

# LINCOLN LORE

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## BACKGROUND FOR THE BIXBY LETTER

Through many years there has been a consistent effort to discredit the classic letter of condolence which President Abraham Lincoln wrote to Widow Lydia Bixby of Boston on November 21, 1864. Possibly the most unwarranted claim which has been promoted in the past is the assertion that the letter was not the product of Lincoln but the work of one of his secretaries. This fall, however, a more ridiculous proposal has been introduced which implies that there was no such writing as the Bixby letter. Two different authors have contributed directly or indirectly to this theory in the October issue of *Holiday* and *Hobbies* magazines respectively.

The contributor to *Holiday* classifies the Bixby letter as "a myth" and attempts to defend this thesis. Although he admits that the writing of a letter by President Lincoln to the Widow Bixby is accepted generally, he claims that it is "not officially recorded." A further comment indicates the author has made no serious study of the question as he states, "I do not know if Lincoln really wrote a letter to Mrs. Bixby or not and don't care." The approach of the writer in *Hobbies* is primarily a criticism of the Bixby letter facsimiles which have been in general circulation for over sixty years. Placing emphasis on the well known fact that the original letter to Mrs. Bixby has never been found he makes the comment, "If indeed, it ever existed." The skeptical statement about the letter being a nonentity is in harmony with the theory propounded in *Holiday* that there may never have been a letter written by A. Lincoln to Mrs. Bixby on November 21, 1864 and delivered to her on the morning of November 25.

Many eminent authorities in the field of Lincolniana have published exhaustive monographs on almost every conceivable angle of the Bixby episode. However, it has not been thought necessary, heretofore, to authenticate the genuineness of the famous letter. The fact that a copy of the text appeared in several newspapers contemporary with its reception has been thought sufficient evidence to accept it as an authentic piece of correspondence. This double barrel blast in October at the very existence of the letter places the charge of deception upon the President himself. It assumes that he allowed to appear in the press, unchallenged, a copy of a letter signed by him which he had never authorized, dictated nor written.

Now that we have the integrity of Mr. Lincoln questioned with respect to the Bixby affair, practically all of those associated in the proceedings have been accused of some kind of sharp practice. Perhaps it might be refreshing at least to make a new approach to the problem by assuming that the entire group having a direct part in the episode were actually sincere in their respective roles. This would include all of those participating, from the widow herself to the President. Several exhibits have been prepared in a chronological arrangement which might serve as a background for the receipt of the letter by the widow.

1862, September—William Schouler, Adjutant General of Massachusetts first called the attention of Governor John A. Andrews to the Widow Bixby who had five sons in the armed forces one of whom had just been wounded in the battle of Antietam.

1864, September 14—Two years after the first visit Widow Bixby called on Schouler in his office at Boston and "showed him five letters from five different company commanders, and each letter informed the poor woman of the death of one of her five sons."

September 24—Gen. Schouler relates to Gov. Andrews the story about the Widow Bixby and states, "She is the best specimen of a true hearted union woman I have seen."

September 24—Gov. Andrews writes to James A. Hardie, Assistant Sec. of the War Department in Washington about the Widow Bixby case and asks that "a letter might be written by the President of the United States taking notice of a noble mother of five dead heroes so well deserved."

September 26—Hardie refers the correspondence to the Adjutant General's office at Washington where it was endorsed as received on the following day.

October 1—Major Thomas M. Vincent requested Schouler to forward "names, companies, and regiments" of the five sons of the widow.

October 7—Schouler sends written requests by messenger to Mrs. Bixby to furnish names, regiments, of five sons, "when they died, the battles in which they were killed or wounded" and asked information be returned by the messenger.

October 12—Schouler complies with request of Vincent by forwarding information, and the data was according to notation received on October 18.

October 18—Samuel Brecht, Assistant Adjutant General, submits the information to Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, with this note "Governor Andrews desires that a letter may be written Mrs. Bixby by the President—such as the noble mother of five dead heroes so well deserves." Also endorsement on note by Hardie calling attention of the case to Assistant Secretary Charles A. Dana. Another endorsement on the memorandum asks, "Is there anything to be done with Gov. Andrews' recommendation?"

October 23—Papers in Bixby case were charged out to Edwin M. Stanton.

November 21—The President writes his letter to Mrs. Bixby with this personal affirmation following the salutation, "I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle."

November 21—Gen. Schouler makes an appeal in the *Boston Evening Journal* for funds and states, "I can point out where, in one of the most wealthy and prosperous wards of this city, a poor but most worthy widow lady can be found who sent five sons into this war, all the children she had, every one of whom has fallen nobly in battle."

November 25—The *Boston Evening Journal* for the above date contained two items about Mrs. Bixby stating that on Thanksgiving Day some money had been raised "a portion being specially intended for Mrs. Bixby" and that General Schouler called on her yesterday to see that she was made comfortable for Thanksgiving." The other news item containing the printed copy of the letter was prefaced in part with these words: "The following letter was this morning received at the Adjutant General's office for Mrs. Bixby, the lady of this city referred to in General Schouler's communications to the General of Monday evening last."

November 25—The letter addressed to Mrs. Bixby by A. Lincoln was printed in the *Boston Evening Transcript* with this statement about its time of delivery, "Her lonely abode was made cheerful this morning by the receipt of the following letter from President Lincoln." Also a news dispatch bearing the date line "Boston Nov. 25" contained a copy of the letter and these introductory words in part: "Mrs. Bixby, the recipient of the following letter is a poor widow living in the Eleventh ward of this city."

This array of background data can not be ignored and seems to present sufficient evidence that A. Lincoln wrote a letter to Mrs. Bixby of Boston on Nov. 21, 1864 which was delivered to her at her home on the morning of November 25.

See *Lincoln Lore* 601.