

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LAST FORENSIC FLIGHT

A hundred years ago on July 25, 1850 Abraham Lincoln gave a funeral oration in Chicago which seems to have marked the last of his studied oratorical outbursts that characterized some of his earlier public speeches. The occasion was a special program arranged in memory of President Zachary Taylor. Lincoln had helped to elevate him to the chief magistrate's office but he survived his inauguration only a few months. The display of eloquence came while Lincoln was reviewing an account of Gen. Taylor's relief of Fort Brown in 1845. The fort had been besieged and through courageous efforts of Gen. Taylor and his troops, the Mexicans were routed and the garrison saved. Lincoln departed from his usual conversational style and described the victory of Gen. Taylor in this dramatic language:

"And now the din of battle nears the fort, and sweeps obliquely by: a gleam of hope flies through the half-imprisoned few; they fly to the wall; every eye is strained; it is—it is—the Stars and Stripes are still aloft! Anon the anxious brethren meet; and while hand strikes hand, the heavens are rent with a loud, long, glorious, gushing cry of Victory! Victory!! Victory!!!"

Lincoln addressed the Senate of New Jersey at Trenton on his way to his inaugural in 1861 and made this comment:

"May I be pardoned if, upon this occasion, I mention that way back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got a hold of a small book, such a one as few of the younger members have ever seen, 'Weems' Life of Washington'. I remember all the accounts then given of the battlefields and struggles for the liberty of the country . . ."

Apparently no author after whom Lincoln read, did quite so much to influence Lincoln's grammatical constructions as M. L. Weems. Among our early historians he was our most dramatic literary interpreter of American revolutionary scenes. Several instances where Weems used his peculiar style of sentence structure in his *Life of Washington* are presented to reveal how Lincoln must have been impressed by the colorful language and unique terminology.

Patriots Day, which falls on April 19, means little to those who have not at some time lived in Massachusetts where it is a legal holiday. The battle of Concord and Lexington, which this day commemorates, must have been long remembered by Lincoln as Weems presented it in this stirring language:

"The shouting farmers, swift closing on their rear, followed their steps with death, while the British, as fast as they could load, wheeling on their pursuers, returned the deadly platoons. Like some tremendous whirlwind, whose roaring sweep all at once darkens the day, riding the air in tempests; so sudden and terrible, amidst clouds of dust, and smoke, and flame, the flight of Britain's warriors thundered along the road."

Lincoln in his speech before the Senate of New Jersey had remarked with reference to Weems' stories of the Revolutionary War: "None fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river, the contest with the Hessians, the great hardship endured at that time." Here are some excerpts from the story by Weems:

"Washington and his little forlorn hope, pressed on through the darksome night, pelted by an incessant storm of hail and snow. On approaching the river, nine miles above Trenton, they heard the unwelcome roar of ice, loud crashing along the angry flood. . . . The Sun had just tipped with gold the adjacent hills, when snowy Trenton, with the wide-tented fields of the foe, hove in sight. To the young in arms this was an awful scene: and Nature called a short lived terror to their hearts. But not unseen of Washington was their fear . . . His looks and voice rekindled all their fire, and drove them undaunted to the charge."

Even more dramatic as presented by Weems was the contest with General Burgoyne in October 1777, where according to Weems the Americans "with arguments of bloody steel, were pleading the cause of ages yet unborn." An excerpt relating to the heat of the battle and another revealing its aftermath are noted here for their striking diction.

"The face of Morgan was like the full moon in a stormy night, when she looks down red and fiery on the raging deep, amidst foundering wrecks and cries of drowning seamen; while his voice, like thunder on the hills, was heard, loud-shouting his heroes to the bloody charge.

. . . .

"Many were the widows, many the orphans that were made that day. Long did the daughters of Columbia mourn their fallen brothers! and often did the lovely maids of Caledonia roll their soft blue eyes of sorrow along the sky-bound sea, to meet the sails of their returning lovers."

The Andre-Arnold episode with the apprehension of Andre gives Weems an opportunity to again coin his unique expressions as he presents Andre mounted on his horse starting his fateful mission:

"Now, like an uncaged bird, and light as the air he breathes, he sweeps along the road. His fame brightens before him—stars and garters, coaches and castles, dance before his delighted fancy—even his long-loved reluctant Delia (Miss Seward) is all his own—she joins in the nation's gratitude—softly she rolls her eyes of love, and brightening in all her beauty, sinks on his enraptured breast!"

Possibly more closely associated with Taylor's contest with the Mexicans at Fort Brown was Washington's historic fight with Tarleton which the famous historian visualizes in these words:

"Then sudden and terrible the charge was made! Like men fighting, life in hand, all at once they rose high on their stirrups! while in streams of lightning their swords came down. . . .

"When the swords of Washington's cavalry pursued his (Tarleton's) troops from the famous fields of the Cowpens, it was like a peal of thunder, loud roaring at first, but gradually dying on the ear as it rolls away along the distant air."

Many peculiar twists which Weems gave to idioms and phrases appear to have become characteristic of Lincoln's own unique literary style. The highly declamatory and wordy pictures for which Weems was noted gradually disappeared from Lincoln's vernacular and possibly the paragraph in the Taylor eulogy might be called the swan song of Lincoln's flights of eloquence used primarily for display.