

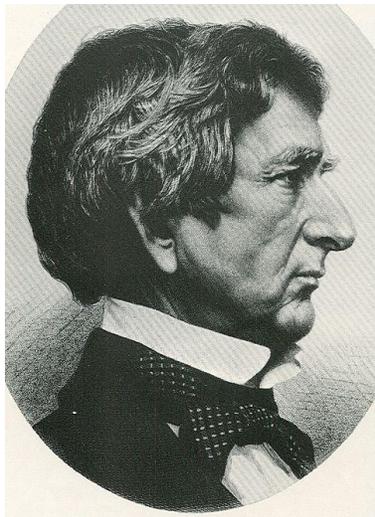


Seward Harbor, Anchorage, Alaska – by Ron Niebrugge

THE PERIPATETIC WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD

by Ed Reilly

When you feed “peripatetic” to Google, the definition returned is “Traveling from place to place, especially working or based in various places for relatively short periods.” This makes it the perfect adjective to describe the life and travels of William Henry Seward, our greatest Secretary of State. Seward was born on October 12, 1801, in the village of Florida in Orange County, six miles from the city of Goshen, NY, where he received a good part of his pre-college schooling; lived in Schenectady for parts of four years while attending Union College; interrupted those studies to teach and reside in rural Eatonton, Georgia for a few months; returned to Schenectady to graduate in 1820; moved to Auburn to practice law with Elijah H. Miller, who became his father in law in 1824; lived part time in Albany from 1831 to 1834 while a New York State Senator; part time again in Albany from 1839 to 1842 as our Governor; part time in Washington, D.C. from 1849 to 1861 while serving as a U.S. Senator from New York for 12 years followed by serving for successive four-year periods as Secretary of State to Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson; and then retired to his home in Auburn and resumed extensive international travel to the point where, by the time he died in 1872, he had visited every continent on Earth except for the island continents, Australia and Antarctica.



William Henry Seward, 1863, by Mathew Brady

The Goshen school's higher grades were essentially equivalent to current day high school and prepared Seward well for college. When he was admitted to Union in 1816 at age 15, he was examined by Professor Francis Wayland and placed in the sophomore class. After one semester, Seward approached college president Eliphalet Nott and asked to be advanced to the junior class. Nott refused, but the two formed a strong bond that continued until Nott died.

At Union, Henry excelled as a student, joined its Adelpic Society, became active in student government, and successfully urged the founding of a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, to which he was elected in his junior year. But he was not above student pranks and sometimes clashed with professorial authority. Seward's father, Samuel Sweezy Seward, though wealthy, provided rather meager financial support to him. When Henry sensed that fellow students may have distained his country clothes, he commissioned more fashionable ones from Schenectady tailors. When the bills reached his father, he refused to pay them, prompting Henry to leave school and go to Georgia to teach. He returned at his parents' request, but the hiatus delayed his graduation to 1820, at age 19, rather than 18 as first planned.

After graduation, Seward read law in Goshen for over a year in the law office of Ogden Hoffman, continued training in New York City, and was admitted to the bar in October, 1822.

Seward met his future wife, Frances Adeline Miller, through his sister Cornelia, Frances's classmate at the Troy Female Seminary, renamed the Emma Willard School in 1895 in honor of its founder. From Frances or perhaps indirectly from Cornelia, Henry learned that Frances's father, retired judge Elijah Miller, had an opening for a law partner in Auburn, NY, about 150 miles west of Schenectady. Henry's application for the position was accepted and he joined Miller in 1822, the year of his admission to the New York State bar. When, two years later, he asked Miller, a widower, for the hand of Frances in marriage, Miller agreed provided that the couple agreed to live with him in his mansion in Auburn. The agreement made, the couple married on October 20, 1824 at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Auburn.

Frances gave birth to five children: Augustus Henry (1826-1876), Frederick William (1830-1915), Cornelia (1835-1836), William Henry Jr. (1839-1920) and Frances Adeline "Fanny" Seward (1844-1866).

Both the Miller and Samuel Seward family owned slaves; slavery was not abolished in New York until 1827. But Samuel sent his slave children to school along with his biological children. Young Seward spent much time in contact with the family servants and later claimed to prefer "the conviviality of the slave kitchen to the severe decorum of his father's front parlor."

Young attorney Seward quickly developed an interest in politics, probably inspired by his father, who had been appointed postmaster of Florida village by Thomas Jefferson. Seward entered politics with the help of his friend Thurlow Weed, whom he had met by chance after a stagecoach accident in 1824. Weed, a native of Cairo in Greene County, NY and a veteran of the War of 1812, was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1824 and became editor of the *Albany Evening Journal* in 1830. In that same year, with the strong support of Weed, Seward was elected to a four-year term in the State Senate, serving from 1831 to 1834 as senator from the district that included his own Cayuga County.

In 1836, Seward was nominated as the Whig candidate for Governor of New York, but he lost to the incumbent Democrat William L. Marcy. But in 1838, he challenged him again, and was elected Governor and reelected in 1840.



Statue of William H. Seward at Madison Square Park in New York created by Randolph Rogers and erected in 1876.

Both as a state senator and governor, Seward promoted progressive political policies including prison reform and increased spending on education. He supported state funding for religious schools, including Catholic parochial schools, a policy that was greatly resented by a segment of Seward's constituency that despised Irish immigrants.

Six years after finishing his second term as Governor, Seward was elected a U.S. Senator from New York by its state legislature; election of U.S. Senators by popular vote was not effectuated until passage and ratification of the 17th Amendment in 1913. He served two six-year terms, 1849 to March 3, 1861, the eve of Lincoln's inauguration.

Senator Seward was much in demand as a public speaker. In his maiden speech on March 11, 1850, he caused a furor among pro-slavery citizens by saying that slavery must be abolished because there is a "higher law" than that of the Constitution. His use of the term can be traced to use of the same concept by Eliphalet Nott. In another famous speech in Rochester, NY on October 27, 1858, "The Irrepressible Conflict," Seward said that the mixture of slave and free states posed such a conflict that eventually one policy or the other would eventually prevail, and left no doubt as to which he favored.

At the Republican National Convention of 1860 in Chicago, there were five main candidates for nomination for President, William H. Seward of New York, Samuel P. Chase of Ohio, Edward Bates of Missouri, Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. Seward was the favorite and led for the first two ballots, but Lincoln was nominated when four delegates changed their vote at the end of the third. In her Pulitzer-prize-winning book of 2005, *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin praises Lincoln for appointing each of his four rivals to cabinet positions.

As predicted by many, the inauguration of Lincoln resulted in the secession of several southern states and the consequent Civil War. For six months early in his tenure as Secretary of State, Union College graduate Seward's opposite number serving the Confederacy was Union Graduate Robert Augustus Toombs, class of 1828.

Seward supported Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, helped draft its language, and was a signer of the document. Next came the challenging but successful effort to persuade Congress to pass the 13th Amendment, so well described in *Team of Rivals* and depicted in the recent popular movie *Lincoln*.

On April 5, 1865, a month after Lincoln's second inauguration, Seward was severely injured in a carriage accident. His right arm was broken, his right shoulder dislocated, and his jaw fractured, requiring an elaborate jaw splint. Fortuitously, the accident saved his life. Nine days later, April 14, as John Wilkes Booth was shooting Lincoln, Seward was attacked by fellow conspirator Lewis Powell, whose knife slashes would have severed his jugular vein had they not been blocked by the jaw splint.

Two months after the death of Lincoln, Seward's wife Frances died of a heart attack. A year later, 1866, his beloved daughter Fanny died of tuberculosis at age 22 and his lifelong friend Eliphalet Nott died at age 92.



Lincoln, Gideon Welles, and Seward are the central figures at first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation.

During his eight years as Secretary of State, Seward was a strong proponent of expanding the country in all possible ways, unrestricted immigration with citizenship conferred after reasonable time; construction of the Transcontinental Railroad; and acquisition of additional territory. His greatest triumph in that last regard was, of course, the purchase of Alaska in 1868 for \$7.2 million in gold, about two cents per acre. At the time, the only one who called this a “folly” was Horace Greeley. And, in keeping with Seward's philosophy, the Treaty of Cession with Russia spelled out that the Russian-American Alaskans “be admitted to the enjoyment of all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States.”

During the last four years of his life, Seward traveled the world, dictating his observations and his political philosophy to Olive Risley, the daughter of a long-time friend. Olive was born in 1844, the same year as daughter Fanny and hence was 43 years younger than Seward. So to quiet the raised eyebrows, Seward adopted her while traveling in China and changed his will to treat her on a par with his surviving children.

Olive Risley Seward became the editor of the magnificent 1873 book *William H. Seward's Travels around the World*, published by D. Appleton & Co. It is now a free E-book illustrated with 200 beautiful lithographs of places visited, mostly in China and Japan.

William Henry Seward died in Auburn on October 10, 1872. A few hours before the inevitable end, daughter-in-law Janet Seward asked him what message he wished to leave for the family. He answered, “Love one another.”