

### 1864. Debate Over the Anti-Slavery Constitutional Amendment

On June 15 and June 16, 1864, *The New York Times* reported on debate in the House of Representatives over passage of “the Anti-Slavery Constitutional Amendment,” which would become the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. At the time, New York City was represented by former Mayor Fernando Wood. On June 16, 1864, *The New York Times* published an editorial on the issue. In these edited articles, enslaved Africans are referred to as “Negroes”.

**A)** June, 15, 1864: “Mr. Fernando Wood of New York said that this was no time for a change of the organic law. We were in the midst of civil war. The din of the conflict and the groans of the dying and wounded are sad evidences of the destruction around us. The entire people are involved directly or indirectly in the dreadful conflict. There was too much excitement in the public mind to admit of calm and cautious investigation. If such a change could be made in the Constitution, this was not the time for it. The effect of such an amendment would produce a revulsion widespread and radical in character and add to the existing sectional hostility, and if possible, make the conflict more intense.”

“Among his reasons for opposing the resolution, he said it proposed to make social institutions subject to the Government, and this was an antagonism to the principles which underlie our republican system. It was unjust. It was the breach of good faith, and not reconcilable even with expediency. It struck at property, and involved the extermination of the whites of the Southern States and the forfeiture of their property, and lands to be given to the black race, who may drive the former out of existence.”

“Mr. Wood argued that the Constitution was a compact and a covenant and that the control of the domestic institutions of the States was never delegated to the general Government, and could not be delegated excepting by the consent of all the States.”

**B)** June 16, 1864: “Mr. Thayer of Pennsylvania replied to the assertion of the gentleman from New York (Mr. Wood) that Slavery was the best possible condition of the Negro. He (Mr. Thayer) denounced the assertion as monstrous, infamous, barbarous and inhuman.”

“Mr. Fernando Wood” replied, “I reaffirm it.”

“Mr. Thayer” stated, “He has a right to the sentiment. Let him and his friends go before the country upon it, if they dare. Let him go to posterity with the record he made yesterday.”

“Mr. Fernando Wood” answered, “That was what I made it for. It was for posterity and not for members of this House.”

**C)** (Editorial) June 18, 1864: “That there is and long has been a thoroughly systematized plan of converting New York City into a rebel foothold is no secret. The assumption of the Southern conspirators before the war was that this Metropolis would abet (support), if not actually join, their movement.”

“In our opinion the hearts of the great majority of our people have at no time for the last two years been so firmly on the side of the Government as now. The success of our arms since Lieut.-Gen. Grant was given the chief command, has had a marked effect in clearing up misapprehension, and in inspiring faith. Under the wonderfully increased activity of business, the almost unprecedented prosperity which now exists in every line of industry, this war has almost ceased to produce a sense of hardship, or to be a trial of patience. In spite of all the plotting here of the retainers (supporters) of the Confederacy, and all the malign influence of former political associations, this city can be carried for Abraham Lincoln next November.”

“Crush Copperheadism (pro-Southern sympathizers) at our polls; with it will vanish the last suspicion that New York is a disloyal City.”

#### Questions

1. Why does Congressman Wood oppose amending the Constitution to outlaw slavery?
2. Why is Congressman Thayer outraged by the statements by Congressman Wood?
3. What does *The New York Times* believe will happen in the next election? Why?