

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 613

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 6, 1941

## LINCOLN'S NEW YEAR RESOLUTION IN 1841

One of the most dramatic and important romances in American history has been so distorted in its essential features that both of the principals in the affair have been made to appear as cowardly or scheming creatures with no real affection for each other. No one would recognize the real Abraham Lincoln and the real Mary Todd in the stories which have been told about their courtship and marriage.

The episode in the Lincoln-Todd romance which has been most grossly exaggerated occurred on January 1, 1841, just one hundred years ago. While we may never know the exact details of what occurred on that day, careful students of Abraham Lincoln are all agreed that William Herndon's account of the supposed wedding scene is a fantastic story based on a passing inference and evolved into a chapter of fiction by his own imagination.

Herndon claimed that the wedding day of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd was set for January 1, 1841, at the Edwards mansion, the wedding supper had been prepared, the guests were assembled, "the bride bedecked in veil and silken gown" was ready for the ceremony, but "Lincoln, the principal in this little drama had purposely failed to appear."

It is beyond the comprehension of any one familiar with the character of Lincoln to cast him in the roll of one given to cowardice and deception to such an extent that he would plan to humiliate Mary and the best friends he had in Springfield by such an act. On the other hand those who may be familiar with the sensitive and highly emotional Mary Todd are firmly convinced that if Lincoln had ever deserted her at such a time, he would never have had a second chance to lead her to the altar, as he finally did on November 4, 1842.

Aside from these conclusions which may safely be drawn with reference to the respective attitudes of the two parties involved, there is much valid evidence available which would completely nullify any such episode as Mr. Herndon described. No invitations were ever issued for the wedding, no marriage license was ever secured, no disappointed wedding guest has ever recorded any such marriage farce. Furthermore, no such event could have occurred in the town of Springfield with a member of the legislature as the principal actor without the story becoming part of the community gossip, and an everlasting bludgeon in the hands of Lincoln's political opponents.

The most convincing evidence against the whole story is the fact that Herndon himself never heard of the episode until an inference was made by Mrs. Edwards whom he interrogated twenty-five years after the incident is said to have occurred, yet Herndon was living in the same building with Lincoln at the very time the event was supposed to have taken place.

Ida M. Tarbell interviewed many of the people still living in 1896 who would be best informed about any such scandal as a groom running away from his wedding ceremony. Three relatives of Mary Todd, a sister, Frances Todd Wallace, another sister, Emily Todd Helm, and a cousin, Mrs. Grimsley, all emphatically denied that any such episode as described by Herndon ever occurred. Mrs. Wallace and Mrs. Grimsley were residents of Springfield.

Lincoln's law partner at the time of the traditional wedding was John T. Stuart. His wife told Miss Tarbell that she never heard of such an incident, and further continued, "I do not believe one word of this dishonorable story about Mr. Lincoln." Mrs. Joshua Speed, widow of the one man in whom Lincoln actually confided, when interviewed by Miss Tarbell claimed she had never heard

of the story as related by Herndon. Mrs. B. T. Edwards, a sister-in-law of Mrs. Ninian Edwards and a close friend of Mary Todd, wrote to Miss Tarbell, "I am impatient to tell you that all that he (Herndon) says about this wedding—the time for which it was fixed, for the first day of January—is a fabrication. He has drawn largely upon his own imagination."

It may also be said that Mrs. Ninian Edwards made no mention of the incident in a subsequent Herndon interview some years later, although she talked about the romance of Abraham and Mary. It would appear that a single inference about Lincoln's failure to "meet his engagement" which Herndon drew from her conversation should not be allowed to stand in the face of direct evidence from individuals who most certainly would have known about such a sensational breach of etiquette as related by Herndon.

If Abraham Lincoln had run away from his own wedding where many guests were assembled to witness the ceremony, it is improbable that the very next day he would have occupied his seat in the Legislature then convening in Springfield. Certainly he would not have made such a dramatic appearance after so humiliating an exhibition, consequently we would say that Lincoln's presence in the Legislature the next day is positive proof that whatever occurred on January 1, 1841, in the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd was known to themselves alone with the possible exception of the information which Lincoln conveyed to his friend Joshua Speed.

After reading letters which Abraham Lincoln wrote to Mary Owens previous to the Mary Todd courtship, and letters which he wrote to Joshua Speed after the breaking of the engagement, and other contemporary letters written by friends which refer to the estrangement of Lincoln and Miss Todd, one must feel certain that whatever did happen on January 1, 1841, left neither one with unkind feelings toward the other. No written word of either Lincoln or Mary, and there are many references, is other than sympathetic in its import.

From the Speed and Edwards sources we feel safe in concluding that Lincoln made a New Year Resolution on January 1, 1841, to break his engagement with Miss Todd. Speed is probably right in stating that when Lincoln broke the news to her she burst into tears and he soon found tears trickling down his own face. Then he is said to have told Speed, "I caught her up in my arms and kissed her." According to Mrs. Edwards, "On the following day Mary wrote a note to Mr. Lincoln releasing him from the engagement." Feeling he had greatly wronged Mary, Lincoln passed through a long period of almost complete mental exhaustion. It was indeed a fatal first of January for Abraham Lincoln.

### DR. WARREN'S ANNUAL ITINERARY

The editor of "Lincoln Lore" while on his annual speaking itinerary would be pleased to meet any of his Lincoln friends who may be living in or near the cities where he is to speak on the days cited. The schedule of his local engagements may be secured at the offices of The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company in the following cities: Amarillo, Texas, January 20, 21, 22; El Paso, 23, 24, 25; Phoenix, Arizona, 27, 28; San Diego, California, 29, 30; Los Angeles area, January 31, February 1-12; San Francisco and Oakland, 13-21; Portland, Oregon, 24, 25; Seattle, Washington, 26, 27, 28; Spokane, March 3, 4; Salt Lake City, Utah, 6, 7, 8; Denver, Colorado, 10, 11; St. Louis, Missouri, 15, 16, 17, 18; Kansas City, Missouri, 19, 20, 21; Wichita, Kansas, 24, 25; Omaha, Nebraska, 26, 27, 28; Des Moines, Iowa, March 31, April 1.