

# 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 958

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 18, 1947

## JAMES SPEED - ATTORNEY GENERAL

When Joshua Speed invited Abraham Lincoln to share his room over the Speed store at Springfield, Illinois, in 1837 he opened the way for a friendship which eventually contributed to the selection of Speed's brother James as Attorney General of the United States. It was through Lincoln's friendship for Joshua that he first met James Speed in 1841. Lincoln was on a visit to Joshua Speed in Louisville, Kentucky, where he met the members of the Speed family. James Speed, in an address on Lincoln, said:

"I knew Mr. Lincoln when he visited Kentucky, twenty years before he came to the Presidency. He then showed he was no ordinary man. I saw him daily; he sat in my office, read my books, and talked with me about his life, his reading, his studies, his aspirations. He made a decided impression upon all. He had an intelligent, vigorous, mind, strong in grasp, and original. He was earnest, frank, manly and sincere in every thought and expression. The artificial was all wanting. He had natural force and natural refinement. His after-life was a continuous development of his youthful promise."

Lincoln's visit in the highly cultural home of Judge John Speed was a far cry from the one room cabin which he had left when he migrated from the state with his parents twenty-five years before. Possibly the outstanding character in the home was the wife of the Judge, Lucy G. Speed, the mother of Joshua and James. On October 3, 1861 Abraham Lincoln sent her his photograph with the inscription, "For Mrs. Lucy G. Speed from whose pious hand I accepted the present of an Oxford Bible twenty years ago."

Upon the resignation of Bates, the Attorney General, it seemed almost certain, for expediency sake at least, that a man from the South would have to be selected to fill his place. Apparently Lincoln's first choice was Judge Joseph Holt also a Kentuckian, a former member of Buchanan's cabinet whom Lincoln had appointed in 1861 Judge Advocate General of the Army, and later Lincoln had made him head of the Bureau of Military Justice. Judge Holt however refused to accept the appointment of attorney general, but he did recommend highly James Speed. He said:

"I can recall no public man in the State, (Kentucky) of uncompromising loyalty, who unites in the same degree the qualifications of professional at-

tainments, fervent devotion to the Union and to the principles of your Administration, and spotless purity of personal character. To these he adds—what I should deem indispensable—a warm and hearty friendship for yourself, personally and officially."

### JAMES SPEED

Born, Louisville, Kentucky, March 12, 1812

Completed course at St. Joseph College, 1828

Graduated from Law Department Transylvania University, 1838

Practiced Law at Louisville, Kentucky Served Term in General Council City at Louisville

Member Lower House of Kentucky Legislature, 1847-1849

Contributed several articles to the press in 1849 against importation of slaves

Member of the Kentucky Senate, 1861-1863

Favored Lincoln's Compensation Emancipation Plan

Mustering Officer for Kentucky, 1861 Exerted tremendous influence in keeping Kentucky in the Union

Entered Cabinet of Abraham Lincoln, 1864

While we would not imply that James Speed was not qualified for the high office he was to occupy it was undoubtedly friendship for the Speed family which was primarily responsible for Lincoln's inviting Speed to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Bates. This was apparently Lincoln's only cabinet appointment where friendship was a major factor in the selection of a member of the official family.

The outstanding personality of James Speed's mother is indicated by the place she occupied in the lives of her sons even after they had become men of prominence. Upon being invited to a place in the Cabinet James Speed wrote to his mother from Washington, Washington, Dec. 5, 1864: "Dear Mother

"I have seen the President this morning and consented to take the office tendered, in the event my nomination is confirmed by the Senate."

Mr. Speed may have had some inkling that his confirmation as attorney general might not be passed immediately, in fact it was held up several days. According to Noah Brooks the delay was purposely caused to impress Lincoln on the obscurity of the man he was nominating. The public inauguration of Chase as Chief Justice was also delayed as the Attorney General's signature was needed on documents necessary to complete the induction. The confirmation was finally made however.

On January 15, 1865 Speed wrote his mother that he had attended "two great dinners . . . we had nothing at either dinner as good as jowl and turnip greens, or pig's head and hominy . . . On looking around at the gentlemen I found them all dressed in swallow-tailed coats, except myself, and nicely fixed up at all points from head to heel. I looked upon it as a mere conventionality of which I had not been appraised and so thought no more of it."

It was also to his mother that he wrote this reaction towards the security of the nation at the time of the President's assassination. His note bears the date of April 17. He said in part.

"The best and greatest man I ever knew, and one holding just now the highest and most responsible position on earth has been taken from us, but do not be downcast and hopeless. This great government was not bound up in the life of any one man. The great and true principles of self-government will under God be worked out by us or by better men."

On the very last public occasion which James Speed attended but a month before his death he read a paper before the Society of the Loyal Legion of Cincinnati. In the introduction of this address he paid a brief tribute to Lincoln which seems appropriate to use here.

"I believe that in all the annals of our race Abraham Lincoln is the finest example of an unknown man rising from obscurity and ascending to the loftiest heights of human grandeur."