

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS NAST, RECRUITING SERGEANT

Abraham Lincoln is said to have paid this compliment to one of the outstanding illustrators of the war period:

"Thomas Nast has been our best recruiting sergeant . . . His emblematic cartoons have never failed to arouse enthusiasm and patriotism, and have always seemed to come when these articles are getting scarce."

Certainly Nast must often have seen Mr. Lincoln but there is no evidence that he was formally introduced to him until late in the war. George William Curtis, whose *Harper's Weekly* furnished the medium for most of Nast's drawings had occasion to write a letter of introduction on December 9, 1864, for the artist to present to Abraham Lincoln. The writing follows:

Staten Island
North Shore
9 Dec. 1864

To the Pres.

Dear Sir

I have great pleasure in presenting to you, my friend the artist, Thos. Nast, whose designs in *Harper's Weekly* have been scattered all over the land and have especially penetrated the lines of the army showing the country what it is fighting for, and in what spirit, and all with a power and felicity the wide good results of which are known to me. You and the country have no more faithful friend than Mr. Nast.

Very respectfully

Sir

Your friend and servant
Geo. William Curtis

Harper's Weekly had been giving ardent support to the administration and the President would welcome as a visitor any member of the staff and especially one whom he had so highly complimented. The wide circulation of the weekly, which went into the homes of the people and kept them informed about the progress of the war, also was sent to the soldiers in the field. This source of information made an excellent medium through which volunteers could be persuaded to join the armed forces and the cartoons proved to be impressive vehicles for recruiting. For three successive weeks on one occasion Nast set forth in his drawings the need for enlistments. One of the cartoons portrayed a man returning to his residence to learn from the servant that his wife had left home to serve as a nurse in one of the hospitals. The servant held a military outfit on his arm which the mistress had ordered cleaned in case her husband wished to follow her.

Thomas Nast was one of the younger illustrators who even as a youth had shown a talent for drawing. He was born in Landau, Bavaria in 1840 and was but a small child when he was brought to America by his parents. While still in his early teens he was admitted to the New York Academy of Design. By the time he was sixteen years of age he was steadily employed by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*. Before he became of age his employer engaged him to go to Europe for a series of descriptive pictures.

The young artist arrived back in the United States about the first of February 1861 and was given a position by the *New York Illustrated News*. It was at this time

that he made his first drawings of Abraham Lincoln. He was assigned to the task of presenting Mr. Lincoln as he was enroute to Washington. Nast portrayed him at the Camden Street station, Baltimore, during the mysterious night passage through that city. It is said that Nast's original sketch was changed at New York to make the drawing harmonize with the press reports which erroneously stated that Lincoln was dressed in a long cape and a scotch cap.

The artist's first political cartoon was also made for the *Illustrated News*. He captioned his companion drawings "President Lincoln's Inauguration." One of the pictures recorded how the North received the address which portrays Lincoln as an agent of "Peace," inscribed in large letters in the background. The other picture shows how the South received the inaugural message, revealing Lincoln as a soldier with sword in hand and the word "War" occupying the background.

In the spring of 1862 the cartoons of Thomas Nast began to appear on the back page of *Harper's Weekly*. By the month of August, Nast began to draw the cover designs and double page spreads in the center of the paper, indicating that by this time he was permanently on their staff. From then on for a long period almost every important political episode was given some attention by the rising young artist.

It appears as if *Harper's* had prepared the way for Mr. Nast's visit to Lincoln already mentioned. In the issue of Nov. 12, 1864 just following the election this note appears, "Mr. Nast and Mr. Bellew have done admirably pictorial service in this paper for the Union cause. The grave and poetic designs of Mr. Nast . . . have brought home the issues of this canvass to many a mind more forcible than any argument or speech." The double page spread by Nast in this same issue entitled "Election Day" reveals Columbia dropping a ballot marked "Abraham Lincoln" into the ballot box.

The issue of *Harper's* immediately preceding Nast's visit to the President in December carries a double page illustration by him entitled "Thanksgiving Nov. 24, 1864." It reveals Abraham Lincoln receiving the congratulations of sailors, soldiers, and citizens with seven other drawings embellishing the main scene. Possibly the most famous of the Nast 20 x 13 inch drawings in *Harper's* during the closing weeks of 1864 was the woodcut reproduction in the issue of December 31, 1864 entitled "The Union Christmas Dinner." Lincoln stands at the door of the banquet hall and invites representatives of the Southern Confederacy to come in and occupy the vacant chairs at the table.

With the announcement of Lincoln's death Thomas Nast prepared a design showing Columbia in tears kneeling beside a casket inscribed LINCOLN. Somewhat symbolizing the artist's own effort to assist in recruiting men for the Union are drawings of a grief stricken soldier and a grief stricken sailor occupying their respective spaces in the two upper corners of Thomas Nast's memorial tribute to the martyred Lincoln.

The name of Thomas Nast must be included among supporters of Abraham Lincoln who contributed their talents to the successful preservation of the Union.