

LINCOLN LORE

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FIRST ATTEMPT TO ASSASSINATE LINCOLN

The significance of the first attempt to assassinate Abraham Lincoln has been minimized by the tragedy which occurred April 14, 1865. The conclusion that the deportment of the president on his approach to Washington in 1861 is not above criticism has also had a tendency to pass by the episode with little comment. The enemies of Lincoln, however, found in this adventure an opportunity to ridicule his clandestine journey to Washington and call the attempt to assassinate him an idle tale.

Lincoln himself lived to regret the incident and is said to have upbraided Lamon for "aiding him to degrade himself at the very moment in all his life when his behavior should have exhibited the utmost dignity and composure."

The story of this sensational episode can best be developed by presenting three scenes: The Plot, The President's Reaction, and The Frustration of the Assassins.

The Plot

No one who has read the life story of Allan Pinkerton will conclude that he was an alarmist. To him, more than any one man, however, should go the credit for Abraham Lincoln's safe arrival in Washington on February 23, 1861.

In the early part of the month Pinkerton established himself and his staff of detectives in Baltimore, having been engaged by the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore railroad to investigate a conspiracy to destroy the company's tracks over which General Scott had been moving soldiers into Washington. It was while thus engaged that an officer of the railroad advised Pinkerton of a plot to assassinate Lincoln. Pinkerton immediately put his men on the case with the result that the entire proceedings of the secret organization sponsoring the move were made available. An Italian by the name of Captain Ferdinandina seemed to be one of the leaders in the plot, and it might be said that through him the idea of assassinating presidents was first introduced into America.

Notes from Pinkerton's own journal made at the time and used as the basis of a magazine article as early as 1868 give us what might be called first-hand evidence of what really occurred. It was learned from the published program of Lincoln's itinerary that he would arrive in Baltimore at the Calvert Street Depot and from there take an open carriage and ride nearly a mile and a half to the Washington Depot.

The details of the plot follow:

"The leaders finally fully determined that the assassination should take place at the Calvert Street Depot. A vast crowd of secessionists was to assemble at that place and await the arrival of the train with Mr. Lincoln. They were to go early and fill the narrow streets and passages immediately surrounding it. When Mr. Lincoln should attempt to pass through the narrow passage leading to the street, some roughs were to raise a row on the outside, and all the police were to rush away to quell the disturbance. At this moment, the police being withdrawn, Mr. Lincoln would find himself in a dense, excited, and hostile crowd, hustled and jammed, and then the fatal blow was to be struck."

A short time after this plot was planned in Baltimore, in the very same place, four northern soldiers were murdered and many wounded by a mob led by the same conspirators who would have assassinated Lincoln just as willingly.

The President's Reaction

Lincoln's first reaction towards the information brought to him by Pinkerton and Judd, on the evening of February 21, at Philadelphia, is revealed by the following entry which the detective made in his journal at that time:

"While Mr. Judd detailed the circumstances of the conspiracy, Mr. Lincoln listened very attentively, but did not say a word, nor did his countenance, which I closely watched, show any emotion. He was thoughtful, serious, but decidedly firm."

Mr. Judd then asked, "Will you, upon any statement

which can be made, consent to leave for Washington on tonight's train?" Mr. Lincoln promptly replied, "No, I cannot consent to do this. I shall hoist the flag on Independence Hall tomorrow morning (Washington's birthday), and go to Harrisburg tomorrow, and meet the Legislature of Pennsylvania; then I shall have fulfilled all my engagements. After this, if you and Pinkerton think there is positive danger in my attempting to go through Baltimore openly, according to the published programme—if you can arrange any way to carry out your purposes, I will place myself in your hands." Pinkerton says: "Mr. Lincoln said this with a tone and manner so decisive we saw that no more was to be said."

It will be observed that there was a determination on the part of Lincoln to carry out the speaking program which had been arranged for him regardless of the consequences. It will also be noted that after these obligations were fulfilled he was willing to be advised by his friends who were in a position to know the facts about the conspiracy. The confirmation of the Baltimore plot by Seward at Washington who sent his son to Philadelphia to warn Lincoln, evidently confirmed the idea in Lincoln's mind that the plot was no bit of phantasm built up by Pinkerton.

There is no question but what the evidence laid before Lincoln at that time convinced him that his life was sought and this fact finds expression in his speech on the following morning in Independence Hall when he said "that he would rather be assassinated on the spot than surrender those principles" for which the fathers of the nation had died.

One who knows how Lincoln's mind would react towards such a program will be convinced that his first thought was not of himself, either as the victim of an assassin or a ridiculed leader fleeing from danger; but the one question uppermost in his mind must have been, "What procedure will be best for the country?" He must have realized that one overt act against his person as president elect would throw the country into civil war immediately. This he wished to avert.

The Frustration of the Assassins

While there is no question about the secrecy of the journey, most of the stories about Lincoln traveling in disguise are the inventions of his enemies. This account of the trip written in 1868 from notes made at the time of the journey seem to set forth just what happened:

After his address at Harrisburg before the legislature and while at dinner "He left the dinner table, went to his room, changed his dress for a traveling suit, and, with a broad-rimmed felt hat (which had been presented to him at New York), he went quietly to a side door, got into a carriage in waiting, and was driven with one companion, Ward H. Lamon, rapidly to the car which awaited him, and was soon speeding on towards Philadelphia.

"On his arrival in Philadelphia Mr. Lincoln was met by Mr. Pinkerton, taken into a carriage, and driven to the depot of the Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad.

"Mr. Pinkerton had caused the three sections of the sleeping car, which was on the end of the train, to be taken, and his agent stood at the door, which was locked, awaiting the arrival of the party. When the party appeared the door was opened and Mr. Lincoln stepped in, went to this berth—the whistle sounded and the train was whirling on towards Washington.

"Nothing occurred to interrupt or delay the passage, and at six on the morning of the 23rd they reached Washington where at the depot they were met by some of the President's Illinois friends."

Possibly some of those who feel quite certain what would have happened if Lincoln had not been assassinated by Booth, would be able to enlighten us about what might have taken place in this country if Lincoln had tried to pass through Baltimore and had been assassinated there.