

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLN-SHIELDS DUEL, A CENTURY AGO

The one-hundredth anniversary of the duel which was planned to have been fought by Abraham Lincoln and James Shields falls on tomorrow, September 22, 1942. No episode in Lincoln's whole life is so full of the combined elements of the ludicrous and the serious, and no event more surely brought to a climax his matrimonial quest. With so much of the dramatic atmosphere prevailing throughout the proceedings, it is not strange that folklore and tradition have done much to contribute to the confusion of the whole affair.

Politics

There is substantial evidence that Simeon Francis, editor of the *Sangamo Journal*, was indirectly responsible for the political controversy which eventually led to the difficulty between Shields and Lincoln. Roy P. Basler, writing in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* for June 1942, presents acceptable evidence that Francis wrote the first and third installments of the series of "Rebecca" letters appearing in the *Journal* which were largely responsible for the challenge being issued.

The first "Rebecca" letter stated that Shields, the state auditor, was about to send out a circular with instructions that the currency of the State Bank would not be received for the payment of state taxes and such a circular was issued by Shields on August 20, 1842 and published in the *Journal* on August 26.

The day after the letter appeared, following the lead of Francis, Lincoln wrote a comment which not only explored the same subject but heaped ridicule on the state auditor as well. Lincoln signed with the same pseudo-signature used by Francis, "Rebecca," and the letter was published in the *Journal* on September second followed by another written by the editor. The controversy which started out as a political discussion between Whigs and Democrats, soon became a personal diatribe with the auditor Shields bearing the brunt of the attack.

Personalities

A third "Rebecca" in the person of Mary Todd made a contribution dated September 8 which appeared in the *Journal* on September 9. In this fourth letter the political issue was overshadowed by the lampooning of the state auditor himself. Some verse apparently of the Todd-Jayne authorship signed "Catherine" was published in the *Journal* on September 6. Evidently the "Catherine" poetry was the last straw, for on September 17, the day following its appearance, Shields went to Tremont, Illinois, where Lincoln was in court and made his demands upon Lincoln.

There can be no doubt but what it was a letter and poetry by Mary Todd in collaboration with Julia Jayne, that was the direct cause of the challenge, as Lincoln apparently had been held responsible for all the letters over the "Rebecca" signature.

According to James Grant Wilson in the *Putman Magazine* article for February 1909 Stephen A. Douglas discounted the political phase as directly responsible for the challenge: "According to the Senator, Lincoln, Shields and himself were rival candidates for the hand of Mary Todd. After the campaign had been carried on for several months it was announced that Abe Lincoln was the accepted suitor. But Shields persisted in paying attention to the young lady much to her annoyance as well as to Lincoln."

Principles

The challenger, James Shields, was thirty-two years old, one year younger than Lincoln. He began the practice of law at Kaskaskia in 1832 and was in the Illinois Legislature with Lincoln in 1836 and 1837. He was elected state auditor in 1839, which office he was holding at the time of the incidents which brought about the challenge. He was also engaged in teaching school at various intervals. According to Dr. Gilbert Patten Brown in the *Masonic Home Journal* for March 15, 1934 Shields had displayed some of his dueling tendencies in youth. He says, "He began as a boy by challenging a choleric veteran of the British army of occupation to mortal combat. Both pistols missed fire." Gustav Koerner in *Century Magazine* for October 1888 says Shields was about medium height, of light weight at the time and by no means strong, while Mr. Lincoln was of towering height, heavy, and long-armed and of almost superhuman muscular strength. Abraham Lincoln in the fall of 1842 was thirty-three years old and had served eight years in the Legislature of Illinois.

Preliminaries

Shields' first note to Lincoln at Tremont was not satisfactory and Lincoln asked Shields to withdraw it. No agreement could be reached by Dr. Merriman, second for Lincoln and Gen. Whiteside, second for Shields, and the challenge was issued. The time set for the duel was September 22; the place, within three miles of Alton, Illinois on the opposite side of the river; the weapons, cavalry broadswords of the largest size; and the rules of contest as follows:

"A plank ten feet long and from nine to twelve inches broad to be firmly fixed

on edge of the ground as the line between us which neither is to pass his foot over or forfeit his life. Next a line drawn on the ground on each side of said plank and parallel with it, each at the distance of the length of the sword and three feet additional from the plank and the retreating of his own accord over such line by either party during the fight shall be deemed a surrender of the contest."

Proceedings

One of the most interesting reminiscences of what took place after the contestants reached the place designated for the duel is found in *The Magazine of History* for September 1906. An eyewitness of the affair, W. H. Souther, reporter for the *Alton Telegraph*, gives this version of the proceedings after the ground had been cleared and contestants made ready to fight:

"After all these arrangements had been completed, the seconds rejoined their principals at the different sides of the clearing, and began to talk in low tones. With Shields was Dr. T. M. Hope, of Alton, a very large, brusque man. He was very much opposed to the duel, and reasoned with Shields for a long time. As a result of the talk, several notes were passed between the seconds. It was intensely interesting to me to see those men handing notes to each other instead of talking out what ever they had to say. Lincoln remained firm, and said that Shields must withdraw his first note, and ask him whether or not he was the author of the *Journal* poem. He said that when that should be done, he was ready to treat with the other side. Shields was inflexible, and finally Dr. Hope got mad at him. He said Shields was bringing the Democratic party of Illinois into ridicule and contempt by his folly. Finally he sprang to his feet, faced the stubborn little Irishman, and blurted out: 'Jimmy, you—little whippersnapper, if you don't settle this I will take you across my knee and spank you.' This was too much for Shields, and he yielded; I believe Dr. Hope would have carried his threat into execution if he hadn't. A note was solemnly prepared and sent across to Lincoln, which asked if he was the author of the poem in question; he wrote a formal reply in which he said that he was not; and then mutual explanations and apologies followed."

Five weeks after this episode Abraham Lincoln married Mary Todd.

Collateral references, *Lincoln Lore* Nos. 194, 448.