

LINCOLN LORE

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HENRY CLAY WHITNEY, 1831-1905

One might suspect from the two given names Henry Clay Whitney received, that he was born during a political campaign, and that his father was a Whig. The fact that Whitney was named after Henry Clay, Lincoln's "beau ideal of a statesman," would in itself be a sufficient self-introduction to the leading Illinois Whig who had served as an elector at large during one of the campaigns in which the "mill boy of the slashes" was a candidate for the Presidency.

Whitney, however, was twenty-two years younger than Lincoln, having been born on February 23, 1831, in Detroit, Maine. His parents were Alfred and Lucinda Ring Whitney. Young Whitney's formal education was consummated at Farmers' College, in Ohio, and in 1854, when but twenty-three years of age, he moved to Illinois.

In the opening paragraph of chapter three, in the book that made Whitney famous, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, the author divides the life of Lincoln into what he designates as five eras. He uses explicit dates to serve as terminals: February 12, 1809, birth; April 1, 1830, arrival at Decatur, Illinois; March 15, 1837, removed to Springfield; May 29, 1854, the day President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska bill; March 4, 1861, inaugurated President; April 15, 1865, death. Whitney then sets forth his own period of personal acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln in these words:

"I first saw Lincoln at 'Bailey's' tavern, on the road from Danville to Urbana in Illinois on June 3, 1854, or five days after the commencement of the fourth era, and my actual acquaintance with him commenced on October 24, 1854, and lasted until October 10, 1861, or seven years.

"During the fourth era of his life he was undergoing training for the grandest mission ever entrusted by Providence to a single man . . . The living witnesses of that eventful period of his life are fast disappearing, and will, soon, all be gone; and no one who ever traveled on the circuit with him during that time has ever given any narrative of it, except Leonard Swett in a lecture, and Lamon in a few brief sentences in his biography."

This statement suggests the significance of Whitney's work, but it would have been well, indeed, if he had confined himself to what he personally observed; whenever he reached out beyond the scope of his own contacts with Lincoln, he was as likely to be in error as to be right.

The works of both Whitney and Herndon were very much alike with respect to their contributions during those periods when both should have been speaking with authority. Both failed to make any considerable number of written comments of importance until many years after the events which they tried to recall had happened, and practically all they wrote was written in the glow of Lincoln's fame.

It is doubtful if this man named for Henry Clay would have been remembered for any act he performed, if he had not contributed his Lincoln writings and tried to bring to life the famous *Lost Speech*. For the writings he should be honored; but not for what is considered by some students as an attempt to pass off on the public as authentic, traditional notes of Lincoln's speech which he claimed were written at Bloomington on May 25, 1856, when all other pencils were stopped by the speaker's eloquence.

Life on the Circuit with Lincoln by Henry Clay Whitney was published in 1892, only three years after the first issue of the Herndon work. It contained 601 pages and immediately became an important source book. No regular edition of a Lincoln volume has continually demanded such a fancy price. Twenty years ago Daniel Newhall was listing the book at \$50.00, and at a recent auction in New York the Whitney copy sold for \$45.00.

This book was reprinted by Caxton Press in 1940 and it contains an introduction and notes by Paul Angle. A most valuable adjunct to the new printing is an excellent index which was missing from the first edition. The publishing of the reprint has had very little effect on the desirability of the first volume.

What is known as the *Life of Lincoln* or *Lincoln the Citizen* by Whitney is often confused with *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*. In the preface of the former work, the compiling editor said, "For permission to use the biography of Lincoln in the present volume, thanks are due to William H. Lambert, President of the Lincoln Fellowship. He is owner of the voluminous manuscripts on Lincoln's life by the late Henry C. Whitney. . . . From this the present work on *Lincoln the Citizen* has been extracted."

At the time the Lambert collection was sold at auction, this note appeared in the catalogue which described the manuscript mentioned above:

"Whitney (Henry C., Author of 'Life on the Circuit with Lincoln'). Original unpublished manuscript. An Epitome of the Life and Character of Abraham Lincoln; Embracing an Analysis of his Character, Review of his Administration; and Critical Selections from his writings and Speeches. Written on one side of about 800 leaves, with numerous corrections, insertions, and annotations. A few leaves either misplaced or missing.

"(Note). Apparently this work was never published, as we find no record of its appearance in print. It bears, in many places in the early portions of the MS., close resemblance to his 'Life on the Circuit with Lincoln'; but it carries out in greater detail the political period of Lincoln's life, and dwells more fully on the great drama of the Civil War and Lincoln's conduct as its chief actor."

A few Lincoln magazine articles were contributed by Whitney, possibly the best known one carried the traditional "Lost Speech." It appeared in a contribution to *McClure's Magazine* for September, 1896, under the joint authorship of H. C. Whitney and Joseph Medill. Two years later Whitney prepared for *The Arena*, appearing in April 1898, an article entitled "Abraham Lincoln, a Study from Life." He also contributed while living at Beachmont, Massachusetts, a magazine article entitled, "Lincoln's Social Isolation."

Henry Clay Whitney published a few other books and pamphlets foreign to the Lincoln theme, but his claim to recognition is due to his Lincoln contributions. He passed away in Salem, Massachusetts, on February 27, 1905, and is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery, Chicago.

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