

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 999

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 31, 1948

ORIENTING LINCOLN AND THE CABINET

The series of brief biographical sketches of Lincoln's cabinet members brought to a close in Lincoln Lore has invited, as a sequel, an issue that would allow one to visualize the executive community at Washington in Lincoln's day. This orientation of the President and his cabinet can best be accomplished by the aid of a plat which includes the location of the White House and its adjacent structures.

The fact that the area which contains the President's House is in Reservation 1, implies that it was the central unit in the overall plan for the entire capital city project. A natural feature which is immediately called to our attention and which we might assume was responsible for the location of Reservation 1, is Tiber Creek at a point where it empties into the Potomac River.

Tradition states that a whole century before the location of Washington this small stream was named Tiber Creek after the famous "Tiber" on the banks of which there was erected the city of ancient Rome. The tradition further states that the name was so chosen because it was very early anticipated that "some day upon its banks would rise a capital greater than Rome."

When the original plans for the city were drawn by Peter Charles L'Enfant, there were seventeen desirable localities set apart for government purposes which were designated as reservations. As has been noted, number one was called "The President's Grounds." Number two embraced the Capitol grounds, number nine was called Judicial Square, and originally set apart for the judicial branch of the government. Thus the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches were all recognized.

If Pennsylvania and New York avenues had been laid out without disturbing their general course they would have intersected each other in the very center of the White House. Connecticut avenue from the North West, Sixteenth Street from the North, and Vermont avenue from the North East, if continued, would have converged at this intersection.

Possibly one of the most interesting descriptions of the Executive Center and its surroundings at the time Lincoln was in Congress was written by a British traveler named Alexander Mackay in reporting his visit to the "Western World." He states:

"In the midst of a large, open square, on a piece of high ground overlooking the Potomac, though about a quarter of a mile back from it, is the Presi-



The President's Grounds

dent's House or the 'White House' as it is more generally called. . . . Within this square, and forming, as it were, its four angles, are the four departments of State, those of the Treasury, of State, of War, and of the Navy, each of which is approached by the public from one of the four streets which encompass the Executive grounds. To each a private path also leads from the President's house, the chief magistrate sitting, as it were like a spider, in the center of his web, from which he constantly overlooks the occurrences at its extremities."

The various departmental structures on the Executive Square were originally called Executive Buildings and designated by the terms North East, South East, North West, and South West. Later they took on the names of the various Departments, State, Treasury, War, and Navy respectively.

State Department

The State Department which occupied the North East corner set the pattern as far as architectural design

is concerned for the others. It was a two story brick over a freestone basement. It was standing during the Lincoln administration but in 1866 was razed to make room for the new Treasury building.

Treasury Department

The loss of the old Treasury building by fire in 1833, standing south of the Department of State building, and similar to the State Department building, caused a new structure to be erected of freestone three stories high. It had four fronts and in 1866 was enlarged by the acquisition of the State Department site.

War Department

The building occupied by the War Department at the north west corner was of similar architectural design as the State Department building. The Secretary's office was at the east end of the corridor on the second floor. It was to this building which Lincoln most often found his way during the war, because the telegraph office was also located here.

Navy Department

Just south of the War Department building stood the building of the Navy Department, also of brick and very much like the War Department structure. A wing was built on this building in 1864. The Secretary's office was in the south end of the corridor on the second floor.

Attorney General

The office of the Attorney General was located in rented property which stood opposite the Treasury building and occupied the upper floors. As indicated by the location of the building, it was just outside the Executive Square to the east.

Department of the Interior

The Department of the Interior was located in the Patent Office building which stood in the two squares bounded by 7th and 9th Streets and F and G streets. The office of the Secretary of the Interior was in the north east corner of the building in the north corridor.

Post Office

The office of the Postmaster General was located in the General Post Office building. His rooms were on the south side of the south corridor on the floor above the basement. The building was started in 1839 and not completed until 1855. It stood in the square between E and F and 7th and 8th streets and directly east of the White House, eight blocks from the Executive Square.