

LINCOLN LORE

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JOHN GEORGE NICOLAY, 1832-1901

The first appointment Abraham Lincoln made after his election to the presidency was the nomination of his private secretary, Nicolay. Although John George Nicolay was foreign born, of limited education, unfamiliar with administrative procedure, and but twenty-nine years of age, he was elevated to this responsible position. He became more closely associated with the President during the Washington years than any other individual outside of the President's own family.

We might say that Nicolay was constantly with the President, as the Chief Executive was almost continually at the White House and Nicolay's office was not only adjacent to the President's, but for a long time Nicolay actually made his home in the White House. Because of John Hay's more colorful public-service in after years he has somewhat overshadowed Nicolay, although the latter served four years as United States consul at Paris and fifteen years as marshal of the Supreme Court.

Nicolay first met Lincoln in 1856 at Pittsfield, Illinois. John was then editor of the *Pike County Free Press*. The following year he became a clerk in the office of the Secretary of State at Springfield, at the same time acting as correspondent for newspapers at Cincinnati and St. Louis. It was while in the office of the Secretary of State that he was drafted, immediately after the Chicago Convention, to assist the new presidential nominee with the voluminous correspondence which began to pour into Springfield.

The office where Nicolay was employed was adjacent to the State Library which by common consent was the caucus room for both political parties. Lincoln was a frequent visitor to this room and Nicolay soon became closely acquainted with him.

About the time Lincoln was in New York, where he spoke at Cooper Union, Nicolay paid a visit to his old stamping-ground at Pittsfield and while there was requested to write an editorial for the paper with which he was formerly associated. Possibly he did not realize that he was making a contribution to a cause which was to eventually demand all his time. In this editorial he advocated the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for the Presidency. The editorial, copied from the *Pike County Free Press* by many other papers, ended with this comment: "He [Lincoln] maintains the faith of the fathers of the Republic, he believes in the Declaration of Independence, he yields obedience to the Constitution and law of his country. He has the radicalism of Jefferson and of Clay and the conservatism of Washington and Jackson. In his hands the Union would be safe."

It is not generally known that Nicolay aspired to write a campaign biography of Lincoln in 1860 and here is his reaction to a competitor, probably Howard: "The moment I heard of Lincoln's nomination it occurred to me that I might write the campaign biography. . . . Full of this purpose and having no idea that anyone would dispute my right to do the work, I began to prepare for the task at once. A week after the nomination, however, a newspaper man from Columbus, Ohio, appeared at the capitol and announced his intention of writing the life of Lincoln. I was instantly filled with a jealous rage and hastened to a friendly official who was closely attached to Mr. Lincoln, to complain of what I considered to be an usurpation of just prerogative."

While Nicolay did not become the biographer of Lincoln for the campaign of 1860, fifteen years later he was compiling the first installment on "Abraham Lincoln, A His-

tory." Nicolay will always be remembered for his work in collaboration with John Hay in producing the two major accomplishments in Lincolniana, the ten volume, *Abraham Lincoln, A History*, and the companion volumes, *Abraham Lincoln, Complete Works*. Later on a one-volume, condensed life of Lincoln was published by Nicolay, which reached a sale of 35,000 copies. In later years his daughter, Helen Nicolay, edited some of his notes.

It is apparent from the correspondence which passed between Nicolay, Hay and Robert Lincoln that Hay was the custodian of the primary sources used in writing the books. On February 14, 1878, Hay wrote Robert Lincoln, "I have been spending a fortnight in Washington with Nicolay and am very much gratified at the work he has done in arranging your papers and in preparing our history. Besides putting the manuscripts in admirable order, he has made a first-rate beginning at the chapters allotted to him."

Ten years later with the work coming to a conclusion Hay again wrote Robert Lincoln about the original manuscript material: "I have asked Nicolay to write you a line saying that I have never had in my possession or custody any of the papers which you entrusted to him. I have handed over to Nicolay to be placed among your papers some of those which your father gave me."

While there seems to have been a fairly equal division of the work in "The History," it would appear from sources available that the supervision of publishing "The Complete Works" was largely in the hands of Nicolay.

In the month of February, 1894, Edward Marshall, a special correspondent for the *Republic*, interviewed John Nicolay with reference to his acquaintance with Lincoln. Nicolay was then living at Washington in a quaint old house on B Street, not far from the Congressional Library. Among other interesting observations Marshall gave this description of the room where Nicolay did so much of his writing: "His workroom, with its great desk and many bookcases, is a place in which the present is not known. There are gathered practically all the Lincoln manuscripts in existence. Some of them are owned by Mr. Nicolay, most of them are the property of the Lincoln family. Of these latter Mr. Nicolay will probably be the custodian as long as he lives. The morning of my visit to him he showed me many of them—there are thousands in all—and the contents and history of each was ready to his tongue, almost without a glance of identification. They are filed away in great manilla envelopes, and are all so well preserved that one wonders when he realizes how very many years have passed since they were penned. Two of them particularly interested me. One was a letter written before the nomination and expressing in modest simplicity Lincoln's own sense of his unfitness for the great place of President. The other was the original manuscript of an historic message to Congress."

It will be observed that the Marshall interview took place the same year that "The Complete Works" came from the press. These same documents used by Nicolay and Hay for many years were housed, after Nicolay's death, in the summer home of Robert Lincoln at Manchester, Vermont. Now the valuable papers are back in Washington, in the Congressional Library, not far from the site of the Nicolay home where for a period of more than twenty years they served as source material for the monumental works in which John G. Nicolay collaborated with John Hay.

Note: This is the sixth of a series of biographical sketches on the ten persons selected by the Foundation Advisory Group for enrollment on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.