

LINCOLN LORE

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THE EXECUTIVE MANSION SECRETARIAT

The casual student of Abraham Lincoln usually associates John G. Nicolay and John Hay as occupying positions of equal importance in the Executive Mansion Secretariat. The daughter of Nicolay however in a recent book in commenting on Lincoln's private secretary states, "Legally and officially my father was the only one. John Hay was his assistant." Elaborating still further on the professional service of Nicolay and Hay, Miss Nicolay notes, "My father appears to have been entirely responsible for John Hay's presence in Washington." It was Nicolay who requested the President Elect at Springfield to allow Hay to go with them to the nation's capitol as an assistant. Hay was given a clerkship in the Department of the Interior and assigned to duty at the White House.

Although Miss Nicolay does present her father as the one private secretary officially so called, she does admit there were others who were recognized in this capacity. She uses the plural form in the caption of one of her chapters entitled "The Private Secretaries" and states that a number of families have made the claim "quite innocently" that one of their relatives was "Private Secretary to Mr. Lincoln."

The other person most often associated with Nicolay and Hay as a member of the Executive Mansion Secretariat was William O. Stoddard. Mr. Lincoln's attention had been called to Stoddard by an editorial he had written for the *Central Illinois Gazette* in 1859, suggesting Lincoln for the Presidency. He was invited to take a clerkship at Washington where he was also assigned to the Department of the Interior and authorized to sign Land Warrants. Eventually his desk was moved to the White House where he was given other duties. One of his tasks was to take care of Mrs. Lincoln's correspondence which suggests he might be referred to as her private secretary as well as Mr. Lincoln's. Stoddard in his book entitled *Inside the White House in War Times* is cited on the title page as "One of the President's Private Secretaries."

Aside from these three better known secretarial assistants who were with Lincoln for the first four years of his incumbency as President it is known that upon Stoddard's retirement, because of an extended illness, Mr. Nicolay invited Edward Duffield Neill to fill the vacancy. Undoubtedly his status was the same as Stoddard's.

Secretary Neill was a Presbyterian clergyman who graduated from Amherst and Andover. Moving to St. Paul he served as chancellor of the University of Minnesota, became an authority on Minnesota history, and the author of several historical books. A biographical sketch of him states; "He was associated with Nicolay and Hay as one of the Private Secretaries of President Abraham Lincoln and assisted in handling the President's mail."

Neill prepared a manuscript entitled "President Lincoln's Mail Bag" which was supposed to have been deposited with the Minnesota Historical Society, but correspondence in 1941 failed to locate this valuable essay. Such papers as he left however, are deposited with the Society. Mr. Neill stated that the last bag of mail for President Lincoln arriving after his death was "opened amid awful stillness and two of the last letters read

were from General Burnside and Chief Justice Chase." The Burnside letter contained his resignation and Chase's memorandum referred to "voting privileges of the negro."

It may be of some significance to note that Hay and Stoddard, both legally under the supervision of the Interior Department, had desks in the same room while Nicolay had a private office. Upon Stoddard's retirement we assume that Neill took over Stoddard's desk.

According to Miss Nicolay, Charles H. Philbrick, an Illinois friend of Nicolay, was made a second class clerk in the Department of the Interior whose duties were associated with the White House. The indexes of the *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* for a period of forty years, however, do not reveal any mention of his name, so it is likely he did not claim to be a private secretary of the President.

A news item appearing in the *New York Times* for January 9, 1949, indicates that a man by the name of Gustave H. Matile wrote from the Executive Mansion in 1864 as a secretary of Lincoln. The letters were directed to S. N. Holmes, one in reply to a request for the President's autograph. No further information is available about the actual status of this secretary.

A recent acquisition by the Foundation in the form of an envelope addressed to John F. Marvel, Fall River, Mass. carries two lines printed in script as follows:

From the President of the United States
(blank space for name)

Private Secretary

The post mark on this envelope is dated "Washington, D. C. August 22" but the year is blurred so that it is difficult to determine whether it is "62" or "64." In the blank space left for a name to be inserted is a beautifully inscribed signature, W. A. Browning. Apparently he felt qualified to sign as a Private Secretary of Mr. Lincoln.

Another envelope in possession of the Foundation carries in old English type the line:

From the President of the United States
(space for signature)

Priv. Sec.

In this instance the name inserted in the blank space is John Hay.

These envelope forms with the blank space left for signatures indicate that it was anticipated so that they would be used by various people, or more than one at least. Otherwise the name of John G. Nicolay would have been printed in. Possibly the signature served the purpose of a franking notice and was so construed. In two instances where John Hay uses this type of envelope it appears as if he had crossed out the title "Priv. Sec."

In Stoddard's reminiscence of White House Days there is this tribute to the President:

"I do not know or believe that he ever found fault with one of his private secretaries in all the onerous and delicate duties with which they were charged."

The roster of the Executive Mansion Secretariat as revealed by the evidence presented would contain the names of John G. Nicolay, John Hay, William O. Stoddard, Edward Duffield Neill, Charles H. Philbrick, Gustave H. Matile, and W. A. Browning.