

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

No. 296

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

December 10, 1934

AN APPRECIATION OF ROBERT TODD LINCOLN

One who has been at all interested in the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's life, especially as it refers to his family, must be conscious of the wise and prudent course which Robert Todd Lincoln chose with respect to his contacts with the public. There appear to have been two ways open to him. One promised rich returns, economically and socially, with little or no effort, and a life lived continuously in the public eye. The other demanded that he match his own skill and native ability with others, and sacrifice, to a very large extent, social intercourse with his fellow men. It is difficult to see how he could have chosen a middle road.

His early choice ultimately drove him into the seclusion of his home, although he was continually harassed, up to the very year of his death, by well-meaning but ambitious program builders and designing politicians.

His Public Life

The refusal of Robert Lincoln to trade on his father's name was all that prevented another father and son occupancy of the White House comparable to that which occurred in the Adams family, according to contemporary newspapers of 1884. They seemed confident that he would be the Republican presidential nominee that year, if he had allowed his name to be used; and, although great pressure was brought to bear upon him, he would not consent to it. From 1881 to 1885 he was Secretary of War and from 1889 to 1893 he was United States Minister to Great Britain. Both offices he filled in a most unassuming way but with distinction.

Robert Lincoln was admitted to the bar in 1867 by virtue of having had a thorough and adequate training for this profession. An English clergyman, who visited America, tells of calling on Robert Lincoln in his first law office at Chicago. His reaction upon meeting Robert was as follows: "There was nothing in his manner to indicate that his father had occupied a higher position than any other citizen. He is about five and twenty, modest, quiet, and unassuming."

In 1871 he was mentioned in a current magazine as being "an excellent manager and a shrewd and capable lawyer, and a systematic man of business. Those who know him best predict for him an eminent position at the bar." It was his own personal achievements which led to his being retained as a legal advisor to the Pullman Company, and his own personal reputation as an executive that caused him to be appointed administrator of the estate of George M. Pullman, whom he succeeded as president of the Pullman Company in 1897. He retained the office of president until 1911, when he resigned to become chairman of the board of directors.

His Filial Loyalty

In 1889 Herndon published his biography of Abraham Lincoln and gave a repugnant picture of Lincoln's parents and home life, which aroused Robert Lincoln to deny emphatically the truth of the statements. Documentary evidence since discovered has shown the Herndon statements to be absolutely false.

When Robert Lincoln learned that there was a possibility of a replica of the Barnard statue at Cincinnati being sent to occupy a place at Westminster Abbey, he immediately remonstrated, claiming that it was "a monstrous figure which is grotesque as a likeness of President Lincoln and defaming as an effigy." He seemed to be particularly anxious that worthy statues of his father be chosen for both Washington and London. With reference to the Barnard statue he said: "That my father should be represented to those two great cities by such a work as that of which I am writing to you would be a cause of sorrow to me personally, the greatness of which I will not

attempt to describe." It may be said his influence was primarily responsible for its rejection.

In 1909 Congress set apart \$5,000 for a bronze tablet bearing the Gettysburg Address to be placed in the Gettysburg National Cemetery. As there were several versions of the address extant, Robert Lincoln was asked to submit his opinion as to the correct version. It is apparent that the adoption of what is known as the Bancroft-Baltimore copy was finally accepted largely because of Robert Lincoln's clear and unanswerable statement that it was his father's "last and best thoughts as to the address."

These exhibits clearly reveal that, when there was called to his attention matters on which he could speak with authority, he did not withhold his testimony.

His Reverence for Family Shrines

When Lincoln visited his step-mother in Coles County, Illinois, just before leaving Springfield for Washington in 1861, he went to the burial lot of his father and "left orders for the erection of a suitable monument over his grave." With the Civil War breaking immediately, other important matters demanded his attention; and, in the press of official business, Lincoln was forced to let the matter rest. In the Fall of 1879 a benefit entertainment was given in Mattoon, Illinois, for the purpose of raising funds to erect a monument over Thomas Lincoln's grave. Only \$35.00 was realized. Upon hearing of this effort, Robert Lincoln at once gave an order to Thomas Donnell, a local monument maker, for a very fine stone of obelisk design to be placed on his grandfather's grave.

The home which the Lincolns occupied at Springfield became the property of Mrs. Lincoln upon the death of the President; and, upon her death, passed into the hands of her only surviving son, Robert. In 1887 Robert Lincoln, learning that the state desired to have the property as a museum, gave the old home of his father to Illinois.

On June 30, 1897, a joint meeting of nine state-wide patriotic and civic groups was called at Indianapolis by the Governor to perfect an organization to care for the grave of Abraham Lincoln's mother in Spencer County. A campaign was started to raise funds from members of these allied groups; but, over a period of three years, only \$56.52 was collected. In 1900 another attempt was made to raise money; and \$1,100 was collected, \$1,000 of this amount coming from Robert Lincoln.

When the bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln at Hodgenville, Kentucky, was dedicated on May 31, 1909, no provision had been made for beautifying the square in which the statue stood. The Ladies Lincoln League of the town started out to raise a sum of money for improvements. The County of Larue, the town of Hodgenville, and individual citizens of the county contributed \$1,100; but \$1,000, or nearly one-half the sum raised, was contributed by Robert Lincoln.

The Lincoln Memorial at Washington, D. C., however, gave him the most satisfaction, and he followed its construction with keen interest. A story, related by Bishop Hartzell of the Methodist Church, who was an eye witness to the incident recorded below, indicates the reverence manifested by Robert Lincoln for his illustrious father.

The bishop and Rev. Herbert Randolph of Washington were visiting the Lincoln monument. The custodian called their attention to an aged man approaching with a colored servant and remarked that it was Robert Lincoln. Upon retiring behind one of the large columns, they witnessed Robert Lincoln in deep reverence before his father's statue, as if he were at worship. Then he waved a last adieu to the cold stone face and departed. This incident is said to have occurred upon his last visit to the memorial.