

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 804

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 4, 1944

BLYTHE, CLAY, LINCOLN—THREE CHAMPIONS OF FREEDOM

There is no question about the tremendous influence which Henry Clay exerted over Abraham Lincoln, who called Clay his "beau ideal of a statesman." Lincoln's viewpoint on the slavery question was entirely in harmony with Clay's and those who heard Lincoln's appeal for the freedom of mankind remarked it was the voice of Clay speaking again to the people. Possibly we may go back still another generation and learn of a man who greatly influenced Clay's thinking on emancipation.

When Henry Clay became twenty-one years of age in 1798, the year after he arrived in Kentucky, he prepared a series of articles for the *Kentucky Gazette*, over the signature "Scaevola." Soon after this, an attempt was made to remodel the constitution of Kentucky so that it would contain an article for the gradual emancipation of slaves within the state. Clay's effort in this first political venture did not contribute to his popularity, but he never retreated from his original position. Twenty years later, on the floor of Congress, he stated that if he were a citizen of Missouri he would contend for an article in her constitution similar to the one for gradual emancipation, which he had supported in Kentucky during those early days.

Possibly the outstanding educator in Lexington for the first twenty years of Clay's residence in "The Athens of the West," as the city was often called, was Reverend James Blythe. When Transylvania Seminary and Kentucky Academy were united to form Transylvania University, in 1798, Rev. James Blythe was made one of the professors and from 1801 to 1816 he served as the president of the University.

A sketch of Lexington, Kentucky, made in 1806, by one visiting there, gives this account of its institution of higher learning: "There is a public library and a university called Transylvania, which is incorporated and is under the government of twenty-one trustees and the direction of a president, the Reverend James Blythe, who is professor of natural philosophy, mathematics, geography, and English grammar. There are four professors besides—The Reverend Robert H. Bishop, professor of moral philosophy, belles lettres, logic and history; Mr. Ebenezer Sharp, professor of medicine, and Henry Clay, Esq., professor of law."

It will be observed that Mr. Clay served under the presidency of James Blythe, who was twelve years the senior of his professor of law.

James Blythe was born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, on October 28, 1765. He graduated from Hampden-Sydney College in 1789. Blythe was the son of a slave-holder. He said on one occasion: "Among the earliest recollections of my life is the kindness of a slave, who taught me my letters in company with his own children when his day's work was finished. I was brought up in a family where the authority of a master was tempered with the kindness of a father. Such was my father and his slaves."

One of the most dramatic adventures in Blythe's life occurred at the time of his graduation from his Alma Mater, already mentioned, his own reminiscences of the event allow us to appreciate his initiation as a public speaker on behalf of the emancipation of the slaves. He stated:

"In the South, forty years ago, to talk about the rights of the black man was deemed as idle as to talk of the rights of cattle. The first public address I ever delivered was on the day of my lauration. It was a plea for black men, and I was only preserved from public insult and violence by the age and authority of those who surrounded me."

Blythe must have made a deep impression on Henry Clay during the early Kentucky years, when in faculty sessions and social contacts they discussed the slavery question then being thrust into the foreground by the attempt to revise the State constitution. The fact that there were not then many advocates of the principle of emancipation is observed by another statement made by Blythe with reference to the genesis of the anti-slavery movement. He said:

"I have lived in slave states all my life, till about a year ago. For half a century I have been an attentive observer of the progress of public sentiment, on all subjects connected with the people of color, both slaves and emancipated persons. I can only speak with confidence of the change and great amendment of public sentiment in Kentucky. In that state there are a thousand sympathies for the colored man now, (1834) for one that existed forty years ago. These kind feelings have increased far beyond the most sanguine hopes of the black man's friends."

One of Blythe's most eloquent statements about the black man, found in an address he delivered on December 23, 1833, at which time he was president of Hanover College, in Indiana,

might be called his tribute to Africa. After reviewing Africa's many contributions to early civilization, he said:

"She does not disown her vertical sun, nor her burning sands, nor blush at their combined influence, which has made her children black, but which has warmed their bosoms with a generosity, and richness of kind and social feelings which the slavery and oppression of two hundred years in America have not been able to extinguish. She weeps in company with millions of those who have inhabited happier climes, now buried under the ruins of former civilizations, enveloped in the darkness of the Prophet's law, or in all the cruelties of paganism. She calls upon freemen, upon the freemen of America to look at her now, if indeed they can indure the sight, and to weep with her. It is the wailing of Africa, such as the world never heard before. Her's are the tears of a mother—a bereaved mother, a violated mother. She has forgotten her olden glory. Her two thousand years of seclusion from science and christianity. These minor evils are with her as though they had never been. For two hundred years she has sat alone. Envied by none—pitied by none—trampled on by all."

Not only did the philosophy of Blythe, regarding the negro, indirectly influence Lincoln through his junior faculty member, Henry Clay, but the principles advanced by Blythe also reached out to Abraham Lincoln through the medium of the Todd family. Robert S. Todd, the father of Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln, came under the instruction of Blythe in the classroom. It was President Blythe who signed a certificate that this same Robert S. Todd had completed courses in "mathematics, rhetoric, logic, natural and moral philosophy, astronomy, Latin, Greek, and history." It was Blythe himself who had been one of the instructors of the father of Mary Todd Lincoln, who saw eye to eye with his close and lifelong friend, Henry Clay, on this question of emancipation.

In tracing the influence which directly or indirectly guided Abraham Lincoln in his thinking with respect to slavery, we would have to go back through Henry Clay to James Blythe, and possibly still further back to the old negro slave owned by Blythe's father, who taught James his letters and incidently instructed him in the basic study of humaneness.