

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S SYMPATHY FOR WIDOWS

On Thanksgiving Day, 1864, Lydia Bixby, a widow living in Boston, Massachusetts, received a letter from Abraham Lincoln, in which he expressed his sympathy for the great loss she had suffered by the gift of her sons on the field of battle. The letter, according to one British authority, is now looked upon as "the most eloquent diction extant."

When Woodrow Wilson had occasion to send a message of condolence to the mothers of the marines who died at Vera Cruz, he could think of no finer sentiment than that expressed by Lincoln in the Bixby letter; and he requested copies of this letter be forwarded as the truest expression of his feelings. Henry Watterson pronounced Lincoln's correspondence to Mrs. Bixby "the most sublime letter ever penned by the hand of man."

Executive Mansion,
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.

To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.
Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,
A. Lincoln

A Widow's Last Son

A widow who may have been just as deserving of condolence as the Widow Bixby was mentioned in a note Lincoln sent to Secretary Stanton on July 15, 1862, suggesting an appointment for the woman's only remaining son. A part of the letter follows:

My dear Sir: This young man—George K. Pomroy—is the son of one of the best women I ever knew—a widow who has lost all her other children, and has cheerfully given this one to the war, and devotes herself exclusively to nursing our sick and wounded soldiers—I wish to do something for him.

A Piteous Appeal

An old lady, presumably a widow, came to Lincoln on the last day of the old year, 1862, with a grievance against the government. While any one of many other officials might have handled the case, somehow she was allowed to make a direct appeal to the President. His note to Stanton tells the story:

Dear Sir: Yesterday a piteous appeal was made to me by an old lady of genteel appearance, saying she had, with what she thought sufficient assurance that she would not be disturbed by the government, fitted up the two south divisions of the old "Duff Green" building in order to take boarders, and has boarders already in it, and others, including members of Congress, engaged; and that now she is ordered to be out of it by Saturday, the 3d instant; and that independently of the ruin it brings on her by her lost outlay, she neither has nor can find another shelter for her own head. I know nothing about it myself, but promised to bring it to your notice.

Weeping Widows

On one occasion there was a large number of deserters sentenced to be shot and the warrants for their execution

were sent to Mr. Lincoln for his approval. Upon his refusal to sign the warrants he was approached by a military officer and criticized for his refusing to support military discipline. After Lincoln heard the general through, he replied, "There are too many weeping widows in the United States now. For God's sake, don't ask me to add to their number; for I tell you I won't do it."

Patronage for Widows

There was called to Lincoln's attention on July 24, 1863, two cases where widows of fallen soldiers were seeking postmasterships. His reaction to these appeals is found in a memorandum to Postmaster General Blair:

Sir: Yesterday little indorsements of mine went to you in two cases of postmasterships sought for widows whose husbands have fallen in the battles of this war. These cases occurring on the same day brought me to reflect more attentively than I had before done, as to what is fairly due from us here in the dispensing of patronage toward the men who, by fighting our battles, bear the chief burden of saving our country. My conclusion is that, other claims and qualifications being equal, they have the better right; and this is especially applicable to the disabled soldier and the deceased soldier's family.

A Widow's Son Cleared

There are many instances where Lincoln as a lawyer befriended widows. Possibly the best-known incident was his coming to the rescue of the Widow Armstrong's son "Duff" whom he cleared of the charge of murder. His letter to Hannah Armstrong follows:

Dear Mrs. Armstrong: I have just heard of your deep affliction, and the arrest of your son for murder. I can hardly believe that he can be capable of the crime alleged against him. It does not seem possible. I am anxious that he should be given a fair trial at any rate; and gratitude for your long-continued kindness to me in adverse circumstances prompts me to offer my humble services gratuitously in his behalf.

It will afford me an opportunity to requite, in a small degree, the favors I received at your hand, and that of your lamented husband, when your roof afforded me a grateful shelter, without money and without price.

Mother of Six Fatherless Children

A prospective client once presented a situation to Lincoln in which he hoped to recover a sum of money which he alleged was due him by the widow of a man against whom he had a claim. This was Lincoln's reply in part: "I could set a neighborhood at logger heads, distress a widowed mother and six fatherless children and get you the \$600, which, for all I know, she has as good a right to as you have; but I will not do it."

Lincoln's Widowed Stepmother

After the death of his father, Abraham Lincoln became the guardian, so to speak, of his stepmother whose own son was endeavoring to get possession of her property. He wrote:

Dear Brother:

Your proposal about selling the east forty acres of land is all that I want or could claim for myself; but I am not satisfied with it on mother's account. I want her to have her living, and I feel that it is my duty, to some extent, to see that she is not wronged You propose to sell it for three hundred dollars, take one hundred away with you, and leave her two hundred at 8 per cent, making her the enormous sum of 16 dollars a year. Now, if you are satisfied with treating her in that way, I am not. It is true, that you are to have that forty for two hundred dollars, at mother's death; but you are not to have it before.