

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE LINCOLNS' WASHINGTON PASTOR

When Abraham Lincoln and his family reached Washington in 1861 they immediately began to make inquiries about selecting a church home. There is a tradition that the President approached Attorney-General Bates regarding a suitable place of worship and commented, "I wish to find a church whose clergyman does not preach politics."

Inasmuch as the family had attended a Presbyterian church in Springfield, it is not surprising to find them associated with a church of the same religious body at Washington, and the qualifications of the clergyman seems to have measured up to requirements, as the President told a distinguished friend, "I like Dr. Gurley. He doesn't preach politics. I get enough of that through the week, and when I go to church I like to hear the gospel."

The Lincolns first attended Mr. Gurley's church in March, 1861. Sometime later they made the selection of a pew. The deacon who took care of assigning the Lincoln family a permanent place to be seated remembers the interview as follows:

"I remember taking the plat of the church over to the White House for inspection. Mrs. Lincoln looked it over and selected the pew, which strangely enough, happened to be the one Mr. Buchanan had just vacated. The annual rental of the pew at the time was fifty dollars a year."

The records of the church show that Mr. Lincoln paid his pew rent promptly each year. In approaching the memorial pew one walks down the center aisle and notes the eighth pew from the pulpit.

Although in 1858, Dr. Gurley had served as chaplain of the United States Senate, and through this connection, became widely known in political circles in Washington, apparently he had not been spoiled by this distinguished honor.

Rev. Gurley according to one of his contemporaries was "a noble representative of old-school Presbyterianism in the capital of this mighty nation. . . Calvinism presented in his beautiful example and spirit and preaching, a practical and irresistible refutation of the criticism so often heaped upon it by those who know little of it."

From a brief obituary notice by Rev. A. A. E. Taylor in *The Presbyterian*, there is a fine summary of Gurley's ability as a preacher and the type of sermons he was in the habit of delivering. Rev. Taylor said: "He spoke with an authoritative air of sincerity and earnestness, a force of personal conviction, that impressed the hearer with the fact that whether the utterance were true or not there was no doubt in the world but that the speaker himself believed it to be true. His preaching, with slow and stately solemnity was confined with remarkable closeness to the great central doctrines of the cross. There was no phrase more frequented on his lips as his constant hearers will bear witness, than, 'Christ and Him crucified'."

When Lincoln was shot Dr. Gurley was immediately summoned to his bedside and remained there until the President expired the next morning. Upon the death of Lincoln, Secretary Stanton turned to Dr. Gurley and said, "Doctor will you say something." Whereupon the pastor replied, "Let us talk with God," and kneeling "proceeded to offer a most touching and impressive prayer."

Later one of the United States senators remarked, after hearing Dr. Gurley's prayer offered in the Executive Mansion, just before the body of the President started on its long trip to Springfield, that the prayer "produced a profounder impression on him than anything he had ever heard from the lips of man."

On the funeral train Dr. Gurley wrote a memorial poem of six stanzas which was set to music and sung at the cemetery in Springfield. There is room for but one verse here:

"This consecrated spot shall be  
To freedom ever dear:  
And freedom's sons of every race  
Shall weep and worship here."

Phineas Densmore Gurley was born in 1816, on November 12, at Hamilton, New York. His father was of Quaker birth, and his mother a member of the Methodist church. When fifteen years of age Phineas united with the Presbyterian Church, at Parishville, New York, to which place the family had removed. He was admitted to Union College in 1833 and graduated from the institution with the highest honors in his class, on July 26, 1837. The Fall of that year he entered the Theological Seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, and completed his course in September, 1840.

A month after Gurley's graduation he was married to Miss Emma Brooks, daughter of a Parishville physician, Dr. Hosea Brooks, and one week later the young couple set out for their newly assigned charge, the First Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis. At this time Henry Ward Beecher was the minister at the Second Presbyterian Church in that city.

During Dr. Gurley's residence at Indianapolis, he assisted in two missions at Fort Wayne, Indiana. On one of these special efforts fifty people were added to the church. After a ministry of nine years in the Indiana state capital, he accepted the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church, at Dayton, Ohio, and four years later was installed as pastor of the F Street Church in Washington, D. C. A union with the Second Presbyterian Church occurred in 1859 at which time the united body was designated as the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. It was at this time that the now famous edifice was erected so that when the Lincolns arrived in Washington, Dr. Gurley was preaching in the new church building which had just been completed.

Dr. Gurley did not long survive his most distinguished church attendant for he passed away on September 3, 1868, in the fifty-second year of his age, while still ministering at the New York Avenue Church.

Mrs. Sidney Lauck, a church member at the time the Lincolns worshiped there claimed that Dr. Gurley himself told her that "Mr. Lincoln had made all the arrangements to be received into the New York Avenue Church and but for the assassin who took his life, he would have made public profession of his faith in Christ on Easter, 1865."