

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 1264

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 29, 1953

THE CRISIS OF LINCOLN'S NERVOUS DEBILITY

Abraham Lincoln was characterized throughout his whole life as a sad melancholy man. Aside from having a natural tendency to become despondent there were certain tragic events which engulfed him and contributed to a spirit of morbidness which eventually brought him to what we might term the crisis of his nervous debility. We are able through his own testimony to fix the exact date when an episode occurred which was to bring him to the very brink of a complete mental collapse.

On what he termed "the fatal first of January 1841" he broke off his engagement with Mary Todd, but immediately began to brood over the action. He came to the conclusion he had wronged Mary and over a year after the separation he wrote about "the never absent idea that there is one still unhappy whom I have contributed to make so. That kills my soul." He further commented: "I cannot, but reproach myself for ever wanting to be happy while she is otherwise."

Apparently by January 20, 1841 Abraham Lincoln had worked himself into a mental frenzy which caused him to write to John T. Stuart, then in Congress: "I have, within the last few days, been making a most discreditable exhibition of myself in the way of hypochondriaism." Three days later he wrote Stuart, "I am now the most miserable man living . . . whether I shall ever be better I can not tell. I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better it appears to me."

Although Lincoln did not die he did worry himself sick and consulted Dr. Anson G. Henry about his condition. It may have been Dr. Henry who recommended that Lincoln get in touch with Dr. Daniel Drake who was then considered the outstanding physician in the western country. The fact that he did correspond with Dr. Drake can be verified in a letter written by Joshua Speed to William Herndon on November 30, 1866.

It will be observed that twenty-five years had passed since the incidents Speed referred to had happened and Herndon had recently delivered his lectures on the fictitious Ann Rutledge affair which seemed to be "all new" to Speed. Speed said in his letter:

"In the winter of 1840 and 1841 he (Lincoln) was unhappy about his engagement to his wife, not being entirely satisfied that his heart was going with his hand. How much he suffered then on that account none know so well as myself: he disclosed his whole heart to me . . . Lincoln wrote a letter (a long one, which he read to me) to Dr. Drake of Cincinnati, descriptive of his case. Its date would be December, 1840 or early in January 1841 . . . I remember Dr. Drake's reply, which was, that he would not undertake to prescribe for him without a personal interview."

Speed also states that there was part of the letter that Lincoln did not read to him and with Herndon's Rutledge story before him Joshua jumps to the conclusion that the unread portion of the letter to Dr. Drake may have been about Ann. This of course is pure supposition and entirely repudiated by modern research.

Herndon in writing to Jesse M. Weik about the Dr. Drake letter deliberately moved it back into the 1835-1836 period and then proceeded to tell Weik a preposterous story about what that secret part of the letter contained. This was a typical Herndonian approach which disregarded chronology, Lincoln's moral integrity and an accumulation of facts about Lincoln which are accepted generally.

It has been observed that Speed mentions Dr. Drake's residence as Cincinnati and it is true that he is often associated with the city. Dr. Daniel Drake was born in 1785, received his M. D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1816 and the following year he accepted an appointment on the first active medical faculty west of the Alleghenies at Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky. The following year he gathered a group of medical students at Cincinnati which formed the nucleus of The Medical College of Ohio. He returned to Transylvania in 1823 and remained on the faculty for four years. Except for a year spent at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, his activities during the next dozen years were in the environs of Cincinnati. However, on September 7, 1839 he was elected to the chair of Clinical Medicine and Pathological Anatomy at Louisville Medical Institute which he occupied for ten years. During the winter of 1841 and 1842 he delivered a series of lectures at Louisville on psychology.

From this brief sketch it will be observed that at the time Lincoln wrote to Dr. Drake in January 1841 the famous physician was living in Louisville and had been at Louisville Medical Institute since the fall of 1839. From Speed's letter to Herndon we learn that Dr. Drake advised Lincoln that a personal interview would be necessary before he could prescribe for him. Sometime between the writing of the letter and late spring Lincoln had promised Speed to visit him at Louisville, as he said in a letter on June 18, 1841: "I stick to my promise to come to Louisville." This question immediately presents itself: Did Abraham Lincoln consult Dr. Drake on one of the days he was in Louisville as he had been urged to do in Dr. Drake's letter. That he was in the business section of the city on many occasions and often in James Speed's law office we are assured and that he had time while there for reading and conversation is recalled. We also know that he did visit a dentist in Louisville as he wrote to Mary Speed after he returned to Springfield: "Do you remember my going to the city while I was in Kentucky to have a tooth extracted and making a failure of it." It would be strange indeed if he would neglect what apparently was the most important quest of his life, the attempt to regain his mental poise. It would not be unusual if he consulted Dr. Drake without informing the members of the Speed family and it would not be assuming too much to surmise that the visit to Kentucky in the summer of 1841 was somewhat influenced by Dr. Drake's presence there.

While Dr. Drake was on the medical faculty at Transylvania University in Lexington he formed a close friendship with Henry Clay, a former professor of law at the institution and he prepared many political articles supporting Clay with which Lincoln must have been familiar. Furthermore, the doctor was a well known advocate of Clay's slavery philosophy.

Although we have no proof that Abraham Lincoln visited Dr. Drake in 1841 it does not seem possible that he would miss an opportunity to consult the famous physician who had suggested the personal interview in his letter. Lincoln had so much in common with the doctor politically and needed so much at this time of the crisis of his nervous debility the advice of this specialist, it would seem incongruous that he would reside in the same community with the physician for three weeks and not make an effort to see him. Possibly Dr. Drake had more to do with Lincoln's return to mental normality than we have thus far anticipated.