

## STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS (1813 – 1861)



*Stephen A. Douglas*  
*Photograph by Mathew Brady*

Stephen Arnold Douglas was born in Brandon, VT on April 23, 1813. His father, a physician and Middlebury College graduate, died suddenly when Stephen was just a few months old. He grew up with his mother (or under the care of a bachelor uncle) and was educated in the local schools. As a teenager, he was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker in Middlebury, but didn't stay in this field for long. His mother remarried in 1830 and moved to New York State, and Douglas attended Canandaigua Academy, beginning the study of law. His mother couldn't support his continued study, and he decided to move west in 1833.

He went to Cleveland, OH, and then on to Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, and finally Jacksonville (Morgan County), IL. He was an itinerant teacher during that time and studied the law at night. He obtained his law license in 1834 in Illinois and quickly became involved in Democratic Party politics, helping organize the state

Democratic Party. He was a State's Attorney from 1834-36, was elected to the state legislature in 1836, and in 1837 was appointed registrar of the Land Office at Springfield. He ran for the US House of Representatives in 1838 but was defeated by only a few votes. He was briefly the IL Secretary of State in 1840. He became a justice on the Illinois Supreme Court in 1841. He was elected to the US House in 1842 and again in 1844. He was elected by the state legislature to the US Senate in 1846, and was reelected in 1852 and 1858, serving until his death in 1861. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the presidential nomination in 1852 and again in 1856, and received the nomination of a badly split Democratic Party in 1860, losing the general election to Abraham Lincoln.

Douglas was only 5 foot 4 inches tall. He was nicknamed the "Little Giant", because of his small size and (a) his large head and massive chest and shoulders, or (b) his great ability as an orator, or (c) his great energy and persuasive power. He courted Mary Todd. In March 1847 he married Martha Martin, the daughter of a wealthy North Carolinian. She had responsibility for a large cotton plantation in Mississippi with slaves. Although Douglas personally never owned slaves, his wife and their children did by inheritance. Martha died in January 1853, leaving the Senator with two small sons (a daughter had died very young). In November 1856, he married 20 year-old Adele Cutts, but their only daughter died at less than a year old.

Though a young Congressman in 1842, Douglas made an impact. He strongly supported westward expansion. He supported the War with Mexico. He held the powerful position of Chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, dealing with the establishment of civil governments in the territories, a prerequisite to statehood. He held that position for 11 years until removed due to his opposition to some of President Buchanan's measures.

As early as 1845, he was proposing the idea that later became known as "popular sovereignty"—the right of the local people in a particular state or territory to make the decision

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about slavery. It was called “squatter sovereignty” by those who opposed it. He and Henry Clay were the key figures in the adoption of the Compromise of 1850. Unable to pass an omnibus bill, Douglas arranged a different majority for different parts of the bill in order to succeed. The results were: admission of California as a free state, creation of Utah and New Mexico territories with the question of slavery to be determined by popular sovereignty, settlement of a Texas-New Mexico boundary dispute in favor of Texas (a slave state), ending the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and making it easier for southerners to recover fugitive slaves (the Fugitive Slave Law).

In 1854, Douglas was the major player in what became the Kansas-Nebraska Act. New laws were needed to allow for the settlement of the Nebraska territory to enable a transcontinental railroad. The region lay north of the 36°30′ line established by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, meaning it would have been free, not slave. Douglas wanted to ensure a northern route for a transcontinental railroad, with a terminus in Chicago, which would have benefited Douglas’ constituents, and himself through Chicago land investments. In order to get southern support for the railroad line, Douglas proposed to create two territories—Kansas and Nebraska—and to use popular sovereignty to settle the question of slavery. This effectively destroyed the Missouri Compromise, reopened the question of the expansion of slavery, and contributed to the rise of the Republican Party. Douglas was vilified by many Northerners for his sponsorship of this Act. He is said to have remarked that he traveled from Washington to Chicago by the light of his own burning effigies. (1)

Another result of the Act was “Bleeding Kansas”—a civil war in the territory. Many outsiders from North and South traveled to Kansas in 1854 and 1855 to try and convert it to their position on slavery. By 1857 Kansas was seeking admission to the Union. The vote on the Lecompton Constitution in 1857 was essentially proposed as a “constitution with slavery” and a “constitution with no slavery”, but it was really not, as the latter only prohibited the importation of new slaves. Anti-slavery forces boycotted the vote and the “constitution with slavery” passed. Congress then considered statehood based on the Lecompton Constitution. President Buchanan supported it. The minority Republicans opposed it. The Democrats split, with Douglas leading the opposition of Northern Democrats, because he thought the voting on the Lecompton Constitution was fraudulent. The Senate passed it, but the House rejected it. Kansans went back to the polls in 1858 and this time rejected Lecompton. After the residents had rejected the pro-slavery constitution, the US Supreme Court in 1858 decided Kansas was a slave territory, which essentially nullified Douglas’ idea of popular sovereignty.

Also in 1858, Douglas campaigned for re-election to the Senate against a little known Abraham Lincoln. They engaged in seven debates. In the second, at Freeport, IL, Douglas argued that by enacting “unfriendly legislation” any territory could exclude slavery, no matter what the Supreme Court said. This so-called “Freeport Doctrine” lost him further support in the South. Sources differ on Douglas’ personal position on slavery. During a debate with Lincoln, he said, “He [Lincoln] says that he looks forward to a time when slavery shall be abolished everywhere. I look forward to a time when each State shall be allowed to do as it pleases. If it chooses to keep slavery forever, it is not my business, but its own; if it chooses to abolish slavery, it is its own business—not mine. I care more for the great principle of self-government, the right of the people to rule, than I do for all the Negroes in Christendom.” (2) Although Republicans won a popular majority in the election, the Democrats controlled the state legislature, and Douglas won

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their vote by 54 to 46. He was not reappointed to his chairmanship of the Committee on Territories, due to his disputes with the Buchanan administration.

In 1860 the Democratic National Convention was held in Charleston, SC. The platform advocated non-intervention with slavery in the territories, but refused the Southern demand that the federal government protect the institution. Seven states (AL, MS, LA, SC, FL, TX, and AR) withdrew their delegates. The convention reconvened in Baltimore, where five more states withdrew (VA, NC, TN, KY, and MD). Douglas was nominated by the Northern Democrats, and John C. Breckinridge (the current Vice President) was nominated by Southern Democrats. Abraham Lincoln was the candidate for the Republican Party and John Bell for the Constitutional Union Party. Douglas came in second in the popular vote (with 29.5% to Lincoln's 39.9%), but last in the Electoral College (only 12 votes to Lincoln's 180).

Douglas urged the South to accept Lincoln's election and tried to arrange a compromise to keep the Union intact. As late as Christmas 1860, he wrote Alexander H. Stephens (later the Confederate Vice President), offering to annex Mexico as a slave state as a sweetener (Mexico had abolished slavery in 1829). Douglas believed that secession was criminal. Lincoln asked him to speak in support of the Union, and he traveled to West Virginia, Ohio, and Illinois on a speaking tour. He died on June 3, 1861 (of typhoid fever or pneumonia or cirrhosis of the liver) and was buried on the shores of Lake Michigan.

In the Verdery Room, we have a letter signed by Stephen Douglas, requesting additional prints of his likeness portrayed within the frame. In 1851, Douglas visited Brandon and Middlebury, where he received a doctorate. In his remarks he observed that "Vermont was a good state to be born in provided one migrated early". (3) Douglas also campaigned in Vermont in 1860, but lost to Lincoln with 19.4% to Lincoln's 75.7%.

Rebecca Talcott, September 2008

Sources:

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(2) Don't Know Much about the Civil War, Kenneth C. Davis, William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1996, p. 128.

(3) The Vermont Encyclopedia, edited by John J. Duffy, Samuel B. Hand, and Ralph H. Orth, University Press of New England, Lebanon, NH, 2003, p. 107.

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