

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S EARLIEST COMPOSITION

The discovery of the periodical containing the first published composition written by Abraham Lincoln would be a major contribution to our historical sources. It would allow us to observe how far Lincoln had advanced in the field of literature while he was still in his teens. There is fairly dependable evidence that at least two of his essays, one on temperance and the other on politics, were published as early as 1827 or 1828.

The only available information about these writings are the reminiscences of William Wood of Spencer County, Indiana as reported by William Herndon. The editor of *Lincoln Lore* has so often criticized the historical accuracy of many of William Herndon's comments that it may seem incongruous to place too much dependence on Herndon's conclusions in this instance. Wood at the time of the Herndon interview was eighty-three years old and he was trying to remember incidents that had occurred thirty-five years before. Herndon's method of recording such comments was to make brief notes at the time or shortly after, and at some later period enlarge upon them and then credit the story, couched in his own language, to the testator. The interview in question is headed "William Wood's Statement" and is dated "September 15, 1865" the salutation begins "William Wood says:" and then follows the affirmation beginning, "My name is William Wood . . ."

While too much dependence need not be placed on the details of the tradition as presented by Herndon, possibly the basic statements that Lincoln wrote an essay on temperance and one on politics and that they both appeared in print can be accepted. The earlier discussion on temperance will occupy our attention in this monograph. Wood claimed that Abraham Lincoln "wrote a piece on temperance and brought it to my house." He continued, "I gave the article to Aaron Farmer, a Baptist preacher; he read it, it struck him; he said he wanted to send it to a temperance paper in Ohio, for publication; it was sent and published." Wood further claimed that he saw the article and "read it with pleasure over and over again."

The first question raised would inquire about the probability of Lincoln writing on the subject of temperance. On September 29, 1863 he was visited at the White House by a group from the Sons of Temperance and in his response as recorded by Nicolay and Hay he said, "When I was a young man—long ago—before the Sons of Temperance as an organization had an existence—I, in a humble way made temperance speeches, and I think I may say that to this day I have never, by my example, belied what I then said." Lincoln students are familiar with the extended discussion which Lincoln presented before the Springfield Washington Temperance Society on February 22, 1842 and it is doubtful if a more sensible and practical discussion of the oft debated question is now available. There can be no doubt about Lincoln's life long interest in the question of temperance.

Possibly the next query would center around the minister who was responsible for having the essay printed. Herndon was mistaken about Rev. Aaron Farmer being a Baptist, evidently one of Herndon's own interpolations in the story. Rev. Farmer was a minister of the United Brethren Church and it was upon a visit to Mr. Wood, also a member of the same church, that his pastor was shown the discussion on temperance. Certainly he would not have been confused about the religious affiliation of his own minister. At the time of Rev. Farmer's death on March 1, 1839, he was serving as presiding Elder of the Indianapolis district.

With the probability of the subject of the essay being one of interest to Lincoln and the identity of its sponsor established, another query of importance is the time element in the story. In a purely independent statement it appears as if Rev. Farmer was conducting a series of meetings in a grove near the Lincoln's home in the fall of 1827, at which time Henry Bruner affiliated with the church. Henry and Allen Bruner were neighbors and close boyhood friends of Abraham Lincoln and Allen Bruner later became a minister in the United Brethren Church. It may have been at this time that the essay was shown to Rev. Farmer. Henry Ward Beecher had preached a series of temperance sermons in 1826 which were widely published and Lincoln having access to the *Western Sun* published at Vincennes may have read some of them. If the date 1827 be accepted as the probable time Rev. Farmer received the manuscript, then we are ready to approach the most difficult question, where was it published? We are not unmindful, however, that it may have been at a later date possibly any time between 1827 and 1829.

Attempting to run down the probability of the article having been printed in a United Brethren paper, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* visited the headquarters of the religious body at Dayton, Ohio and conferred with several of the officials of the Otterbein Press. While they were very cooperative, they were unable to point to any specific paper in which the Lincoln discussion may have appeared.

Inasmuch as the quest for the missing essay seems to point vaguely to a Cincinnati paper the editor of *Lincoln Lore* visited the Cincinnati Historical and Philosophical Society Library at the University of Cincinnati with the hopes of learning of some temperance paper published in the city as early as 1827. Although he was given much assistance by the staff, a likely prospective publication could not be discovered. However files of both the *Cincinnati Advertiser* and the *Cincinnati Gazette* of early dates are preserved there and possibly these two papers will invite more attention than could be given to them in one day, also the *Cincinnati Emporium* would be a possible source. All three papers were being published between 1827 and 1829. It might be worth while, if copies can be found, to make a search in the *Western Annotator* published at Salem, Ind. where Rev. Farmer later printed his church periodical as the *Annotator* was issued as early as 1827 and continued through 1835.

The *Western Sun* published at Vincennes, with almost complete files from 1827 to 1829 in the Indiana State Library, should also be checked carefully, although the editor of *Lincoln Lore* many years ago spent several weeks off and on in the files in this old paper and found no contribution that appeared to be the work of Abraham Lincoln.

If some one is fortunate enough to bring to light this extremely important discussion on temperance then Lincoln students will be more anxious to search for the early essay Lincoln is said to have prepared on politics. The same Mr. Wood claimed it was published in a newspaper contemporary with the time of Lincoln's Indiana years. Such a discovery would contribute to an objective study of Lincoln's political background.