

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 939

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 7, 1947

CALEB BLOOD SMITH—INTERIOR DEPARTMENT

Several books which have come from the press during the past few years and especially one of 1946 vintage by Hendrick have created a new interest in the activities of Lincoln's cabinet members. The opening of the Lincoln manuscripts in the Library of Congress this coming July will also bring to the front again Lincoln's relations with the members of his official family. It has been thought that a brief chronicle and a few comments about the men who served with Lincoln in the cabinet during the period of the Civil War might be timely at various intervals in Lincoln Lore.

Possibly it might be well to introduce at the beginning one of the more obscure members appointed by Mr. Lincoln to a cabinet post. Among the first seven men chosen Caleb Blood Smith, Secretary of the Interior would rank as the least known. Various estimates have been placed on Smith's qualifications for the office, none of them flattering and possibly all of them too severe.

Would there have been an opportunity for any one, appointed as secretary of the rather unimportant Department of the Interior, to distinguish himself in the short time (March 5, 1861-January 1, 1863) which Smith served? Did Smith's predecessors in the office, Ewing of Ohio, McKennan of Pennsylvania, Stewart of Virginia and Thompson of Mississippi show outranking capacity to Smith at the time of their appointments to the Secretaryship of the Interior Department? It seems an unfair supposition to expect Smith to display any superior talents comparable to contemporaries situated in the more colorful cabinet posts.

One would think, after reading some of the stories of how Smith promised support of Lincoln by the Indiana delegates at the Chicago Convention in exchange for a place in the cabinet, that he had introduced log rolling into politics. It would be interesting to know what percentage of state delegations at any political convention before or after 1860 have not in some direct or indirect way expected patronage for their votes. Smith, nevertheless, greatly injured his place in history by doing openly what so many politicians did secretly.

Lincoln's letter to Smith written on May 26, 1860, shortly after the convention, will be recalled. It contained this acknowledgment: "I am indeed much indebted to Indiana and as my home friends tell me, much to you personally." On January 2, 1861, Jesse Fell wrote to Lincoln: "Cabinet places should go to Indiana and Pennsylvania," although as late as that date Fell seems to have been sure that at

Chicago no "improper pledges" were asked, "as they were not, and could not be given."

Aside from the "bargain" accusation another influence which helped to place Smith in the lowest bracket of Lincoln's early cabinet appointees was the organized opposition to his elevation to the portfolio. Colfax, a fellow Hoosier was using every possible means of gaining the seat and his friends did not hesitate to discredit Smith. Lincoln's letter to Colfax after the appointment of Smith will be remembered. The President said in part. "When your name was brought forward I said, 'Colfax is a young man

CALEB BLOOD SMITH

Born, Boston, Massachusetts, April 16, 1808.

Moved with parents to Ohio, 1814

Attended Cincinnati College

Graduated from Miami University

Read law at Connersville, Indiana

Admitted to the bar, 1828

Founded and edited *Indiana Sentinel*, 1832

Member Indiana House of Representatives, 1833-1836

Speaker of House, 1836

Grand Master of Free Masonry in Indiana from 1838-1844

Elected to 28th, 29th, 30th Congresses, 1843-1849

President of Cincinnati and Chicago R. R. in 1852

President Elector in 1840 and in 1856

Delegate at large, Chicago Convention

Seconded the nomination for Lincoln at Convention

Seconded the motion that Hamlin's nomination be made unanimous

Member of committee to notify Lincoln of nomination

Member of the Peace Congress of 1861
Secretary of Interior, March 5, 1861-
January 1, 1863

(38), is already in position, is running a brilliant career and is sure of a bright future in any event: with Smith it is now or never." At this time Smith was 53 years old and one of his friends who after an interval of some years met him in 1858 said: "How changed; age has marked him visibly, his head was bald, his cheeks furrowed, his eyes sunken, and covered with glasses." Lincoln was right about "now or never" for Smith because he died a year after he resigned from the cabinet.

Eliminating all the discussion about the Davis-Smith bargain, it is likely that if no pledge had been made Lincoln would have chosen some Hoosier

for his official family. The fact that no member of a President's cabinet had ever been chosen from Indiana would make a strong appeal for representation and between Colfax and Smith, Lincoln had gone on record as favoring Smith.

A more far reaching attack on Smith was made in the *Cincinnati Commercial* which alleged that Smith was dishonest, a man of double dealings and lacking in business capacity. Richard Thompson of Terre Haute wrote to Smith and asked him if there was any special cause for these attacks in the *Cincinnati* paper. From Smith's reply it appears that he had been retained as counsel in a suit brought against the newspaper for "wanton libels" and the case was compromised by the *Commercial* paying expenses and making humiliating retractions." Another count the paper had against Smith was his opposition to "Jim Day once elected to Congress by the know-nothing vote." Smith claimed that the *Commercial* was "very much controlled by Jim Day" who was defeated in the election in 1858 and who charged his defeat to Smith "without cause." Smith stated in the letter to Thompson that "Day is the most malignant devil I ever knew."

There seems to be tendency in modern biography to give more emphasis to what a man's enemies say about him than the testimonies of his friends. The attorney with whom Smith as a young man studied law stated in a biographical sketch of him prepared for publication.

"Few men in the West have filled a larger space in the public eye than the subject of this sketch. . . . He rose rapidly at the bar, was remarkably fluent, rapid and eloquent before the jury, never at a loss for ideas or words to express them. . . . He was one of the most eloquent and powerful stump speakers in the United States. . . ."

The most important letter in the Foundation Collection written by Caleb Smith as a cabinet member was addressed to Richard Thompson on April 16, 1861, the day after the firing on Sumpter. He said in part: "I advocated before the Cabinet the immediate evacuation of Fort Sumpter. After a good deal of discussion the President finally concluded to send provisions. Gov. Pickens was formally notified that our expedition would carry neither men nor arms but our only object was to supply our men with food. They refused to admit the supplies and commenced the attack. We must now either vindicate the power of the government or make an unconditional surrender. We have concluded to test the power of the government to protect itself."