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CHRISTMAS AT THE WHITE HOUSE

The social conditions existing during the war between the states makes it improbable that Christmas was featured to any extent at the White House during the time the Lincoln family occupied the executive mansion. There is a story about one incident which happened at Christmas time in 1863 that may serve as an introduction to this monograph.

Long before Christmas a live turkey had been sent to the White House by one of Mr. Lincoln's friends with the suggestion that it be used for the Christmas dinner. Tad, the president's youngest son, won the confidence of the turkey, whom he named Jack, fed him and petted him until the turkey followed him around the White House grounds.

The day before Christmas while the president was engaged with one of his Cabinet members in an important conference, "Tad burst into the room like a bombshell, sobbing and crying with rage and indignation. The turkey was about to be killed. Tad had procured from the executioner a stay of proceeding while he hurried to lay the case before the President. 'Jack must not be killed; it is wicked.' 'But,' said the President, 'Jack was sent here to be killed, and eaten for Christmas dinner.' 'I can't help it,' roared Tad between his sobs, 'He's a good turkey, and I don't want him killed.' The President of the United States pausing in the midst of his business took a card and on it wrote an order of reprieve. The turkey's life was spared and Tad seized the precious bit of paper fled to set him at liberty."

The White House during the term preceding the coming of the Lincolns had been a bachelor's quarters for four years. Three rollicking boys took possession of the premises in the spring of 1861; Robert, age seventeen; Willie, age ten; and Tad, eight years old. While Robert was in Washington for the first few days after the family arrived he soon returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was a student at Harvard.

Just before the Lincoln family left Springfield, Mrs. Lincoln arranged a party for Willie, whose birthday, December 21, was very close to Christmas. As the party was held on the

22nd, it may have been a joint birthday and Christmas party. One of the invitations has been preserved; it reads as follows:

Willie Lincoln
will be pleased to see you
Wednesday afternoon
at 3 o'clock
Tuesday, December 22nd

The first Christmas in the White House, December 25, 1861, was undoubtedly the happiest one. The children were together on this festive occasion for the last time. There had been one other boy in the Lincoln family but he had been dead for more than ten years. While Christmas probably recalled to the parents the sorrow of his passing, the pleasure they had in the fellowship of their other children would allow them to become reconciled to this earlier loss.

We may feel sure that Abraham Lincoln had visited Joseph Schot's Toy Shop before Christmas and made some purchases which he knew the boys would appreciate. In fact there are well established traditions that he was a rather frequent visitor to this store kept by the old crippled soldier who had fought under Napoleon and who was now content to make wooden soldiers for the children of America's capitol city.

The Christmas season of 1862 was a sad one indeed for the Lincolns. Willie Lincoln passed away when they had been occupying the White House one week less than a year. Mrs. Lincoln is said never to have gone into the room in which the child was laid out, after the funeral services were over.

The loneliness of Tad was pathetic after the loss of his constant playmate, Willie, but two years older than he; and the attempt of the President to serve as a companion to the only son now left at the White House was responsible for the very strong attachment which grew up between father and son.

Robert was ten years older than Tad and was at the executive mansion very little after the Lincoln family took up their residence there.

While Jack, the turkey, did not grace the table at the White House for the Christmas dinner in 1863, some other fowl was substituted, undoubtedly, for this pet bird which had escaped the usual fate of turkeys by Tad's appeal on his behalf.

There was one bit of Christmas joy that came into the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln on this day which must have made the day in their own family circle a memorable one.

A son of one of Lincoln's close friends in Illinois, who had been serving in the Confederate army, had been captured. Lincoln had an interview with the lad the day before Christmas

with the result that the following telegram was sent to his father in Illinois on Christmas eve:

"Your son has just left me, with my order to the Secretary of War, to administer the oath of allegiance. I send him home to you and his mother."

There must have been a cheerful atmosphere in the White House on Christmas, 1864. Advice of the capture of Savannah had reached the President that morning, and the following day he wrote to General Sherman as follows:

"Many, many thanks for your Christmas gift: the capture of Savannah . . . please make my grateful acknowledgment to your whole army, officers and men."

Another letter written on the day following, suggests a presentation which evidently was received with deep appreciation. He wrote to Dr. John MacLean acknowledging the announcement that the trustees of the College of New Jersey had conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws.

Could he at this time have been reminded of that early political effort when he first offered his services to the people and closed with this announcement:

"If the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined."

Now "a body of gentlemen of such high character and intelligence" had conferred upon him the highest compliment within their power and he replies, "I am most thankful if my labors have seemed to conduct to the preservation of those institutions under which alone we can expect good government—and in its train sound learning and the progress of the liberal arts."

In 1913 the building in which the old toy shop was located was razed. It had seen service for half a century and contributed much to the happiness of the Lincoln children and other Washington boys and girls. It was in reality a monument to the child life of the city and it is to be regretted that it could not have been preserved. It would have recalled many visits of Mr. Lincoln and Tad to this store and especially the memorable one which tradition has recorded as follows:

"Tad teased his father to buy him a company of tin soldiers. These gaily decorated toys stood on wooden pedestals, but the tin general was broken and would not stand. The clerk in charge suggested that a fine upstanding captain might do for a commander and the sale was made." It was this incident which paved the way for the promotion of one of the great generals of the war according to the recorder of this typical Christmas story.