

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE NEW SALEM POSTMASTER

Just one hundred years ago on May 7, Abraham Lincoln was appointed postmaster at New Salem, Sangamon County, Illinois. An old volume in the archives of the Post Office Department at Washington contains the data referring to Lincoln's first official duties in the service of the Government.

Lincoln was obliged to furnish a bond of \$500.00. This was required of all applicants for fourth class offices. His bondsmen were N. Alley and A. Trent. The old record book reveals that Lincoln continued as postmaster until May 30, 1836, when the office was discontinued. It is likely that the very small amount of mail circulating through the office caused it to be abandoned.

While the annual salary Lincoln received has not been determined, as late as 1847, ten years after the New Salem office was closed, there were three hundred and four postmasters in the state receiving less than \$25.00 for their entire year's work. One man in Illinois received as little as sixteen cents for the year. It is safe to assume that during the three years Lincoln served as postmaster his total reimbursement was not more than one hundred dollars and likely very much less.

The peculiar advantages which came to Abraham Lincoln as postmaster for a period of more than three years have largely been overlooked. Three years before his appointment the person holding the office of postmaster at Fort Wayne wrote to the postmaster general asking for an increase in salary. His reply is interesting inasmuch as it puts a new emphasis on the privileges granted the postmaster:

Post Office Department  
April 8, 1830

P. M.,  
Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Your letter of the 26th of February is at hand. The law will not permit the Department to allow you additional compensation. There are many other Postmasters similarly situated, and should Congress pass a law for their relief, the cases are so numerous that it would reduce the funds of the Department to such a degree as to paralyze its efforts.

The franking privilege, exemption from military and jury duty, and the advantage of receiving early intelligence of passing events, are considerations of such importance, that there is no difficulty in procuring men of great respectability to act as Post Masters.

O. B. B.

It is doubtful if the franking privilege was of much value to Lincoln personally as very few letters have been found that were franked by him.

One letter in the collection of Oliver R. Barrett reveals that he exercised

the privilege of franking for George M. Marsh on one occasion.

Exemption from military and jury duty could not have appealed to Lincoln because he had just returned from the Black Hawk War where he served as a captain. His interest in the courts might suggest he would invite jury service rather than seek to be relieved from it.

The advantage of receiving "early intelligence of passing events" would be of particular interest to Lincoln. Possibly not so much emphasis should be placed on the early intelligence by which some men profited economically but on general intelligence which would be acquired by having access to much periodical literature.

A few years ago the editor of Lincoln Lore discovered in the court house of Morgan County, Illinois, the record book of the postmaster at Jacksonville in 1832. As Jacksonville and New Salem were not more than thirty miles apart, much of the same literature would pass through the two offices, in much larger quantity of course at Jacksonville.

The paper with the largest circulation at Jacksonville was "The Christian Advocate and Journal of New York" with fifty-eight subscriptions. "The Church Messenger" of Georgetown, Kentucky, was next among the religious publications with twenty-two subscriptions.

The "Louisville (Kentucky) Advertiser" had the largest circulation of the newspapers, with twenty-two subscriptions. Several agricultural papers and a few magazines of a literary nature were also in circulation. Altogether about one hundred and thirty different papers passed through the Jacksonville office, and it is likely that a large percentage of these found their way into Postmaster Lincoln's office.

In the light of events that followed it is likely that the paper coming into Lincoln's hands which influenced him more than any other was the "Congressional Globe" published at Washington. John Vance, who had loaned Lincoln an English grammar, had passed away, and Lincoln wrote the following note to the publishers of the Globe:

New Salem, Ills.  
Nov. 3, 1835.

Messrs.

Your subscriber at this place, John C. Vance, is dead, and no person takes the paper from the office.

Respectfully,  
A. Lincoln, P. M.

Blair and Rives

Francis Preston Blair and John Cook Rives were both to have very close contact with Lincoln in later years, but what they contributed to him through their paper was of equal importance to other services rendered. Blair was in the convention and helped to nominate Lincoln at Chicago and took active steps towards peace during the war. Rives was one of the

well-known Washington philanthropists who supported the Union cause and was of great assistance to Lincoln during the war.

The franked letter written by Matthew S. Marsh to George M. Marsh, mentioned above, carried some information about Lincoln's services as postmaster which would imply that he did not think his \$25.00 a year job demanded that he remain in the office twelve hours a day. The following excerpt gives Marsh's appraisal of the New Salem postmaster.

"The Post Master Mr. Lincoln is very careless about leaving his office open & unlocked during the day—half the time I go in & get my papers etc. without any one being there as was the case yesterday. The letter was only marked 25 & even if he had been there & known it was double, he would not charged me any more—luckily he is a very clever fellow & a particular friend of mine. If he is there when I carry this to the office—I will get him to 'Frank' it—"

Lincoln was also taken to task once for not forwarding a receipt to a man whose paper came through his office, and he replied as follows:

Mr. Spear,

At your request I send you a receipt for the postage on your paper. I am somewhat surprised at your request. I will however comply with it. The law requires newspaper postage to be paid in advance and now that I have waited a full year you choose to wound my feelings by insinuating that unless you get a receipt I will probably make you pay it again—

Respectfully,

A. Lincoln.

Received of George Spear in full for postage on the Sangamon Journal up to the first of July, 1834.

A. Lincoln, P. M.

It may have been some of Spear's money which contributed to the most familiar story associated with Lincoln's post office experience relating to the closing of the office and the tardiness with which the government representatives came around three years later to make a settlement with the former postmaster. One of the earliest versions of the story follows:

"Lincoln," as the memorandum relates the story, "responded by rising from his chair, crossing his office to an old trunk in the corner and taking from it a cotton rag tied with a string. Untying it he produced the exact amount of money demanded by the post office agent, indicating that he had held the sum intact and untouched ever since his retirement as postmaster. 'I never used any man's money but my own,' he ejaculated calmly."

Note: The Abraham Lincoln Council Boy Scouts of America at Springfield, Illinois, will sponsor two cachets on May 7, 1933, commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the commissioning of Abraham Lincoln as postmaster of New Salem.