

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 509

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 9, 1939

COOPER INSTITUTE PRELIMINARIES

No single event contributed more to the nomination of Abraham Lincoln as the Republican candidate for the Presidency than his address at the Cooper Institute in New York, and no incident preliminary to his nomination so greatly embarrassed him during the days following the address as the fact of his having received a sum of money for his address.

The Lincoln National Life Foundation has recently acquired a remarkable collection of contemporary source material collected by Cephas Brainerd, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Young Men's Republican Union. The manuscripts, broadsides, campaign pamphlets, periodicals, circulars, clippings, and so on, now available, allow one to approach with some degree of accuracy just what did occur with respect to the preliminary arrangements for Lincoln's appearance at Cooper Institute in February, 1860.

James A. Briggs of Brooklyn, on behalf of the Plymouth Lecture Course which was presented during the winter in Beecher's church, wrote to Mr. Lincoln with reference to his appearing as one of the speakers and mentioned that they would pay him two hundred dollars, enough to take care of his expenses and a small honorarium.

In the correspondence that followed it was suggested by Mr. Lincoln that if time would not permit his preparing a formal lecture he might have to speak on a political subject, and on November 13, 1859 he wrote to Mr. Briggs as follows:

"I will be on hand and in due time will notify you of the exact date. I believe after all that I will make a political speech of it. You have no objection? I would like to know in advance whether I am also to lecture or speak in New York".

Lincoln did not receive any advance notice that the lecture, supposed to be delivered in Beecher's church in Brooklyn, had been announced for Cooper Institute in New York, and it was not until he arrived that he learned a change of meeting-place had been made.

The address was held at Cooper Institute, and the usual Plymouth Lecture Course fee of twenty-five cents was charged for admission. The occasion was a tremendous success which aroused two different political groups to action. One group was the Central Republican Campaign Club which was especially interested in the candidacy of Mr. Seward.

Supplementing to some degree the lecture course in Brooklyn, the Young Men's Republican Union of New York had invited speakers to address them. As early as 1857 the Honorable Cassius M. Clay had delivered to them an address for which an admission price was asked. In January, 1860, one month before Lincoln's appearance, the Honorable Frank P. Blair gave at Cooper Institute one of the "pay political lectures" as the Union called them.

It is not strange that Lincoln's speech, also given in Cooper Institute where the Young Men's Republican Union held forth, would be associated by many with their organization. When Mr. Lincoln began to be received with some favor in New York as a possible candidate for the presidency, because of the address, the supporters of Seward took occasion in one of their meetings to attempt to discredit Lincoln for receiving a fee for a political address and to give a general condemnation of the policy of the Young Men's Republican Union which they associated with Lincoln's visit.

Mr. J. A. Briggs who had corresponded with Mr. Lincoln about his Brooklyn engagement happened to be in Clinton Hall where the Central Republican Campaign Club had convened, and when the criticism of Mr. Lincoln was made he arose to defend him in these words:

"Mr. Lincoln was in no manner responsible for what occurred, and he did not come here at all under the auspices of the Young Men's Republican Union; but he was invited to deliver a lecture in the Plymouth course, in Beecher's church, at Brooklyn, and to select his own subject. It was known afterwards, however, that he would speak on a political subject, and the managers of the affair concluded instead of having it in Mr. Beecher's church to have it in Cooper Institute, where more people could hear it". Mr. Briggs continued that: "So far as charging for Republican addresses was concerned, he did not approve of it; but he would not sit still and hear Mr. Lincoln arraigned, because he was innocent of any improper conduct".

The other group which tried to make capital out of the Cooper Institute incident was the opposition party which published critical statements about Lincoln's fees for political speeches.

On the twenty-third of March C. F. McNeil wrote to Lincoln, enclosing a clipping from an eastern paper which stated that Lincoln had charged two hundred dollars for a political address. These facts Lincoln admitted in a letter to Mr. McNeil:

"Last October I was requested by letter to deliver some sort of speech in Mr. Beecher's church, in Brooklyn—two hundred dollars being offered in the first letter. I wrote that I could do it in February, provided they would take a political speech if I could find time to get up no other. They agreed; and subsequently I informed them the speech would have to be a political one. When I reached New York, I for the first time learned that the place was changed to 'Cooper Institute'. I made the speech, and left for New Hampshire, where I have a son at school, neither asking for pay, nor having any offered me. Three days after a check for two hundred dollars was sent to me at New Hampshire; and I took it, and did not know it was wrong. My understanding now is—though I knew nothing of it at the time—that they did charge for admittance to the Cooper Institute, and that they took in more than twice two hundred dollars".