

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

Just one month to a day after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, a correspondent of the *New York World* sat in Abraham Lincoln's office chair in the White House and jotted down some observations. His comments are of much interest as they help one to visualize the room in which the President lived most of the time for four long years.

Mrs. Lincoln, a mentally broken woman, was still occupying the White House and inasmuch as she did not vacate the premises until a week later very few things in the President's office had been disturbed. A few excerpts from the correspondent's account of his visit give one a good description of the White House office during the war.

"Washington, May 14,

"I am sitting in the President's office. He was here very lately, but he will not return to dispossess me of this high-backed chair he filled so long, nor resume his daily work at the table where I am writing. There are here only Major Hay and the friend who accompanies me. A bright-faced boy runs in and out, darkly attired, so that his fob chain of gold is the only relief to his mourning garb. This is little Tad, the pet of the White House. That great death, with which the world rings, has made upon him only the light impression which all things make on childhood. He will live to be a man pointed out everywhere for his father's sake; and as folks look at him the tableau of the murder will seem to encircle him. The room is long and high, and so thickly hung with maps that the colour of the wall cannot be discerned. The President's table, at which I am seated, adjoins a window at the farthest corner; and to the left of my chair, as I recline in it, there is a longer table before an empty grate, around which there are many chairs, where the Cabinet used to assemble. The carpet is trodden thin, and the brilliance of its dyes is lost. The furniture is of the formal cabinet class, stately and semi-comfortable. There are book-cases, sprinkled with the sparse library of a country lawyer, but lately plethoric. Like the thin body which has lately departed in its coffin, they are taking away Mr. Lincoln's private effects, to deposit them wheresoever his family may abide, and the emptiness of the place on this sunny Sunday revives that feeling of desolation from which the land has scarce recovered. I rise from my seat and examine the maps; they are from the Coast Survey and the Engineer Departments, and exhibit all the contested ground of the war; there are pencil lines upon them where someone has traced the route of armies and planned the strategic circumferences of campaigns. Was it the dead President who so followed the march of empire, and dotted the sites of shock and overthrow? . . .

"There is but one picture on the marble mantel over the cold grate—John Bright—a photograph. I can well imagine how the mind of Mr. Lincoln often went afar to the face of Mr. Bright, who said so kindly things of him when Europe was mocking his homely guise and provincial phraseology . . . I see some books on the table—perhaps they have lain there undisturbed since the reader's dimming eyes grew nerveless—a Parliamentary manual, a Thesaurus, and two books of humour, 'Orpheus C. Kerr' and 'Artemus Ward.' These last were read by Mr. Lincoln in the pauses of his hard day's labour . . . Out-

side of this room there is an office, where his Secretaries sat—a room more narrow, but as long—and opposite this adjunct office a second door, directly behind Mr. Lincoln's chair, leads by a private passage to his family quarters. This passage is his only monument in the building. He added or subtracted nothing else. It tells a long story of duns and loiterers, contract hunters, and seekers for commissions, garrulous parents on paltry errands, toadies without measure, and talkers without conscience. They pressed upon him through a great door opposite his window, and, hat in hand, came curtseying to his chair, with an obsequious 'Mr. President!' If he dared, though the chief magistrate and commander of the army and navy, to go out by the great door, these vampires leaped upon him with their Babylonian pleas, and barred his walk to his hearthside. He could not insult them, since it was not in his nature, and perhaps many of them had really urgent errands. So he called up the carpenter and ordered a strategic route cut from his office to his hearth, and perhaps told of it after with much merriment. Here should be written the biography of his official life—in the room where have concentrated all the wires of action, and whence have proceeded the resolves which vitalized in historic deeds. But only great measures, however carried out, were conceived in this office. The little ones proceeded from other places . . .

"The White House has been more of a Republican mansion under his control than for many Administrations. Uncouth guests came to it often, typical of the simple Western civilization of which he was a graduate, and while no coarse altercation has ever ensued the portal has swung wide for four years . . .

"He was a good reader, and took all the leading New York dailies every day. His Secretaries perused them and selected all the items which would interest the President; these were read to him and considered. He bought few new books, but seemed ever alive to works of comic value; the vein of humour in him was not boisterous in its manifestations, but touched the geniality of his nature, and he reproduced all that he absorbed to elucidate some new issues, or turn away argument by a laugh . . .

"His domestic life as like a parlour at night time, lit by the equal grate of his genial and uniform kindness. Young Thaddy played with him upon the carpet; Robert came home from the war and talked to his father as to a schoolmate. He was to Mrs. Lincoln as chivalrous on the last day of his life as when he courted her. I have somewhere seen a picture of Henry IV of France riding his babies on his back; that was the President. So dwelt the citizen who is gone—a model in character, if not in ceremony, for good men to come who will take his place in this same White House, and find their generation comparing them to the man thought worthy of assassination. I am glad to sit here in his chair, where he has bent so often, in the atmosphere of the household he purified, in the sight of the green grass and the blue river he halloed by gazing upon, in the very centre of the nation he preserved for the people, and close the list of bloody deeds, of desperate flights, of swift expiations, of renowned obsequies which I have written, by inditing at his table the goodness of his life and the eternity of his memory."