

# LINCOLN LORE

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## STANTON AT LINCOLN'S BEDSIDE

The name of Edwin A. Stanton appears in the story of Abraham Lincoln's assassination more often than that of any other character except the assassin himself. The dispatches which Stanton sent from the bedside of Lincoln that fateful April night seventy-five years ago, brought to the people of the United States the most tragic news that the nation has ever read.

Notwithstanding the recent attempts to make it appear as if Stanton himself was the moving figure who instigated the assassination plot, the statement which he made at the hour of the President's death, that Lincoln belonged to the ages, will outlive any malevolent remarks about Lincoln's Secretary of War.

It would seem timely on this seventy-fifth anniversary of Lincoln's death to record the activities of Stanton from the time he learned of Lincoln's assassination, a short time after 10:30 on Friday night, April 14, until the President breathed his last at 7:22 A. M. on the following day—a period of approximately nine hours.

After Stanton reached his home that fateful Friday evening, he spent some time playing with his children in a back room of his residence. He was just preparing to retire when a messenger brought him the news of an attack on Secretary Seward. He immediately set out for the Secretary's home, and it was there that he first learned of Lincoln's assassination.

Secretary Welles states in his diary that he had just retired about 10:30 when a messenger, James Smith, came to the door and announced that the President had been shot and Secretary Seward and his son assassinated. Welles dressed and went immediately to Seward's home which was just across the square from his own residence. He found a large crowd of people assembled in front of the place, the lower hall and office were full of people, and there were already three physicians in attendance upon the injured men.

Welles made note that Stanton arrived at the Seward home "after but almost simultaneous with me." Following the visit to the rooms of Seward and his son, Welles and Stanton made immediate preparations to go to Lincoln. General Meigs, the military authority in charge at the Seward house, "begged Stanton not to go down to Tenth Street," and Welles also claimed that the remonstrators gathered around Stanton and, after he had placed his foot on the step of the carriage, detained him and pleaded with him not to go. Just as they were leaving Major Eckert rode up on horseback beside the carriage and protested vehemently against Stanton's going to Tenth Street, as he considered it "very unwise for the Secretary of War to expose himself." To all these entreaties Mr. Welles states that Stanton said he should certainly go.

It must have been approaching 11:00 when Stanton arrived at the Petersen home where the body of Lincoln had been taken. One of the first moves Stanton made after visiting the room where the President reposed was to send a message for Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, to come to him immediately. Dana states that upon his arrival at the Petersen House all the members of the Cabinet and the Chief Justice were already there, and Stanton began immediately to dictate orders to him one after another. A paragraph from Dana's reminiscences gives one some idea of the load which fell on Stanton's shoulders. He states:

"Mr. Stanton alone was in full activity. . . . Then he began and dictated orders, one after another, which I wrote out and sent swiftly to the telegraph. All these orders were designed to keep the business of the Government in full motion until the crisis should be over. It seemed as if Mr. Stanton thought of everything, and there was a great deal to be thought of that night. The extent of the con-

spiracy was, of course, unknown, and the horrible beginning which had been made naturally led us to suspect the worst. The safety of Washington must be looked after. Commanders all over the country had to be ordered to take extra precautions. The people must be notified of the tragedy. The assassins must be captured. The coolness and clearheadedness of Mr. Stanton under these circumstances were most remarkable."

One of Stanton's biographers, Frank Flower, gives in further detail some of the tasks which involved upon Stanton during those early morning hours:

"He sent for several army officers to act as aides; directed General Thomas M. Vincent (assistant adjutant-general) to take charge of affairs in the Petersen building; telegraphed to General Grant at Philadelphia that Lincoln had been shot and to return at once to Washington; issued orders, oral and written, to the police and military authorities of the District to be prepared for emergencies; telegraphed to Chief Kennedy of New York to send on his best detectives immediately; ordered General L. C. Baker to return from New York to search for the assassins."

But Dana was not the only scribe whom Stanton was keeping busy during those exciting hours. James Tanner, employed as a stenographer at the Capitol, was immediately summoned by General Augur. Chief Justice Carter of the Supreme Court of the district had come to the Petersen house with Stanton from the Seward home, and had already set up a court of inquiry when young Tanner arrived. This is Tanner's story of the proceedings:

"General Augur conducted me into the rear parlor, where I found Secretary Stanton sitting at one side of the small library table and Chief Justice Carter of the supreme court of the District at the end. They had started in to take what testimony they could regarding the assassination, having someone write it out in longhand. This had proved unsatisfactory. I took a seat opposite the secretary and commenced to take down the testimony. . . . We had Harry Hawk, who had been on the stage, Laura Keene, and various others before us. No one said positively that the assassin was John Wilkes Booth, but all thought it was he.

"Many distinguished people came in during the night. Our work was often interrupted by reports coming in to Secretary Stanton and more often interrupted by him when he halted the testimony to give orders. Through all that awful night Stanton was the one man of steel.

"I finished transcribing my notes at 6:45 A. M. and then passed back to the room in the L where the President was dying.

"I repeat, Stanton had been steel all through the night, but as I looked at his face across the corner of the bed and saw the twitching of the muscles I knew it was only by a powerful effort that he restrained himself and that he was near a break."

John Hay, personal secretary of Abraham Lincoln, wrote a letter to Stanton on July 26, 1865, which is now preserved in the Library of Congress. It is irrefutable testimony of the esteem in which the President held Edwin A. Stanton, his Secretary of War, who carried on at the bedside of his chief to the last hour. An excerpt from the letter follows:

"If any human names are to have the glory of this victory, it belongs to you among the very few who stood by the side of him who has gone to his better reward, and never faltered in your trust in God and the people.

"Not every one knows as I do how close you stood to our lost leader, how he loved you and trusted you, and how vain were all the efforts to shake that trust and confidence not lightly given and never withdrawn, and this will be known sometime of course to his honor and yours."