

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1222

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 8, 1952

A LOST LINCOLN BANK CHECK

A feature article was released in the *Rocky Mountain News* of Denver on August 10, 1952 relating to what it termed "The world's most famous check." The \$5.00 check in question dated August 11, 1863 was made out to a "colored man with one leg" and signed "A. Lincoln." The Riggs National Bank of Washington on which the check was drawn is of the opinion that this check now lost might be in Denver, hence the local interest.

As far as can be ascertained the famous check has been missing from the files of the bank for "some fifty years." Ronald T. Carr, vice-president of the Riggs Bank in a recent letter to George C. Berger, Jr., vice-president of the Colorado National Bank states:

"We have made intensive and fruitless search for this check which disappeared from our files some fifty years ago."

A facsimile of the check was published in McClure's magazine for June 1899 in an article by Ida M. Tarbell entitled, "Lincoln and the Soldiers." This brief comment referred to the check: "It was, no doubt, as he (Lincoln) crossed the park that he saw the colored man with one leg . . . and after listening to his story, gave him the money to help him out of his trouble." Miss Tarbell at this time gave no further information about the ownership of the check but in her book *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* published in 1900 she further adds to the statement, "The check is now in the collection of H. H. Officee of Denver, Colorado."

The *Washington Star* for February 11, 1917 printed a photograph of the check and made one or two interesting observations about it. It states that Judge David Davis a member of the Supreme Court of the United States and the executor of Abraham Lincoln's estate "received from the Riggs National Bank a statement of Mr. Lincoln's account and receipted in full for the balance but left all cancelled checks in possession of the bank." We understand it was customary in those days to follow this procedure with respect to cancelled checks.

It is stated that Robert Lincoln once called on Charles Glover, then president of the bank, and "expressed regret that his father had left so very few personal mementoes." Thereupon, according to the news account, Robert Lincoln "was made happy by being given a large batch of cancelled checks and he expressed his keenest satisfaction at his find."

As early as March 25, 1870 Robert began distributing the Riggs and Company checks signed by his father. On the above date he sent to C. C. P. Holden, Esq. a note stating, "According to my promise of yesterday I enclose an autograph check of my father's which by its date and wording was evidently given to bribe my brother (when nine years old) to take his medicine." The face of the check dated March 10, 1862 reads, "Pay to Tad (when he is well enough to present or bearer) \$5.00."

The Lincoln National Life Foundation is in possession of a fragment of a check presented on April 24, 1911 by Robert Lincoln to S. M. Wright, Collector of Exhibits, San Diego Savings Bank. The letter which accompanied the autograph has also been preserved. The check is dated February 5, 1861 less than a week before the

President Elect left for Washington. The fractional amount shown on the check, namely, ninety-four cents, identifies it as one listed in Pratt's *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln* for the full amount of \$149.94 drawn on the Springfield Marine and Fire Insurance Company. As late as 1911 it appears as if Robert had on hand some of the Springfield cancelled checks as well.

The quest for the "lost check" after all seems to lead back to the citation in the Tarbell article which states that in 1899 the check was in possession of one H. H. Officee. A clipping from the *Denver Colorado Times* for July 23, 1897 just two years previous to the Tarbell note announces that custodian C. A. Deane in charge of the war relic room at the Colorado capitol had been presented a check dated April 24, 1863 and made out to John Saunie for the sum of \$4.00. The news item further states that "the cancelled check was presented to the society by H. H. Officee of this city . . ." The same news story identifies the donor as follows: "Some years ago Mr. Officee was the private secretary of Robert Lincoln, the son of the former President. The check was accidentally discovered one day in a desk belonging to Mr. Lincoln and as a keepsake was presented to the secretary."

That this man H. H. Officee and H. H. Officer were one and the same cannot be doubted and it is very important to observe that he was a one time secretary of Robert Lincoln. More recent investigation about the man who once lived in Denver reveals according to the vital statistics, the fact that Harry H. Officer died there on Nov. 10, 1906 and that his body was claimed by A. H. Officer of Raton, New Mexico.

There is a statement made in one of the news items relating to the "lost check" which makes one wonder if it ever did pass through the regular business channels of the institution. The comment is as follows: "The check . . . was ultimately paid out of the pocket of some teller of the Riggs National and preserved as a souvenir, never having been charged to the account of A. Lincoln."

That this was sometimes done is supported by the absence of any cancellation mark on a check for \$2.50 made out on May 4, 1864 by the President in favor of Franklin & Co. of Washington who were opticians and had supplied Lincoln with a pair of glasses. Jules Halprin the president of the company never cashed the check but kept it as a memento.

The *Minneapolis Journal* has a brief story about the check in their issue for February 8, 1931. It states that "For fifty-one years that small piece of paper lay in the bank's files gathering dust, forgotten." The article also affirms that "Bank examiners stumbled on the old check. Officers of the institution value it highly, and it has been placed in safe keeping." Inasmuch as the *Rocky Mountain News* is of the opinion that the check Lincoln made out to the "colored man with one leg" is the world's most famous check it might be worth hunting for. At least the officers of the Riggs National Bank at Washington would like to learn where it may be found.