

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 842

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 28, 1945

LINCOLN'S LAST REQUEST FULFILLED

Memorial Day will always invite moments of quiet meditation, and the far removed resting places of those recently fallen in battle will accentuate the silent hours in which memory can best approach the shrines of the lamented dead.

During the first week in April the editor of *Lincoln Lore* spent some time in central Illinois, and while there took occasion, for the first time, to visit the graves of many of Abraham Lincoln's close associates, who are buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, at Springfield. It was at this season of the year, the last week in March and the first week in April, 1865, that Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln were at City Point, Virginia. An incident occurring there was called to mind by the earliest spring flowers which were just then beginning to open at Oak Ridge.

Isaac N. Arnold, in 1874, was in conversation with Abraham Lincoln's widow when the subject of her husband's burial place was mentioned. Mrs. Lincoln revealed to Mr. Arnold the incident above mentioned which is seldom recalled even by the best informed Lincoln students. She told Mr. Arnold that at the time of the visit to City Point and Richmond with the President, shortly before his death, one day they took a carriage drive along the banks of the James River. She said that they came to an old country graveyard and Mr. Arnold relates her reminiscences about that place in these words:

"It was a retired place, shaded with trees, and early spring flowers were opening on nearly every grave. It was so quiet and attractive that they stopped the carriage and walked through it. Mr. Lincoln seemed thoughtful and impressed. He said: 'Mary, you are younger than I. You will survive me. When I am gone, lay my remains in some quiet place like this!'"

It was with great difficulty, however, that the widow of Abraham Lincoln was finally allowed to carry out the wish of her husband with respect to his burial place, although it was less than a week after Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln returned from the City Point visit that her husband was assassinated.

Much pressure was brought to bear upon Mrs. Lincoln to have the body of the martyred President buried in the Capitol building at Washington. A crypt had been prepared there for the remains of George Washington, which were finally deposited at Mt. Vernon. It was the opinion of many that the remains of the illustrious Lincoln had become the property of the entire nation, superseding private, municipal, or even state claims. It appeared at one time as if the body of Lincoln might repose in the vault prepared for Washington.

Preliminary steps for the reception of the body at Springfield were taken on April 24, 1865, which resulted in the formation of the National Lincoln Monument Association. Correspondence dated May 10, 1865, Springfield, Illinois, and appearing in the *Chicago Republican* makes this comment about the division of opinions in Springfield, as to where the body of the President should be interred.

"It is an error to suppose the people of Springfield are united on the subject of the proper place for the monument. Probably a majority favor the Mather property in this city, one of the finest sites for a monument which could be selected. To this place, however, it is understood, Mrs. Lincoln is unalterably opposed. She refuses ever to allow Mr. Lincoln's remains to be placed there. The reason given by her friends is, that some relatives of hers, with whom she has not been for some time on speaking terms, reside on adjoining property.

"Other citizens of Springfield favor the selection of a fine lot of land, offered by Major Iles as a donation, and situated in the southeastern part of the city. Others again say that there is no more beautiful spot for the monument than the block on which the Governor's residence stands. Others again suggest that the monument might be placed at the intersection of two leading streets in the city, as is the case in Baltimore and other places. Then again others favor the Oak Ridge Cemetery, the only objection to which is that it is too far from the city. It is a very beautiful and romantic spot."

Mr. Harry Pratt in his valuable source book, *Concerning Mr. Lincoln*, published a brief note which Henry P. H. Bromwell, a Charleston, Illinois lawyer, wrote to his parents on April 30, 1865, five days before the arrival of Lincoln's body from Washington. He mentioned the preparations being made for the interment of the body, stating that the people had purchased the Mather grounds and had a vault nearly completed. He then continued, "but last night Mrs. Lincoln telegraphed that she would not let him be buried there. The people are in a rage about it, and all the hard stories that ever were told about her are told over again. She has no friends here. . . ."

Another letter published by Mr. Pratt and written by Julia Kirby to her brother, Joseph Duncan, on May 7, 1865, mentions the Mather burial site and indicates that regardless of Mrs. Lincoln's wishes the vault was completed as the Kirby letter states. "It seems strange that Mrs. Lincoln should act the way she does after all they have done. The vault is complete and Abraham Lincoln engraved on the arch over the door, and a lovelier spot could not be found in Springfield."

But a "lovelier spot" was found in Springfield, which apparently measured up to the specifications mentioned by Mr. Lincoln in the City Point conversation with his wife but a short time before. Of course, the gossips and the city fathers of Springfield thought they knew more about what should be done, than the distressed and almost distracted little woman in Washington, who was still prostrated in the White House. But no one in Springfield today, except some go-getter who has an eye for business, would want Lincoln buried on some street corner, or even on the state capitol grounds, or where the governor's mansion stands.

The first purchase of land at Oak Ridge for burial purposes was in 1855, and the following year an additional purchase was made. On Thursday, May 24, 1860, the day after Abraham Lincoln had formally accepted the nomination for the presidency, at the Chicago Convention, the dedication ceremony of Oak Ridge Cemetery was held. The speaker of the day was James C. Conkling, a close friend of Lincoln's. An excerpt from Conkling's address, which assumes a deeper significance when re-read after the lamented President's body was interred there, helps to confirm Mary Lincoln's choice of Oak Ridge as the burial place of her husband:

"How solemn, how impressive the scene! Far away from the haunts of busy life, far distant from the ceaseless rush of active enterprise, far removed from the giddy whirl of fashion and of pleasure, we are assembled to consecrate this ground . . . here, with naught but the pure arch of heaven above us, and Nature in all her silent beauty and loveliness around us, we dedicate the City of the Dead."

The Oak Ridge Cemetery fulfills Lincoln's last request: "When I am gone, lay my remains in some quiet place like this."