

A summary of the career of William H. Seward



William H. Seward was born in Florida, New York, which is in upstate Orange County. He attended Union College, studied law and graduated with high honors in 1820. When in Georgia he saw firsthand the immorality of slavery so became a member of the anti-slavery movement. In addition he was pro-Free Soil. He returned to New York and joined a law practice run by his father-in-law Justice Elijah Miller in Auburn, New York. In 1831 he began his career in politics.

1831-1834 New York State Senator in Albany 1839-1843 Governor of New York State

During these terms he promoted progressive policies such as prison reform, increased education spending, the idea of schools for immigrant children taught in their native tongue.

1849-1861 United States Senator from New York

He won as a Whig and emerged as the leader of the anti-slavery wing. He was a strong opponent of the Fugitive Slave Act; he even defended runaways in court pro-bono.

Seward believed there was a “higher law” than the Constitution. He voted against the Compromise of 1850 and believed that if slavery was not abolished then there would be Civil War.

1855 Re-Elected as United States Senator from New York

The Whig Party had declined so Seward now became a Republican. His views were now moderate in opinion and he no longer associated himself with the Radical Republicans.

In 1856 he lost the presidential nomination to John C. Fremont.

In 1860 he loyally supported Abraham Lincoln.

1861-1869 Secretary of State

During the Civil War he established a secret police force that arrested thousands for disloyalty, sabotage, spying and disruption of the draft. Under the Writ of Habeas Corpus those arrested were not told the reason for their arrest, no investigation of their wrongdoing was carried out, and no trials were held.

April 14, 1865 Assassination attempt by Lewis Powell (a.k.a. Lewis Payne) an associate of John Wilkes Booth who shot President Abraham Lincoln. Powell broke into Seward's bedroom and stabbed him repeatedly.

March 30, 1867 bought Alaska from Russia for \$7,200,000.00

The purchase of this frontier land became known as "**Seward's Folly**" and "**Seward's Icebox**" and "**Andrew Johnson's Polar Bear Garden.**"

- Alaska is more than twice the size of Texas
- It covers 586,412 square miles
- Seward's price works out to be 2 cents per acre of land
- The last Monday of March is Seward's Day in Alaska

At the time Seward had no idea of the massive gold reserves that were later found in the area.

Seward retired in Auburn, New York; traveled to Alaska and around the World. His portrait appeared on the \$50.00 Treasury Note in 1891 (today very rare).

Named for Seward are:

The city of Seward, Alaska, Seward Peninsula in Alaska, Seward Park in Seattle, the town of Seward, upstate New York, and Seward Peak (4316 feet) in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.

In two New York City parks there are statues of Seward; Madison Square Park and Volunteer Park (where he faces Alaska).