

LINCOLN LORE

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SUBSTITUTING FOR LINCOLN

It is not known, generally, that there served in the Union Army a soldier by the name of J. Summerfield Staples who at the President's request became his substitute in the ranks of the Union Army. The two provisions in the draft law which called for the most severe criticisms were the privileges which allowed a drafted man, to substitute \$300 for himself, or to substitute another man for himself. It was under this last provision that the President, although exempt from the draft by virtue of his office as Commander in Chief of the Army, desired to be represented by a substitute.

Lincoln prepared a discussion in 1863 in which he explained the purpose of these enactments about money and men substitutes which seems so undemocratic to us today. Even Lincoln felt then that the inequality suggested by the practice could "only be perfectly cured by sweeping both provisions away." It may be of interest to present verbatim Lincoln's opinions on the bounty system. They were prepared about August 15, 1863.

"Much complaint is made of that provision of the conscription law which allows a drafted man to substitute three hundred dollars for himself; while, as I believe, none is made of that provision which allows him to substitute another man for himself. Nor is the three hundred dollar provision objected to for unconstitutionality; but for inequality, for favoring the rich against the poor. The substitution of men is the provision, if any, which favors the rich to the exclusion of the poor. But this, being a provision in accordance with an old and well-known practice in the raising of armies, is not objected to. There would have been great objection if that provision had been omitted. And yet, being in, the money provision really modifies the inequality which the other introduces. It allows men to escape the service who are too poor to escape but for it. Without the money provision, competition among the more wealthy might, and probably would, raise the price of substitutes above three hundred dollars, thus leaving the man who could raise only three hundred dollars no escape from personal service. True, by the law as it is, the man who cannot raise so much as three hundred dollars, nor obtain a personal substitute for less, cannot escape; but he can come quite as near escaping as he could if the money provision were not in the law. To put it another way: is an unobjectionable law which allows only the man to escape who can pay a thousand dollars made objectionable by adding a provision that any one may escape who can pay the smaller sum of three hundred dollars? This is the exact differ-

ence at this point between the present law and all former draft laws. It is true that by this law a somewhat larger number will escape than could under a law allowing personal substitutes only; but each additional man thus escaping will be a poorer man than could have escaped by the law in the other form. The money provision enlarges the class of exempts from actual service simply by admitting poorer men into it. How then can the money provision be a wrong to the poor man? The inequality complained of pertains in greater degree to the substitution of men, and is really

Inscription on tombstone at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania:

"J. Summerfield Staples,

a Private of

Co. C., 176 Regt., P. V.

Also a Member of the

2 Reg. D. C. Vols., as a
Substitute for

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Died Jan. 11, 1888

Aged 43 Years, 4 Mos., 25 Days."

modified and lessened by the money provision. The inequality could only be perfectly cured by sweeping both provisions away. This, being a great innovation, would probably leave the law more distasteful than it now is."

One of the more humane workings of this substitute system is to be found in the case of a father who desired to substitute for a son who had enlisted under age. He talked with Lincoln about it who later wrote to Major General Meade.

"Bannister wants to take his son's place and have the boy discharged and sent home to his mother, who is back there alone. I can see no objection, if it would not be subversive to discipline in your army, to discharging the boy and taking the father in his place. If this meets with your views I would like it done."

There is no evidence that Lincoln made undue display of the fact that he had secured a substitute to represent him in the ranks and the incident is seldom given attention in Lincoln biographies. It was not unusual for some outstanding men too old for service, or who were not subject to draft, to desire to be represented in the army and it is evident Lincoln wished to encourage the appeal for representative recruits.

Mildred Emery Jones, in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* for December

1940, gives a list of a few of the celebrated men who followed Lincoln's example in supplying substitutes: "Alexander Agassiz, Edward Everett, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell and John G. Palfrey of Massachusetts, R. E. Fulton of New York, J. K. Morehead and David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, Justin S. Morrill of Vermont, Joshua F. Speed of Kentucky and William B. Allison of Iowa."

Thirty years ago Bernard Y. Cigrand gathered some facts about Staples and interviewed one of his comrades who tells about Lincoln's selection in these words:

"According to my recollection, in the fall or late summer of 1864 Mr. Lincoln had a committee of citizens of the District of Columbia search for as perfect a specimen of physical manhood as could be found to become his representative recruit. This committee, or some of them, met my dear comrade (Staples) on the streets of Georgetown, and seeing his superbly compact form, and being at once satisfied that he was the man worthy to be Lincoln's representative in the army, they made a proposition to him, and the loyal boy—for he was but a boy—at once signified his desire to fill the honorable position. He was soon afterward introduced to President Lincoln, and the latter gladly chose him as his representative."

J. Summerfield Staples was born in Monroe County, Pennsylvania on August 14, 1845. He was a descendant of John Staples, a Revolutionary War soldier and a son of John L. Staples, an ordained minister of the Methodist Church, who in 1864 was Chaplain of the Second Regiment, District of Columbia Volunteers. Young Staples, on November 3, 1862, when but seventeen years old enlisted as a private and was honorably discharged in 1863 because of physical disabilities due to typhoid fever. He was convalescing by April 1864 when he appeared in Washington and was selected by Mr. Lincoln as his substitute.

Staples' enlistment as the President's substitute is recorded as of October 1, 1864 and credited to the third ward of the District of Columbia. Two days later, fitted out in his new uniform, in company with his father and government officials he called on the President and received his good wishes. Staples served for eleven months in Company H, 2nd Dist. of Columbia Infantry and for three months was stationed at Briggs Barracks, Alexandria, Virginia. It was at Alexandria where he was mustered out on September 12, 1865, five months after the President for whom he was substituting had expired.