

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 675

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 16, 1942

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE DISCIPLES

Nearly every religious body has gathered evidence purporting to show that at sometime Abraham Lincoln came in contact with its denomination and was more or less influenced by its teachings. There has appeared in the *Christian Evangelist* for March fifth and March twelfth, comments which would imply that Mr. Lincoln was baptized by a clergyman of the Disciples, Church of Christ, Christian Church, or profanely called Campbellites. Two or three facts about the Lincoln family's interest in the Disciples might be observed before the more controversial subject of Abraham's baptism is discussed.

Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809 the same year that the Disciples originated as a separate religious body. His formative years were also spent in the states of Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois, where this American born church was showing its most healthy growth. It is also a matter of record that Abraham Lincoln's father and step-mother were affiliated with the Disciples in Illinois. There has been preserved the testimony of Rev. Thomas Goodwin, minister of the Christian Church at Charleston, Illinois, with which organization Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln were affiliated. In referring to Thomas, the father of the President, Mr. Goodwin observed: "He was a consistent member through life of the Christian Church or Church of Christ, and was as far as I know always truthful, conscientious and religious."

Frederick D. Power, for many years an outstanding clergyman of the Disciples and one time minister of the Vermont Avenue Christian Church in Washington, D. C., told on both lecture platform and in personal interview, an interesting conversation he had about Lincoln's religion with Jeremiah S. Black, Attorney General in the Cabinet of President Buchanan. Mr. Black told Mr. Power that "Lincoln made all arrangements for his own immersion but was later deterred by the opposition of his wife."

Possibly this reminiscence may be associated with the story which appeared in the *Evangelist* stating that G. M. Weimer of Chicago talked with Brother John O'Kane, former state evangelist of Illinois for the Disciples, about the baptism of Abraham Lincoln, and reported Brother O'Kane's conversation in these words:

"Yes, Brother Weimer, I know all about the affair. On the night before Lincoln was to be baptized his wife cried all night. So the matter was deferred as she thought. But soon after Lincoln and I took extra clothing and took a buggy ride. I baptized him in a creek near Springfield, Illinois. We changed to dry clothing and returned to the city, and by his request I placed his name on the church book. He lived and died a member of the Church of Christ."

The *Christian Standard*, another religious publication circulated among the Disciples, in an issue of January 21, 1911, presented the reminiscences of W. H. Morris, one of the early ministers of the Disciples Church and a soldier in the Union Army from 1861 to 1865. W. R. Lowe in reporting his conversation with Morris makes this statement in part:

"He told me that in 1862, while his regiment was in Washington, or just across the river in Arlington Heights, he held a protracted meeting of about two weeks, during which he baptized many of the soldiers of his regiment. Mr. Lincoln and his Cabinet attended his meeting. Mr. Lincoln and Secretary Stanton attended nearly every night, and, near the close of his meeting, Mr. Lincoln came to him and said: 'Morris, do you think it necessary for every person to be baptized?' He replied: 'It is not a matter of think-so with me! It is a matter of revelation.

Jesus said, 'Go and teach all nations, etc. . . . ' When he had made these quotations from the old Book, Mr. Lincoln said: 'Well, Morris, I look at this matter just as you do, and I intend to attend to it.' Bro. Morris says he thinks from what he saw that Secretary Stanton and other members of his Cabinet persuaded him to defer the matter for the time being, and he never had a favorable opportunity after that, or, at least, he never attended to it."

The *Evangelist* and the *Standard* have not always agreed in the past and it is quite evident that the claims set forth by the contributors referring to Lincoln's baptism are in disagreement on several points. The time of Lincoln's decision to be baptized is in variance. The *Evangelist* version places it sometime after Lincoln's marriage, but the *Standard* makes it as late as 1862. The *Evangelist* cites Springfield, Illinois as the probable place of conversion, but the *Standard* avers that it was at Washington, D. C. The *Evangelist* claims Lincoln was baptized but the *Standard* says he was not. The *Evangelist* states that Lincoln's wife objected to the ceremony, but the *Standard* says it was the cabinet members who did the opposing. The *Evangelist* affirms that Lincoln joined the Church but the *Standard* says he did not. The *Evangelist* claims that Lincoln lived and died a member of the Christian Church, but the *Standard* is not on record as to what was the end of Lincoln.

C. W. Cauble in his book on "Disciples of Christ in Indiana" published in 1930, unwittingly antedates both the *Evangelist* and the *Standard* in suggesting an earlier contact of Lincoln with the Disciples. In a group of illustrations opposite page 96, Mr. Cauble reproduces a picture of a log cabin in which he claims that the Central Christian Church of Indianapolis was organized. Any Lincoln student will immediately recognize the picture as a likeness of the Lincoln birthplace cabin. Although we would not imply that Mr. Cauble thought the Central Christian Church was organized in the home of Abraham Lincoln, it is a strange coincidence that on the same page with the Lincoln cabin there also appears the picture of John O'Kane who organized the Indianapolis Church and who is said to have baptized Abraham Lincoln. If Abraham Lincoln ever had his name placed on the record book of the Christian Church at Springfield, it is very likely the people of the city would have known it, for besides Baker, many of Lincoln's friends were members of this congregation. Furthermore the name of John O'Kane does not appear in a list of ministers who served the church from 1835 to 1836 and by what authority he placed Lincoln's name on the church register it is difficult to ascertain.

It is evident that Lincoln was well acquainted with the Disciple movement as there was a strong congregation of this religious body in Springfield, Illinois when he first settled there. There had also been a Christian Church established at Clary's Grove, near New Salem in 1834, with fifteen members, in fact there were eleven Christian churches in Sangamon County by 1840.

There is but one instance on which Abraham Lincoln is known to have mentioned the Disciples in writing. He had occasion in 1842 to explain some support in an election given to one of his local political opponents and said, "Baker is a Campbellite, and therefore, as I suppose with few exceptions got all that church. . . . as to his own church going for him, I think that was right enough. . . ."

Mrs. Lincoln on several occasions is said to have stated that her husband never affiliated with any church and it is quite likely she knew as much about it as anyone.