

# 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 809

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 9, 1944

## AN OCTOBER VISITOR AT THE WHITE HOUSE, 1864

Among the strangest reformers associated with the abolitionist movement in America was a colored woman called, Sojourner Truth, whose real name was Isabella Van Wagener, a child of James and Betsy, slaves of Col. Ardinburgh, of Ulster County, New York. The exact date of her birth is not known but it was about the year 1800.

She was set free by the emancipation law of New York which became operative on July 4, 1828. After spending fifteen years in New York City, experiencing adverse economic conditions and strange emotional reactions, she started on June 1st, 1843, on her first extended religious speaking mission. From that time on her life was dedicated to the uplift of humanity and the freedom of the slave.

Possibly the great notoriety enjoyed by Sojourner in the latter part of her life was due to an article which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, for April, 1863, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The colored reformer was a house guest of Mrs. Stowe for several days, and the description of her by the sponsor of Uncle Tom and Little Eva was ultimately responsible for the creation of *The Libyan Sibyl* by William Wetmore Storey.

Mrs. Stowe visited Mr. Storey, the sculptor, at Rome, and told him the story of the tall, spare woman, Sojourner Truth. Mrs. Stowe described her as follows: "She was evidently a full-blooded African, and though now aged and worn with many hardships, still gave the impression of a physical development which in early youth must have been as fine a specimen of the torrid zone as Cumberworth's celebrated statuette of the Negro Woman at the Fountain. Indeed, she so strongly reminded me of that figure, that, when I recall the events of her life, as she narrated them to me, I imagine her as a living, breathing impersonation of that work of art.

"I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with any one who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than this woman. In the modern spiritualistic phraseology, she would be described as having a strong sphere. Her tall form, as she rose up before me, is still vivid to my mind. She was dressed in some strong, grayish stuff, neat and clean, though dusty from travel. On her head she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban, after the manner of her race. She seemed perfectly self-possessed and at her ease; in fact, there was almost an unconscious superiority, not unmixed with a solemn twinkle of humor, in the odd, composed manner in which she looked down on me. Her whole air had at times a gloomy sort of drollery which impressed one strangely. . . . Her great, gloomy eyes and her dark face seemed to work with some undercurrent of feeling."

It was on October 29, 1864, less than a week before the election, that Sojourner Truth visited President Lincoln, at Washington, and we have her account of the visit in a letter which she wrote a few days later on November 17th.

"It was about 8 o'clock a.m., when I called on the president. Upon entering his reception room we found about a dozen persons in waiting, among them two colored women. I had quite a pleasant time waiting until he was disengaged, and enjoyed his conversation with others; he showed as much kindness and consideration to the colored persons as to the whites—if there was any difference, more. One case was that of a colored woman who was sick and likely to be turned out of her house on account of her inability to pay her rent. The president listened to her with much attention, and spoke to her with kindness and tenderness. He said he had given so much

he could give no more, but told her where to go and get the money, and asked Mrs. C—n to assist her, which she did.

"The president was seated at his desk. Mrs. C. said to him, 'This is Sojourner Truth, who has come all the way from Michigan to see you.' He then arose, gave me his hand, made a bow, and said, 'I am pleased to see you.'

"I said to him, Mr. President, when you first took your seat I feared you would be torn to pieces, for I likened you unto Daniel, who was thrown into the lion's den; and if the lions did not tear you into pieces, I knew that it would be God that had saved you; and I said if he spared me I would see you before the four years expired, and he has done so, and now I am here to see you for myself.

"He then congratulated me on my having been spared. Then I said, I appreciate you, for you are the best president who has ever taken the seat. He replied: 'I expect you have reference to my having emancipated the slaves in my proclamation. But,' said he, mentioning the names of several of his predecessors (and among them emphatically that of Washington), 'they were all just as good, and would have done just as I have done if the time had come. If the people over the river (pointing across the Potomac) had behaved themselves, I could not have done what I have; but they did not, which gave me the opportunity to do these things.' I then said, I thank God that you were the instrument selected by him and the people to do it. I told him that I had never heard of him before he was talked of for president. He smilingly replied, 'I had heard of you many times before that.'

"He then showed me the Bible presented to him by the colored people of Baltimore, of which you have no doubt seen a description. I have seen it for myself, and it is beautiful beyond description. After I had looked it over, I said to him, this is beautiful indeed; the colored people have given this to the head of the government, and that government once sanctioned laws that would not permit its people to learn enough to enable them to read this book. And for what? Let them answer who can.

"I must say, and I am proud to say, that I never was treated by any one with more kindness and cordiality than were shown to me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God president of the United States for four years more. He took my little book, and with the same hand that signed the death-warrant of slavery, he wrote as follows:

"'For Aunty Sojourner Truth,  
'Oct. 29, 1864. A. Lincoln.'

"As I was taking my leave, he arose and took my hand, and said he would be pleased to have me call again. I felt that I was in the presence of a friend, and I now thank God from the bottom of my heart that I always have advocated his cause, and have done it openly and boldly. I shall feel still more in duty bound to do so in time to come. May God assist me."

Sojourner Truth's most interesting possession was an autograph book which she invited all her friends and visitors to sign by asking this question: "Don't you want to write your name in *De Book of Life*?" Presidents, senators, reformers, authors, and military leaders complied with her request. With the exception of President Lincoln's signature, possibly the reformers, among whom Sojourner might be classified, offer the most impressive group of signers which includes: Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Wendell Phillips, Amy Post, Gerritt Smith, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Sumner, and Jonathan Walker.