

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN UNDER GUNFIRE

The military strategy of Robert E. Lee on one occasion brought Abraham Lincoln under gunfire at Fort Stevens, within two miles of where the President spent his summers at the Soldiers' Home in Washington. Grant was slowly advancing upon Richmond in July 1864 and Lee felt that he might be able to divert Grant's attention to some other front. With this purpose in mind he sent Gen. Jubal A. Early and 30,000 men up the Shenandoah Valley to make a direct attack on the city of Washington from the north. If success and failure can be computed in terms of hours, it might be said that Early came within twenty-four hours of capturing the National Capitol. It was this offensive move that brought Lincoln within range of Confederate guns, but it did not cause Grant to be drawn from his supreme objective.

Historians have been so busy condemning General Lew Wallace for his part in the trial of Lincoln's assassins that they have placed little emphasis upon the fact that possibly more than anyone else General Wallace was responsible for delaying General Early during those costly twenty-four hours which apparently stood between him and success at Washington. The heroic stand of General Wallace's greatly outnumbered hundred-day-men at Monocacy on July 8 delayed the progress of Early long enough so that reinforcements from Grant's army arrived in Washington about the time Early's troops appeared before the Capital City.

On Sunday, July 10, Lincoln sent a telegram to Baltimore with respect to the advancing Confederate Army in which he stated, "By latest accounts the enemy is moving on Washington. They cannot fly to either place. Let us be vigilant, but keep cool."

Irrespective of the fact that the enemy was marching on the city, instead of staying at the White House that very evening, Lincoln as was his custom, during the hot summer months, went to spend the night at the Anderson Cottage which was on the direct line of march into the city. Early and his troops were but a few miles away. Fearful for Lincoln's safety, Secretary Stanton insisted that the President return to the White House. On the following morning the Confederate troops continued their march on to Washington.

It was on the afternoon of Monday, July 11, that Rhodes' division of Early's troops arrived within sight of Fort Stevens which protected the Seventh Street entrance to the city, and they were immediately brought in line for an attack. Just at this time, however, about 600 Union soldiers were seen by Early to file into the fort. After sending out a fringe of skirmishers the Union forces opened fire from all the batteries and the contest for the Capital City was on.

That afternoon shortly after General Early saw a column of blue-coated soldiers file into the fort, General Wright with two divisions from the Army of the Potomac arrived in Washington and Lincoln was at the wharf to meet them as they disembarked from the transports.

The stories about Lincoln's appearance at Fort Stevens, how he behaved, what those in command said to him and his own reaction toward the episode are rapidly approaching the status of folklore.

Lincoln was at Fort Stevens on both days that Early's men were before the city. In fact he may have made more than one trip to the Fort on each day. It is known that he visited several other fortifications on the outskirts of the city with Secretary Seward. According to Nicolay and Hay: "He saw the first shots exchanged in front of Fort Stevens, and stood in the Fort, his tall figure making him a conspicuous mark until ordered to withdraw."

If he saw this first engagement it must have been on that Monday afternoon, and it is observed that at this time he was ordered to seek protection behind the fortifications when he unduly exposed himself to the enemy sharpshooters.

On the morning of the twelfth, General Wright sent out Bidwell's brigade to scatter some Confederate skirmishers who had established themselves in a house and orchard on the Silver Spring road. It was this engagement between the Union and Confederate troops that usually is referred to as the one Lincoln saw at Fort Stevens and where it is said that he so persistently endangered himself that he was finally ordered to come within the protecting walls of the Fort. There are many different versions as to just what happened and just what orders were given and what was said, but of this fact we are sure that Lincoln was under gunfire on the morning of July 12, 1864, at Fort Stevens.

Nicolay and Hay gave this version of Lincoln's behavior at the time of the Tuesday morning engagement: "On the 12th when Bidwell's brigade marched in perfect order, out of the works to drive the enemy from the Rives house, the President again stood, watching, with that grave and passive countenance, the progress of the fight amid the whizzing bullets of the sharpshooters, until an officer fell mortally wounded within three feet of him and General Wright preemptorily represented to him the needless risk he was running."

General Wright who was in command of the troops at Fort Stevens gave this version of Mr. Lincoln's presence there on July 12:

"During the morning President Lincoln arrived on the scene in his carriage, accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln. . . . He sent his wife back and when I mounted the parapet, there he was beside me, looking out upon the scene with a great deal of interest. The enemy's sharpshooters were firing pretty closely, and I explained to him that the place was entirely too dangerous for him.

"'It is not more dangerous for me than it is for you,' he replied coolly.

"'But it is my duty to be here while it is your duty not to expose yourself. Your position requires this, and I particularly request you to remember it.'

"Just then a sharpshooter's bullet struck a surgeon who was standing near the President and I became really alarmed for his safety and I have no doubt a little excited, as I said firmly:

"'Mr. President, you must really get down from this exposed position. I cannot allow you to remain here longer and if you refuse I shall deem it my duty to have you removed under guard.'

"'I suppose the absurdity of my threatening to put the President of the United States under arrest amused him, for he smiled, looked at me quizzically and got down behind the parapet, where I provided him with an ammunition box for a seat, but he wouldn't sit still a minute at a time and was constantly stretching up his long form to see what was going on, thereby exposing fully half of himself to danger in spite of all I could do; and thus he continued to bob up and down until the action was over, when he cheered lustily along with the rest and bidding us good night, got into his carriage and rode away home.'

The spot where Lincoln was standing at Fort Stevens is now marked with a bronze tablet portraying General Wright, the wounded Assistant Surgeon Crawford, and President Lincoln under gunfire.