movement in Vermont had ended, as part of his analysis of the causes of a southern filibustering expedition against the Mexican town of Matamoros. See Phelps Papers, NYPL, Phelps MS Diary, Nov.-Dec. 1851. In 1854 Phelps translated a history of secret societies in France, published by Lippincott & Co. in 1856 and privately republished in a second edition in 1864.

⁶¹ David B. Davis has written cogently and at length regarding the social functions of prejudice and the conspiratorial mind-set in 19th century America. See "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Masonic Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVII, No. 2 (Sept., 1960), 205-24, and "Some Ideological Functions of Prejudice in Antebellum America," *American Quarterly*, XV (Summer, 1963), 115-25.

⁶² Phelps Papers, NYPL, J. Phelps to John Blanchard, Jan. 10, 1869; J. Phelps to G. J. Scott, July 31, 1872; J. Phelps to *New York Tribune*, April 25, 1873; J. Phelps to Charles Eliot, Dec. 18, 1873; J. Phelps to Gordon Ford, Oct. 13, 1873, Jan. 5, 1874; and J. Phelps to Leonard Bacon, June 2, 1877.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Proceedings of the Windham County Antimasonic Society, 1871-1879.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Phelps MS Diary, May 9, June 25, 29, 1880; and J. Phelps to Thomas Hodge, June 22, 1880; and McClaughry, "John Phelps," 263-90. The National Christian Association was headed by Jonathan Blanchard, a cousin of Phelps and president of Wheaton College in Illinois. Blanchard, like Phelps, was a staunch foe of slavery, Mormonism, and Masons, and a proponent of Indian rights. Clyde S. Kilby, *A Minority of One: The Biography of Jonathan Blanchard* (Grant Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959.)

⁶⁵ Phelps Papers, NYPL, Phelps MS Diary, Nov. 11, 1879, July 11, 1879, May 13, 1881. Phelps' personal life brightened perceptibly in 1883 when, at the age of 70, he married for the first time. His wife, Ann B. Davis, was thirty-two years old at the time and one year later bore Phelps a son, Oliver S. Phelps, *The Phelps Family of America and Their English Ancestors* (Pittsfield, Mass.: n.p., 1899), II, p. 863.

⁶⁶ Phelps died of a heart attack after shoveling snow in his shirt sleeves during a February snowstorm, McClaughry, "John W. Phelps," 289-90.