

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRATIONS

Seventy-five years ago today, April 16, 1859, in reply to a letter suggesting his availability as a presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln wrote, "I must in candor say I do not think myself fit for the presidency." Just how early Lincoln began to aspire to this high office it is difficult to ascertain. It does not seem improbable that, even in his childhood, with George Washington as his great ideal in life, he may have given some expression to his desire to follow in the steps of his hero.

There are some interesting traditions extant which would put Lincoln's declarations as a boy in the form of serious resolutions. Arnold in his biography claims that in Indiana Lincoln often said in a serious impressive way "I shall some day be president of the United States." Mrs. Elizabeth Crawford, who came to Indiana in 1825, claimed that on one occasion, when reproving Abe for some mischief, she asked him what he supposed would ever become of himself. He replied that "He was going to be president of the United States." A close friend of Lincoln claims that on one of Lincoln's two visits to New Orleans he visited an old fortune teller, "a voodoo negress." It is said that during the interview she became very much excited and exclaimed "You will be president and all the negroes will be free."

Upon his election to the Illinois Legislature and his subsequent removal to Springfield, the presidential aspirations of Lincoln seemed to find expression through another spokesman in the person of Miss Mary Todd. It is said that as a girl in Kentucky she used to contend that "she was destined to marry a president." Herndon claims that he heard her make this same "seemingly absurd and idle boast" in Springfield.

He also concluded that Mary Todd married Abraham Lincoln solely because he was most likely to give her, through his political preeminence, "position in society, prominence in the world, and the grandest social distinctions."

Herndon seemed to think that it was about 1840 that Lincoln himself began to have some very definite ideas that he was set apart for some brilliant career. In fact, he claimed it had been growing on Lincoln through the years.

Upon the conclusion of his first speech in the House, he wrote Herndon that he "found speaking here and elsewhere about the same." It is possible that the first aspiration toward the presidency which had any promise of fulfillment came with the opening days of his congressional term. This

illusion must have been shattered, however, as the term progressed and he received unfavorable reaction from the folks back home because of his position on the Mexican question.

It would appear that placing the name of Abraham Lincoln as a candidate for the vice-presidency before the Philadelphia Convention in 1856, at which time he received 110 votes, the second largest number cast, would at least make Lincoln feel that the presidency itself was not beyond his reach. This was also the year of the famous speech at Bloomington which Jesse K. Dubois declared put Lincoln on the track for the presidency, and he so advised Lincoln at the time.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates gave Lincoln nation-wide publicity. Here he had occasion to refer to the prominence of Douglas and then contrast his own position. He said, "All the anxious politicians of his (Douglas's) party... have been looking upon him as certain at no distant date to be the president of the United States... On the contrary nobody has ever expected me to be president." By this time, however, many people besides Mary Todd were expecting him to be president, and before the debates were over he must have come to that conclusion himself.

The first public announcement, however, that Lincoln was presidential timber for the campaign of 1860 appeared in the *Commercial Register* of Sandusky, Ohio, on November 6, 1858. The item, appearing in the editorial column, was as follows:

"LINCOLN FOR PRESIDENT

We are indebted to a friend at Mansfield (Ohio) for the following special dispatch:

Editor Sandusky Register: Mansfield, Nov. 5, 1858

An enthusiastic meeting is in progress here tonight in favor of Lincoln for the next Republican candidate for president.

Reporter."

While Lincoln undoubtedly had his attention called to this news item, a conference with Jesse W. Fell in December, 1858, may have done more to convince him of his availability. Fell had been as far east as New England and visited many other states. He told Lincoln his debates had given him a national reputation; and that, if his history and efforts on the slavery question could be brought before the people, he would become a formidable, if not a successful, candidate for the presidency.

It does not appear that Lincoln was anticipating a busy political year in 1859, as he states in a letter written February 1 that "this year he must keep close watch of the courts." He

wrote to the same man as late as March 4 that he doubted whether or not he would be able to get to Kansas due to the press of business. On April 16 he wrote a letter to Pickett in which he discouraged any concerted effort to put him forward as a candidate for the presidency which he felt would not be best for the cause.

On the 27th of April Lincoln was in the office of *The Central Illinois Gazette* when the editor suggested that he allow his name to be used as a candidate for the presidency, but Lincoln is said to have discouraged the move. On May 5, however, the paper carried an editorial endorsing Abraham Lincoln as a presidential candidate.

It was not until September, 1859, that Lincoln seemed to take the initiative in the matter. Having recently returned from a trip into Kansas and Missouri where he had made several political addresses, he accepted invitations to speak in Ohio and Indiana. Later on he went to Wisconsin for some political speeches, and in December visited Kansas and Missouri again. The trip to New York and New England the following February without question contributed much to his presidential aspirations. Up until one week before the Decatur Convention Lincoln seems to have been reluctant to make it generally known he anticipated the nomination. On April 29, 1860, he wrote a letter in which he stated "The taste is in my mouth a little" referring to his attitude towards the presidency; and to another correspondent he said, "When not a very great man begins to be mentioned for a very great position his head is likely to get a little turned."

There is no question about his attitude on May 2, when he wrote Hon. R. M. Corwin:

"First I think the Illinois delegation will be unanimous for me at the start, and no other delegation will. A few individuals in other delegations would like to go for me at the start but may be restrained by their colleagues."

On May 9, 1860, the State Republican Convention at Decatur, Illinois, passed the following resolution:

"Abraham Lincoln is the first choice of the Republican party of Illinois for the presidency and instructs the delegates to the Chicago Convention to use all honorable means to secure his nomination and to cast the vote of the state as a unit for him."

Nine days later Lincoln was nominated at the Chicago Wigwam to represent his party in the campaign of 1860 and on Tuesday, November 6, was elected president of the United States. His inauguration occurred on Monday, March 4, 1861.