

# Today in History - April 23

&lt; April 23 &gt;

Select date April 23



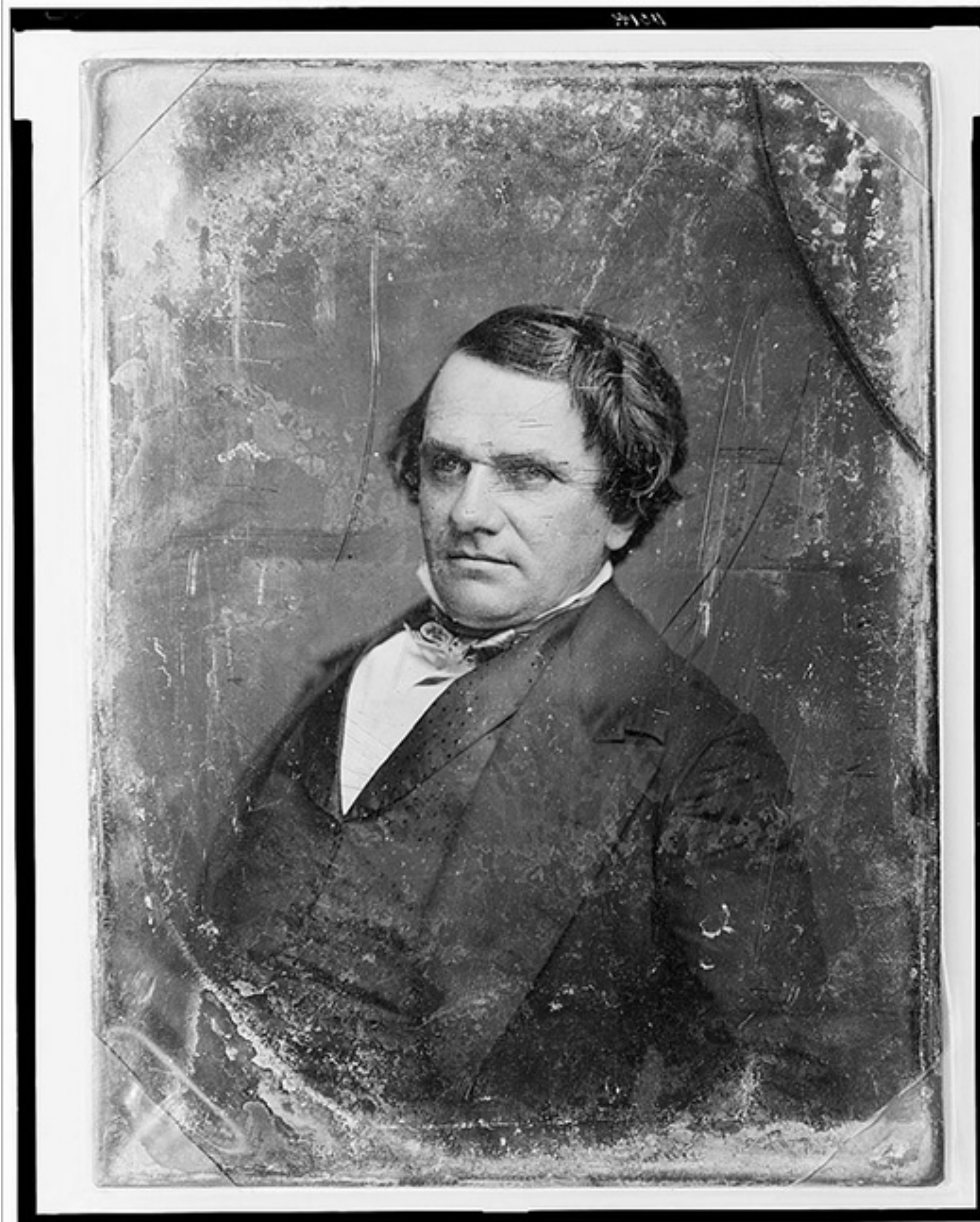
Go

Today's Stories: [The Little Giant](#)

Listen to this page

## The Little Giant

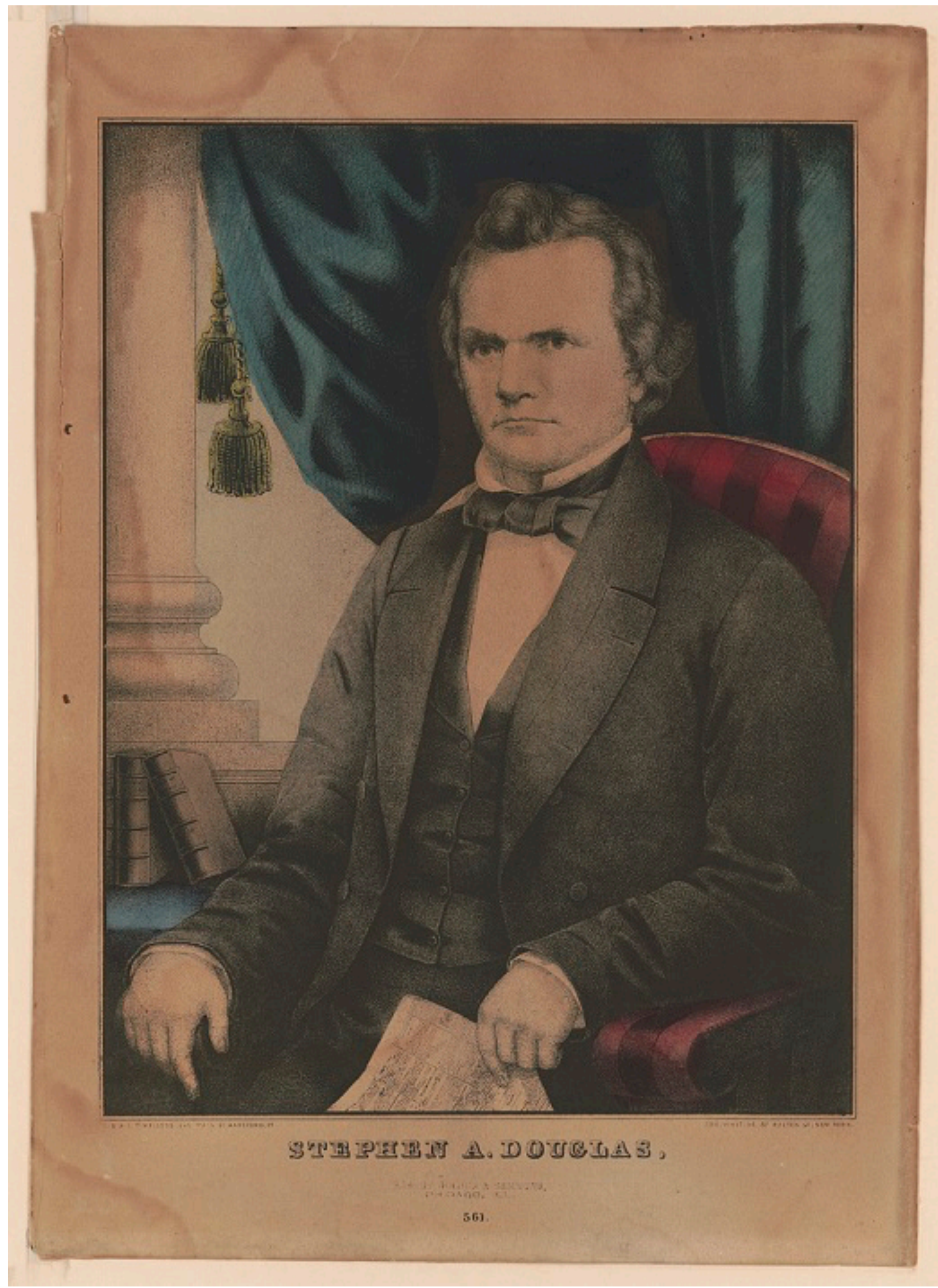
U.S. congressman, senator, and presidential candidate Stephen A. Douglas was born in [Brandon, Vermont](#), on **April 23**, 1813. Short in stature but influential in Congress, Douglas was nicknamed the "Little Giant."



[Stephen Arnold Douglas](#), head-and-shoulders portrait, slightly to left. Mathew Brady's Studio, [between 1844 and 1860]. [Daguerreotypes](#). Prints & Photographs Division

Douglas left New England at the age of twenty, settling in Illinois where he quickly established himself as a leader in the Democratic Party. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1843 and to the U.S. Senate in 1847, serving there until his death in 1861. A strong advocate of national expansion, he supported the [annexation of Texas](#) and the [Mexican War](#).

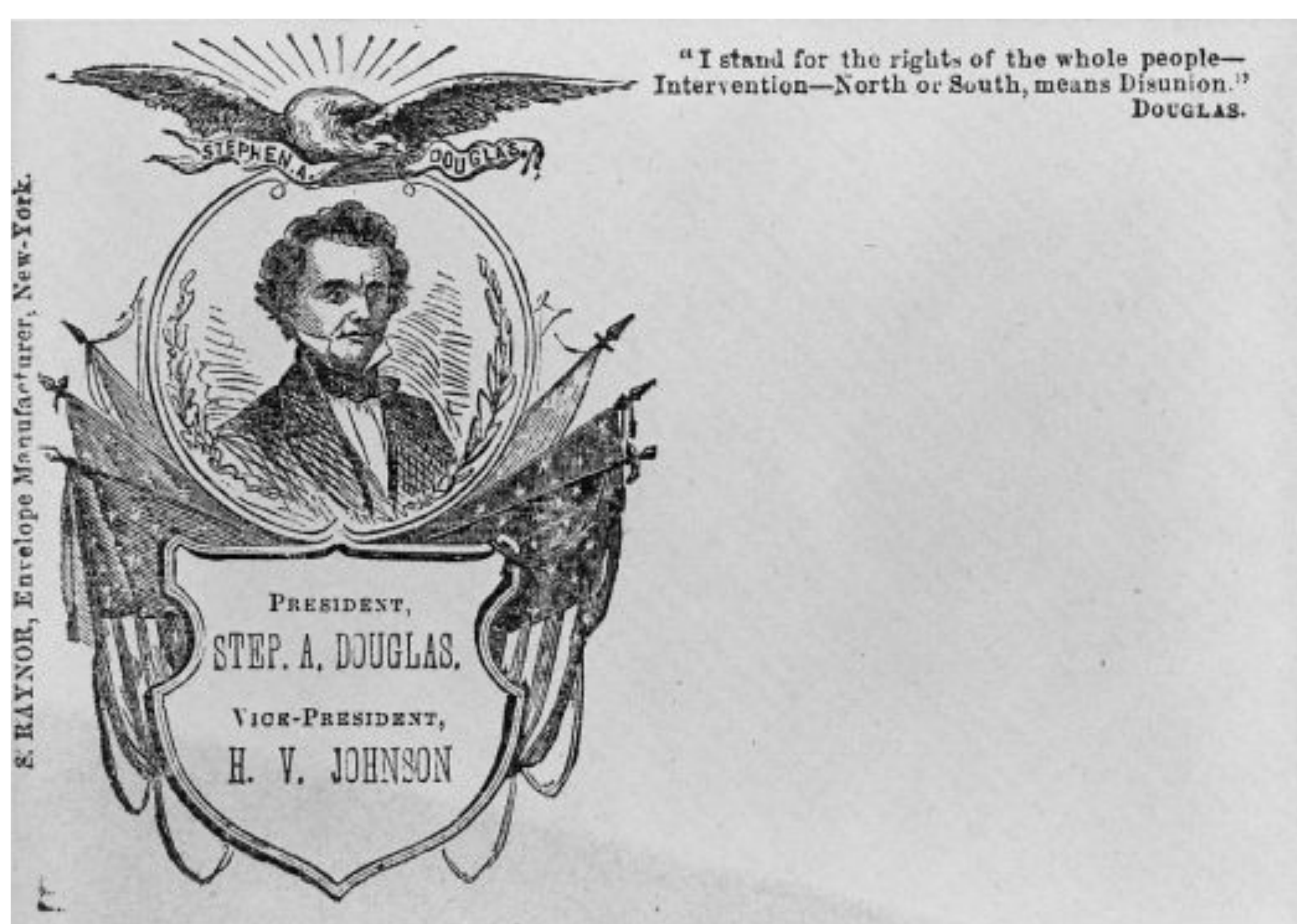
In the 1850s, Douglas became a leader in the effort to negotiate the volatile issue regarding the spread of slavery into the territories. To this end, he supported the [Compromise of 1850](#), which attempted to maintain the congressional balance between free and slave states, and, in 1854, sponsored the highly controversial [Kansas-Nebraska Act](#). This legislation removed from the congressional authority to exclude slavery from a territory, legislatively repealing the congressional compromise achieved with the [Missouri Compromise of 1820](#) and upheld with the [Compromise of 1850](#).



[Stephen A. Douglas](#). [no date recorded]. [Popular Graphic Arts](#). Prints & Photographs Division

Douglas favored the doctrine of popular sovereignty in the territories, a policy in which settlers themselves—not the federal government, decided the status of slavery. After passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the rivalry in Kansas between pro- and anti-slavery settlers led to the formation of two separate territorial legislatures. When the pro-slavery faction submitted to Congress the [Lecompton Constitution](#) establishing Kansas as a slave state, [Douglas denounced](#) the proposed constitution as a violation of the concept of popular sovereignty in a speech on December 9, 1857. This stance caused a breach between Douglas and President [James Buchanan](#), despite both being members of the Democratic Party. This difference was so strong that for a time [Buchanan](#) worked to block Douglas' reelection.

In the Senate campaign of 1858, Republican hopeful [Abraham Lincoln](#) challenged Douglas to a series of seven debates, known today as the [Lincoln-Douglas debates](#). Although Douglas won the election of 1858, he lost the [presidential election of 1860](#) to Lincoln in a four-way race that included [John Breckinridge](#) and [John Bell](#).



[Bust of Stephen Douglas over Northern Democratic Party's presidential campaign shield](#). 1860. Prints & Photographs Division

## Learn More

- Search [A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875](#) to find additional information about Douglas' congressional career, including speeches found in the [Congressional Globe](#). For example, on March 6, 1861, Douglas defended Lincoln's inaugural address as a "[peace-offering rather than a war message](#)."
- The [Alfred Whitall Stern Collection of Lincolniana](#) contains over thirty items related to [Stephen Douglas](#), including prints, ephemera, newspaper articles, and an original life mask taken in Chicago in 1857.
- An important topic of the Lincoln-Douglas debates was slavery and the Dred Scott case. Search on the term [Dred Scott](#) in [Slaves and the Courts, 1740 to 1860](#) to learn more from primary source documents of Douglas' time.
- Search on the keywords [Stephen Douglas](#) or [debate](#) in the [Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress](#) to learn more. Find, for example, [Richard T. Merrick's telegram](#) to Abraham Lincoln, reporting the death of Stephen Douglas.

&lt; April 23 &gt;

Select date April 23



Go

Follow Us



Take our survey