

LINCOLN LORE

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WILLIAM PITT FESSENDEN, SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY

William Pitt Fessenden, usually addressed by his friends as "Pitt," visited Springfield, Illinois on June 19, 1837, in company with Daniel Webster and his party. A largely attended barbecue was prepared by the Whigs of central Illinois at Porter's Grove in honor of the illustrious Webster. Inasmuch as Abraham Lincoln was living in Springfield at this time and an influential Whig member of the Legislature, there can be no doubt but what it was here that he first met Mr. Fessenden. In fact it would appear as if this future Secretary of the Treasury was presented to Abraham Lincoln earlier than any other member who was later taken into his cabinet.

There is no evidence that Fessenden remembered meeting Lincoln at Springfield and possibly Lincoln may not have had any distinct memory of meeting Fessenden because of the greater importance of Webster. It was an eventful trip for Fessenden. After the visit to Clay in Kentucky, the Webster party stopped at Cincinnati and here Fessenden made the acquaintance of a young man named Salmon P. Chase, whom he was to succeed twenty-seven years later in the Lincoln cabinet.

Fessenden was a member of an influential New England family, his father, Samuel, having been very early affiliated with the anti-slavery party in Maine and for forty years the head of the bar in that state. William became an ardent follower of his father with reference to the slavery question and as early as 1840 sponsored anti-slavery legislature as a member of Congress and became one of the leading Whigs opposed to "property in men." As a senator in 1854 he made a speech on the Kansas-Nebraska bill which was widely acclaimed.

As early as 1854 Fessenden was advocating and helping to promote what he termed an "anti-extension party" but with the formation of the Republican group he became an ardent supporter of its principles. The newly organized party in Maine sent him to

the Senate in 1859. He would have been a favorite son candidate for the Presidency in 1860 if he had allowed his name to be presented by the delegation from his state. Regardless of his unwillingness to become a candidate, James G. Blain wrote to him from Chicago on Monday, May 16, 1860, during the Republican convention a letter containing this advice, "The game lies between Lincoln and

WILLIAM PITT FESSENDEN

Born in Boscawen, N. H., Oct. 16, 1806

Graduated from Bowdoin, 1823

Admitted to the bar at 21 years of age

Practiced law successfully at Bridgetown, Bangor, and Portland, Maine

Sent to the Maine Legislature, 1832 and 1840

Elected a Whig congressman, 1840

Served in Maine Legislature, 1845-1846, 1853-1854

Sent to Senate by coalition of Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats, 1854

Assisted in formation of Republican Party

Re-elected to Senate, 1859

Member of Peace Congress, 1861

Chairman of the finance committee, War Congress

Appointed Secretary of the Treasury, July 1, 1864

Resigned Secretaryship to take seat in the Senate, March 3, 1865

yourself." On the following day Fessenden wrote a letter to his family, "Lincoln seems to be in the ascendant." Dennison was another possible nominee for the presidency in 1860 who eventually found his way into the successful candidate's cabinet.

As soon as Lincoln was elected Fessenden became a strong advocate for the appointment of Chase as head of the Treasury department which he felt to be the most important post in view of the possibility of a war. Senator Fessenden himself was chairman of the committee on Finance. On

May 29, 1861, he received at his home in Maine a note from Chase stating that the President desired his presence in Washington and from then on Fessenden was more responsible than any one else for the measures passed in Congress which gave congressional financial support to the war enterprise.

One of the most drastic movements in the early part of the war came when a committee from the Senate attempted to force Lincoln to reorganize his cabinet for the primary purpose of getting rid of Seward. Fessenden took a leading part in the procedure and in the meetings with the President which followed was very outspoken in his criticisms: so much so that when his name was proposed as a successor to Seward he remarked, "You know very well that the part I have taken in this movement would effectually exclude me from a cabinet appointment if there were no other reason."

However the time came when Mr. Fessenden learned that Mr. Lincoln would not allow personal differences to stand between him and an appointment that should be made for the good of the nation. Upon Mr. Chase's withdrawal from the cabinet Mr. Fessenden was almost commanded by the President to accept the portfolio. This he consented to do purely from the sense of duty and on no desire of his own. There was also an understanding that just as soon as the emergency was over he would be relieved and with this promise from the Chief Executive he was appointed.

The very efficient service Mr. Fessenden rendered the country at the time of one of its most difficult financial crises was much appreciated by Mr. Lincoln and for eight months Fessenden directed the affairs of the department acceptably. With the senatorial elections coming up and some movement taking form in Maine to nominate another for Fessenden's former seat in the Senate, his resignation to take effect on March 3, 1865 was handed to the President.