

John Curtiss Underwood

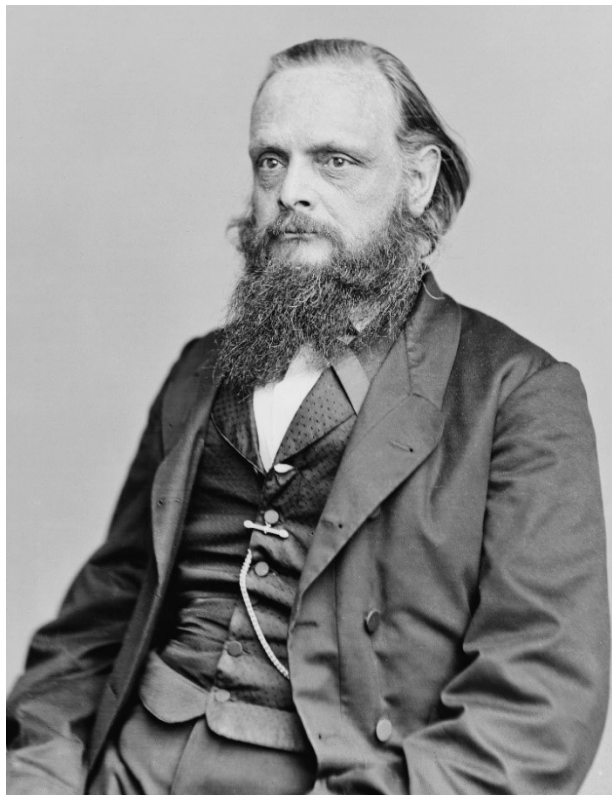
(14 Mar 1809 – 7 Dec 1873)

SPEECH OF MR. UNDERWOOD OF VIRGINIA *[given at Republican Convention in Philadelphia, 1856 as extracted from the Evening Post (New York), June 20, 1856]*

Mr. Underwood, of Virginia, was the next speaker. He said:

Gentlemen: I have but a few words to say to you, and I shall be compelled to speak them in sadness. Why is it that Virginia is not represented here today as she was in 1776? Why has the sceptre departed from the Old Dominion? It is as Thomas Jefferson declared, because God is just, and his justice will not slumber forever. *[Applause]*

Sir, it is because slavery has blighted what was naturally one of the fairest and loveliest portions of our country. It is, sir, because our political masons, instead of building the bulwarks of freedom, have been erecting fortifications for slavery, and cementing the walls with the blood of crushed humanity.



[Great applause] It is because our hunters, instead of pursuing the enemies of freedom, have been hunting down Christian women for the performance of acts which might almost invite an archangel to come down from the regions of the blest. *[Cheers]* Hunting them down for teaching the poor children of oppression and licensed wrong to read the Word of God. *[“Shame”]* Hunting them down by means of those tyrannical laws which were made not to govern, but to crush out every sentiment of freedom of virtue and of humanity. Virginia is not here today, because her wise statesmen by their unwise legislation have polluted its fair land with the sweat and tears of unpaid labor. *[Applause]*

And now I ask you, my friends, if you are willing that this blighting curse of slavery shall be extended all over the fair plains of the West? Are you willing that the clanking of manacles and fetters shall be heard all the way to the Rocky Mountains? *[“No”, “no”]* Will you aid in forging more manacles and fetters for the arms and ankles of christian men and women, brothers and sisters,

husbands and wives; to be separated from one another, lashed and chained in the coffle gangs of the trader, driven to the cotton fields and dreary sugar plantations of the far South, to drag out their lives in hopeless, unrequited toil, and then to end their existence in an agony of woe unutterable. *[Continued applause].*

This is the work which Virginia is doing today. Shall the same infamous work curse the future states to spring up in the West which were destined to be the homes of freemen. *[“No”, “no”]* Shall these homes, dedicated to you and your children and your children's children forever, become the habitations of freedom and happiness or the habitation of chattel oppression and misery. *[Cheers.]*

Gentlemen, I will not detain you longer. I appeal to you to let the fate of Virginia be a warning. Let us all remember the admonitions of Jefferson. Let us remember that the curse of Heaven is and ever must be upon human oppression. *[Long continued cheering.]*

Evening Post July 8, 1856

Willard's Hotel, July 7, 1856

Dear Sir: I thank you for the kind notice of me in the *Evening Post* of the 1st instant, but would correct one or two slight errors in your notice of that date. You speak of Clarke County as the largest slave-holding county in Virginia and having more slaves than freemen. This is not strictly correct. Clarke is a very small county on the map, not being more than ten by fourteen miles in extent. I believe it is generally considered, by its citizens at least, one of the richest farming counties in the State. It has a greater proportionate slave population than any other county west of the Blue Ridge. The last census gives the following: Whites, 3,614; slaves, the same precisely, 3,614; and free colored, 124.

Your other error was mortifying to me, for you say I am an extensive planter – I only consider myself an ordinary farmer. I am certainly not a planter, for the sweat of unpaid labor has never moistened my fields, and while I should be unwilling to acknowledge any man master, I would scorn to call any man slave. One month ago I supposed I owned 800 acres of Virginia soil, but perhaps the respectable gentlemen who have driven me from the State have confiscated my property by a new code established very recently.

My wife who reached me on Saturday evening, informs me that when she appealed to the respectable gentlemen who demanded either my blood or banishment from the State, to know what law of Virginia I had violated; they replied to her that they did not know that I had broken any law, but that I had broken the “rules of Virginia,” I think it very possible that they may apply to property as well as personal freedom. It seems to me that confiscation is just as suitable a “rule” as exile to apply to freedom of opinion. One of the old rules of Virginia, as I had supposed, was free speech, and, in the language of Jefferson, I had thought that even “error of opinion might be safely tolerated when reason is left to combat it.”

On my return from the Philadelphia Convention, I received at this place letters from my friends, assuring me that I could not go home without meeting personal violence. In this difficulty General Spinner, of your State, kindly offered his assistance, and after an absence of two days returned on Saturday evening with my wife and a part of my family to this place. My poor wife was almost broken down with loss of sleep and excitement having been haunted for two weeks, with visions of murder and assassination. She is now, however, much improved by the rest of a quiet Sabbath and by the generous sympathy which has seemed to breathe like a new atmosphere around her.

We intend to leave this city in a day or two seeking a temporary refuge in some of the quiet hills of the free North. Yours truly,

J.C. Underwood

See WIKIPEDIA for a detailed account of his life

Underwood. The funeral of Judge John C. Underwood will take place at the Unitarian Church corner of 6th and D streets at 2 o'clock tomorrow (Tuesday) afternoon. The friends of the family are respectfully invited to attend.

The Evening Star, December 8, 1873

Sudden Death of Judge Underwood

Apoplexy the Cause

Judge John C. Underwood, of Virginia, but recently residing in this city, died suddenly of apoplexy at his residence, 226 3d street, at 10 o'clock last evening. The deceased, who was a native of Herkimer county, New York, emigrated to Fauquier county, Virginia, some twenty-five or thirty years ago, where he married and settled. He was educated for the law, and divided his attention for some years between agricultural pursuits and the practice of his profession. On account of his well-known sympathy with the abolition movement and his support of Mr. Lincoln for the Presidency in 1860, he was compelled to leave the state. Mr. Chase, in 1861, secured his appointment as fifth auditor, and in 1864 President Lincoln appointed him district judge for the district of Virginia, which position he held at the time of his death. In 1865 he was elected U.S. Senator by the legislature in session at Alexandria, to succeed Mr. Carlisle, but was not admitted to his seat, owing to the reconstruction measures debarring Virginia from representation in Congress. He presided over the convention which framed the present constitution of Virginia. Latterly his name has been brought prominently before the public in connection with the McVeigh suits for the recovery of confiscated property--the Judge being the holder of this property and defendant in the suits. The circumstances of the late personal attack upon him in Richmond by McVeigh are well remembered, as they were detailed in *The Star* at the time. The funeral will take place at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon from the Unitarian church, corner 6th and D streets, and the remains will be interred in the Congressional cemetery. The deceased, who was 63 years of age, left a wife and two children.

Christian Union, January 7, 1874

The Death of Another Veteran

With Reminiscences Of The Conflict

We publish today with pleasure some reminiscences of the late Judge Underwood **from the pen of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was a guest of the family at the time of his death.** We believe that he has been greatly misunderstood and reviled by the very people whom he faithfully served, and who will see their error and do justice to a noble, great hearted and sincere man. His errors came from his rare tenderness for others. His virtues were such as dignify humanity, although his life was one which need bring no blush upon those who mourn his departed presence.

John C. Underwood was a native of Herkimer county, New York. Like many other young Northern men of education and culture, he accepted the situation of tutor in one of the old Virginia families, where his fine acquirements, his steadfast and quiet dignity of character, his calm consistency of principle, won for him the respect of all who knew him.

After a while he married a daughter of the family, a Miss Maria Jackson. His wife might be truly said to have inherited and to represent the blood of the highest Virginia families. There is one district in the state which was represented in Congress for more than thirty years by members of her family – by Colonel George Jackson, her grandfather, by Edwin B. Jackson, her father, and by John G. Jackson, her uncle, whose first wife was a sister of Mrs. Madison.

Mrs. Underwood was both by the paternal and maternal side a cousin of Stonewall Jackson. When only seven years of age she was brought across the mountains on horseback, under the charge of Stonewall Jackson's grandfather, to the house of his sister, her grandmother.

In his wife, Mr. Underwood found a convert to all his convictions, which she advocated with the fearlessness which the vantage ground of her high position in society gave her.

After his marriage, Judge Underwood resolved to devote himself to the great conflict of liberty – not in a Northern state, but on the soil of Virginia. He had hopes that perhaps something might be done by

introducing free labor into the state. He therefore bought a property of some eight hundred acres in Clarke county, in the romantic vicinity of the Blue Ridge and undertook to introduce the dairy industry of his native county of Herkimer into Virginia. How this enterprise fared can be judged by an extract from a Virginia paper, which shows how he and his schemes were looked upon by his neighbors and how they prospered:

“Mr. Underwood commenced operations among us by establishing a dairy for the manufacture of cheese, and soon drew around him quite a little colony of abolitionists from his native state, of a much more objectionable class than himself – they were abolitionists a la Garrison, the real simon, pure amalgamationists. The men, woefully lacking the sense and education of Underwood, his goodness of temper, his gentleness of manner, soon rendered themselves highly obnoxious to their new neighbors, and, becoming dispirited thereby or from some cause not known to the writer, dispersed, seeking more congenial surroundings in the Northern states, and the enterprise fell through.”

Notwithstanding the ill success of this enterprise, Mr. Underwood succeeded in founding a very charming home, the seat of domestic peace and hospitality. His neighbors could not refuse to like a man whose obligingness and prompt love of helpfulness were so remarkable, although they considered him as tinctured with extreme and fanatical opinions. His taking of the New York Tribune and Evening Post was a sore matter of suspicion and regret in so otherwise good a neighbor, but it was borne with. Still, all his actions were narrowly watched, and some deep design was supposed to lurk under most innocent deeds. For example, having discovered that a large number of the settlers in the mountains were destitute of the Bible, he wrote to the Bible Society for a box of Bibles and Testaments, and employed a man at his own expense to distribute them. This awakened the attention of the vigilance committee, and he was waited on by gentlemen who informed him that he was accused of distributing “incendiary documents.” He replied, “Gentlemen, it is true. I have been distributing incendiary documents; but they are only the Bible and New Testament – nothing more. They are, and always have proved incendiary wherever there was a wrong to be righted.” Yet as one of the newspaper writers afterwards said of him, Mr. Underwood's manner was so childlike and innocent, and he appeared to be so unaware of the mischief his peculiar sentiments might produce, that his neighbors felt disposed to do all they could to defend him.

But it was a season when the hottest fervor of the conflict between freedom and slavery was going on, when the whole forces of the South were arraying themselves to gain the new territories for slavery, and Mr. Underwood could not rest in retirement in silence. He went to Philadelphia to the great national convention that nominated Fremont in 1856, and there poured out his burning heart in a speech, which, though short deserves to be preserved.

The effect of this speech in Virginia was like the upsetting of a bee-hive. There was buzzing and stinging in every direction; there were threats that he should be met and lynched on his return and his wife in alarm telegraphed to him his danger and begged him not to return until matters were more composed.

“You know I am a Jackson,” she wrote, “and I could not have Jackson blood in my veins without resisting till the last drop is shed in defense of life and liberty, but I do not believe in courting mob-law and martyrdom, and so I hope you will be prudent and remain in New York for the present.”

Meanwhile, to confirm these rumors, the citizens of Clarke county held a meeting, in which they characterized John C. Underwood as a “miscreant” who had come to Virginia and purchased a farm in Clarke county well suited for the purposes of a conspirator; that he had there been in correspondence with one or more abolition prints of the North, and that judging the man by his antecedents, his conduct in going to and attending the convention referred to, it is the opinion of the committee that he should not be permitted to return to the commonwealth of Virginia to reside; he stands guilty of moral treason, and is beyond doubt dangerous to the good order of society. Be it therefore,

Resolved. 1. "That the institution of slavery as it exists in Virginia is entirely in accordance with the feelings of our citizens. That we have no respect for the morbid sentiment which holds slavery to be a moral evil or for the anti-slavery propagators of such sentiments; and it is high time for Virginia to discountenance all such teachers whether in our pulpits, our school-houses, or elsewhere.

2. "That the citizens of Clarke county cannot and will not, longer tolerate the presence of John C. Underwood among them as a citizen or resident; and that if he dare return to reside we will take steps to eject him, peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must."

Mr. Underwood was received with open arms in New York, appointed secretary of the republican committee, and took an active part with other stump speakers in the campaign for Fremont.

In a scrap-book that lies open before us, we see extracts from various papers, giving accounts of rallies and mass meetings in Berkshire county, where, in conjunction with J.P. Hale and Ward Beecher, Mr. Underwood labored for the cause. Meanwhile an amusing incident showed the state of feeling in his county. His little son unknown to his mother, had rudely prepared and painted a Fremont flag, and one day, in her absence, had raised it on a pole with a boy's delight.

On her return she called him and said, "My son, don't you know that is a dangerous thing to do?" "Why mother," he replied, "all the other boys put up their flags; why mustn't we put up ours – haven't we a right?"

"Yes, my son, we have," she replied "and there it shall stay; and what's more, I'll go to the store and get something to make you a bigger one," which she did accordingly.

The high-spirited lady was soon waited on by committees, who told her the flag could not be permitted, and requested her to take it down. She asserted her right to have any flag she chose on her own premises. They told her it would be cut down, and she replied that the first man that touched it should be shot down.

The result showed that Mrs. Underwood well understood the temper of her own state. The courage, amounting to audacity, which she showed, won secret admiration even from those who were most offended.

It is to be confessed, moreover that a handsome, spirited, accomplished woman, gifted both with ready speech and a fluent pen, and standing on the ground of high family connections, has some advantages of her own in an encounter of this kind.

The final result was that it was agreed to pass over the matter of the flag as something belonging to women and children, and unworthy of serious notice, and so it continued to wave.

That flag is yet preserved as a precious family relic, and John Pierpont afterwards commemorated it in a song.

After the election of Buchanan had calmed down the tides of the great conflict, Mr. Underwood began to think of returning once more to his home. Despite his principles, and his fearless manner of advocating them, he was personally a favorite among his neighbors, and many of them desired to see him back and even wrote friendly letters begging him to return. But the more violent faction, to leave no doubt of their intentions and sentiments called another committee meeting, and, after Mr. Underwood's return to keep Christmas under his roof-tree, he was greeted with the following Christmas carol:

[Markham Station, Nov. 25, 1856]

Mr. J.C. Underwood, Sir – You are aware that there was a meeting held at Piermont last July, for the purpose of expressing indignation at the course you had pursued in relation to their rights while you claim to be a citizen of this state. At a meeting above referred to I was appointed chairman of a committee of twelve to wait upon you on your arrival, and inform you of their feelings in regard to this course. In pursuance of my duty I hereby inform you that if you have come among us as a visitor, or to settle up your business preparatory to leaving the state finally, the committee feel it their duty to give you their protection and every facility in their power while doing so. But should you persist in renewing

the idleness incident to slavery, were brought by his mourning relatives and buried by the side of his worthy and excellent father.”

Nothing can be a more perfect picture of Mr. Underwood's character than this letter.

Courageous and undaunted in danger, he still maintained an immovable kindness and sweetness of disposition, which led him to put the most generous construction on the character and actions of his adversaries. At any time his bitterest enemy might have entrusted Mr. Underwood to represent his character and motives, sure that he would appreciate every virtue and allow for every failing. His faith in the good that there is in every human being was strong, even to the verge of credulity – and the world-wise sometimes considered it a weakness. Perhaps, after all however, it was but a manifestation of that higher wisdom, spoken of in Holy Writ, that thinketh no evil, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

After the family left the homestead they never returned. For one reason or another they never received much pecuniary return for the sale. It was virtually a giving away of the property. The house was rented to a careful and friendly tenant; the household furniture stored away. At the time of the John Brown raid shortly after, a rumor got abroad that the place was a deposit of arms and ammunition, and a rendezvous for slaves. A detachment of Black-Horse Cavalry was sent down by Governor Wise to search the house; and down they came forcing an entrance with such violence as to wound with a bayonet the arm of the woman who in blind terror, had sought to bar the door against them. They shattered mirrors with their bayonets, searched and tumbled over the goods and chattles of the occupants, but found nothing. So great was the terror they produced, that the tenants gave up the place, and it was left unoccupied. When the war broke out, the Governor of Virginia declared the place confiscated. All the furniture stored in it was taken and sold at public auction, including a trunk containing Mrs. Underwood's bridal dress, which she had carefully preserved and which was bought by a thrifty housewife in the mountains, dyed brown, cut up and made into vests, and sold.

The house and out-buildings gradually fell into ruins and the farm went back to the wildness of nature and such was the end of the Virginia home. Mr. Underwood, however, found employment in the service of a society for promoting emigration into the different unoccupied states. Western Virginia was a special field of interest to him, and he still hoped by promoting an emigration of free laborers, to effect the future character of the state. Some million acres of land was sold to free laborers, and the destiny of Western Virginia to free institutions was decided.

Mr. Underwood was a member of the Chicago Convention which nominated President Lincoln, and stumped the Western states as a speaker during the canvass that ended in his election. After the election of Lincoln he was appointed consul to Calao, and had made preparations for leaving the country; but Secretary Chase, unwilling that so true and tried a friend of liberty should leave the country during our great struggle offered him the situation of fifth auditor of the Treasury, and he remained at Washington.

It would seem that Judge Underwood had devoutly entered into the spirit of Jesus, and that his great life purpose had been in sympathy with His, who came to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. Like his Master, when reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not, and as He commanded he was through his life ever ready to return good for evil.

It was only an evening or two before his death that he drew upon himself a shower of remonstrances from a whole social circle by taking up the part of a famous guerrilla captain [McVeigh], who, in the war time, had hunted his life most perseveringly. Judge Underwood seemed to have the most charitable hopes that, having now taken the oath of allegiance, this man would prove true to the government, adding, “he is a brave man, and a grave man cannot deceive.” Though all remonstrated then yet a few hours after we could not but feel that this merciful and charitable view of character was a fit preparation for the higher sphere to which even then he was drawing near.

After the death of Judge Underwood, crowds of mourners flocked to the house. He was, above all things, a friendly and a helpful man. His whole life was a series of thoughtful care for others, and when such an one dies there are many mourners. More than once we heard from some of the poor and lowly who came to take a last look, the expression "Iv'e lost my best friend." "He was always ready to help" said another. "When he could, he gave money; but if he could not, he always gave sympathy." "Ah," said another "the world has been hard and cruel to me, but the Judge was always kind – he was never too busy to hear or to help."

The funeral was attended in the Unitarian church, which was crowded, and after the services the whole congregation passed in turn around to take a last look upon his face; and it was observed that many strangers dropped tears in passing – they were probably among the many whom he had helped.

The pity and sympathy of Judge Underwood were so characteristic as to make him known to every one who had a grief to tell or help to seek. The drain upon his purse was so great that the only way to secure anything for his family was to have his purse in other keeping than his own. The times of receiving his quarter's salary were remembered by many better than himself, and on one occasion before he returned to his dwelling it was all lent, to pay a mortgage on a poor man's property who had come to him in distress.