

LINCOLN LORE

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

Number 451

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 29, 1937

LINCOLN AND THE GENERAL LAND OFFICE APPOINTMENT

The patronage system in American politics has offered a means of recognizing those who have given their time and energy in contributing to the success of the party in power. Those in a position to direct this patronage, because of their personal influence with the authorities who dispense it, have always been the objects of severe criticism if it appeared that justice was not being done to those who had been most instrumental in party victories.

Abraham Lincoln, as the lone Whig congressman from Illinois, found himself in a very difficult position with respect to directing patronage at the beginning of the Zachary Taylor administration. When the Whigs were demanding the lucrative offices which were to be filled with new appointees, it was up to Lincoln to see that Illinois received her proper share of the political spoils. The office most desirable which it appeared might fall to Illinois, was the General Land Office.

Some historians of the period have felt that Lincoln desired this office for himself and have placed him in a position which reflects upon his integrity and square dealings. One who will carefully read through all the correspondence available in this field will come to the conclusion that Lincoln had uppermost in his mind, during the entire controversy over the appointment, the welfare of the Whig party in Illinois, rather than the gratification of any personal ambition.

Lincoln's term in Congress was drawing to a close about the time that Taylor took office and he received a letter from his old friend, Joshua Speed, in which the question of Lincoln's receiving some political appointment was mentioned. He replied to Speed on February 20, in these words: "There is nothing about me to authorize me to think of a first-class office, and a second-class one would not compensate my being sneered at by others who want it for themselves. I believe that, so far the Whigs in Congress are concerned, I could have the General Land Office almost by common consent, but then Sweet and Don Morrison and Browning and Cyrus Edwards all want it, and what is worse, while I think I could easily take it myself, I fear I shall have trouble to get it for any other man in Illinois."

All of the above mentioned men were from Lincoln's home state. By the first of April, however, it looked as if the office was to be lost to Illinois with Edwards as the state's leading candidate. Lincoln was under this impression and wrote that McGaughey, an ex member of Congress from Indiana, was in Washington after it. It was necessary for Lincoln to throw his strength against McGaughey, so consented to allow his name to be used in case it was, "the only way the office could be secured for Illinois, but not otherwise."

With the Indiana threat sidetracked, another more difficult problem arose with reference to the appointment. On April 25, Lincoln wrote to J. M. Lucas that he feared the Land Office was not going as it should. His theory

was confirmed by a letter from W. B. Preston on May 16 which stated "it is not impossible that Justice Butterfield would be appointed." Inasmuch as Butterfield had been opposed to Taylor's nomination and inactive in Whig politics during the last campaign, Lincoln was greatly agitated by this unjust recognition.

Lincoln had occasion, a short time before, to write to Preston with reference to advertising that was given by the administration to the opposition papers instead of the Whigs' news sheets. This had caused wide complaint. If Butterfield was appointed on top of the dissatisfaction in patronage already evident, according to Lincoln, it would cause the active Whigs to "throw down their arms and fight no more." Three days after the Preston letter was received, Lincoln wrote to Duff Green about the probability of Butterfield's appointment and said "This ought not to be." He furthermore advised Green "Some of my friends think I ought to be an applicant but I am for Edwards."

Lincoln wrote several letters in which he made it clear that the appointment of Butterfield would be "an egregious political blunder." Reluctantly he found himself drawn into the fight at the ninth hour to try and prevent the Butterfield appointment by allowing his own name to be used. He advised Richard Thompson to suggest to the President "that either I or the man I recommend should be appointed." He was successful in getting the decision postponed for three weeks and immediately set out for Washington to plead the cause of the active Whigs, as opposed to the drones who seemed to be receiving the patronage. He could not prevent at that late hour, however, the appointment of Butterfield.

It is apparent that Lincoln was very much misunderstood with respect to his attitude towards his candidacy for the office as he wrote to Joseph Giles on July 13, 1849: "Mr. Edwards is angry with me, and in which he is wronging me very much. He wrote a letter against me and in favor of Butterfield."

A few months later it was discovered that some of the letters of recommendation on Lincoln's behalf which had been forwarded to Washington had been suppressed and as late as August 9, 1850, Lincoln was in correspondence with John Addison who knew about the suppressed letters. In this letter he told Addison, "I would" not now "accept the Land Office if it were offered to me." The letter now in possession of the Lincoln National Life Foundation gives evidence that Lincoln knew of irregularities in the proceedings with reference to the Land Office appointment but would take no action because he feared the Whig cause might be injured.

If Lincoln had wanted this office at the outset for himself, there is no question but what he could have had it. The keen disappointment he suffered by the ultimate loss of it on behalf of others was occasioned by a party loyalty rather than any personal ambition.