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RESEARCH NOTE:
JAMES G. BLAINE'S EFFORT TO HAVE
JOHN L. STEVENS APPOINTED
MINISTER TO HAWAI'I IN 1869

BY PAUL T. BURLIN

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THE DOCUMENTS discussed and contextualized in this article were found among State Department personnel files. They clearly show that James G. Blaine and his long time friend and business partner, John L. Stevens, were interested in Hawai'i much longer than previously realized by historians. Their interest stemmed from at least 1869. This is significant insofar as their concern and involvement with the Pacific archipelago has heretofore been thought of as part of the expansionist mindset that first emerged on a broad-based scale in the United States during the final decade of the nineteenth century. Blaine and Stevens were thinking in expansionist terms, long before of their contemporaries.

Blaine was a towering figure during the Gilded Age. Following several terms in the Maine Legislature, he was elected to the House of Representatives in 1862 and was re-elected for six more consecutive terms, rising rapidly to the position of Speaker of the House in 1869. He then served one term as United States Senator, headed the State Department under two presidents, and received the Republican nomination for president in 1884—narrowly losing to the Democrat Grover Cleveland. Like many Gilded Age politicians, Blaine was tarred by allegations of serious



Photograph of James Gillespie Blaine (January 31, 1830 – January 27, 1893). Blaine served as a representative of Maine in the United States House of Representatives from 1863 – 1876 and in the United States Senate from 1876 – 1881. He also served as Secretary of State under Benjamin Harrison, James Garfield, and Chester Arthur. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

misdoings while in Congress. Whether the charges of peddling influence were well grounded or not, they were to pursue him throughout much of his public career.¹

Notwithstanding the claims of his involvement with corruption, there was much more to Blaine than insatiable political ambition and dubious scruples. As some historians of American foreign relations have made clear, he was an ambitious thinker when it came to the future of America's world standing. He had what can only be called a grand, imperial vision, all moral judgments about it aside.² The documents that are presented here speak to that vision, and what follows attempts to place them in context.

It is well known that when Blaine became Secretary of State for the second time in 1889, his long-time Maine business associate, political

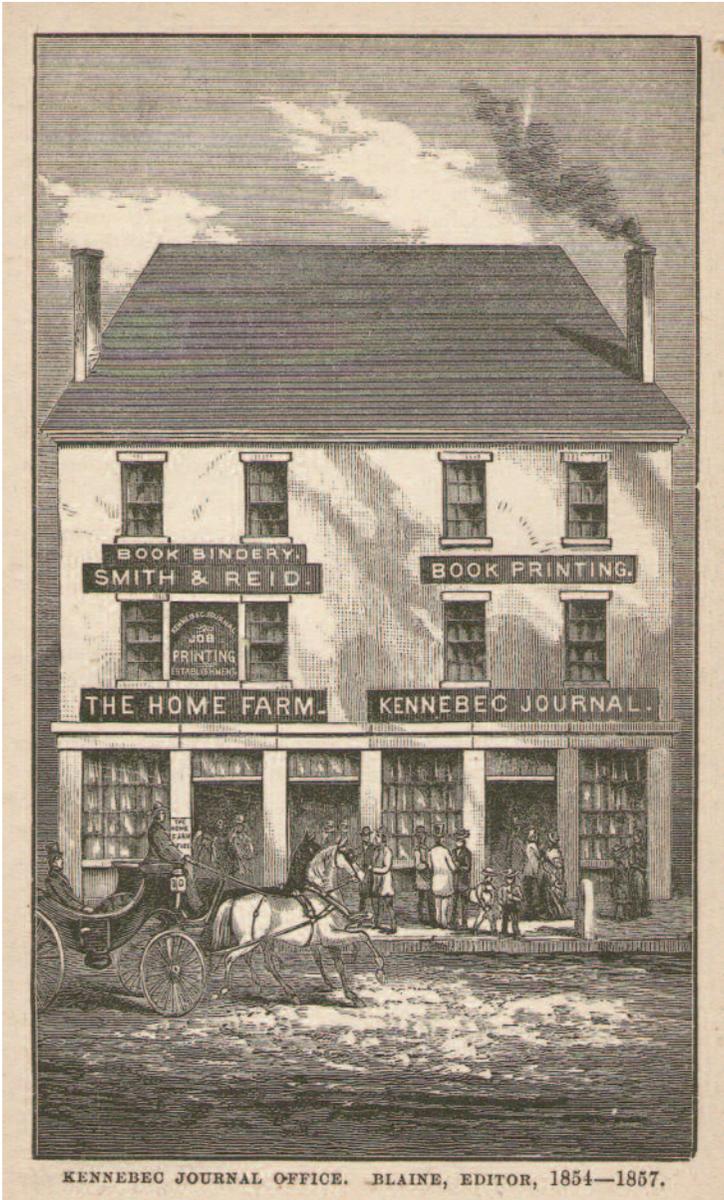
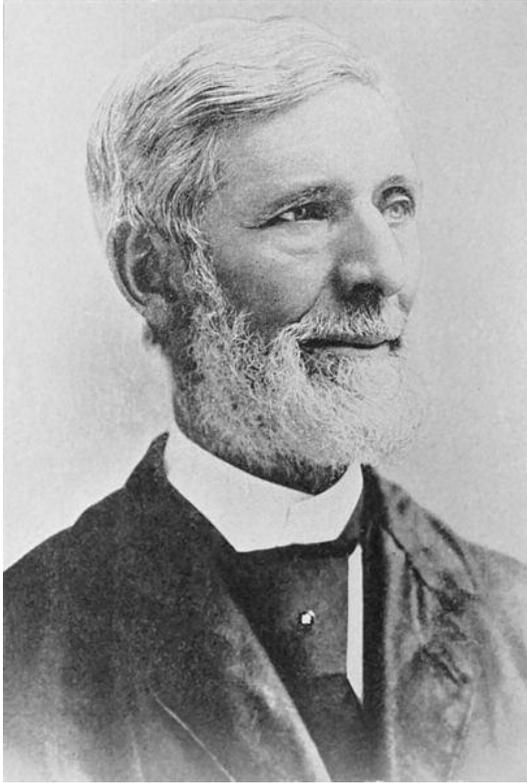


Image of the office of the *Kennebec Journal*. Blaine began his political career working as an editor for this newspaper. The business was co-owned by James G. Blaine and John L. Stevens starting in 1855. From Russell Conwell, *Life and Public Services of Jame G. Blaine, a Campaign Biography* (Augusta, ME: E.C. Allen & Co., 1884): 75.



Photograph of John Leavitt Stevens (August 1, 1820 – February 8, 1895). When Blaine became Secretary of State for the second time in 1889, his long-time Maine business associate, political colleague, and friend, John L. Stevens, was appointed Minister to Hawai'i. From John L. Stevens and W. B. Oleson, *Riches and Marvels of Hawaii* (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1900).

colleague and friend, John L. Stevens, was appointed Minister to Hawai'i.³ Stevens would go on to earn lasting notoriety—at least in some circles—for landing United States troops in Honolulu in 1893, an action that helped cement the fate of Queen Lili'uokalani and the demise of the institution of the Hawaiian monarchy. The troops were stationed at strategic points in Honolulu and they insured that the new provisional government, largely made up of Americans, would not be overthrown.⁴

While these events are all well-known, what had not surfaced until recently was that Blaine, and some other well-placed Mainers, attempted to get Stevens appointed to the Hawaiian post a full two decades earlier in 1869.⁵

As noted at the outset, the documentation of this fact is located in personnel records of the Department of State at the National Archives.⁶ Ulysses S. Grant had recently been elected President, Blaine had risen to the position of Speaker of the House, and he and some of his Maine Republican colleagues put forward Stevens' name for the post in Hawai'i.

Although Stevens did not get the post at that point (he received an appointment to Uruguay and Paraguay instead, which is interesting given what follows below regarding Blaine's interest in Latin America), what the effort demonstrates is that Blaine's interest in Hawai'i, and the Pacific more broadly, was of a longer duration than has been generally known.⁷ While one of Blaine's early biographers did make the claim that the future Secretary of State favored acquiring Hawai'i "from early manhood," that fact was merely asserted and not documented in any way.⁸ The 1869 effort to get Stevens appointed to the post in Honolulu substantiates Blaine's long-term interest in the Pacific archipelago.

To some extent, this should not be surprising insofar as Blaine and Stevens were co-owners of the *Kennebec Journal* starting in 1855. The founder, editor, and owner of the newspaper from 1825 to 1850 was Luther Severance, who had gone to Hawai'i as Commissioner in 1851. At one point in a crisis situation involving the Hawaiian and French governments, Severance came close to declaring an American protectorate over Hawai'i. It was well known at the time that he favored the annexation of the island kingdom. As a matter of fact, Severance was much more eager to flex American muscle in Hawai'i than was his superior, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, who later admonished his subordinate about not exceeding his delegated authority.⁹

In addition to lobbying the State Department about annexation, Severance also wrote to congressional figures on the subject. Upon his return to Maine, when his diplomatic duties in Hawai'i came to an end with the election of Democrat Franklin Pierce to the presidency, he kept up the mantra in articles published in the *Kennebec Journal*, then owned by Blaine and Stevens.¹⁰

Severance was, no doubt, a mentor to both Blaine and Stevens, and his earlier involvement in Hawai'i, along with his positive views on annexation, surely influenced the younger men. They were fellow Republicans, business associates, and they all lived in either Hallowell or Augusta. When Severance died in 1855, within a year of his return home from Hawai'i, Blaine published a very laudatory memoir of him.¹¹

What is most important to understand about Blaine in terms of his views on American foreign policy was his ability to see beyond the con-

ventional Republican wisdom of the period. This allowed him to imagine, as well as to work for, a new foreign policy paradigm—one that was more commensurate with the country's emerging political economy.

A key element of the Republican Party's program was the protective tariff. Support for protection was one of the most important and consistent policy differences demarcating Republicans from their Democratic rivals during the period. While there were exceptions, Republicans supported a tariff to protect American industry while the Democrats typically, although not universally, favored a tariff for revenue purposes only. Throughout his political career, up until the late 1880s, Blaine consistently supported a protective tariff. However, with the election of Benjamin Harrison to the presidency and Blaine's appointment as Secretary of State for the second time, the Maine politician and diplomat backed away from blanket protectionism and threw his support to a set of reciprocity provisions which were ultimately enacted—after a good deal of acrimonious lobbying by Blaine and arm-twisting by Harrison—as a part of the so-called McKinley Tariff of 1890.¹²

Blaine's advocacy of reciprocity was based on his realization that the American political economy had matured to a point where enhanced exports were absolutely critical to the country's prosperity. Legislation that would provide some executive flexibility in the administration of the tariff was seen by Blaine as one way to expand American exports. As one of his biographers wrote:

. . . he [Blaine] perceived clearly that as protection stimulated manufacturing there must be an outlet for the production thus fostered or protection would end in disaster. . . . He was not a professed economist. . . . But years before his time he saw or felt or suspected or guessed a truth that was to become only too apparent to all men. Unless there could be a consumption elsewhere of the difference between the total American production and the total of the country's purchasing power there would be an inevitable smash.¹³

When Blaine thought about the necessity for commercial expansion he was particularly concerned about the unfavorable balance of trade between the United States and Latin America. He sought to replace Latin American imports from Europe with those from the United States. To improve the country's commercial position relative to Latin America, and thereby spur American exports, Blaine labored to promote Pan-American integration on a number of different levels.¹⁴

First, in 1881 during his initial and very brief tenure as head of the

State Department under President Garfield, Blaine invited the Latin American countries to confer with the United States on means by which intra-American tensions and disagreements could be resolved peacefully. While this was to be the principal expressed purpose of the conference, it is clear Blaine had a broader agenda in mind. As one scholar wrote regarding the Secretary's initiative:

his policy was a jealous one for this country in that he desired to increase our trade with Hispanic America at the expense of European nations. The idea of a union to promote peace seems to have been secondary in his mind . . . he desired to secure Hispanic-American tranquility first in order to obtain its trade.¹⁵

The conference never took place as a result of Chester Arthur assuming the presidency in the wake of Garfield's assassination and Blaine's exiting the State Department.

In 1889, however, with Blaine once again at the helm of the State Department, a Pan-American conference did take place with the Secretary giving the opening and closing addresses. He was also elected president of the proceedings. The agenda for the 1889 conference was much broader than the one of eight years earlier. It encompassed discussions leading to a customs union, exploration of a common silver currency for all American states, the promotion of a Pan-American railroad, as well as procedures for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Although the actual concrete results of the conference were limited—Blaine's customs union, for example, went nowhere, as did most of his other proposals—it is quite clear from the record that the promotion of inter-American trade had moved to the front and center of the American agenda under Blaine's tutelage.¹⁶

At this point, it is legitimate to ask where Hawai'i, and Blaine's interests in, and concerns about the Pacific more broadly, came into play given his focus on Latin America? Quite simply, Blaine saw Hawai'i as an integral part of what he defined as the "American system." As a result, in December of 1889, Harrison asked Capitol Hill to extend an invitation to Hawai'i to attend the Pan-American Conference, but Congress authorized the action too late for the kingdom's delegates to attend. Blaine wrote to the head of the Hawaiian Legation about the delay as follows:

The government regrets the circumstances no less, not only by reason of the peculiar importance of Hawaii as one of the geographical extremes of the American system, but also in view of those well known

qualities which would have rendered your participation of signal value to the work of the Conference.¹⁷

It is important to clarify just what Blaine meant by the "American system." Minimally what he had in mind was that Hawai'i, as well as Latin America, by virtue of the Monroe Doctrine, were off limits to European or other foreign power colonization. Blaine was by no means the first American official to extend the Monroe Doctrine to Hawai'i. President John Tyler had done that in 1842.¹⁸ In addition, however, because of the needs of the country's maturing industrial political economy, the Secretary of State essentially extended the logic of the Monroe Doctrine to embrace the deliberate displacement of foreign exports by those of the United States. This was an integral part of his thinking on the subject.

A clear statement of his thoughts as related to Hawai'i was included in a long diplomatic instruction Blaine sent to the American Minister to that nation, James M. Comly, in December of 1881, shortly before he was to step down as Secretary of State. The communication was prompted in part by concerns the British Minister to Hawai'i had voiced regarding the terms of the reciprocity treaty the United States had signed with the island kingdom in 1875. It gave the United States some exclusive rights that were viewed unfavorably by the British representative.

In his missive, Blaine recounted the history of American continental expansion that left the country with a very extensive Pacific coastline the economic growth and trade of which had become prodigious. Blaine pointed out that American control of a canal across the Central American Isthmus and a predominate influence in Hawai'i were two foreign policy imperatives for the United States given the needs of the country as a whole and particularly the Pacific slope. As to Hawai'i, Blaine wrote in part:

In thirty years the United States has acquired legitimately dominant influence in the North Pacific, which it can never consent to see decreased by the intrusion therein of any element of influence hostile to its own. The situation of the Hawaiian Islands, giving them the strategic control of the North Pacific, brings their possession within the range of questions of purely American policy, as much as that of the Isthmus itself. Hence the necessity, as recognized in our existing treaty relations, of drawing the ties of intimate relationship between us and the Hawaiian Islands so as to make them practically a part of the American system without derogation of their absolute independence.¹⁹

Given Blaine's views, it is not surprising that when Benjamin Harrison was elected in 1888, and Blaine entered the State Department for the second time in 1889, Hawai'i was on their radar screen. In addition to Stevens receiving the appointment to Honolulu, Blaine sought to revise the terms of the reciprocity treaty between the United States the island nation.

For Blaine, it was the strategic location of the islands as well as the harbor at the mouth of the Pearl River that excited his interest. Trade between the United States and Hawai'i would never be of major consequence but, given the archipelago's location, it provided a defensive outpost for the nation's extensive Pacific coast. While the reciprocity treaty of 1875 had been revised and re-ratified in 1887, giving the United States sole access to Pearl Harbor, that was not good enough for Blaine because the cession was not permanent and could be abrogated by Hawai'i if it gave the United States sufficient notice. Therefore, the very active diplomat engaged in semi-covert negotiations with the Hawaiian Minister to Washington for an outright protectorate over the islands. Although the negotiations came to naught, because of resistance by the king and other political figures in Hawai'i, the effort was a clear demonstration of the Secretary's maneuvering to bring the islands into a closer relationship with the United States.²⁰

If further evidence is needed to substantiate Blaine's virtual obsession with Hawai'i, then he certainly provided it a short time later in a letter to the president. He wrote to Harrison:

I think there are only three places that are of value enough to be taken, that are not continental. One is Hawaii and the others are Cuba and Porto Rico. Cuba and Porto Rico are not now imminent and will not be for a generation. Hawaii may come up for decision at any unexpected hour and I hope we shall be prepared to decide it in the affirmative.²¹

While Hawai'i was certainly paramount to him, Blaine was also interested in maintaining a strong position in Samoa, the South Pacific island group that included Pago-Pago, the single best harbor in the entire Pacific. When Blaine reentered the State Department 1889, a lingering crisis between the United States, Germany, and Great Britain loomed over the isles. Blaine quickly took steps to cement a tripartite protectorate that preserved American access to the islands and to their harbor.²²

As it happened, within less than a year of this communication to the

president about the two Caribbean Spanish Islands and Hawai'i, Blaine would resign his position as Secretary of State, at least in part as a result of declining health and the fact that his relationship with Harrison had never been as close as that which he had enjoyed with Garfield. In addition, quite tragically, he and his wife had suffered the loss of two of their grown children within days of each other in 1890, and a third in 1892.²³

Blaine himself died on January 27, 1893; just ten days after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy facilitated directly or indirectly by John L. Stevens. The outgoing Harrison administration then rapidly negotiated a treaty of annexation with the new Hawaiian provisional government and submitted it to the Senate for ratification. On assuming office in March of 1893, however, Grover Cleveland withdrew the treaty and accused Stevens of inappropriate involvement in the overthrow of a legitimate government with which the United States had normal diplomatic relations.

Stevens returned home to Augusta and made a valiant attempt to defend his record and his reputation. He too died before his, and his long terms friend's, aspirations in the North Pacific were achieved.²⁴ Had they lived, there can be no doubt that they would have been very pleased by the events that trailed in the wake of the Spanish American War, when the United States rounded out Blaine's imperial threesome, annexing Puerto Rico as well as Hawai'i and establishing a protectorate over Cuba.

The 1869 documents contextualized here demonstrate quite clearly that Blaine's and Stevens' interest Hawai'i, and the Pacific more broadly, were not the product of the broad-based turn toward imperialism and the more active foreign policy that came to the fore as the nineteenth century entered its final decade. Quite the contrary, they provide clear evidence of these Mainer's' early and expanded vision for an American footprint on the broad waters of the North Pacific.

NOTES

1. The standard biography of Blaine remains David S. Muzzey, *James G. Blaine: A Political Idol of Other Days* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1934). Also see Gail Hamilton, *Biography of James G. Blaine* (Norwich, CT: The Henry Bill Publishing Company, 1895); Edward Stanwood, *James Gillespie Blaine* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, Company, 1972); Charles Edward Russell, *Blaine of Maine: His Life and Times* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1931). For a recent work, see Neil Rolde, *Continental*

Liar From the State of Maine—James G. Blaine (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 2006).

2. See, for example, Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963) & *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Edward P. Crapol, *James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2000); David Healy, *James G. Blaine and Latin America* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001). For an earlier, but quite wide-ranging and detailed treatment of Blaine's foreign policy, see Alice Felt Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1927).

3. Blaine was first appointed Secretary of State in 1881. He served in that capacity until just after the assassination of President James Garfield, an act that brought Chester Arthur to the helm of state. It was simply untenable for Blaine to continue in the cabinet under the tutelage of a president who was from a bitter rival faction of the Republican Party.

4. Among the many accounts of the events attendant the overthrow of the Queen, see Helena G. Allen, *The Betrayal of Liliuokalani: Last Queen of Hawaii 1838-1917* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing, 1982), 281-350; Liliuokalani, *Hawaii's Story* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing, 1990), 243-374; Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 3, 1874-1893, *The Kalakaua Dynasty* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 582-650.

5. For the first, but very brief reference to this fact, see Paul T. Burlin, *Imperial Maine and Hawai'i: Interpretative Essays in the History of Nineteenth-Century American Expansion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 168-169.

6. Blaine to President, March 17 & April 27, 1869; Blaine et al to President, March 17, 1869; microfilm series M 968, reel #58, RG 59, National Archives and Records Administration. At about the same time, Blaine also tried to influence the choice for Secretary of State. He was unsuccessful in this as well. See Crapol, *James G. Blaine*, 32.

7. "Consular Appointments," *Kennebec Journal*, April 21, 1869.

8. Stanwood, *James Gillespie Blaine*, 359.

9. For details regarding Severance's activities in Hawai'i, see Burlin, *Imperial Maine*, 95-134.

10. *Ibid.*

11. James G. Blaine, "Memoir of Luther Severance," (Augusta, ME: *Kennebec Journal*, 1856).

12. For Blaine's support of the reciprocity provisions of the McKinley Tariff against Republican as well as Democratic dissenters, see Tom E. Terrill, *The Tariff, Politics, and American Foreign Policy 1874-1901* (Westport, CT: Greenwood press, 1973), 159-183 & Healy, *James G. Blaine and Latin America*, 160-170. Also see, "Blaine to His Critics," *The Washington Post*, September 17, 1890.

13. Russell, *Blaine of Maine*, 381-382.

14. James G. Blaine, "Foreign Policy of the Garfield Administration," in *Political Discussions: Legislative, Diplomatic and Popular 1856-1886* (Norwich, CT: The Henry Bill Pub-

lishing Company, 1887), 411-419. Also see, LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity*, 74-79.

15. A. Curtis Wilgus, "James G. Blaine and the Pan American Movement," *The Hispanic-American Historical Review*, Vol. 5, No 4, November 1922, 667.

16. On the minimal results of the conference, see Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine*, 179-181. For a perspective on the conference which viewed Blaine's agenda as clearly imperial and lauded Latin American push-back, see José Martí, "On: The Pan-American Congress," <http://www2.fiu.edu/~fcf/martipanamerican103197.html>, accessed January 2, 2014. Also see, Bill J. Karras, "Jose Marti and the Pan American Conference, 1889-1891," *Revista de Historia de América*, No. 77/78, 1974, 77-99.

17. Blaine to Carter, May 3, 1890, quoted in Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine*, 183.

18. Edward P. Crapol, *John Tyler: The Accidental President* (Chapel Hills, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 155.

19. Blaine to Comly, #113, December 1, 1881, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1881-1882*, 636. Also see James G. Blaine, "The United States and the Hawaiian Kingdom," in *Political Discussions*, 388-396 & Crapol, *James G. Blaine*, 78-79.

20. For details on the negotiations, see Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1936), 24-42. Also see, Blaine to Harrison, September 16, 1891 with enclosure, in Albert T. Volwiler ed. *The Correspondence Between Benjamin Harrison and James G. Blaine 1882-1893* (Philadelphia, PA: The American Philosophical Society, 1940), 186-189.

21. Volwiler, *The Correspondence Between President Harrison and James G. Blaine*, 173-174.

22. On Blaine's interest in Samoa see, Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine*, 218-253 and Paul T. Burlin, "Harold Marsh Sewall and the Truculent Pursuit of Empire: Samoa, 1887-1890," *Maine History* (39:2) Summer, 2000.

23. Muzzey, *James G. Blaine*, 461, 465-472.

24. Stevens died on February 8, 1895.