

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD JEFFERSON

No series of discussions released through Lincoln Lore seems to have met with more favorable reception than the several monographs dealing with serious criticisms which have been brought against Lincoln. As each succeeding November brings out a new crop of political aspirants and stirs the blood of the old ones, this may be a proper time to review a story of the 1860 campaign, which holds that Abraham Lincoln brought serious charges against Jefferson for the purpose of discrediting him and his party.

The following article appeared in the Macomb, Illinois, Eagle in August, 1860, right in the midst of the campaign, and stated that it was "an extract of a speech made by Mr. Lincoln in 1844":

Lincoln on Jefferson

"Mr. Jefferson is a statesman whose praises are never out of the mouth of the democratic party. Let us attend to this uncompromising friend of freedom, whose name is continually invoked against the Whig party. The character of Jefferson was repulsive. Continually puling about liberty, equality, and the degrading curse of slavery, he brought his own children to the hammer, and made money of his debaucheries. Even at his death he did not manumit his numerous offspring, but left them, soul and body, to degradation and the cart whip. A daughter of this vaunted champion of democracy was sold some years ago at public auction in New Orleans, and purchased by a society of gentlemen, who wished to testify by her liberation their admiration of the statesman who

"Dreamt of freedom in a slave's embrace."

This single line I have quoted gives more insight to the character of the man than whole volumes of panegyric. It will outlive his epitaph, write it who may."

A copy of this clipping was sent to Lincoln by Anson G. Chester, Esq., and Lincoln replied to him as follows:

Springfield, Ills., Sept. 5, 1860.

Anson G. Chester, Esq.

My dear Sir: Yours of the 1st is received. The extract upon a newspaper slip which you sent, and which I herewith return, is a base forgery, so far as its authorship is imputed to me. I never said anything like it, at any time or place. I do not recognize it as anything I have ever seen before, emanating from any source. I wish my name not to be used; but my friends will be entirely safe in denouncing the thing as a forgery, so far as it is ascribed to me.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.

About two or three weeks after writing to Mr. Chester, Lincoln had another letter referring to the same speech apparently alleged to have been made by him in McDonough County of which Macomb was the county seat. To this inquirer Lincoln replied in these words:

Springfield, Illinois, October 1, 1860.

My dear Sir: Yours of September 21st was received some time ago, but I could not till now find time to answer it. I never was in McDonough County till 1858. I never said anything derogatory of Mr. Jefferson in McDonough County or elsewhere. About three weeks ago for the first time in my life did I ever see or hear the language attributed to me as having been used toward

Mr. Jefferson; and then it was sent to me, as you now send, in order that I might say whether it came from me. I never used any such language at any time. You may rely on the truth of this, although it is my wish that you do not publish it.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

How widely this story became circulated there is no way of learning, but it left a very erroneous impression which has lived until this day, that Lincoln had no admiration for Jefferson. In two speeches which Lincoln made in Congress in 1848 he had occasion to mention Thomas Jefferson and in both instances his remarks were complimentary.

In 1852 Lincoln was asked to deliver a eulogy on Henry Clay and near the close of his address he read a long letter by Jefferson which he felt to be very complimentary to the Virginia statesman then in retirement.

During his debates with Douglas time and time again he showed that he was sustained in his argument by Thomas Jefferson and there was always the utmost respect for the opinions of the great statesman whom he quoted as an authority on so many questions.

In April, 1859, Abraham Lincoln was invited to attend a festival in Boston in honor of the birthday of Thomas Jefferson. Although distance made the acceptance of the invitation impossible he did write a fine testimonial on Thomas Jefferson too long to be copied here. Lincoln argued that his own party now stood where Jefferson stood and Jefferson's party occupied a position contrary to the ideals of its founder. These excerpts from the conclusion of Lincoln's personal tribute to Jefferson should forever silence anyone who would question Lincoln's loyalty to Jefferson:

"Bearing in mind that about seventy years ago two great political parties were first formed in this country, that Thomas Jefferson was the head of one of them and Boston the headquarters of the other, it is both curious and interesting that those supposed to descend politically from the party opposed to Jefferson should now be celebrating his birthday in their own original seat of empire, while those claiming political descent from him have nearly ceased to breathe his name everywhere.

"Remembering, too, that the Jefferson party was formed upon its supposed superior devotion of the personal rights of men, holding the rights of property to be secondary only, and greatly inferior, and assuming that the so-called Democracy of to-day are the Jefferson, and their opponents the anti-Jefferson party, it will be equally interesting to note how completely the two have changed hands as to the principle upon which they were originally supposed to be divided...."

"But, soberly, it is now no child's play to save the principles of Jefferson from total overthrow in this nation... The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society... All honor to Jefferson—to the man, who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there that to-day and in all coming days it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression."