

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN UNDERGIRDS AGRICULTURE

Three basic and major laws which undergird American agriculture were enacted during the first sixteen months of Abraham Lincoln's administration as President of the United States. They were: the Act to establish the Department of Agriculture; the Homestead Act; and the Land Grant College Act. His first two annual messages to Congress reveal his personal sponsorship for these fundamental laws. Inasmuch as two of these acts became laws in the month of May, this season of the year would seem to be an appropriate time to mention them.

While Abraham Lincoln's father was professionally a cabinet maker, his three established homes, one each in the states of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, were small farms of approximately 100 acres. On these first two homesteads Abraham Lincoln grew up, becoming of age before he ever lived in other than a farm community where tilling the soil was the primary means of survival. In the autobiographical sketch which Abraham Lincoln prepared for Jesse W. Fell in 1859 he stated, "I was raised to farm work, which I continued until I was twenty-two."

Possibly a more important contributing factor to the interest Lincoln took in agriculture in later years, was his retention by clients who were makers of farm implements. This association necessitated his becoming informed about new methods of plowing, cultivating and harvesting then being introduced. It will be recalled that a year before he was elected to the Presidency, he gave at the Wisconsin State Fair his famous speech to the people on scientific farming. He developed a thesis that, "No other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable and agreeable combination of labor and cultivated thought as agriculture."

United States Department of Agriculture

Abraham Lincoln's first annual message to Congress delivered on December 3, 1861 contained this statement:

"Agriculture, confessedly the largest interest of the nation, has, not a department, nor a bureau, but a clerkship only, assigned to it in the government. While it is fortunate that this great interest is so independent in its nature as to not have demanded and extorted more from the government, I respectfully ask Congress to consider whether something more cannot be given voluntarily with general advantage.

"Annual reports exhibiting the condition of our agriculture, commerce, and manufactures would present a fund of information of great practical value to the country. While I make no suggestion as to details, I venture the opinion that an agricultural and statistical bureau might profitably be organized."

Abraham Lincoln's second annual message to Congress on December 2, 1862 contains this reference:

"To carry out the provisions of the act of Congress on the 15th of May last, I have caused the Department of Agriculture of the United States to be organized.

The last annual message which Lincoln delivered to Congress presented on December 6, 1864, reveals Lincoln's deep interest in the enlargement of what he called "the people's department" and its perpetuity:

"The Agricultural Department, under the supervision of its present energetic and faithful head, is rapidly commending itself to the great and vital interest it was created to advance. It is peculiarly the people's depart-

ment, in which they feel more directly concerned than in any other. I commend it to the continued attention and fostering care of Congress."

A few timely excerpts are made from the act which outline some of the duties of the department: "To acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture . . . and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants, . . . to employ other persons for such service as their services may be needed, including chemists, botanists, entomologists, and other persons skilled in natural sciences pertaining to agriculture."

Homestead Act of 1862

The exact title of the act which Lincoln signed on May 20, 1862 is "An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers in the Public Domain." Its purpose is set forth by these excerpts from the law:

"Any person who is the head of a family or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one and is a citizen of the U. S. . . . shall be eligible to enter one quarter section or a less quantity of unappropriated public lands at two dollars and fifty cents per acre . . . no individual shall be permitted to acquire title to more than one quarter section under the provisions of this act. . . ."

Land Grant College Act of 1862

The wording of the title of the act which put the colleges of agriculture on the map and signed by Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862 is as follows: "An Act donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts." Excerpts from this act which has become so important in the advancement of agriculture are submitted.

"That there be granted to the several States, for the purposes hereinafter mentioned, an amount of public land, to be apportioned to each State a quantity equal to thirty thousand acres for each senator and representative in Congress. . . ."

"All moneys derived from the sale of the lands aforesaid by the States to which the lands are apportioned, and from the sales of land scrip hereinbefore provided for, shall be invested in stocks of the United States, or of the States, or some other safe stocks, yielding not less than five per centum upon the par value of said stocks; and that the moneys so invested shall constitute a perpetual fund, the capital of which shall remain forever undiminished, (except so far as may be provided in section fifth of this act,) and the interest of which shall be inviolably appropriated, by each State which may take and claim the benefit of this act, to the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."

Few scientific farmers of the modern day, beneficiaries of the Homestead Act, and students in our agricultural colleges, are informed about the major part paid by Abraham Lincoln in undergirding agriculture and the by-products of the vast agricultural empire.