

LINCOLN LORE

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JOHN PALMER USHER — INTERIOR DEPARTMENT

Continuing the series of bulletins presenting brief chronicles and a few human interest comments about Lincoln's official family it seems appropriate in this installment to present John Palmer Usher, the successor of Caleb Smith, who occupied our attention last month. If Smith was the least known member of Lincoln's first cabinet the portfolio was not enhanced as far as fame is concerned by the appointment of Usher as he was not as well known as Smith.

Both the Smith and Usher families originated in New England, Smith having been born in Boston and Usher's first American progenitor, a book dealer in Boston, was one of the founder's of Old South Church in 1669. Smith and Usher were both lawyers and also close friends. They resided at Terre Haute, Indiana at the time Lincoln was elected to the Presidency and both were ardent Whigs. Usher had been acquainted with Lincoln during the circuit riding days in Illinois and was acknowledged as a lawyer of repute.

If it was Smith's ability as a log-roller which allowed him to force his way into the cabinet, he bowed himself out in the same manner according to Nelson H. Loomis in his brief sketch of Usher. Mr. Loomis states that Usher reluctantly accepted the office of assistant secretary as he much preferred to have the appointment as federal judge for the district of Indiana. Upon learning later of the death of the incumbent, Judge Huntington, Usher wrote Smith about securing the appointment for him but by this time Smith was dissatisfied with the secretaryship of the Interior Department and secured for himself the appointment of District Judge for Indiana.

A letter written on Jan. 20, 1862, written by Usher to Richard W. Thompson, also of Terre Haute, reveals the reactions of Usher, then assistant secretary of the Interior, to the anticipated vacancy in the department:

"The Interior Department I design shall continue to be filled by an Indianian and as Colfax and his friends made so strong a fight for him, Lincoln I suspect will first turn to him . . . I would like to have you have the place if you incline to it and will be glad to aid you . . . Some of my very partial friends here have suggested that I should stand in for the position but I assure you I have no ambition that way and recoil from the conflict

which if successful must be accompanied with many most trying incidents but I have agreed that if you determine to decline to make an effort for the position for yourself, and think after careful reflection of the whole subject that it is proper and important in any respect that I should try to get it, I will with your aid try for it. It appears to me quite preposterous to engage in such an undertaking on my own account, but when I reflect that I may, without arrogance, believe that

JOHN PALMER USHER

Born, Brookfield, New York, Jan. 9, 1816

Son of Dr. Nathaniel and Lucy Palmer Usher

Read law in office of Mr. Henry Bennett at New Berlin, N. Y.

Admitted to practice in Chancery Courts of New York Jan. 17, 1839, and in the Common Law Courts the following day

Moved to Rockville, Parke County, Ind., in 1840

Shortly after became resident of Terre Haute, Ind., where he formed a law partnership with William D. Griswold

Prosecuting Atty. for district comprising seven counties, 1842-1844

Member of Legislature from Vigo County, 1850-1851

Republican candidate for Congress, 1856

Appointed Attorney General of State of Indiana, Nov. 10, 1861

Appointed Asst. Secy. of Interior, March 20, 1862

Made Secretary of the Interior, Jan. 8, 1863

Resigned, to take effect May 15, 1865

I am as competent as some of the incumbents, and that it is not possible to be more dishonest, I feel the less delicacy in the undertaking . . . If you consent to have your name used in connection with the position; write to me and I will do all I can to set you afloat to the best advantage, in which event I think you had better come on and do what you can for yourself."

While it would seem logical for the President to appoint another Hoosier to replace Caleb Smith, the fact that

Usher was already at work in the Interior Department as Assistant Secretary probably would offer a more important consideration for his advancement to the position than any other consideration even the urgent recommendation of Smith.

With the election of 1864 over there was a general feeling in the Cabinet that it would be reorganized. On Dec. 2, 1864, Usher wrote another letter to Thompson in which he says in part:

"I write now about a matter concerning myself. You may see, daily, in the papers I am to be appointed Judge, etc. There is no truth or reason in these reports. The question is, can I stay here in my present position? There are reports of various gentlemen being promoted to the position, but there is no prospect for any of them. There is, however, on foot, a project to put Gov. Wright in the place. It is expected that this will be backed up by certain peculiar and powerful influences. I do not (know) that there is anything to this, but it is to be apprehended. I do not entertain any resentment or spirit of resistance to this. . . . I would suggest for your consideration the idea of the Electoral College expressing the satisfaction of the people of the state with the present arrangement and also expressing in a delicate way that Indiana expected to be near the President in the Cabinet."

A week and a half later Usher seems much more confident about retaining his position and so advises Thompson on Dec. 13 as follows:

Dec. 13, 1864

"I don't now believe that I shall be disturbed. The fact that the aspirants for the office are so numerous and as the President is disposed I believe to give our state a Cabinet appointment he will I think incline to let me alone believing that by doing so he will give as much satisfaction as by attempting a change. I feel tolerably secure. . . . I hope you will keep an eye upon the movement in our state and advise me of any ambitious schemes for my overthrow. . . ."

Upon the appointment of Hugh McCulloch as Secretary of Treasury who was also from Indiana, Secretary Usher voluntarily resigned so as not to embarrass the President by having two Hoosiers in his cabinet. As his resignation did not take effect until May 15, 1865, he was still holding office at the time of the President's death.