

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE BIBLE

Next Sunday, December 14th, will be observed throughout the Christian world as Bible Sunday. Coming as it does each year midway between the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons with their religious festivals the day should create the proper atmosphere for raising the question with reference to Abraham Lincoln's attitude towards the Holy Writ.

The first public address which Lincoln made that has been preserved verbatim, and which appeared over his signature, was dated March 9, 1832. He was then twenty-three years old and a candidate for the Illinois legislature. After submitting several arguments in favor of a better system of education for Illinois he continued; "to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the Scriptures and other works, both of a religious and moral nature."

The sincerity of Lincoln's own statement about there being "advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the Scriptures" is challenged by William Herndon, recognized by some authors as the founder of the realistic school in Lincoln biography. In a letter written by Herndon to Isaac N. Arnold on November 20, 1866, he submitted this query and the accompanying warning.

"Did you know that Mr. Lincoln wrote a work—a book on *Infidelity*—and that his friends say they burnt it up? Beware that some leaf is not slumbering—to be sprung on you, when we are dead and gone, and no defense being made—he, Lincoln, will go down all time as a writer of infidelity, atheism, etc."

During the following years Herndon gave varied versions of the burning of the book but his most complete statement about it seems to have been written as late as August 21, 1887, over fifty years after the alleged destruction of the book and twenty-one years after his early revelation of the incident to Arnold. The story in part appeared in his essay on "Lincoln's Philosophy and Religion" as follows:

"Now for facts. In the years 1835-36 Mr. Lincoln wrote out, fully wrote out, his ideas and intended to publish them in pamphlet or book form; he read his manuscript to Samuel Hill, his employer, before or soon after. Hill was the personal friend of Lincoln at that time and said to Lincoln: 'Lincoln let me see your manuscript.' Lincoln handed it to him. Hill ran it in a tin plate stove, and so the book went up in flames. Lincoln in that production attempted to show that the Bible was false. Finally it may be said that he was an infidel, one who did not believe that the Bible was the special divine revelation of God as the Christian world contends."

The source material which Herndon used in preparing this story appeared in the *Menard Axis* for February 15, 1862. Apparently it was not until June 6, 1865 that Herndon first observed the item when it was forwarded to him by the editor of the paper, John Hill. Between June 6 and June 27, 1865, the date of the next letter which Herndon received from Hill there had been a conference of the two men and Hill stated, "As to Mr. Lincoln's book on *Infidelity*, I gave you all my knowledge verbally." Hill did add a few other reminiscences which definitely associated his father, Samuel Hill, with the episode.

The *Axis* account in which the burnt book is mentioned is a sordid story of Lincoln's early days at New Salem written in the typical style of political harangue; Hill being in politics an active adversary of Lincoln. The incident associated with the book according to Hill occurred shortly after Nov. 22, 1834, when the sheriff had levied on Lincoln's personal property for debt and left Lincoln without anything "save the clothes which he wore." Hill then continued:

"Again necessity forced him to manual labor. This he very much disliked to perform, but his honest pride would not allow him to eat the bread which he had not earned. Here, it is stated, he employed his intellectual faculties in writing a dissertation (sic) against the doctrine of divinity of the scriptures. Of this he soon repented, and consigned his production to the flames. He had designed for its publication, but his senior friends pointing him to Paine and Voltaire (sic), wrought a change in his intentions, and perhaps his destiny."

John Hill was born in 1834 and the book burning was supposed to have taken place during the winter of 1834-1835 when Hill was an infant, so what he wrote could not have been from personal observation. At best, the story was hearsay evidence before Herndon began to embellish it. In the original version it was Lincoln himself who destroyed his own papers but later it was Samuel Hill who burned the book. Originally it was prepared before the death of Ann Rutledge, but Herndon makes the death of Ann partly responsible for this work on infidelity which he called Lincoln's "blast of despair." Herndon avowed "The book was a lofty criticism, a high spiritual nationalistic criticism," although it is said to have been written by Lincoln in the midst of a "crazy spell."

The Herndon prophecy that some leaf of the alleged destroyed book might "be slumbering" and later brought to light, has not been fulfilled but another document that was slumbering until five years ago has been brought to light which nullifies the book burning folklore. Strange that Herndon never mentioned the circular Lincoln published in 1846 and the accompanying letter to Allen N. Ford, editor of the *Illinois Gazette* at Lacon, Ill. Mr. Lincoln advised Mr. Ford that "the little handbill, herewith enclosed" was published because "Mr. Cartwright was whispering the charge of infidelity against me" and Lincoln further continues, "I at once wrote a contradiction of it." That one statement over Lincoln's own signature should take care of the "infidelity" charges which Mr. Herndon continued throughout his life to hurl against Lincoln.

The "little handbill" also written by Lincoln becomes even more specific about the Bible and contains one statement which absolutely refutes the burnt book folklore. Lincoln makes this direct statement, "I have never denied the truth of the Scripture." In rather a long dissertation about his religious belief (see *Lincoln Lore* 677) which includes the above statement about the Scripture, he comes to a conclusion in these words, "The foregoing, is the whole truth, briefly stated in relation to myself upon this subject."

In his first political speech of 1832 Abraham Lincoln spoke about "the advantages and satisfaction to be derived" in reading the Bible. In the circular he prepared in 1846 he wrote, "I have never denied the truth of the Scripture" and during his administration there are illustrations innumerable of his appreciation of the sacred book.

Joshua Speed one of Lincoln's closest friends visited the President in the summer of 1864 when the Lincolns were living out at the President's Villa. Speed said: "As I entered the room, near night, he (Lincoln) was sitting near a window intently reading his Bible. Approaching him I said, 'I am glad to see you so profitably engaged.' 'Yes' said he, 'I am profitably engaged.'" Speed was a self admitted skeptic and had not changed his opinions during the years as he informed Lincoln. Speed then continued: "Looking me earnestly in the face, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he said, 'you are wrong Speed, take all this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man.'"