

# LINCOLN LORE

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## EXECUTION OF THE SIOUX INDIANS

Those who believe that Abraham Lincoln issued many cruel and inhuman orders during the Civil War submit as one of the examples of his alleged atrocious acts the execution, at his command, of thirty-eight Indians. The fact that the Indians were all "executed on one platform simultaneously" and that the execution had to be postponed one week due to a shortage of rope for the hangings, has given some additional color to the gruesome spectacle.

The story of this apparently inhuman act against so large a group is usually told without any attempt to discuss the crimes committed by the Indians which resulted in so severe a penalty. The criticism of that day and time, however, was directed towards Lincoln because he did not order the hanging of three hundred Indians rather than thirty-eight. With the evidence before one it would appear to be a more difficult problem to defend Lincoln for his leniency in this matter rather than for what seemed to be a wholesale slaughter.

If Lincoln had been a man who sought to revenge casualties in his own family suffered at the hands of the Indians, a selfish motive for the issuance of this order might be found. The paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, for whom the president was named, was massacred by the Indians. Sarah Mitchell, own cousin of his mother, had been captured by the Indians, and Sarah's mother was massacred. Lincoln's mother was a witness to this tragedy. Lincoln's own father had service in a military company to fight the Indians in Kentucky and Abraham himself helped to bury some of the whites who had been killed in the Black Hawk uprising. Those who know Lincoln, however, will not admit that there was any of the spirit of revenge in him. This makes us feel he was justified in his procedure with reference to the execution of the Sioux Indians.

Excerpts from a contemporaneous report of the uprising follow:

"During the spring and early summer of 1862, reports from various sources reached the United States Government, indicating that the Indian tribes of Utah, Colorado, Dakota, and Western Nebraska would ravage the Territories and frontier States. It was said that emissaries from the Southern Confederacy had been among them, stimulating them to rise and plunder and destroy the frontier settlements; and to encourage them in this movement they were told that The United States Government was broken up by the South, and could make no resistance.

"On the 17th of August, four drunken Indians, belonging to Little Crow's band of Sioux, roaming through the country and becoming intoxicated on whiskey obtained from a white man, had a violent altercation with each other as to which of them was the bravest, and finally determined that the test of their bravery should be the killing of a white man. After committing several murders, and becoming somewhat sober, they fled to their village (Red Wood), and told their chief, Little Crow, who was one of the conspirators, what they had done. He, expecting retaliation for this outrage, at once determined upon commencing the intended attack, and on the morning of the 18th, with a force of 250 or 300 Indians, proceeded to the agency at Yellow Medicine and engaged in an indiscriminate slaughter of all the whites he could find there.

"The marauders, flushed with success, pressed on with their work of death, murdering, with the most atrocious brutalities, the settlers in their isolated farmhouses, violating and then killing women, beating out the brains of infants or nailing them to the doors of houses, and practicing every species of atrocity which their fiendish na-

tures prompted. . . . The loss of life in this insurrection has never been accurately ascertained. Gov. Ramsey, in his message, stated it in round numbers at 800, a number undoubtedly larger than subsequent facts would sustain. . . . Probably not far from 500 in all lost their lives, either through the ferocity of the Indians or from the sickness, suffering, and starvation which resulted from their hasty flight from their homes."

About five hundred Indians were made prisoners and tried by court martial. Of this number three hundred were sentenced to be hanged and the decision forwarded to President Lincoln for his approval.

It is very fortunate that Lincoln's letter to Brigadier General H. H. Sibley, then at St. Paul, Minnesota, was preserved long enough at least to allow photographic copies to be made of it, as it serves as one of the really valuable indexes to Lincoln's thoroughness in pursuing his executive duties. It is evident that the case of each one of the three hundred Indians sentenced by the court to be hanged was carefully examined by the president. In drawing up the list of those to be executed, Lincoln was not only careful to spell out the name of each condemned Indian, placing a hyphen between each syllable and also including the number on the execution order. He further guarded against any mistake by qualifying the number referring to the condemned man by the words "by the record," which appears in every instance inscribed in full. The whole document was carefully written in Lincoln's own hand. This exhibit is a copy of the salutation and conclusion of the letter:

### EXECUTIVE MANSION

Washington, December 6th, 1862.

Brigadier General H. H. Sibley  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Ordered that of the Indians and half-breeds sentenced to be hanged by the Military Commission, composed of Colonel Brooks, Lt. Colonel Marshal, Captain Grant, Captain Bailey, and Lieutenant Olin, and lately sitting in Minnesota, you cause to be executed on Friday the nineteenth day of December instant, the following named, to-wit:

"Te-he-has-ne-cha," No. 2 by the record.

(Thirty-seven other names follow in the same form.)

The other condemned prisoners you will hold subject for further orders, taking care that they neither escape, nor are subjected to any unlawful violence.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN,  
President of the United States.

It will be observed that while the military court had sentenced three hundred to be hanged, the number was reduced by the President to thirty-eight. No one ever mentions the fact that Abraham Lincoln at one time saved the lives of two hundred and sixty-two Indians, but he is usually portrayed by his unsympathetic critics as the hard-hearted executive who could issue one single order for the execution of thirty-eight Indians.

Lincoln was not only anxious that those condemned Indians whose death sentences he had not approved be held subject to further orders, but he was equally insistent that they should not be "subjected to any unlawful violence." The full signature and office of the president attached to this order gives one the impression that this document was prepared by Abraham Lincoln with great care, and signed by one who fully realized the significance of the writing.