

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PEACE COMMISSIONERS

Seventy-five years ago this month a concerted effort was made to bring the war between the North and the South to a close through compromise. Negotiations which began just before the New Year came in, were concluded just after the month of January had come to a close without accomplishing the desired end. The effort put forth, however, is of interest to all students of history and especially so at this time of military unrest in Europe.

Nine men were more or less involved in the proceedings: Francis P. Blair, Sr., the original promoter of the plan, President Lincoln, Secretary Seward, and General Grant representing the North; and President Davis, three commissioners, Messrs. Stephens, Hunter, and Campbell, and General Lee representing the South.

Francis P. Blair, Sr., an influential politician, conceived the idea of becoming a mediator between the divided parts of the Union. On December 24, 1864, President Lincoln upon the request of Mr. Blair, signed a pass which he worded as follows:

"Allow the bearer, F. P. Blair, Sr. to pass our lines, go South and return."

It will be observed from the note that President Lincoln did not invest Blair with any governmental authority but that the envoy went wholly on his own responsibility. Blair had in mind what has become known as the Mexican Project which he felt would appeal to both sides in the struggle. He proposed that, inasmuch as slavery was now doomed, the North and South forget their differences to unite in driving an European power out of Mexico.

In conference with President Davis, a commission to confer with President Lincoln was suggested, and a note was given to Mr. Blair in which President Davis said:

"I would, if you could promise that a commissioner, minister, or other agent would be received, appoint one immediately, and renew the effort to enter into conference, with a view to secure peace to the two countries."

Lincoln did not take kindly to the Mexican Project which was looked upon as a "joint filibustering foray," but he did open the doors of negotiation a little wider in the hope that the ultimate objective could be agreed upon. He wrote in part to Mr. Blair on January 18:

"I have constantly been, am now, and shall continue ready to receive any agent whom he (Davis) or any other influential person now resisting the national authority, may informally send to me, with the view of securing peace to the people of our one common country."

It will be observed that President Davis spoke of "the two countries" while President Lincoln mentioned "our one common country." Mr. Blair, not yet willing to give up his "joint invasion of Mexico" project, thought that General Lee and General Grant might declare an armistice which would pave the way for joint movements, but this did not materialize.

The Blair private mission did pave the way, however, for two conferences. In the first one the South was represented by the Confederate officials, Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens, Senator R. M. T. Hunter, and Assistant Secretary of War John A. Campbell; the Union was represented by Secretary Seward. In a memorandum prepared for Secretary Seward, the President had noted three definite requisites.

"First. Restoration of the national authority throughout all the states.

"Second. No receding by the executive on the slavery question from the position assumed thereon in the late annual message to Congress and in preceding documents.

"Third. No cessation of hostilities short of an end of war, and the disbanding of all forces hostile to the Government."

Nothing came of this conference, but a dispatch from General Grant, who had made arrangements for the conference at Fortress Monroe, contained this suggestion:

"I fear now their (southern commission) going back without any expression from anyone in authority will have a bad influence . . . I am sorry, however, that Mr. Lincoln cannot have an interview with the two named in this dispatch (Stevens and Hunter) if not all three now within our lines."

President Lincoln decided to go at once to Hampton Roads, and then on board the *River Queen* entered into a four hour conference with the commissioners and Mr. Seward. It was agreed that no writing or memorandum should be made at the time of the conference. We have the reminiscences of the southern commissioners who later reported Mr. Lincoln's relations to five different subjects which were discussed:

I. Reconstruction. "When the resistance ceased and the national authority was recognized, the Southern states would be immediately restored to their peculiar relation to the Union."

II. Confiscation. "He (Mr. Lincoln) should exercise the power of the Executive with the utmost liberality."

III. The Emancipation Proclamation. "Mr. Lincoln said that was a judicial question . . . the proclamation was a war measure, and would have effect only from its being an exercise of the war power. As soon as the war ceased it would not be in operation for the future."

IV. Division of Virginia. "Mr. Lincoln said he could only give an individual opinion which was that western Virginia would continue to be recognized as a separate state in the Union."

V. The Thirteenth Amendment. On this question Mr. Seward is said to have mentioned that Congress had passed but not ratified the Amendment rather implying that the immediate relief of the southern states would prevent the immediate abolition of slavery.

On February 8 Congress asked President Lincoln to submit a report of the Hampton Roads conference, and two days later he submitted the correspondence which he had carried on with Mr. Blair as well as other dispatches referring to the incident. There was also filed by Secretary Seward an informal report of what took place at the second conference at Hampton Roads. He submitted some of the various points raised for discussion as follows:

1. The declaration of an armistice.
2. A review of the anti-slavery policy.
3. The ultimate results of the Emancipation Proclamation.
4. The restoration of national authority.
5. The liberal policy of the Chief Executive.
6. Congressional action in view of the Constitution.
7. The amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery.

This second conference with Lincoln present did not result in any agreement for peace, and after President Davis had reported the results of the conference to the Confederate Congress, he (Davis) urged a renewed offensive on their military fronts.