

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN AND IMPRISONED MEN

Leonard Swett and Ebenezer Peck, two of Lincoln's old friends have given us a general idea of the President's attitude toward northern soldiers under the sentence of death. The former related that on a Thursday, while visiting Mr. Lincoln at the White House he was driven from the room with this explanation: "Get out of the way Swett, tomorrow is butcher-day and I must go through these papers and see if I cannot find some excuse to let these poor men off." Peck happened to be with the President on a Friday when he exclaimed: "This is Friday, black Friday, hangman's day! This day they execute farmers' boys for falling asleep at their posts down on the Potomac."

Many stories are in circulation of Lincoln's clemency with respect to northern boys condemned to death, but not quite so much attention has been paid to the President's clemency toward prisoners of war, the farmers' boys on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line. Because of limited space, but a very few of a great many episodes available can be mentioned. By selecting widely divergent cases they may serve as a memorial to hundreds of such instances where Lincoln came to the rescue of imprisoned men.

### Hospitality Returned

While the editor of *Lincoln Lore* was living at Morganfield, Union County, Kentucky, he learned for the first time of the President's only political speaking itinerary in his native state, and it consisted of but one address in the above named town. Although there are different versions of the following letter written to Mr. Lincoln, there is no doubt about the release of the old Whig advocate, who had been imprisoned for his boldly expressed opinions favoring the newly formed Confederacy. Here is the letter with its Lincoln endorsement:

"My Dear Mr. President: After presenting my compliments to you I wish to remind you that a good many years ago I had you in tow at a Whig barbecue in Union county, Ky. On that occasion I tried to treat you kindly, and even burst my cannon in firing a salute in your honor. I hope you have not forgotten it. Now, sir, you have me in tow, and I am your prisoner here in Camp Chase. I am lonesome and homesick, and want to get back to my old wife. Please let me go. Yours truly, George W. Riddle."

When Mr. Lincoln received this letter he is said to have laughed heartily, and at once wrote on the back of the letter: "Please let Capt. George Riddle go home."

"A. Lincoln."

### Alexander H. Stephens' Nephew

When Alexander H. Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, and

Abraham Lincoln were parting after the Hampton Roads conference, Lincoln asked Stephens if there was any personal favor he could show him. Stephens replied, "Nothing unless you can send me my nephew who for twenty months has been a prisoner on Johnson's Island." Lincoln telegraphed to the prison and asked to have Lieut. John A. Stephens, of Georgia, report to him at Washington. Lincoln informed him of the conversation with his uncle, and an exchange of prisoners was accomplished.

### The President and Two Secretaries

The release from imprisonment of a young Confederate, the son of a Union officer, required the collaboration of the President and two of his secretaries. Attorney General Bates appealed to Lincoln for the boy's release and then wrote the following note to Secretary Welles:

"On behalf of Captain Shock I applied personally to the President to release his son and give him back to his anxious father. The President, knowing little himself of the parties did not choose to act definitely upon his own generous prompting, but promised to grant the favor to Capt. Shock if you would ask it."

### The Son of George D. Prentice

The famous editor of the *Louisville, Kentucky, Journal*, had an only child, Clarence G. Prentice, who became a Confederate Major. He was captured while on a secret visit to his family, and imprisoned at Camp Chase. The elder Prentice wrote to the President a long letter concluding with this appeal:

"I do not suppose, Mr. Lincoln, that you can parole my boy, upon taking the non-combatants' oath, to remain in the United States, though I should be most happy if you could. But I fervently appeal to you to let him go, upon his taking the simple oath, anywhere outside of the United States and of the rebel Confederacy. I know his plans. His mother will go with him, and he will never bear arms against us again. I will be surety for this with fortune and life."

Lincoln, relying on the father's good faith, was about to let Clarence take the oath and go abroad, when the younger man refused to comply with his father's pledge. The result was that he was exchanged for a northern prisoner of like rank.

### A Little Rebel's Brother

A few years ago while at Norfolk, Virginia, on a speaking itinerary, the director of the Lincoln Foundation was interviewed by a member of the staff of the *Norfolk Ledger*. This is the story as it was written down at the time:

"My grandmother was Thalia Francis Wildman, when a small child, her brother, John Burdit, was made a rebel prisoner. She went with her mother to ask for the release of the boy. When the President asked her to come and sit on his knee she was not afraid because he had a kind face. Lincoln told her that she would have her brohter back again."

### A Supreme Court Judge

A Confederate prisoner of war on Johnson Island had been confined in the hospital for six months and a card at the head of his bed indicated that he was tubercular. The boy was from Tennessee and his mother, learning of his condition, made her way to Washington to see the President. On February 22nd, 1865, she secured an interview which is reported in this language:

"'Mr. President,' she said to him, 'my boy is doomed to death unless I can get him back to Tennessee. I want to take him home.'

"That big-hearted, generous man said, 'I will parole him on sick leave.'

"'But,' she said, 'then it will be too late. I want to take him home with me.' And President Lincoln wrote a note which said, 'Let the boy go home with his mother.'"

That boy, who went home with his mother, was nursed back to health and when a vacancy occurred in the United States Supreme Court, President Taft appointed to the position, Horace H. Lurton, of Tennessee, who thirty-one years before Lincoln had paroled to his mother.

### Lincoln's Last War Order

On the night of April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was just about to leave for the theatre with his wife, when he was approached by Senator Henderson, with an appeal for the pardon of a Confederate prisoner by the name of George Vaughn, who had been arrested while visiting his home in Canton, Missouri. George had a brother Allmon who was in the Union army. George was charged with being a spy, and although denying any purpose in his journey, except a visit to parents and friends, he was found guilty. Stanton had absolutely refused to do anything for the Senator in the way of a pardon for the boy and he appealed again to Lincoln, whom he had consulted earlier in the day. The fact that the war was virtually over, apparently made it seem proper for the President to issue an order pardoning this Confederate soldier. This was Abraham Lincoln's last official act relating directly to the Civil War and it is significant in that it was related to the pardoning of an imprisoned Confederate soldier.