

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN IN NEW ORLEANS

Abraham Lincoln never went abroad. He did go into Canada on one occasion, and had a considerable amount of controversy about Mexico, but it was New Orleans which gave him an opportunity to visualize a typical foreign city.

Even before he had an opportunity to visit New Orleans, he must have heard much about it from his father who made one trip there in 1806 and possibly others earlier than that. Thomas Lincoln would not fail to recall the story of flatboat navigation on the Ohio before the steamboats were available for transportation back up the river.

Thomas Lincoln's own memories of these eventful days would be quickened by his removal to Indiana in 1816, when he settled but a few miles back from the Ohio River and continued to live there for fourteen years. Supplementing Abraham's father's stories, would be the reminiscences of the many men along the Ohio whom the youth met after he went to work on the river as a ferry-man.

It was, however, Abraham Lincoln's own visits to the city at the mouth of the Mississippi which were remembered over a greater period of time. That these two visits made a deep impression upon Lincoln is evident from a letter which he wrote to Alexander Stevenson on July 9, 1860, nearly thirty years after his last trip to the city. The statement recalling New Orleans follows:

"When I was a boy I went to New Orleans on a flatboat and there I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky and I heard worse of the Red River plantations."

An observing youth of nineteen, however, would see more than the slave markets, and we are fortunate in having preserved some of the reminiscences of one who visited the city the same summer Lincoln was there.

A certain Col. Baillie, one-time member of the English Parliament, visited America, and his itinerary in this country took him from Washington to Vera Cruz by the way of the Ohio River. He gives this description of New Orleans as he saw it in 1828:

"New Orleans is built very like an old French provincial town; the same narrow streets, old fashioned houses and lamps suspended by a chain across the road. Many of the houses, however, are picturesque, with their large projecting roofs and painted sides and windows. . . . The population including blacks is upwards of 40,000 the greater part of which are still French, or speak only that language. The whole place has quite the air of a French town.

"There are 2 Catholic churches and one Presbyterian church for the whole population. I should suppose that New Orleans like the small town of Natchez is not famous for its morality or religious feeling. Those who come here on account of trade think only of making money as fast as they can, and trouble themselves little about other matters."

"There is a public ball here 2 or 3 times a week, which includes all of the colored ladies of the place known by the name of quadroons. Many I have seen are really very

beautiful girls; their blood is a mixture of Indian, African and French. I see many of the Indians in town every day. There was a play Sunday evening at the French theatre. Sunday is one of the regular days of performance.

"I observed in walking through the streets several large rooms fitted out as slave markets and generally filled with unhappy blacks dressed up for the occasion. The men and women are ranged on opposite sides of the apartment where they may traffic for human beings with the same indifference as purchasing a horse. New Orleans, I conclude, is a good market for this kind of human stock."

Col. Baillie was not very favorably impressed with the climate, as he was there at a very disagreeable season of the year; but, since Lincoln was in New Orleans about the same time, the colonel's reactions are of interest.

He wrote: "I cannot conceive of a more unhealthy, deadly situation than New Orleans during the last of the summer . . . bogs, swamps, morasses in every direction which they do not attempt to drain. Mosquitoes of course are abundant, even now they swarm in as bad as in the worse places in the West Indies."

The Lincoln National Life Foundation recently acquired a very interesting letter by Simon Cameron, Lincoln's first Secretary of War, which throws further light on New Orleans as Lincoln saw it. It was written from New Orleans to Dr. Sheldon Potter of Philadelphia on December 20, 1831. This was the same year as Lincoln's second visit to New Orleans.

Mr. Cameron gives his reactions to the city and allows us to see it as Lincoln saw it, through a few lines in his letter to Dr. Potter. He says:

"I like the city (New Orleans) exceedingly, the people are kind and hospitable and the place itself will some day be one of the greatest in the Union. The shipping now along the wharves far exceeds that of Philadelphia. Vessels are now waiting in port for cotton and sugar, the latter is scarce and of course rising in price in consequence of the early rains and frost injury to the cane.

"Everybody makes money here. Raw materials are all cheap and labor of every kind dear. The whole western world must come here and they do come and leave their money which is generally picked up by Yankees but they are clever Yankees.

"Next Saturday I shall go to a masquerade if I have time. On Sunday perhaps to the French Theatre. All matters of pleasure are attended to on Sunday and many of the stores are open on that day."

Cameron's reaction towards the climate was much different, however, from that of Col. Baillie, as indicated by this complimentary paragraph in his letter:

"I think this as healthy as any place along the Susquehanna. In the winter, it is healthy as any place in the world. I never was more healthy in my life."

While it may be accepted that the deepest impression left on Lincoln by his two visits to New Orleans was the witnessing of slaves sold over the auction block, it is also quite certain that economic and civic affairs in the city claimed his interest.

When the difficult adjustments with respect to New Orleans were made necessary during the Civil War, we are sure that the Chief Executive was greatly aided in the solution of many problems by his having on two occasions been in the city for short periods.