

LINCOLN LORE

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THE IMPOUNDED LINCOLN MANUSCRIPTS

Four locked and sealed boxes of Lincoln manuscripts in the Library of Congress which are not to be opened until July 26, 1947, promise to become the nation's most mysterious treasure chests. They contain the personal papers of Abraham Lincoln, and approximately ten thousand different items are said to be included in the collection.

A story by Nicholas Murray Butler, appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* for February 11, 1939, and relating to the preservation of these historic writings, has greatly increased the public interest in the impounded manuscripts. Much speculation has been aroused about the character of the writings.

Someone has suggested that the papers contain information that there was under way a conspiracy to wreck Abraham Lincoln's policies and to eventually achieve his assassination, but Mr. Butler rejects this theory. He does, however, create a new ghost to haunt future biographers and then throws a veil of secrecy about the mysterious parchments. Mr. Butler believes that "the letters contain records and evidence of various happenings in Abraham Lincoln's own life and family which it is just as well not to make public."

The above statement apparently was made by Mr. Butler in answer to his own question, "Why did Robert Lincoln want to burn these family letters?" There may be discovered in the account of the conference which Mr. Butler had with Mr. Lincoln a clue which might suggest a different answer to this interesting query.

Mr. Butler states that in August 1923, after having spent considerable time abroad, he visited Robert Lincoln whom he had been advised was about "to burn a lot of his father's papers." After remonstrating with Mr. Lincoln against such proceedings, in which it was pointed out that "those papers belong to the nation," Mr. Butler says that Robert consented to their preservation with the understanding that no one should see them while he lived. Whereupon Mr. Butler remarked: "Very well. Then deposit them in the Library of Congress and fix a date before which they shall not be opened."

Apparently Mr. Butler is not aware that his advice about impounding the writings for twenty-one years had already been anticipated by Robert Lincoln eight months before Mr. Butler offered the suggestion. In a deed dated January 23, 1923, conveying certain family papers to the government, Robert Lincoln provided . . .

"That all of said letters, manuscripts, documents and other papers shall be placed in a sealed vault or compartment and carefully preserved from official or public inspection or private view until after the expiration of twenty-one (21) years from the date of my death." . . .

The gift was excepted by the government on the same day the deed was made.

If it was not the urging of Butler, which caused Lincoln to impound the family papers as early as January 23, 1923, some other consideration must have motivated him. We learn that, on the very same day the documents were deeded to the government, Lincoln wrote a letter to Albert Beveridge in which he refused to allow the Senator to use the family papers as source material for the new book. It is to be regretted that Mr. Butler did not see fit to print this written reply of Mr. Lincoln to Mr. Beveridge, as a copy of the letter apparently is in his files. It would have been much more interesting than the copy of the letter of Mr. Lincoln to Mr. Butler, inasmuch as we may infer that Robert Lincoln told Mr. Beveridge in this letter why he could not use the papers. Mr. Lincoln advises Mr. Butler that after the reply to Senator Beveridge had

been read that Mr. Butler would fully appreciate his (Mr. Lincoln's) position in the matter. The public also would have been interested in knowing the attitude of Robert Lincoln as stated in this unpublished letter.

One would not admit that a coincident of dates establishes a point of argument, but one logical conclusion would be that the primary reason why the Lincoln papers were put out of circulation by the requirements of the deed made in January 1923, was to prevent Beveridge from gaining access to them at that time or at any other time.

Possibly a more interesting question than the one raised by Mr. Butler about why Lincoln wished to impound the papers or burn them, is the explanation of his willingness to snatch them out of the fire, as it were, so soon after they were sealed. This he did on January 16, 1926, less than three years after the alleged attempt to destroy some of them. Surely the contents had not been changed during this period.

Under the date above mentioned Robert Lincoln wrote a letter to Dr. Putnam of the Library of Congress from which correspondence this excerpt is made:

"It is now my desire to modify the condition of the above deed with regard to inspection of these papers, and I do hereby modify it, so as to give access to said papers to my wife, Mary Lincoln, and to vest in her power and authority at any time during her life or until the expiration of the 21 years from my death to grant a permit to examine said papers to any person or persons who, in her judgment and discretion, should have permission to make such an examination."

It would not appear from this modified requirement, which would make the papers available to any student whom his wife might designate, that the twenty-one year clause was of tremendous importance, but it was apparently important that some member of the family should decide who would have the privilege of inspecting the papers.

Upon getting drift of how Senator Beveridge was developing the earlier chapters of his Lincoln biography and hearing that the same old Herndon traditions about the President's parents were again to be aired, it is likely Robert made his modified provisions to meet this emergency. Evidently Robert concluded if he passed away his wife would then have the authority to make the papers available to students who by their use would be able to refute the erroneous opinions which might grow out of further use of the Herndon papers. With the death of Robert Lincoln's wife, however, the papers became definitely impounded until 1947.

It is common knowledge among Lincoln students that Robert Lincoln was bitterly opposed to the use of the Herndon manuscripts by any one who was attempting to write an authentic biography of his father. Both the Lamon and the Herndon-Weik books had caused him much grief because of the wholly unreliable information which had been published about the President's parentage and childhood.

Miss Ida M. Tarbell had an interview with Robert Lincoln about the papers and he told her, "There is nothing of my father's there that is of value—Nicolay and Hay have published everything; but there are many letters to him which if published now would pain, would possibly discredit useful men still living." It is not expected that any family skeletons will jump out at one or that a new biography of Abraham Lincoln will have to be written when the "secrets in ink" are made available for research in 1947.