

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S 1863 ILLNESS

Those who observed Abraham Lincoln at the time of his first inaugural and again saw him during the second inaugural ceremonies have testified to the great change which had occurred in his physical appearance. While it is accepted generally that the President wasted away during these four years until he was but a shadow of his old self, yet, he was almost without medical attention. With the exception of his case of nervous debility at Springfield, Illinois in early 1841 there seems to have been no extended periods of illness in his whole life unless we call his ailment in November and December 1863 a period of indisposition.

Preliminary to the Gettysburg exercises on November 19 there was illness in the White House and one of the correspondents of a Boston paper on November 14 spoke of Mrs. Lincoln as having been suffering from chills. It was "Tad" the youngest boy, however, who was causing the most uneasiness at this time. Mr. Lincoln was very much worried about him when he departed for the dedication and apparently left some instructions for Secy. Stanton to keep him posted on the child's condition. By the time the President reached Gettysburg, or shortly after, on the evening of November 18, a dispatch was received from Stanton which contained this personal information "Mrs. Lincoln reports your son's health is a great deal better this evening."

On the 19th, the day of the delivery of the address, another telegram reached the President from Stanton which carried this welcome note: "Mrs. Lincoln reports your son's health a great deal better, and that he will be out today." At some time, probably before the receipt of the last dispatch the President had advised Edward Everett about the illness of his son. On the day following the Gettysburg ceremonies Edward Everett wrote to Lincoln thanking him for some courtesies extended and expressed appreciation for Lincoln's eloquent speech. He concluded the letter with this note of personal interest: "I hope your anxiety for your child was relieved on your arrival." The President acknowledged Mr. Everett's note on the same day it was received and concluded his reply with this comment. "Our sick boy, for whom you kindly inquire, we hope is past the worst."

The first symptoms of Mr. Lincoln's illness appeared on the very day he delivered his address at Gettysburg. While on the train returning to Washington that evening one of the members of the party recalled that the President was "suffering from a severe headache and lying down in the drawing room with his head bathed in cold water." The next morning there appeared at the head of the editorial column in the *Washington Chronicle* a notice dated November 18, which stated that the President would not receive visitors until after Congress convened. Whether or not as early as this date he had some symptoms of illness we are not advised. This notice was carried every day until the reading of his annual message.

The family physician attending the Lincolns at this time was Dr. Robert King Stone. We are not able to determine the exact day on which the President announced to his cabinet that the doctor had diagnosed his illness as varioloid, a mild form of smallpox which was prevalent in the city. Lincoln wrote his son Robert about two months later that "there is a good deal of smallpox here."

It is evident that Mr. Lincoln and his son "Tad" were both ill with the same ailment. This item appeared in the *Washington Chronicle* for November 28:

"The President's youngest son, who had been sick for some time past with scarlatina, was much better yesterday, the crisis of his disease being past. It is expected he will be able again to be out in a short time."

It is difficult to gain much detailed information about the President's condition between Nov. 19 and November 28 when the earliest press dispatches about his illness began to appear.

On November 28 the *National Republican* contained this brief notice: "We are glad to announce that the President is much better today. The fever from which he has suffered has left him. Wednesday and Thursday night his suffering was chiefly from severe pains in the head. Yesterday and the day before he was not permitted by his physician to hold any interviews, even with members of his cabinet."

The best evidence of the President's declining health can be observed by the gradual falling off of his correspondence after the Gettysburg trip and from November 26 to December 1, inclusive, not a single autograph writing by the President is known to exist. On December 1, John Hay, assistant private secretary of the President, replied to Major General Dix who had written the President about breaking ground for the Union Pacific Railroad:

"Dear Sir:

"I have not been permitted until today to present to the President your communication of the 28th of November. He directs me to express his deep regrets that his illness will prevent him from giving expression to the profound interest he feels in the success of a task so vast and beneficial as that which you are about to inaugurate. I have the honor to be Your Obedient Servant.

"John Hay, Assistant Priv. Secy."

The Washington correspondent to the *Boston Journal* observed in his dispatch dated Dec. 2:

"Mr. Lincoln's scarlatina of yesterday is pronounced varioloid today and if it could be magnified into smallpox tomorrow, it would perhaps keep politicians away, and thus give him time to complete his message. As it is he has only been able to send detached portions to the printers, among them his views in brief on reconstruction."

On the same day a Washington paper carried this notice: "Convalescent—President Lincoln is rapidly recovering from his recent severe indisposition and will be able in the course of a few days to resume the arduous duties of his office."

Also on Dec. 2, Lincoln wrote a letter to George Opdyke and others acknowledging their invitation to him to be present at a Cooper Institute meeting in New York on December 3. He stated that "the now early meeting of Congress, together with a temporary illness, render my attendance impossible."

As late as December 7 the President was still unable to receive guests as one of the traditional customs of the nation's capital was postponed on account of his illness. The annual visitation of the justices of the Supreme Court to the White House which had been set for December seventh had to be postponed and they finally made the historic pilgrimage on December 17.

When Congress opened on December 7 the President was still somewhat under the weather but he had succeeded in having his annual message ready. In the prayer offered by Dr. Sutherland at the opening session of the Senate on December 8 he included this petition: "We beseech thee, O Lord, to recover the President from his present illness again to health."