

LINCOLN LORE

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PECULIARITIES IN LINCOLN'S PENMANSHIP

Back in the schoolroom again, meticulous teachers will soon be warning careless students to dot the "i" and cross the "t". Pupils may wonder who started the dotting and crossing nuisance which makes one pause after every other word to decorate two or three sophisticated members of the alphabet family. It would have been better to have urged the children of long ago to open the "e" and the "l" and forget the dotting and crossing. This would have allowed the hand to continue uninterrupted in its flow of words and the mind to function unimpaired, without continually checking and re-checking dots and crosses.

Lincoln succeeded fairly well during his early life in dotting the "i" and crossing the "t", but as time went on, he usually allowed the dot to fall where it would, if he made one at all. Often the cross intended for the "t" trailed behind like a pennant, crossing several letters; in most instances where "th" was used, the "h" was crossed instead of the "t". Possibly this apparent carelessness should not be called a peculiarity in Lincoln's handwriting, as a large per cent of the adult population dot and cross letters at random.

A study of the penmanship of Lincoln's cabinet members reveals some interesting evasions as well as some extraordinary accentuations of the dot and cross system. McCulloch used as few crosses as possible, only seven of sixteen of these letters being crossed in one epistle, while Smith scratched the whole page with his crossings which often extend over two whole words. Stanton crosses the "t" with much care, and Seward often crosses the letter so lightly that it is hardly discernible. Usher like Smith gives a flourish to the crossing which makes it especially noticeable.

On August 25, 1850 Lincoln wrote a letter to the Honorable William Martin which was characteristic of his writing at this time. The original letter in possession of Oliver R. Barrett is presented in facsimile in this issue of *Lincoln Lore*.

Springfield, Aug: 25- 1851.

Hon: Wm Martin

Dear Sir.

Our New-York depositions are here; and our court commences to-day — Send me, instanter, the minutes of organization, the news-paper publications of the calls, and a witness to prove all by — Mr Ferguson is thought to be the person for a witness—I telegraph you now; but lest there should be a slip, I write also —

Yours as ever

A. Lincoln

Possibly the most noticeable peculiarity in Lincoln's handwriting was the use of a dash in the place of a period at the end of a sentence. Although it was not used consistently, we do find it as early as 1839 in Lincoln's correspondence. It will be observed that in the Martin letter there are four sentences, and each one is followed by a dash. In Kirkham's grammar which Lincoln studied at New Salem, Lincoln undoubtedly read that "the dash, though often used improperly by hasty and incoherent writers may be introduced with propriety where the sentence breaks off abruptly; where a significant pause is required; or where there is an unexpected turn in the sentiment." Lincoln must have learned to use a dash instead of a period in his writing as a child before he studied Kirkham's text, and found much difficulty in breaking away from this primitive custom.

On one occasion Lincoln is reported to have said, "I have great respect for the semi colon; it is a mighty handy little fellow." Apparently he also had great respect for

the colon but no respect for the period. He not only used a dash in place of a period, but also a colon in place of a period, as is evident in the specimen letter after the abbreviations for August and Honorable.

After an abbreviated word it has been shown that Lincoln for good measure put in two periods in vertical position, i.e., a colon, but after the initial "A" in his own signature he invariably added,

although not without exception, another period in a horizontal position. Thus there appear after the "A", standing for Abraham, two small dots.

Among the many thousands of autographs in the collection of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, we have yet to find one by an individual who consistently used two periods instead of one in horizontal position after an initial. Possibly the fact that his given name was such a long one encouraged this custom.

The placing of dots after his initial "A" began as early as 1832 and is especially noticeable during all his early years. After coming into the Presidency where he was compelled by statute to sign his full name to official papers, there seems to be a tendency to break away from the use of the double punctuation mark. The two periods after the initial "A", however, will always remain the most outstanding characteristic of Abraham Lincoln's handwriting.

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