

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN BEFRIENDS PRISONERS OF WAR

Much has been written about President Lincoln's leniency towards convicted Union soldiers and the great number of men released by his orders may never be known. Not so much information is available about his attitude towards Confederate prisoners in Union hands. The receipt of a pamphlet by Charles M. Segal about a furlough for a rebel boy in a northern prison, just about the time our first American prisoners were released by the northern Koreans, seems to invite a few brief notations on Lincoln's attitude towards certain Confederate prisoners of war.

A note with accompanying instructions written to Secretary of War Stanton by the President on March 18, 1864 gives the general attitude which Lincoln took towards prisoners of war. He laid down this fundamental principle in these words: "In using the strong hand, as now compelled to do, the government has a difficult duty to perform. At the very best it will by turns do both too little and too much. It can properly have no motive of revenge, no purpose to punish merely for punishment's sake." The little note, in part, sent with the order and its reply are of interest.

"Hon. Secy. of War: I am so pressed in regard to prisoners of war in our custody, whose homes are within our lines, and who wish to not be exchanged, but to take the oath and be discharged, that I hope you will pardon me for again calling up the subject . . . I shall be glad therefore to have your cheerful assent to the discharge of those whose names I may send, which I will only do with circumspection." Stanton replied on the following day, "Your order for the discharge of any prisoners of war will be cheerfully and promptly obeyed."

Johnson's Island situated in Sandusky Bay about three miles north of the city of Sandusky, Ohio was the seat of one of the larger prison camps for captured Confederates. A census of the number of men incarcerated there shows 2,301 present in late November 1863. The case reported by Mr. Segal in the monograph mentioned above relates to a prisoner at that camp by the name of Charles H. Jonas. The boy's father, Abraham Jonas of Quincy, Illinois, was one of Lincoln's close friends. The old gentleman became fatally ill which fact was made known to the President and on June 2, 1864 he signed this parole.

"Allow Charles H. Jonas, now a prisoner of war at Johnson's Island, a parole of three weeks to visit his dying father, Abraham Jonas, at Quincy, Illinois."

An early associate in Congress when Lincoln was there in 1847-1849 was Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia. It was not until sixteen years later that they met again while attending a peace conference on a gunboat at Hampton Roads. Lincoln was then President of the Union and Stephens Vice President of the Confederacy. Although no apparent good came from the conference, it did give Lincoln an opportunity to visit with his old friend and inquire, "Alex is there anything I can do for you?" Lincoln learned that Stephens had a nephew in prison at Johnson's Island and agreed to have him exchanged. On February 4, 1865 Lincoln sent this order to the officer in command at the prison:

"Parole Lt. John A. Stephens, prisoner of war, to report to me here in person and send him to me. It is in pursuance of an arrangement I made yesterday with his uncle, Hon. A. H. Stephens." When the young man arrived he was allowed to visit friends in Washington a few days and then sent with a note to his uncle bearing

this instruction: "Please, in return, select and send to me that officer of the same rank imprisoned at Richmond whose physical condition most urgently requires his release."

Not all of the prisoners released were young men. One other Johnson's Island prisoner with Confederate sympathies was George W. Riddell who lived at Morganfield. Although he lisped because of a mouth injury, he talked too much and too loud about his loyalties to the south, so he was imprisoned. He once entertained Lincoln at Morganfield, Kentucky during the Clay campaign in 1844 and recalled this visit in a letter to the President complaining about the treatment he was receiving. He too was sent back home by executive order and never failed to credit Mr. Lincoln for his release.

A seventeen year old boy while in college joined the Confederate army unbeknown to his mother, a loyal Union widow living in Tennessee. She did not know of her only son's presence in the army until she learned of his injury and capture in the battle of Nashville. Rebuffed by Stanton on her attempt to see her son on her first visit to Washington, she approached the President on a second visit and received this signed reprieve.

"March 13, 1863.

"To the Commandant at Fort McHenry:

"General: You will deliver to the bearer, Mrs. Winston, her son, now held as a prisoner of war in Fort McHenry, and permit her to take him where she will, upon his taking the proper parole never again to take up arms against the United States.

Abraham Lincoln"

The memorandum to Stanton in 1864 already mentioned opened the way for what we might call the wholesale release of prisoners who would take the oath of loyalty. On November 1, 1864 Lincoln issued this order for the discharge of six Kentuckians.

"Let the following named prisoners of war, take the oath of Dec. 8, 1863, and be discharged.

Josiah Gentry, at Camp Douglas
Archibald W. Kavanaugh, at Camp Douglas
John W. Mitchell, at Camp Douglas
Jonathan D. Jones, at Camp Douglas
Roger X. Quisenberry, Camp Chase
William T. Simmons, Camp Douglas

A. Lincoln."

There was much criticism by members of the cabinet of Lincoln's pardoning policy except when one of the number himself wanted a favor granted. Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax recalled Attorney General Bates once said that "lack of sternness was a marked defect in Lincoln's character" and in Colfax's presence Bates told the President he was "unfit to be trusted with the pardoning power." Yet it was this same member of the cabinet who came to Lincoln once with the request, "I want you to give me a prisoner." A Confederate soldier, a son of one of Bates' Virginia friends, was the object of his request. Lincoln told him of a similar case before him just then about another Confederate soldier who had been captured, a son of one of his old friends. Lincoln replied to Bates: "If you and I unite our influence with this administration I believe we can manage it together and make two loyal fathers happy. Let us make them our prisoners."