

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLNIANA AND THE FIRE HAZARD

The approach to the Independence Day, as it is now observed, will recall by contrast many of the episodes which occurred during boyhood, on what was then known as "The Glorious Fourth." One of the by-products of these wild celebrations was a tremendous fire loss and the fire headquarters in any city was an exciting point of interest. There were few spectacles so thrilling to youth as the racing horses of the various fire companies were urged on to place their equipment first at the scene of the conflagration. With the introduction of a sane Fourth of July there has been removed one of the nation's greatest fire hazards.

We are reminded that nearly all of the larger collections of Lincolniana have at some time been threatened by fire. The outstanding Lincoln Library of its day, owned by Major William Lambert, of Philadelphia, was partially destroyed and a tremendous loss suffered in this field that can never be replaced.

In the library of the Lincoln National Life Foundation is a printed pamphlet of four pages which gives in part Major Lambert's own account of this costly fire. The first page of the pamphlet contains this statement. "From letter of William H. Lambert, giving an account of some of the damage that resulted from the fire at his residence, West Johnson Street, Germantown, June 5, 1906." Then follow these paragraphs related to the Lincoln section of the Library:

"West Johnson Street, Germantown,
June 15, 1906.

"I have not yet completed the inventory of the losses caused by the fire which, on the fifth instant, destroyed a large part of my library, but I am happy to be able to say that the destruction was not so complete as has been stated in some of the newspaper reports, or so great as I had feared. None of the Lincoln and Thackeray manuscripts, and but few of the letters, were at risk because, in accordance with my custom each Summer, these had been removed to safes in the city. . . . The greater part of the bound pamphlets contained in the closed cases in the alcove—Lincoln sermons, eulogies, political and personal publications—have been saved, although most, if not all, are more or less stained by smoke and water.

"But whilst a large part of the collection was saved, the loss is very great and much of it irretrievable. The book

case, table and chair from Lincoln's law office, at Springfield, were entirely destroyed; the chairs from the White House library ruined, though one, perhaps, may be fairly restored. The books contained in the Lincoln case, comprising biographies, various editions of his speeches and writings, volumes from his library, autographed presentation volumes, limited and especial editions were, in great part, either destroyed or damaged beyond repair, as also were the books in the open shelves adjoining, in which were the convention reports, political pamphlets, campaign speeches and songs, and the assassination literature. The busts, including the Jones of 1862, and statuettes, and the framed proof engravings in the alcove, were demolished. The case containing the medals was reduced to charcoal, the white metal specimens melted, the bronze, brass and copper stained and scratched. About two-thirds of a somewhat full collection of sheet music, directly relating to Lincoln, were destroyed. The broadsides, campaign flags, photographs and engravings, contained in portfolios in the alcove, were ruined.

"The scarred and twisted remains of many of my choicest books are pathetic memorials of collections which approached completeness and were fairly comparable with any others in the same lines, of which I had knowledge; but I rejoice that excellent collections of both Lincoln and Thackeray exist elsewhere in the possession of enthusiastic and loyal collectors, who I trust may be spared the sorrow which has come to me in the loss of treasures whose acquisition, possession and exhibition were sources of great enjoyment. And I am truly thankful for the many messages of sympathy received from friends and collectors whose appreciation of my loss has given me much comfort and will be ever gratefully remembered."

It was not long, however, before Major Lambert was attempting to restore the serious losses in that part of the collection where replacement copies might be available. After an inventory of what he most needed was made, he issued another four page pamphlet with this statement at the top of the first page:

"Wishing to restore and to complete, so far as possible, his collection of Lincoln Literature, which was greatly damaged by fire, June 5, 1906, William H. Lambert, address, Mutual Life Building, Philadelphia, asks reports

upon the following books and pamphlets relating in whole or part to Abraham Lincoln." Then followed the authors and titles of 170 rare Lincoln books and pamphlets.

When the Lincoln National Life Foundation acquired the Daniel Fish collection of Lincolniana, at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, it was learned that at one time a fire in Judge Fish's home was discovered in the room adjacent to where he kept his Lincoln collection. We are also advised that the collection of Benjamin Oakleaf, at Moline, Illinois, was once threatened with destruction by fire. This makes three of the original big five collections which have been partially destroyed or threatened by the fire hazard.

Possibly the most tragic story of the fire hazard, as it has been associated with Lincolniana, is related in connection with the death of George P. Hambrecht, state director of Vocational and Adult Education for the state of Wisconsin. He had not only acquired one of the finest libraries of Lincolniana in the country, but had also accumulated a fine collection of books similar to those used by Abraham Lincoln. He was a widower and lived alone with his library as his chief companion.

Mr. Hambrecht mentioned to his associates at his office the day before his death the probability of a leak in the oil burner at his home. He awoke early the next morning and discovered his house on fire. He rushed to the telephone and had just sufficient time to say, "Fire Department," when he fell over dead from a heart attack. The telephone operator notified the fire department, which in turn relayed the message to the police, and within three or four minutes after Mr. Hambrecht put in the call, policemen discovered his dead body close to the telephone where he had fallen.

Inasmuch as Mr. Hambrecht was a keen student of Lincoln he must have known about the fire loss of Major Lambert, some of whose books in later years he acquired for his own collection. Among all his possessions it was his Lincoln library that Mr. Hambrecht prized most, and there can be little doubt but the excitement of the moment upon finding his home on fire was accentuated by thoughts about his Lincolniana. Although his library was not damaged, its compiler and interpreter is no longer here to enjoy it.