

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE SUPPLEMENTAL LINCOLN PAPERS

A bulletin such as Lincoln Lore which is expected to keep its readers advised on current opinions in the field of Lincolniana could not fail to take some notice of an article in the current issue of *Life* magazine (August 25, 1947) by Stefan Lorant entitled "Where Are The Lincoln Papers?" The main thesis of the argument holds that there was a supplemental collection of Abraham Lincoln's papers to which even Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln's secretaries, did not have access and that Robert Lincoln was about to burn these papers when Nicholas Murray Butler remonstrated with him against such an act. This is by no means an unknown incident as it has already been related by Mr. Butler in *The Saturday Evening Post* for February 11, 1939 and the following year it appeared verbatim in volume two of Butler's *Across the Busy Years*.

The Butler story is of two parts. Part one is the account of a personal interview which Dr. Butler had with Robert Lincoln at Manchester, Vermont in the month of August, 1923. Part two presents the fragments of some correspondence which passed between Albert J. Beveridge, Nicholas Murray Butler, and Robert Lincoln in the years 1923 and 1924.

Dr. Butler's Vermont interview with Robert Lincoln occurred at the urgent request of Horace G. Young who told Dr. Butler that Lincoln was "going to burn a lot of his father's papers." Mr. Butler states that he observed "a trunk in the library of the home and in answer to Dr. Butler's query, Lincoln stated that it contained 'only some old family papers which I am going to burn.'" Dr. Butler recalled that after considerable persuasion against such procedure Robert said, "All right but no one must see them while I live."

The sequel to this interview told by Dr. Butler is of most importance. He said he "drew a long breath" when Robert promised to preserve them and that he then advised Robert to put them in the Library of Congress and "fix a date before which they shall not be opened." Dr. Butler then concluded, "That he (Robert) did. The letters whatever they may be are in the Library of Congress where he had already put other family papers." The Library of Congress however claims that Robert Lincoln did not present any papers to the Library after the original deposit in 1919.

Although no one, to the writer's knowledge, has ever questioned the fact that Mr. Butler visited Robert Lincoln in August, 1923, the *Life* magazine article introduces the evidence of three people to corroborate this already well established episode.

The first witness, a friend of the Mr. Young who stirred up Butler, presents hearsay evidence that Mr. Young saw on his visit to Mr. Lincoln "a number of large boxes" instead of just the one trunk observed by Butler. The concluding statement of the affiant states that Robert Lincoln told Mr. Young that he was burning "the documentary evidence of the treason of a member of Lincoln's cabinet". Surely this statement does not corroborate the opinion of Dr. Butler who states: "I cannot believe that there is the slightest ground" for treasonable acts on the part of Stanton. Dr. Butler was under the impression from his conversation with Robert that the papers contained "records and evidence of various happenings in Abraham Lincoln's own life and family which it was just as well not to make public while his son was living."

Lorant implies that this family skeleton, which Robert was able to hide by blue pencilling Nicolay and Hay's story, took residence in the Hanks lineage. However Robert wrote Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock on February 10, 1895: "I know nothing whatever of my father's mother's family beyond what is to be found in Nicolay & Hay's *Life of Lincoln* and there is no way in which I can aid you in this investigation."

With Dr. Butler refuting the Stanton story by Mr. Young, and Robert Lincoln himself disposing of Dr. Butler's hidden secrets about the family lineage we have little left for the Supplemental Papers to reveal, as implied by *Life* except some data about Ann Rutledge. There is no dependable proof that Abraham Lincoln ever wrote the name of Ann Rutledge or ever spoke of her to any of his close associates.

Lorant's two eyewitnesses, to what is presumed to be the same Dr. Butler episode, contribute further confusion rather than corroboration to the incident. The proprietor of the hotel where Dr. Butler was a guest claims Senator Beveridge was with Dr. Butler in August, 1923, but the other witness, Robert Lincoln's doctor, claims that in the summer of 1923 as he went up the Lincoln driveway "Dr. Butler and Frank Lowden were leaving the house." Dr. Butler makes no mention of either one of these gentlemen collaborating with him in the supposed preservation of the Lincoln papers which had actually been impounded by Robert eight months before Butler's visit. The hotel proprietor also stated that Dr. Butler came back to the hotel and remarked, "How discouraged he was over Robert Lincoln's threat to destroy some papers concerning his father and how he tried to persuade him not to," but according to Butler's own testimony, he, Butler, "drew a long breath" apparently of relief, when Robert told him he would put the papers in the Library of Congress. This should have made Dr. Butler very happy rather than despondent upon his return to his hotel.

Part two of Dr. Butler's story relates that eight months after the Manchester episode upon the request of Albert J. Beveridge, Dr. Butler wrote to Robert Lincoln on April 21, 1924 seeking permission for Beveridge to use the Lincoln papers "both those in the Library of Congress and those in your possession." Robert Lincoln's reply dated three days later included as an enclosure a letter which Robert had written to Albert J. Beveridge on Jan. 23, 1923 refusing such a request which had come directly from Beveridge. It is something more than a coincidence that the deed of gift for the Lincoln Papers made out by Robert Lincoln to the Library of Congress bore the same date, January 23, 1923 as Robert's letter to Beveridge refusing him access to the papers. It is a fair assumption that eight months before the Butler episode Robert Lincoln impounded the Lincoln Papers to prevent Beveridge from gaining access to them.

The trunk in the Lincoln home at Manchester never reached the Library of Congress although Butler affirmed it did. Sixteen years after the interview he remembered that Robert said it contained "only some old family papers," probably remnants from the papers of his father and those of his mother and also his own manuscripts and possibly some of the Senator Harlan papers.

Robert Lincoln as Minister to England, Secretary of the Navy, and President of the Pullman Company must have acquired a very large file of correspondence in his own name. Upon the death of his mother he probably inherited such family papers as she had preserved and during the course of fifty years after his father's death a vast amount of correspondence would be carried on with friends of the deceased President. That the family papers in the Robert Lincoln collection would serve as a valuable supplement to the magnificent gift of 18,350 Lincoln items now in the Library of Congress is admitted.

President Lincoln sent a telegram to General Schofield on July 23, 1863 in which he said, "I care very little for the publication of any letter I have written." It is a great injustice to the memory of Abraham Lincoln to build up a purely hypothetical proposition that certain important papers were burned or suppressed by Robert Lincoln as the "guarding of his father's reputation."