

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN, COLONIZATION, AND LIBERIA

The epochal visit at the Executive Mansion of President Edwin Barclay of the West African Negro Republic of Liberia, recalls another episode in the mingling of races which occurred during the administration of Abraham Lincoln.

On the afternoon of August 14, 1862, Rev. James Mitchell, Commissioner of Emigration, introduced to Abraham Lincoln a committee from the negro race. Dr. Mitchell claimed that for "the first time in the history of the country, a company of colored men were received by the President at the White House."

The President made a rather lengthy address to his visitors on the subject of colonization. The speech has not been preserved verbatim and the records state what has been published "is merely given as the substance of the President's remarks." A few of the more timely excerpts follow:

"The President, after a few preliminary observations, informed them that a sum of money had been appropriated by Congress, and placed at his disposition, for the purpose of aiding the colonization in some country, of the people, or a portion of them, of African descent, thereby making it his duty, as it had for a long time been his inclination, to favor the cause. . . .

"Your race is suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people. But even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoys. The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best, and the ban is still upon you. . . .

"I suppose one of the principle difficulties in the way of colonization is that the free colored man cannot see that his comfort would be advanced by it. You may believe that you can live in Washington, or elsewhere in the United States, the remainder of your life as easily, perhaps more so, than you can in any foreign country; and hence you may come to the conclusion that you have nothing to do with the idea of going to a foreign country.

"The colony of Liberia has been in existence a long time. In a certain sense it is a success. The old President of Liberia, Roberts, has just been with me—the first time I ever saw him. He says they have within the bounds of that colony between three and four hundred thousand people. . . .

"The place I am thinking about for a colony is in Central America. It is nearer to us than Liberia—not much more than one fourth as far as Liberia, and within seven days' run by steamers. Unlike Liberia, it is a great line of travel—it is a highway. The country is a very excellent one for any people, and with great natural resources and advantages, and especially because of the similarity of climate with your native soil, thus being suited to your physical condition. The particular place I have in view is to be a great highway from the Atlantic or Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, and this particular place has all the advantages for a colony. On both sides there are harbors—among the finest in the world. Again, there is evidence of very rich coal mines.

"You are intelligent, and know that success does not so much depend on external help as on self-reliance. Much, therefore, depends upon yourselves. As to the coal mines, I think I see the means available for your self-reliance. I shall, if I get a sufficient number of you engaged, have provision made that you shall not be wronged. If you will

engage in the enterprise, I will spend some of the money intrusted to me. I am not sure you will succeed. The government may lose the money; but we cannot succeed unless we try; and if we think, with care, we can succeed.

"The practical thing I want to ascertain is, whether I can get a number of able-bodied men, with their wives and children, who are willing to go when I present evidence of encouragement and protection.

"These are subjects of very great importance—worthy of a month's study, instead of a speech delivered in an hour. I ask you, then, to consider seriously, not pertaining to yourselves merely, nor for your race and ours for the present time, but as one of the things, if successfully managed, for the good of mankind—not confined to the present generation, but as

"From age to age descends the lay
To millions yet to be,
Till far its echoes roll away
Into eternity."

The following resolution was prepared by the committee of colored men which visited the President:

"Resolved, That in the present condition of the public affairs of this country we, the few assembled, deem it inexpedient, inauspicious and impolitic to agitate the subject of emigration of the colored people of this country anywhere, believing that time, the great arbiter of events and movements, will adjust the matter of so infinitely vital interest to the colored people of these United States.

"And furthermore, that we judge it unauthorized and unjust for us to compromise the interests of over four and a half millions of our race by precipitate action on our part."

The James Mitchell, already mentioned, for many years an agent of the American Colonization Society, has given an interesting account of his visit with Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, as early as 1853. He stated:

"My first acquaintance with Mr. Lincoln began early in July, 1853, when I visited Springfield to promote the cause of colonization and to organize the State of Illinois in its interest, as I had already organized Indiana. I first called on Rev. Mr. Dodge, then pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, and asked him if they had any one there who could aid me in my work in Illinois as Joseph A. Wright had aided me in his State.

"Mr. Dodge replied: 'Yes, I think we have—an attorney named Abraham Lincoln.'

"I requested that he take me to him at once. We proceeded to the public square of the town, and as we leisurely walked forward along its best-built side Mr. Dodge pointed out a gentleman on a dry goods box five or six doors ahead of us, saying as he did so: 'There sits Mr. Lincoln.'

"My friend had previously eulogized the attorney very highly, yet when I saw his great, gaunt and angular figure, loosely if not carelessly dressed, I was not favorably impressed, and said to myself: 'If that is Illinois' great man, Illinois is not much.' But when I had been introduced and subjected to his close searching inquiries about the policy of our society, and our action in Indiana, I quickly changed my opinion of the man, and from that hour we were friends.

"On the following Sabbath, July 5, I preached in Mr. Dodge's church, where the Lincoln family sometimes worshipped. Mr. Lincoln was present on that occasion. At the conclusion of the services I took a collection to make the Rev. Mr. Smith, of the First Presbyterian Church, a life member of the Colonization Society, and Mr. Lincoln contributed \$5, Dr. Smith being his regular pastor."