

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 1263

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 22, 1953

THE FILIAL RELATION OF THOMAS AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Mother's Day creates the proper atmosphere for tributes which may be paid to those who most deserve the praise of men. In keeping with the spirit of the present occasion it appears as if Father's Day should also invite some kindred sentiments with respect to the other member of the paternal group. It is doubtful if the forebear of any great American has been so grossly misrepresented as Thomas Lincoln.

The origin of the wholly unreliable data about him can be traced to William Herndon, the same author who so spitefully and grossly misrepresented the characters of the two women Abraham Lincoln loved best—his mother and his wife. As if that were not enough, he has portrayed the father of the President as one of the most unworthy characters which history records.

Herndon began his abuse of Thomas Lincoln by the allegation that he was the putative sire of the President and on this thesis built up the argument that there was never any real filial relation between Thomas and Abraham. In fact he introduced the proposition that there was a feeling of enmity between the two.

Thomas, according to Herndon, had "little faith in books" and leaves the impression that he objected to Abraham's schooling and saw to it that the "drudgery of human toil" was put first. There were no grounds, however, for this assertion and in his own notes Herndon recorded this statement made by the stepmother: "Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything, if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first . . . he himself felt the uses and necessities of education and wanted his boy Abraham to learn and he encouraged him to do it in all ways he could."

Beveridge, who used the Herndon manuscripts as source material introduces the most often discussed question about Lincoln's affection for his father as revealed at the time his father became ill in 1851. John D. Johnston, Lincoln's stepbrother notified Abraham about his father's illness and Beveridge states, Lincoln sent Johnston a strange letter, which is made intelligible only by recalling the mutual dislikes between father and son, displayed during Lincoln's boyhood days in Indiana.

Before Lincoln's reaction to Johnston's letter in 1851 should be considered, previous messages sent by Johnston and his relatives about Thomas Lincoln's health should be scrutinized. Such correspondence has been preserved in the Robert Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress.

About a year and a half before Thomas Lincoln's final illness he had another spell of sickness at which time both Johnson and his kinsman, A. H. Chapman pleaded with Abraham to come at once if he would see his father alive. Chapman opened his letter with this statement: "Sir, at the special request of J. D. Johnston I write you to inform you of the severe illness of your father. He was attacked with a lesion of the heart some time since and for the last few days has been getting much worse and at this time he is very low indeed. He is very anxious to see you before he dies and I am told that his cries for you for the last few days are truly heart-rending. He wishes you to come and see him instantly if you possibly can." Chapman further continues in his letter with a statement: "If you are fearful of leaving your family on account of the

cholera" . . . (some writers have interpreted the word "children" which appears to me to be cholera.) Chapman assures Lincoln that "the health of our place is excellent," and invites Lincoln to bring his family. A few days later Lincoln received a letter from Isaac Onstott from Havana, Ill. stating, "There have been no cases of cholera in this vicinity up to this time" indicating cholera was then prevalent in Illinois.

The following day John D. Johnston wrote to Lincoln using about the same appeal which he had dictated to Chapman stating he had secured a doctor and stressed Thomas's desire to see him, as Johnston put it "for you are his only child that is of his own flesh and blood."

Four days after Chapman penned his first letter he wrote again stating, "I was fearful at the time I wrote to you that I was giving you considerable unnecessary uneasiness and so told Johnston . . . I now have the pleasure of informing you that your father is not only out of all danger but that he is not afflicted with a disease of the heart . . . will undoubtedly be well in a short time." Chapman concluded his letter with this apologetic note, "I hope you will forgive me for writing you as I did without knowing what I was about and promise for the future to be more careful."

Thomas Lincoln became ill again about the first of January 1851 and letters reached the President from both John D. Johnston and Harriet Chapman advising that the aged Lincoln was in serious physical condition. Abraham must have recalled former requests for his presence. He wrote urging Johnston to secure any medical or material aid that might be needed and then stated, "My business is such that I could hardly leave home now, if it were not as it is, that my own wife is sick abed. (It is a case of baby sickness and I suppose is not dangerous.)" William Wallace Lincoln had been born Dec. 21, 1850, just few days before the illness of Thomas was made known. Attorney Lincoln was also engaged for several days in a heavy schedule of law cases he was trying in the United States district and circuit courts.

There is no cause whatever for stressing the argument that his failure to make a trip to Coles County at this time indicated bad feeling for his father or that he was revealing animosity when he wrote in his letter to Johnston: "I sincerely hope father may get well . . . Say to him if we could meet now, it is doubtful if it would not be more painful than pleasant, but that if it is his lot to go now he will soon have a joyous (meeting) with many loved ones gone before; and where (the rest) of us, through the help of God, hope ere-long (to join) them."

There is no word written by Lincoln or no dependable reminiscence about the father and son that would even suggest that they did not enjoy a reciprocal filial relationship.

A granddaughter of Sarah Bush Lincoln made this statement, "I am just tired of hearing grandfather Lincoln abused . . . He had the old Virginia notion of hospitality . . . Uncle Abe got his honesty and his clean notions of living from his father." William G. Green who visited Thomas Lincoln stated, "He was candid and truthful; popular with his neighbors . . . his desire was to be on terms of amity and sociability with everyone."