

# 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 866

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 12, 1945

## LINCOLN'S APPRENTICESHIP ON THE SLAVERY CONTROVERSY

Abraham Lincoln's term in the Thirtieth Congress might be called his session of apprenticeship on the slavery controversy. Here for the first time he observed the divisive factions at work which eventually were to bring on civil strife. He witnessed an actual "house divided" demonstration as the members of the lower House debated with great heat this most disturbing issue which had been accentuated by the Mexican War and the Oregon Territory questions. The many ramifications of the slavery controversy which he heard discussed from every possible angle in the debates in the House were supplemented by his reading the accounts of what was happening at the same time in the Senate. We may assume that if Lincoln went to Washington at this time with any misgivings about the seriousness of the sectional strife over slavery he returned to Springfield at the end of the session with a very realistic portrait of the drama in which he was to play the leading role a dozen years later.

The lower House had been in session but four days and the preliminary business of electing officers and appointing committees had not been completed before R. Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina observed that a new committee on commerce which was recommended to take care of internal improvements might be induced "to pave the way for some law to regulate the slave trade between the states." So it was throughout the session that almost every question was weighed with respect to its possible influence on slavery.

Ten days after Rhett's objection to the appointment of the new committee Jacob Thompson of Mississippi offered a resolution which called upon the Secretary of State to provide "all the information in his department touching on and relating to the suppression of the slave trade, since the ratification of the Treaty of Washington in the year 1842."

On the following day December 21, 1847, Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio presented a petition from the citizens of the District of Columbia "praying that all laws authorizing or sanctioning the slave trade in the District of Columbia may be repealed." George W. Jones of Tennessee moved that the resolution be laid on the table which motion brought out the first division of the House on the slavery question. It resulted in a tie vote 97 to 97 but the Speaker of the House supposed to vote under such circumstances cast his vote with those opposed to tabling the motion. So by the narrow margin of one vote the anti-slavery group won the first brush on the slavery problem, Lincoln contributing his vote to this end. However the original resolution later was defeated.

An episode occurred in a Washington boarding house where some of the Congressmen boarded which added fuel to the already burning question, and which caused Joshua Giddings to offer the following resolution on January 17, 1848.

"Whereas, on Friday last, three armed persons engaged in the internal slave trade, entered a dwelling in this city and violently seized a colored man, employed as a waiter in the boarding-house of several members of this body, and in the presence of his wife gagged him, placed him in irons, and with loaded pistols, forced him into one of the slave prisons of this city, from which, it is reported, he has since been despatched for the slave market at New Orleans;

"And whereas said colored man had been employed in said boarding-house for several years, and become well and favorably known to members of this House, had married a wife in this city, and under a contract to purchase his freedom for the sum of three hundred dollars, had by great industry paid that sum within about sixty dollars;

"And whereas outrages like the foregoing have been of common occurrence in this district, and are sanctioned by the laws of Congress, and are extremely painful to many of the members of this House, as well as in themselves inhuman: Therefore,

"Resolved, That a select committee of five members be appointed to inquire into and report upon the facts aforesaid; also, as to the propriety of repealing such acts of Congress as sustain or authorize the slave trade in this district, or to remove the seat of government to some free State."

The resolution was not adopted.

One of the most heated controversies of the entire session took place on April 20, referring to a resolution, which implied that a member of Congress had been menaced by a mob in Washington because he had offered legal assistance to some imprisoned negroes, and which further requested that a committee be appointed to investigate the circumstances. Rhett, Toombs, and Venable led the southern representatives in opposing the appointment of a committee and the latter in his remarks classified the abolitionists of the North in two divisions:

"One, a set of fanatics who though possessing no genuine social feelings were honest men, and the other, men who made use of them to secure seats in Congress and power and elevation to themselves, who stirred up strife—vile hypocrites who went around to factories and Sunday Schools getting women and children to sign petitions on matters which they had no concern." Venable in conclusion denied "that slavery was either a moral, social, or political evil."

Abraham Lincoln's contributions to the slavery controversy in the House was primarily through his consistently voting with the anti-slavery forces. However near the close of the session on January 13, 1849, "Abraham Lincoln gave notice of a motion for leave to introduce a bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia by consent of the free white people of said district and with compensation to the owners."

While the debates in the House of Representatives were much more spirited than those in the Senate the Oregon Territory question brought the Senate to an oratorical climax seldom equaled. The last day of the controversy the session continued unabated for twenty-two hours. Hannibal Hamlin of Maine entered into a long discussion on the subject. Thomas Corwin contributed a scholarly historical treatise on the resolutions relating to slavery presented previous to the final adoption of the Constitution in 1789, followed by a compilation of the opinions of leading statesmen of the young republic on the question of slavery.

Mr. Calhoun during the discussion of the Oregon Bill said "He would now tell the people of the South that they can never settle this question (slavery) until they take it into their own hands. . . . He believed, if the great test should come the calamity will not fall the heaviest on the South."

The Congressional Record for August 10, 1848, reports a speech by Webster on the Oregon question from which this notation is excerpted: "The Territory of Oregon was above the line of the Missouri Compromise. His (Webster's) objection to slavery was irrespective of lines and points of latitude: it took in the whole country, and the whole question. He was opposed to it in every shape and in every qualification and was against any compromise of the question." It would be interesting to know whether our exacting historians would feel that this statement placed Webster in the class of the much despised anti-slavery fanatics.