

# William Henry Seward: Futurist and Change Agent

By John R. Vincenti



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William Henry Seward is best remembered for the purchase of Alaska. At the time, he was much criticized and ridiculed for spearheading this transaction with Russia, which the press dubbed "Seward's Folly".

## William Henry's grandfather was a colonel in the New Jersey Militia during the Revolutionary War.

The outcry over this historical event unfortunately overshadowed the man's savvy and intuitiveness. Seward's deep-seated concerns regarding social justice, the abolition of slavery, diplomacy, money and banking, the law, and business development eventually created transformative change in American society. He was also a man of principle who supported a president and his office that he hoped to have occupied himself. He deserves a prominent place in the national memory.

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The Seward family emigrated to the colonies from Wales. William Henry's grandfather was a colonel in the New Jersey Militia during the Revolutionary War. William Henry was born in 1801 to Mary Jennings and Samuel Sweezy Seward in Florida, New York, a small village about sixty miles north of New York City in Orange County, New York, founded by Anglo-European colonists

in 1760. Henry, as he was called then, was the fourth of six children (Seward/Mapes Homestead Restoration).

His father, Samuel, a businessman, educator, and doctor, was also active in politics and served as First Judge on the New York Court of Orange County. A secondary school he founded still exists today as the S.S. Seward Institute, a public secondary school in the Florida Union Free School District in Orange County, New York ("S. S. Seward Institute").

The Seward family owned three slaves, who lived in the loft of the Seward home. (Slavery continued in New York until it was abolished in 1827.) As a youngster, Henry loved to listen to the slaves tell stories. He came to think of them not as slaves, but as people; though never an abolitionist, he found slavery morally oppressive and later in life supported the rights of African Americans ("Seward House"). This conviction would have a profound impact on his life and others.

Henry's schooling began at the Farmers' Hall Academy in Goshen, Orange County, New York. At the age of 15, he was accepted into Union College, but his progress to graduation was circuitous: between his entrance and graduation Henry left school and moved to Georgia where he taught school. What he saw of life in the South further added to his conviction that slavery was wrong ("William H. Seward").

He ultimately graduated from Union College in 1820, earning a spot in Phi Beta Kappa. The Schaffer Library at

Union College notes that Henry “impressed classmates with his remarkable assiduity and capacity of acquirements” (Schaffer Library). Seward was admitted to the bar in 1822 and became a partner in the law office of Judge Elijah Miller in Auburn, New York.

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Seward was 23 when he married 19-year-old Frances Adeline Miller, daughter of Judge Elijah Miller, in 1824. Frances had attended the Troy Female Seminary. Upon marriage, Seward moved into the home of his in-laws in Auburn, New York, as part of her father’s marriage agreement. The home in Auburn, built by Frances’s father, remained Seward’s home until his death (Civil War Women).

Between 1826 and 1844, Henry and Frances had five children. Small pox killed one daughter, Cornelia, at five months of age in 1837, and Fanny, the apple of Henry’s eye, was ill most of her life and died of tuberculosis at age 22, in 1866. The sons went on to have distinguished careers. William H. Seward, Jr., served as a Brigadier General during the Civil War. Augustus Henry Seward was also a career officer in the U.S. Army, and Fredrick William Seward twice served as Assistant Secretary of State (Civil War Women).

Frances was raised a Quaker, and her family had strong anti-slavery feelings. Frances and her sister, Lazette Worden, played an active role in the local underground railroad. In 1850, the Seward home in Auburn served as a safe house for fugitive slaves (Civil War Women). Abolition, it turned out, was to play a significant role in her husband’s career.

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Six years into his marriage, William Henry Seward began his political career with his election as state senator in 1830. As a state senator, he was outspoken about the need for sound paper currency and country’s national bank, which made him part of the opposition

to the power then in the White House—in 1833, President Andrew Jackson used executive power to deny the renewal of the charter of the Second Bank of the United States and remove from it all federal monies, a decision that earned him the censure of Congress.

Seward also served as governor of New York from 1839 to 1843 as a member of the Whig Party. As governor, he championed fair and better treatment of “prisoners, the insane, debtors and immigrants” (Schaffer Library).

## Lincoln’s nomination as the party’s presidential candidate almost drove Seward into retiring to private life.

In 1846, after his governorship, Seward once again found himself in the role of a private citizen practicing law. In a now famous trial that changed capital punishment cases in the United States, he was the first to use the “insanity defense” (Spiegel and Spiegel).

Seward’s push for a law to rescue free African Americans kidnapped into slavery (a practice depicted in the recent film *Twelve Years a Slave*) drew contempt from Southerners, who labeled him a radical. Henry also supported equal educational opportunity for Irish Catholic children, something not desired by nativists at that time in the North (“William H. Seward”).

In 1849, Seward was elected a U.S. Senator by the New York state legislature. His advocacy against slavery was noticed (especially by Southerners), and his re-election in 1855 made him a

leading figure in national politics. Joining the Republican Party, created in 1854, added to his stature. Seward’s strong belief in the Constitution and his anti-slavery stance and actions came to a head when the question before the United States was whether this would be a slave-holding or a free-labor nation. During 1860 prior to the presidential election, Seward was considered a promising candidate (Office of the Historian).

As the election process neared, Seward’s slavery and immigrant views and close ties to New York political boss and publisher, Thurlow Weed, concerned the Republican party, so the party chose Abraham Lincoln (Civil War Trust). Lincoln’s nomination as the party’s presidential candidate almost drove Seward into retiring to private life. However, a visit with Lincoln at his home in Springfield, Illinois, changed his mind as he became impressed with Mr. Lincoln.

Nonetheless, the two men differed. Seward favored compromise with the South; Lincoln did not (Lehrman Institute). Lincoln’s victory and his inaugural address was a concern to Seward. Henry was also upset with Lincoln’s selection of his Cabinet. However, in a private meeting on December 12, 1860, Vice-President-elect Hannibal Hamlin, on Lincoln’s behalf, offered Seward the opportunity to be Secretary of State. He accepted on December 28 (“William H. Seward”).

Once the Civil War began, disagreements broke out between Lincoln and Seward over how to deal with the different factions within the country and international governments. Seward, though, proved to be one of President Lincoln’s most faithful and most relied upon allies for his protocol and social skills. Seward was not liked by fellow cabinet members, as many thought he meddled in their department matters, but Lincoln respected Henry’s years of

political office and experience (“Lincoln’s Cabinet”).

Seward’s role as a diplomat was significant. His diplomacy thwarted Britain’s potential plans for attacking New York. As relations improved with France and Britain, the Confederacy was declared belligerent by international law. At one point, Maryland was considering leaving the Union, but Seward thwarted that plan through his use of a detective named Alan Pinkerton (“Arrest”).

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As the Civil War continued and the South saw itself in an increasingly hopeless situation following the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, plots to kill Lincoln and those who surrounded him became more real than not. The surrender by Robert E. Lee on April 9, 1865, was a turning point that would change history not just in Appomattox, but also in Washington, DC.

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The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln took place on Friday, April 14, 1865 at 10:15 p.m. in Ford’s Theatre. John Wilkes Booth had initially planned to kidnap the president, but the conspirators, hoping to reverse the course of the war, eventually decided to assassinate not only Lincoln, but also Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State

Seward (“Assassination”). Considering that the nation was at a crossroads, and given Seward’s goals and aspirations, the assassination attempt of Henry, had it been successful, may have drastically changed America’s future in business and international commerce.

Lewis Thornton Powell, also known as Lewis Paine, was assigned by Booth to kill Seward. Powell had fought in the Civil War and was wounded in Gettysburg. Once a member of Mosby’s Rangers, Powell met Booth while working with the Confederate Secret Service in Maryland (“Lewis Powell”).

Seward was at home that evening, having been injured in a carriage accident on April 5<sup>th</sup> before the attack. When Powell arrived, supposedly to deliver medicine, Seward’s son Fredrick, then Assistant Secretary of State, and others attempted to stop him. Fredrick was nearly killed. Powell was forceful and rushed into Seward’s bedroom, where he found Seward with his daughter Fanny by his side. Powell stabbed Seward in the face and neck five times. Initially, Seward was believed to be dead (Morgan). A metal jaw brace that Seward was wearing at the time, because of his accident, probably saved his life (“Attempted Assassination”).

Powell escaped, but his assistant David Herold, who was holding the horses outside, fled before Powell could exit from the home. Powell was caught three days later in a boarding house run by Mary Surratt, mother of another co-conspirator, John Surratt. Powell was sentenced to death and hung on July 7, 1865 at the age of 21 (“Lewis Powell”).

The *New York Times* reported on Saturday, April 15, 1865, that “Mr. Seward and Fredrick (his son) were both unconscious. It is believed that the injuries of the Secretary are not fatal”. Five people were attacked that evening in the Seward home. They were Henry, Fredrick, August, Fanny

and Frances. All survived. Seward, however, was in a coma for six days after the attack, but recovered and continued as Secretary of State (“President Lincoln Shot”).

Frances Adeline Miller Seward, who had suffered from illness throughout her adult life, never recovered from the shock and anxiety caused by witnessing the assassination attempt on her husband. She died on June 21, 1865 from a heart attack.

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Following Lincoln’s death, Vice President Andrew Johnson was sworn in as president. A war Democrat, Johnson was a state’s rights advocate who took a moderate approach to reconstruction and clashed with radical Republicans. Seward, once again, found himself at odds with the new president and his cabinet, but nonetheless got a great deal accomplished, especially in international relations.

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He encouraged and supported expansionism. Seward negotiated and attempted, though unsuccessfully, to acquire the Virgin Islands, parts of the Dominican Republic and several other islands in the Caribbean. Between

1865 and 1867, Seward was also involved in Mexican affairs that led to the defeat of Austrian archduke Maximilian who was made Emperor of Mexico in 1862 (Office of the Historian). Undoubtedly, though, he is best remembered for the purchase of Alaska.

The Crimean War of the 1850s in which Russia lost to the alliance of France, the United Kingdom, Ottoman Empire and Sardinia caused great economic strain on the economy and government stability in Russia.

Czarist Russia under Peter the Great sent Vitus Bering to explore Alaskan territory in 1723. (Office of the Historian). During President Buchanan's administration, the Russians expressed an interest in selling the land, but Buchanan's efforts to make both the South and the North happy under Constitutional law and maintain peace meant he had little time for other matters. President Lincoln had even less time available to consider expansion or further negotiations with the Russians. Besides, Alaska was a territory that most knew little about.

Russia's desire to sell Alaska, some historians theorize, came from two possible reasons. One was the need for money; the other was the fear of Britain. The Crimean War of the 1850s

in which Russia lost to the alliance of France, the United Kingdom, Ottoman Empire and Sardinia caused great economic strain on the economy and government stability in Russia. Russia and Britain's strained relationship included, at times, alliance, rivalry and even war, and Russian leadership felt that Britain might seize Alaska if war broke out in Europe (Manaev).

Secretary of State Seward had an interest in whaling, and the Pacific Northwest was ideal for this business development. When Seward heard of Russia's interest in selling, he approached Russia's Washington minister. Seward also knew that the purchase would end Russia's presence in North America and give the United States access to the Pacific northern rim. Seward worked with Russian Minister in Washington, Edouard de Stoeckl. The offer was struck on March 30, 1867 for \$7.2 million in gold. It would take the U.S. Senate to approve the treaty of purchase (Manaev).

There were pockets of positive reaction to the proposal in different parts of the United States, but Alaska's arctic climate, harsh winters, short-growing season, and relative inaccessibility gave the news media an opportunity to lambast the Secretary for attempting the purchase. Articles titled "Seward's Folly," "Seward's Icebox," and even "President Andrew Johnson's Polar Bear Garden" were common in the press. Seward, however, put his considerable political skills to work to get the necessary votes for approval. He needed two-thirds of Senate to ratify the treaty. Key support came from Massachusetts, which desired to limit fishing in Alaska's waters in both the Pacific and Arctic to enhance New England's fisheries and industry. Seward saw this as the bait, so to speak, for getting votes for approving the purchase (Dunham).

On April 9, 1867, the U.S. Senate approved the treaty that effected the

purchase of Alaska, voting 37 to 2. On May 28, 1867, President Johnson signed the treaty. The land was formally transferred to the United States on October 18, 1867. With all that political bargaining and action, it was learned later that bribery proved to also be part of the voting process. The Russian ambassador in Washington provided monetary kickbacks as high as \$10,000 to selected congressmen to secure their votes (Alaska Humanities Forum; Kizzia).

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Unfortunately, Secretary Seward did not live to see his purchase of Alaska's 375 million acres justified by the unbelievable treasure that it would become. It took three decades before the territory exposed its wealth in gold and other mineral resources. Fishing, game, lumber, and Alaska's parks make our 49<sup>th</sup> state a true bargain considering the two cents per acre the United States paid for it. During World War II, Alaska was a strategic foothold in North America. The famous Alaska-Siberia Lend Lease Airway helped make possible the defeat the Axis powers during World War II.

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General Ulysses S. Grant was elected president in 1868, defeating New York Governor Horatio Seymour.

Though Seward made a major speech supporting Grant before the election, Grant chose not to retain Seward as his Secretary of State. At age 68, Seward returned to Auburn, New York as a private citizen (Dunham)

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In 1866, widower Seward had met Olive Risley, then 19 years of age. Like Seward's late wife, Olive was an ardent abolitionist. She was the daughter of Anson A. Risley, a civil servant who worked for the Secretary of the Treasury, and his wife Harriet. She was also a friend of Seward's daughter Fanny before Fanny's death in 1866 (Diodato).

Olive became Seward's closest companion. She and her sister Harriet traveled with Seward on a transcontinental trip that included Utah, the Pacific coast, Sitka in Alaska, Oregon, California, Mexico and finally Cuba before returning home after nine months of travel.

When Seward traveled to Utah, he stopped off in Salt Lake City to visit Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon Church. When Young was sixteen years old, he had been a workman on the Seward home in Auburn.

From 1870 through 1871, the threesome of Seward, Risley, and Risley

toured Europe, the Middle East and Asia including India and China. To curtail gossip and family problems, Seward adopted Olive in 1870 as his daughter. Seward began to write his memoirs, but his travels curtailed that project, and Seward and Olive instead began to write a travel book of their experiences ("Olive Risley Seward").

On October 10, 1872, William Henry Seward became ill and called his family to gather around him. His final words were, "Love one another." After his death, Olive finished the book, *William H. Seward's Travels Around the World*, which became a bestseller.

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William Henry Seward was like a gem with many facets. As a youngster, he saw indignity in a world of slavery. Henry became restless in college and ran away to gain a life experience in another culture.

He was passionate about social justice and public speaking and chose public office as a means of working to change the inequities he perceived in society. Seward respected immigrants and the value of fairness and education. He did not hide his convictions, thus becoming an extremist for his cause. He was self-confident and challenged others; he used his own home as a safe house for runaway slaves.

Seward respected law, the Constitution and preserving the Union while trying to find compromise in troubled times and issues. He recognized the value of a strong currency and good banking. He wanted to be president, but respected and allied himself with the man who became president; he was a successful collaborator, diplomat and strategist.

He loved to travel, smoke cigars, and drink brandy, and he knew how to get votes. Above all, William Henry Seward was America's futurist and change agent.

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