

# 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 615

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 20, 1941

## LINCOLN'S COMMENTS ON ITALY

Our disturbed diplomatic relations with Italy have brought to notice again a letter said to have been written by Abraham Lincoln in 1853 to the scientist Macedonio Melloni. Some weeks ago an Italian newspaper *Il Corriere* published at Yonkers, New York, printed the letter in full and made some comment on its significance. Later a copy of the paper containing the letter was forwarded to the Lincoln National Life Foundation, asking for criticism with respect to the genuineness of the letter.

It is claimed the document was used to influence Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. The document was first made public, however, in 1920 when a dispatch from Paris dated May 1 appeared in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, announcing that a letter written by Abraham Lincoln in 1853 had been found in the archives of the Melloni family at Modena and that Countess Zucconolini was then in possession of the reputedly original copy.

Again in 1931 a United Press dispatch from Rome dated November 19 stated that a letter written by Abraham Lincoln to the scientist Macedonio Melloni had been discovered. The *New York Times* published the story on the following day and noted that the letter was owned by Nino D'Altham, a relative of the original recipient. The dispatch said that the Historical Society of the Italian Renaissance ordered that photostatic copies be distributed to libraries and historians all over the world.

Lack of space will not permit the printing of the entire letter in *Lincoln Lore*, but it may be found in Emanuel Hertz, *Abraham Lincoln, A New Portrait*. (pp. 623-625.)

A few excerpts from the letter follow:

(Springfield, Illinois, 1857)

"My dear Melloni:

"Humboldt has given me the message you sent me through Mr. Faraday, of your desire to have my thoughts concerning the political reorganization of Europe. I admire all you have suffered for science and still more what you have suffered for the independence and liberty of your beloved country. . . .

"We were all on the road to the forming of a single race when suddenly there fell upon the civilized world that epoch of deep darkness, that epoch of barbarism, obscuring the glorious light of immortal, eternal Rome—that Rome which had given civilization to the entire world, that Rome which has even made America a civilized nation and which has nourished us morally by her indisputable laws, that Rome which in my opinion will be, in the more or less distant future, the luminous capital of the United States of Europe. It is criminal to obstruct the normal course of the development of nations and block the foundation of the future United States of Europe. . . .

"As to the Albanians, they are Italians and nothing else, the same as the Sicilians and the inhabitants of the southern part of your peninsula. When you Italians were already civilized we Americans had not yet been born. . . .

"Two empires in my opinion are destined to disappear from the face of the earth to make place for the birth of free and independent nationalities. I mean the British empire and the Austrian empire which are indeed historical absurdities or, if you like better the expression, ethnical paradoxes. The universal confederation of human consciences must triumph.

"Napoleon once said that Europe would either become republican or Cossack. She must not become Cossack. . . .

"Science teaches us that our politics should end all the forms of imperialism which weigh as a great cloud on the human race. This then would be true civilization. Yours,

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

Although the authenticity of the letter was immediately questioned, the official publication of the National Italian Historical Society published a special edition on January 11, 1932, confirming the genuineness of the letter and challenging anyone to prove it otherwise.

American Lincoln students, even before reading the body of the document, branded the letter a forgery on four external counts: the date, the opening salutation, the addressee, and the signature. In 1853 when the letter is alleged to have been written, Lincoln had temporarily withdrawn from politics and was traveling the Eighth Judicial Circuit on the prairies of Illinois. The opening salutation is rather too familiar to have been used by Lincoln at any time. A careful search gave no evidence that Lincoln ever had an opportunity to know the famous scientist to whom the letter was addressed before the year 1853. In signing his personal correspondence previous to his election to the Presidency, Lincoln is not known to have used his full signature. He always signed A. Lincoln.

Aside from the observations in the examination of the external evidence, the internal evidence also proved conclusively that the letter was a forgery. One of the provinces mentioned in the correspondence dated 1853 did not come into existence until 1860. The use of certain words such as "Cossack," instead of the word "Russian," seems not to have been used in Lincoln's vocabulary, and the diction throughout the letter is not comparable to Lincoln's simple manner of expression.

Later, government authorities in Rome brought charges against Giuseppe Leonida Capobianco, an attorney, for forging state documents. He is the same person who wrote some preliminary statements associated with the Italian translation of the Lincoln letter.

It would now appear that influence at Versailles was the motive for the forgery and that Capobianco had something to do with the composition of the original letter, which by the way has never been submitted in the handwriting of Lincoln.

Rather than make this copy of *Lincoln Lore* entirely negative, we are presenting a reply made by Abraham Lincoln on July 23, 1864, to the Italian minister, Bertinatti, at Washington. Although Lincoln may not have composed this statement, he most certainly addressed Bertinatti as follows:

"Mr. Commander Bertinatti: I am free to confess that the United States have in the course of the last three years encountered vicissitudes and been involved in controversies which have tried the friendship and even the forbearance of other nations, but at no stage in this unhappy fraternal war in which we are only endeavoring to save and strengthen the foundations of our national unity has the king or the people of Italy faltered in addressing to us the language of respect, confidence, and friendship. We have tried you, Mr. Bertinatti, as a charge d'affaires and as a minister resident, and in both these characters we have found you always sincerely and earnestly interpreting the loyal sentiments of your sovereign. At the same time I am sure that no minister here has more faithfully maintained and advanced the interests with which he was charged by his government. I desire that your countrymen may know that I think you have well deserved the elevation to which I owe the pleasure of the present interview.

"I pray God to have your country in his holy keeping, and to vouchsafe to crown with success her noble aspirations to renew, under the auspices of her present enlightened government, her ancient career, so wonderfully illustrated in the achievements of art, science, and freedom."