

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 822

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 8, 1945

ANOTHER PERLEY REMINISCENCE

Ben Perley Poore, before he was twenty years old, had edited the "Southern Whig" at Athens, Georgia. From 1844 to 1848 he was in France as foreign correspondent of the *Boston Atlas*. Upon returning to America he became editor of the *Boston Bee* and Sunday *Sentinel*. His most famous newspaper connection, however, was with the *Boston Journal* for which he served as Washington correspondent, and was active in the affairs of the capitol for thirty years.

Poore is best known to Lincoln students as the author of *The Conspiracy Trial for the Murder of Abraham Lincoln*. Best known to historians in general, however, is his two volume *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*.

While serving as correspondent in Washington his contributions were signed "Perley" and under this pen name his writings "gained him a national reputation by their trustworthy character." In 1863 he prepared a column which he called "Waifs from Washington," especially for women readers of the *Journal*. Excerpts from the issue of December 2, 1863, follow:

"As we were on our way to pay our respects to President Lincoln and his wife, by way of opening our campaign, Mrs. Journal Reader took me to task for not following the example of the royalty-apers hereabouts, who speak of the official residence of our Chief Magistrate as the Executive Mansion. I prefer the more homely and better known appellation. It is not a palace, like the Tuileries, St. James, the Escorial or the Vatican, but a large sized house (modeled after the residence of the Duke of Leinster in Ireland), built of such trashy free-stone that it is only preserved from disintegration by being painted white. . . . Perhaps when the war is over, and the national debt has been paid, a building will be erected worthy the name of Executive Mansion.

"The entrance hall leads into a spacious cross passage in the centre of the building. At the left hand extremity of this passage is the East Room, eighty feet in length, forty feet in width and twenty-eight feet in height. Along the north side of the passage and of the house are four drawing rooms, en suite, and on the western side is the banqueting room, with the smaller family dining room. In the basement story are the butler's and the culinary departments, and in the second story are the family rooms, at the western end, and the offices at the eastern end.

"Mrs. Journal Reader, as we walked through the house, thought that the furniture was not exactly what it should be, yet it is perhaps good enough for the building. President Monroe was

ferociously denounced in Congress for the purchases which he had made in France, to replace the furniture burned up by the conquering legions of John Bull. Mr. Fenton's attack on the furniture purchased by President John Quincy Adams, including a billiard table, did much to prevent his re-election; and President Van Buren was actually defeated when he was also a candidate a second time, by Mr. Ogle's wonderful accounts of gold spoons and other extravagant articles. No one can bring any such charges against Mr. Lincoln, for the White House presents no signs of gaudy extravagance. Everything is appropriate, in good taste, and alike creditable to Mrs. Lincoln's discretion in making the selections, as well as to Congress, which has voted the money for the payment of the bills.

"But we did not visit the White House to examine its furniture, or even to linger long in its charming conservatory, which has been renovated during the past summer, and is now filled with rare exotics ready to contribute their floral charms during the coming season. President Lincoln is naturally an object of interest, not only to those who visit him, but to the people who elected him their chief magistrate, and Mrs. Journal Reader advises me to give a sketch of his usual daily life.

"Mr. Lincoln is an early riser, and he thus is able to devote two or three hours each morning to his voluminous private correspondence, besides glancing at a city paper. At nine he breakfasts—then walks over to the War Office to read such war telegrams as they give him (occasionally some are withheld), and to have a chat with General Halleck on the military situation, in which he takes a great interest. Returning to the White House, he goes through with his morning's mail, in company with a private secretary. Some letters are endorsed and sent to the Departments—others are entrusted to the Secretary, who makes a minute of the reply which he is to make—and others the President retains, that he may answer them himself. Every letter receives attention, and all which are entitled to a reply receive one, no matter how they are worded, or how inelegant the chirography may be.

"Tuesdays and Fridays are Cabinet days, but on other days visitors at the White House are requested to wait in the ante-chamber, and send in their cards. Sometimes, before the President has finished reading his mail, Louis will have a handful of pasteboard, and from the cards laid before him Mr. Lincoln has visitors ushered in, giving precedence to acquaintances. Three or four hours do they pour in, in rapid succession, nine out of ten asking offices, and patiently does the President

listen to their applications. Care and anxiety have furrowed his rather homely features, yet occasionally he is 'reminisced of an anecdote,' and good-humored glances beam from his clear, gray eyes, while his ringing laugh shows that he is not 'used up' yet. The simple and natural manner in which he delivers his thoughts makes him appear to those visiting him like an earnest, affectionate friend. He makes little parade of his legal science, and rarely indulges in speculative propositions, but states his ideas in plain Anglo-Saxon, illuminated by many lively images and pleasing allusions, which seem to flow as if in obedience to a resistless impulse of his nature. Some newspaper admirer attempts to deny that the President tells stories. Why it is rarely that any one is in his company for fifteen minutes without hearing a good tale, appropriate to the subject talked about. Many a metaphysical argument does he demolish by simply telling an anecdote, which exactly overturns the verbal structure.

"About 4 o'clock the President declines seeing any more company, and often accompanies his wife in her carriage, to take a drive. He is fond of horseback exercise, and when passing the summer at the Soldiers' Home used generally to go to and fro in the saddle.

"The President dines at six, and it is rare that some personal friends do not grace the round dining table, where he throws off the cares of office, and reminds those who have been in Kentucky of the old school gentleman who used to dispense generous hospitality there. From the dinner table the party retire to the crimson drawing-room, where coffee is served, and where the President passes the evening, unless some dignitary has a special interview. Such, I am informed, is the almost unvarying daily life of Abraham Lincoln, whose administration will rank next in importance to that of Washington in our national annals.

"The President's wife (in the opinion of Mrs. Journal Reader) ought not to be left unmentioned, although there is little of interest to chronicle in the daily round of serving, reading and visiting hospitals, which occupies the time of Mrs. Lincoln. She may have made mistakes—who does not? in her invitations, and thereby have provoked envious criticisms. Neither do those of the Democratic era admit that there can be any courtesy displayed here now-a-days. But I am sure that since the time that Mrs. Madison presided at the White House, it has not been graced by a lady so well fitted by nature and by education to dispense its hospitalities as is Mrs. Lincoln. Her hospitality is only equaled by her charity, and her graceful deportment by her goodness of heart."