

LINCOLN LORE

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GIDEON WELLES—NAVY DEPARTMENT

Abraham Lincoln returning from a visit to his son in school at Exeter, New Hampshire, made an address at Hartford, Connecticut, on Monday, March 5, 1860, and a leading citizen of the city, Gideon Welles, was on the committee of arrangements. Lincoln and Welles met the following morning for a chat on politics in the office of the *Evening Post* and this informal talk may have had much to do with fixing in Lincoln's mind the availability of this Connecticut Yankee for his cabinet. One other meeting with Welles must have left a favorable impression with Lincoln as the Connecticut man was on the notification committee which came to Springfield after the Chicago convention to officially advise Lincoln of his nomination. Although Welles favored Chase over Lincoln at the convention, other delegates from Connecticut went for Lincoln on the first ballot.

With the possible exception of Caleb Smith, Welles would rank as the member of the cabinet with the least prestige, and that fact is responsible for introducing him thus early in this series of brief monographs on the cabinet members.

The procedure in securing Welles as a member of the official family is known to all Lincoln students. At one of the conferences in Chicago with Vice President elect Hamlin covering the period of November 20, 21, and 22, 1860, Lincoln said, "You shall have the right, Mr. Hamlin, to name the New England member of the cabinet." On December 10, 1860, about three weeks after this conference Gideon Welles wrote a letter to Lincoln cautioning him that the South was but awaiting some "fancied overt act on the part of the incoming administration" and further consulting Lincoln on not being forced into some position "until it becomes a duty." This letter must have done much to elevate Welles in Lincoln's esteem.

Two weeks after Lincoln received the Welles letter on December 24, he wrote to Hamlin making some suggestions for the Vice President elect's

consideration. He said: "I need a man of Democratic antecedents from New England. I cannot get a fair share of that element in without. This stands in the way of Mr. Adams. I think of Governor Banks, Mr. Welles, and Mr. Tuck. Which of them do the New England delegations prefer? Or shall I decide for myself?"

Mr. Hamlin assumed the responsibility for making the selection and Mr. Welles apparently was his choice.

GIDEON WELLES

Born, Glastonbury, Conn., July 1, 1802

Student at Norwich University

Editor of *Hartford Times* 1826-1836

Democratic Member of Conn. Legislature 1827-1835

Comptroller of Conn., 1835, 1842, 1843

Contributor to the *New York Evening Post*

Postmaster of Hartford 1836-1841 under Van Buren

Divisional Chief in Navy Dept. 1846-1849 under Polk

Identified himself with the Republican Party in 1855

Candidate for Governor of Conn. in 1856

Member of Rep. Nat. Committee 1856-1864

Chairman of Connecticut delegation to Chicago Convention in 1860

Member of Notification Committee at Chicago Convention in 1860

Sworn in as Secretary of the Navy on March 5, 1861.

Several factors may have entered into the naming of Welles for the Navy post and one at least would be a sort of precedent which had been established by former Presidents of placing a New England man in the office. Welles also had some training in the Navy Department during the Polk administration. Furthermore his father, Samuel Welles, was the owner of a shipyard and engaged in maritime business. There can be no doubt that

Welles by environment, by training, and by precedent, qualified for the office of Secretary of the Navy. He was appointed by the joint recommendation of the President and Vice President for the Navy portfolio on March 4, 1861, and the following morning the oath of office was administered by Chief Justice Taney.

The appointment of Welles was not altogether satisfactory to some of his friends who would have preferred to see him Postmaster General and especially the Senate Naval Committee of which Senator Hale was the chairman was not enthused at the naming of Welles. An excerpt from a letter written by John P. Usher to R. W. Thompson on December 26, 1861, states: "I hear that the Senate Naval Committee have unanimously petitioned the President to remove Welles and I think they will yet be as decisive with Mr. Cameron." Welles was able to weather the storm but held great animosity towards Senator Hale whom he called "a Senatorial buffoon." Welles eventually secured the support of most of the members of the Naval Committee.

Although it is accepted generally that Welles conducted his department so as to invite less criticism than that brought against some other departments he will probably be longest remembered as the "diary writing" member of the cabinet. The publishing in 1911 of such portions of his diary as relate to the Civil War and Reconstruction Days put his name prominently before the people.

An earlier publication by Welles with the title *Seward and Lincoln*, brought from the press in 1874, received wide acclaim by admirers of Lincoln. It was published in refutation of some conclusions made by Charles Francis Adams in his address on "Memorial Address on the Life, Character, and Services of William H. Seward."

No member of the cabinet was more loyal to the President than his Secretary of the Navy who was still serving in that capacity at the time of the President's demise.