

LINCOLN LORE

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PRELIMINARIES TO THE GOOD FRIDAY TRAGEDY

The fact that Abraham Lincoln was attending a theater performance on the evening of Good Friday, 1865, at which time he was assassinated, has had a tendency to cause many people to draw a wrong conclusion as to Lincoln's attitude towards church observances and to question his respect for organized religion. Many pious people have felt that he should not have been in a playhouse on a Good Friday.

It must be remembered that the assassination of Abraham Lincoln occurred seventy-five years ago and during the intervening period a remarkable change has taken place in the practices of many Protestant church bodies with respect to their attitude towards certain church festivals. There was a tendency long ago among the evangelical church groups, especially those on the frontiers of American civilization, to break away from all formalities in worship, even to the negligence of the observance of holy days. This was particularly true of the Baptists, Disciples, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and others whose early log cabin structures and simple frame buildings discouraged ritualistic services.

It is very doubtful if Abraham Lincoln as a youth ever saw Good Friday being celebrated in the churches with which he was familiar, and it is very certain that Lent was never observed by his parents. It is only in the last few years that the evangelical churches have featured pre-Easter services in their church programs, and in 1865 there was very little emphasis placed on Good Friday by those religious bodies in the Indiana and Illinois country where Lincoln grew up.

One who is at all acquainted with the deeply religious nature of Abraham Lincoln would conclude that it was farthest from Lincoln's thoughts that he would offend anyone by attending the theater on Friday, April 14, 1865. The atmosphere of "Happy Easter" clearly overshadowed any emphasis which might have been placed on the memory of the death of Christ. This was especially true in the light of recurrent events in which victory and peace had come to the North after four long years of war. A festival of rejoicing was in order which would apparently disperse even the gloom of the sad religious rites of Friday observed by a few religious bodies.

One may search in vain through the reminiscences of those who recall any conversation about the theater party arrangements, for the slightest mention of Good Friday or the least inkling of a feeling that it would be improper to attend the theater on the evening of Good Friday. There was at that time far more feeling against theater attendance in general than in participating in any kind of festivities on Good Friday.

James R. Ford, business manager of Ford's Theatre, testified that on the morning on Friday, April 14, at half-past ten o'clock "A young man, a messenger from the White House, came and engaged the box." Mr. Ford said the President had previously been invited to attend the theater that night but no reply was received until Friday morning.

The manager of Glover's Theatre had also extended the President an invitation to attend the performance at his playhouse, but the fact that the comedy at Ford's was a benefit production and the title "Our American Cousin" had a patriotic atmosphere probably caused the Lincolns to select Ford's.

In the *National Republican* for April 14 the following announcement appeared in an issue Friday afternoon:

"Lieutenant General Grant, President and Mrs. Lincoln and ladies will occupy the state box at Ford's Theatre tonight to witness Miss Laura Keene's Company in Tom Taylor's *American Cousin*."

The advertisement in the *Washington Evening Star* for April 14 read:

"Lieut. Gen'l Grant, President and Mrs. Lincoln have secured the state box at Ford's theatre tonight to witness Miss Laura Keene's *American Cousin*."

Very early Friday morning, April 14, Mr. Lincoln sent the following note to General Grant:

"Please call at 11 A. M. to-day instead of 9 as agreed last evening."

If the time of Grant's appointment had not been changed and he had arrived at the White House before the Ford's Theatre reservation was made at 10:30, it is very likely no theater party would have been planned. The Lincolns would have been advised that the Grants would not be able to attend as both were to be out of the city by evening.

Lincoln is said to have told William Crook, a guard, with reference to going to the theater, "It has been advertised that we will be there, and I cannot disappoint the people. Otherwise I would not go. I do not want to go." Noah Brooks, who talked with the President just before his departure for the theater, also stated that Lincoln was "inclined to give up the whole thing" and then commented that, inasmuch as the theater party had been advertised, he consented to go "rather than that people should be disappointed." It was also noted in one of the papers that a special song in honor of the soldiers would be presented.

One is reminded of a statement made by an early biographer about Lincoln having read a certain book which he had not read, but which he immediately secured and read that the statement might be correct. It seems quite clear indeed that the presence of Mr. Lincoln at Ford's Theatre on the evening of April 14 was chiefly due to the fact that the papers said he would be there.

The seventy-fifth anniversary of Lincoln's assassination occurs this year, and it has seemed timely on the approach of Good Friday, the day on which Lincoln was assassinated, to write some few words in defense of Lincoln's apparent disrespect for the day. One may be assured that, if custom in 1865 had placed so much emphasis on the observance of the day as is placed on the Lenten season and its holy days in the year of our Lord 1940, there would have been no theater party arranged by the Lincoln family on Good Friday.