

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 812

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 30, 1944

POLITICAL LETTER TO GENERAL SHERMAN

The Indiana state election for October, 1864, was approaching with an outlook not too optimistic from the viewpoint of the Union men. Most of the larger states in the Nation had made provision for the soldiers voting in the field, but the Hoosiers in the army did not have that privilege, due to the strong opposition of the Copperheads.

Governor Morton sent a message to Lincoln about the reactionary efforts of the southern sympathizers to deprive the men in the army from voting and his initiative was followed up by two other Hoosier officeholders, Lane and Mitchell.

Senator Harry S. Lane, of Crawfordsville, and Representative William Mitchell, of Kendallville, also brought their grievances to the President and attempted to get some relief from the situation. The combined appeal of Morton, Lane and Mitchell resulted in Lincoln writing a letter to General Sherman with respect to letting Indiana soldiers, who could safely do so, go home to vote. The original letter, of which a copy follows, is in the possession of the Lincoln National Life Foundation.

"Executive Mansion,
Washington, D. C.
September 19th, 1864.

"Major General Sherman,

"The State election of Indiana occurs on the 11th of October, and the loss of it to the friends of the Government would go far towards losing the whole Union cause. The bad effect upon the November election, and especially the giving the State Government to those who will oppose the war in every possible way, are too much to risk, if it can possibly be avoided. The draft proceeds, notwithstanding its strong tendency to lose us the State. Indiana is the only important State, voting in October, whose soldiers cannot vote in the field. Anything you can safely do to let her soldiers, or any part of them, go home and vote at the State election, will be greatly in point. They need not remain for the Presidential election, but may return to you at once. This is, in no sense, an order, but is merely intended to impress you with the importance, to the army itself, of your doing all you safely can, yourself being the judge of what you can safely do.

"Yours truly,
"A. Lincoln."

One of the most interesting suggestions in this letter is the President's advise that the soldiers "need not remain for the presidential election," although he was a candidate, whose prospects for re-election were not over-encouraging.

The envelope which contained the Lincoln letter was addressed, "Gen'l. Wm. T. Sherman, Present," and in the upper right-hand corner the signature in the same handwriting, "H. S. Lane."

Henry Smith Lane, at the time he addressed this envelope, was a United States Senator from Indiana. He had served in the State Senate in 1837, and in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh Congress. He was the permanent chairman of the first Republican convention at Philadelphia, in 1856, where Lincoln had received one hundred and ten votes as a candidate for the nomination of the party vice-president. He was elected governor of Indiana in 1860, and served but four or five days when he resigned, and was elected to the United States Senate where he was a member of both the thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth Congresses.

The President not only handed the Sherman letter to William Mitchell, but made available a pass which allowed him to go through the Union lines. The original pass is also in the Foundation collection and the printed form is inscribed as follows:

"War Department
Washington, D. C., September 19, 1864.

"Pass Hon. William Mitchell to Major Gen. Sherman's Headquarters and return.

"By order of the Secretary of War:

"Jas. A. Hardie.
"Col. and Insp. Genl. U. S. A."

[Not Transferable]

William Mitchell was born in Montgomery County, New York, in 1807. He was elected to this thirty-seventh Congress in 1860, but with all the effort put forth to get out the soldier vote he was defeated for re-election in 1864. The letter which he solicited from Abraham Lincoln, however, with its statement about the importance of the Indiana vote and the unselfish attitude toward his own candidacy for the presidency was well worth the effort.

When the Foundation acquired this valuable Lincoln letter from a descendant of William Mitchell, there were two other pieces of correspondence which accompanied it and confirmed the authenticity of the Lincoln message and also the fact that Mitchell was the messenger. Both of these letters were written by Jesse J. Brown, vice-president of the First National Bank at New Albany, Indiana, to John Mitchell, a son of the above mentioned William Mitchell.

Brown accompanied William Mitchell to General Sherman's headquarters and his two letters containing the aforesaid information follow:

New Albany, Ind., March 15, 1888.

John Mitchell, Esq.,
Kendallville

My dear Sir:

Yours 13th inst received & in reply would say that I accompanied your father in the trip from Washington to Shilo. Two others were appointed. None went to Sherman's army but your father and myself. I shall be much pleased to have you send me Mr. Lincoln's letter to look at and which I will promptly return.

I hope I may sometime have the pleasure of meeting you as it would seem like renewing the acquaintance of your respected father, whose friendship I enjoyed very much. Will you be at Chicago at the Convention in June? If so, and you send me your address, I will take pleasure in calling on you.

Very truly
J. J. Brown

New Albany, Ind., March 21, 1888.

John Mitchell, Esq.,
Kendallville

My dear Sir:

Your esteemed favor 17th with Mr. Lincoln's letter duly received, and I assure you it has been a very great pleasure to me & some of my friends to peruse this paper and look upon that grand man's signature.

I return the same herewith & sincerely trust it may reach you safely.

I am a constant reader of Hay & Nicolay in the Century and have been intensely interested. If I go to Chicago I will let you know as I shall be much pleased to make your acquaintance.

Again thanking you for your thoughtfulness in this matter, I am

Very truly,

J. J. Brown.

Please send me postal saying you received the letter, as I shall be anxious until I know you have received it safely.

J. J. B.

Although William Mitchell was not re-elected, the Union ticket was largely successful. Very few, if any, of the men in Sherman's army were allowed to return because of the pressure put on the Union forces by the enemy. If there were some irregularity in voting by the soldiers, who were fortunate enough to return for the election, and it is quite evident there was, it may have been accounted for by the determination of the soldiers to avenge the political strategy of the Copperheads.