

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 464

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

February 28, 1938

CABINET BUILDING IN 1861

It is doubtful if there has ever been more speculation as to who would be given portfolios in a president's cabinet than was evident upon Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency. Within twenty-four hours after the votes had been counted, Lincoln had selected in his own mind the seven men he would prefer to have associated with him in the management of government affairs and with one or two exceptions, these were the men finally appointed. The diplomacy he used, however, in keeping these names to himself until they were proposed by others caused much guessing as to the final selections.

The leading newspapers of the country were soon busy in assisting Lincoln to build his cabinet and their prospective lists included most of the outstanding political leaders in the country who were at all in sympathy with the new administration.

The Chicago correspondent of the New York Herald, supposed to have inside information about the selections, named: Colfax of Indiana; Bates of Missouri; Judd or Ogden of Illinois; Shenk, Corwin, or Piatt, all of Ohio; Stephens of Georgia; Stevens of Pennsylvania and Ashmun of Massachusetts. The correspondent further advised that "Seward would not be offered a post." Out of a total ten guesses he picked one.

The very day after Abraham Lincoln received assurance that he had been elected President of the United States, he wrote to Vice-President-Elect Hamlin, with respect to a conference at which time they might talk over the building of a cabinet, along with other important matters which would need attention.

Seward

On December 8, Lincoln enclosed in a letter to Hamlin some notes to Governor Seward, which he asked Hamlin to read and forward if he had no reason to withhold them. One was a formal invitation for Seward to take charge of the State Department; the other an informal note in which Lincoln stated, "It has been my purpose from the day of nomination at Chicago to assign you, by your leave, this place in the administration." It therefore appears that Lincoln's most outstanding rival at the Chicago Convention was probably Lincoln's first choice as a cabinet member.

Seward took three weeks to consider the invitation to become a member of the official family, which greatly retarded Lincoln's approach to the other prospective cabinet members, but he finally accepted the portfolio of Secretary of State on December 28. That the appointment of Seward was not entirely satisfactory, even in his own state, is evident from the following letter which Lincoln wrote to Lyman Trumbull in reply to a remonstrance: "Yours of the 2nd is received. I regret exceedingly the anxiety of our friends in New York, of whom you write; but it seems to me the sentiment in that state which sent a united delegation to Chicago in favor of Gov. Seward ought not and must not be snubbed, as it would be, by the omission to offer Gov. S. a place in the Cabinet."

Cameron

With the acceptance of Seward the next problem which called for solution was the Simon Cameron appointment and evidently Lincoln immediately telegraphed Cameron to come to Springfield as he was there on December 31, just three days after Seward replied. When Cameron left Springfield he carried with him a letter which stated: "I think fit to notify you now that by your permission I shall at the proper time nominate you to the United States Senate for confirmation as Secretary of the Treasury, or as Secretary of War—which of the two I have not yet definitely decided. Please answer at your earliest convenience."

Unbeknown to Lincoln, and without his authority, evidently some agreement had been made at the Chicago Convention between the friends of Lincoln and the friends of Cameron that, in case Lincoln should secure the nomination, Cameron should have a place in the cabinet. One cannot imagine the volume and severity of criticism heaped upon Lincoln for this appointment. It was not until weeks later, however, that the question was permanently settled with Cameron being given the office of Secretary of War.

Chase

On the very day Cameron had visited Springfield, December 31, Lincoln also wrote a brief note to Chase, which reveals the urgency with which Lincoln was pursuing his task: "In these troublous times I would much like a conference with you. Please visit me here at once." Four days later Chase arrived in Springfield. It is apparent that it took much explaining on Lincoln's part to account for the long interval which had elapsed between the election and the letter urging a conference. Only a frank explanation by Lincoln of the dilatory reply from Seward reconciled Chase. After Mr. Lincoln had assured Chase that had Seward declined the post as Secretary of State, he had him in mind for the office, was Chase willing to consider the appointment as Secretary of the Treasury. Notwithstanding the fact that Lincoln had complained to Chase about Seward taking so long to make a decision, Chase also took plenty of time to think it over, so that it was several weeks before his confirmation as Secretary of the Treasury was available.

Bates

The first personal conference which Lincoln had with a prospective Cabinet member after his election was with Edward Bates on December 15. Three days later Lincoln wrote to Bates asking him to let the following editorial appear in the *Missouri Democrat*: "We have permission of both Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Bates to say that the latter will be offered, and will accept, a place in the new cabinet, subject of course, to the action of the Senate. It is not yet definitely settled which department will be assigned to Mr. Bates." There seemed to be general satisfaction over Bates' appointment and inasmuch as the portfolio he was to receive was not specifically designated, it served as an excellent foundation for Lincoln's Cabinet building.

Smith

It would appear that Lincoln was not very anxious to pay the obligations which his friends had made, without his permission at Chicago and so it required some pressure to be brought by the friends of Caleb B. Smith before the office of the Secretary of the Interior was offered to him. Another fact which made Lincoln hesitate to make the appointment was the eligibility of Schuyler Colfax, also a Hoosier. Although on January 27, Lincoln made known his desire for "the utmost privacy" during the interval before leaving for Washington, he was besieged by delegations from Indiana urging Smith's appointment to the Cabinet and it was finally done.

Blair

On December 18, 1860, Montgomery Blair wrote to Lincoln with reference to publishing a public letter. Lincoln had already been in correspondence with J. A. Gilmer about the same matter and neither Blair nor Gilmer, whose minds seemed to be reacting towards Lincoln's policy in the same manner, knew that a choice between them would be made for a cabinet portfolio. Seward was not in favor of Blair but Gilmer did not respond enthusiastically when he was offered a cabinet position so it finally was offered to Blair.