

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S VISIT TO WEST POINT

The fact that West Point has been very much in the news for some days past seems to offer an occasion for reviewing President Lincoln's visit to the military academy in June 1862 as very little attention has been given to this somewhat secret but important mission. A brief summary of the itinerary of the Commander-in-chief is presented and a speech that he made at Jersey City enroute home, which does not appear in any of the standard editions of his writings, is also recorded.

A Washington correspondent for a Boston paper referring to this trip stated: "President Lincoln's unannounced visit to General Scott at West Point is regarded as an escapade by the metropolitan Turvytops, who think that the chief magistrate should never journey unheralded and without pompous state." It is true the President's entourage on this occasion was not a very impressive one, just two men beside Mr. Lincoln; Col. D. C. McCallum, the Military Supt. of Railroads, and William, the President's colored servant, accompanied the chief executive.

The party of three left Washington by special train at four P.M. on Monday, June 23 and arrived in New York a little after one A.M. the next morning, making the fastest time a train had ever traveled between these two cities. They immediately boarded another special train waiting for them at the Hudson River Railroad depot and arrived at Garrison, three P.M. Tuesday where ferry connections were made for West Point. General Scott was waiting on the ferry boat which conveyed them to the Point and the President greeted the veteran soldier in these words: "General, I am glad to see you looking so well: I have come to see you." Accommodations had been arranged at Cozzens Hotel and Mr. Lincoln retired immediately upon arrival. He was up at seven A.M., however, and directly after breakfast went into conference with General Scott for five hours but no official report of their discussions was made available. Following the conference accompanied by Col. McCallum the President visited the military academy where the cadets were assembled and saluted the President with military honors. The barracks and apartments were inspected and "the President expressed his great satisfaction at the appearance of everything he beheld."

About three P.M. the President returned to the hotel and a dinner party consisting of Mr. Lincoln, Gen. Scott, Col. Bowen, Prof. McMahon, Col. MaCallum and Mr. Sloan was arranged. When the head waiter was about to direct the President to his chair he remonstrated and remarked that "the commander-in-chief will seat me" whereupon he sat down at the right of General Scott. After dinner the iron foundry of Gouverneur Kemble was visited and several Parrott guns were tested.

Back at the hotel about nine P.M. the President escorted Baroness Stoeckel to the reception parlor and for about half an hour received guests among them the wife of General Viele whom he advised with humor, that the wives of his generals have a claim upon him. The correspondent reporting the reception stated: "The President charmed all the ladies with his conversational powers and affability." Mr. Lincoln returned to his room about eleven P.M. and at midnight the academy band serenaded him.

When the party left Garrison on Wednesday, June 25 at nine A.M. a presidential salute was fired as the group boarded the special train consisting of "a locomotive and one handsomely furnished ladies' car." General Scott accompanied the President as far as New York. All along the route people had assembled to greet the President and upon nearing Thirty-fifth St. a number of torpedoes

"one for each state that ought to be in the Union" were exploded on the tracks. The members of the press had been allowed to join the presidential party at Garrison and one of the members asked General Scott his opinion of the President and received this reply: "He is an honest, upright man, very conscientious, and tries to do right with all parties." The train arrived at twenty minutes past ten. Besides the 200 railroad workmen, a large crowd of spectators had come to the depot and pleaded for a speech but as one reporter said, "The President could not see it."

The party ferried to Jersey City reaching there at eight minutes past eleven on the morning of June 25th. It was not known generally that the President would be at the depot at this hour but about 100 people had gathered. When Lincoln boarded the train that was to take him to Washington they cheered and called for a speech but Lincoln shook his head. However, after continual applause and appeal he spoke these informal words:

"When birds and animals are looked at through a fog, they are seen to disadvantage, and so it might be with you if I were to attempt to tell you why I went to see General Scott. I can only say that my visit to West Point did not have the importance which has been attached to it; but it conceived (concerned) matters that you understand quite as well as if I were to tell you all about them. Now, I can only remark that it had nothing whatever to do with making or unmaking any General in the country. The Secretary of War, you know, holds a pretty tight rein on the Press, so that they shall not tell more than they ought to; and I am afraid that if I blab too much, he might draw a tight rein on me."

General Scott in a letter bearing the date of their conference June 24, 1862 summarized for Mr. Lincoln, at his request, the substance of the recommendations which had been presented during their discussion. The paragraph of salutation very specifically sets forth the purpose of the President's visit and confirms the statement made in his brief speech that it had nothing to do with the dismissal or appointment of generals as had been reported through the press. The opening paragraph in Gen. Scott's letter follows:

"The President, having stated to me, orally, the present numbers and positions of our forces in front of the rebel armies south and southwest of the Potomac, has done me the honor to ask my views in writing as to the further dispositions now to be made of the former, and particularly of the army under McDowell, toward the suppression of the rebellion."

The importance of the proposed attack on Richmond which prompted the President to seek Gen. Scott's advice is summarized by the general in these words: "The defeat of the rebels at Richmond, or their forced retreat thence, combined with our previous victories, would be a virtual end of the rebellion, and soon restore entire Virginia to the Union."

The optimism and assurance of General Scott was nullified, however, by dispatches which Lincoln received from General McClellan upon arriving home and part of Lincoln's reaction to the last dispatch follows:

"The probability of your being overwhelmed by 200,000, and talking of where the responsibility will belong, pains me very much. I give you all I can, and act on the presumption that you will do the best you can with what you have, while you continue, ungenerously I think, to assume that I could give you more if I would. I have omitted and shall omit no opportunity to send you reinforcements whenever I possibly can."