

# LINCOLN LORE

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## FIRST OFFICIAL COMMEMORATION OF LINCOLN'S BIRTHDAY

The first official commemoration of Lincoln's Birthday was in reality a memorial service arranged by Congress "to express the deep sensibility of the nation to the event of the decease of their late President." Although nearly ten months had passed since his demise, the fact that Congress was not in session at the time of the tragedy had postponed, until the members returned to Washington, the formal expression of their grief.

Upon learning of the assassination of the President on April 14, 1865 several Congressmen hurried to Washington and met in the Senate reception room at the capitol at noon on April 17. A committee of four members of each house was appointed to report at 4:00 p.m. the same day and recommendations were adopted with respect to funeral arrangements and resolutions of sympathy.

President Andrew Johnson in his annual message on December 5, 1865 officially announced to Congress the death of Abraham Lincoln in these words:

"To express gratitude to God, in the name of the people, for the preservation of the United States, is my first duty in addressing you. Our thoughts next revert to the death of the late President by an act of parricidal treason. The grief of the nation is still fresh; it finds some solace in the consideration that he lived to enjoy the highest proof of its confidence by entering on the renewed term of the Chief Magistracy to which he had been elected; that he brought the civil war substantially to a close; that his loss was deplored in all parts of the Union; and that foreign nations have rendered justice to his memory."

After the reading of the annual message was completed, on the motions of Mr. Washburne of Illinois, and Mr. Foot of Vermont, on behalf of the House of Representatives and the Senate, respectively, a committee of arrangements was appointed, twenty-four from the House and thirteen from the Senate to plan for a commemorative program.

The following resolutions were adopted by the Joint committee:

"Be it resolved by the Senate, (the House of Representatives concurring.) That the two Houses of Congress will assemble in the Hall of the House of Representatives, on Monday, the 12th day of February next, that being his anniversary birthday, at the hour of twelve meridian, and that, in the presence of the two Houses there assembled, an address upon the life and character of Abraham Lincoln, late President of the United States, be pronounced by Hon. Edwin M. Stanton; and that the President of the Senate *pro tempore* and the Speaker of the House of Representatives be requested to invite the President of the United States, the heads of the several Departments, the judges of the Supreme Court, the representatives of foreign governments near this Government, and such officers of the army and navy as may have received the thanks of Congress who may then be at the seat of Government, to be present on the occasion."

It will be observed that February 12 was chosen for the ceremonies because it was Lincoln's "anniversary birthday." There is little general knowledge that Secretary Stanton was first invited by resolution to deliver the memorial address on "the life and character of Abraham Lincoln." Possibly he had already pronounced in six words at the moment of Lincoln's death the eulogy which will outlive all others: "Now he belongs to the ages."

The committee announced that Mr. Stanton "not having accepted that which was tendered to him," the Honorable George Bancroft in response to an invitation consented to deliver the address.

Two very rare items of Lincolniana are associated with the preliminary plans and procedure of the memorial program. Much of the information already spread before the reader is excerpted from a sixteen page government publication with the caption "In Memoriam" (M804). Another pamphlet even more difficult to acquire is a four page leaflet in mourning borders entitled "Arrangements" (M837). It is a prospectus setting forth in minute detail the procedure to be followed.

The first paragraph states: "The Capitol will be closed on the morning of the 12th to all except the members and officers of Congress." It further specifies that "The doorkeepers will have imperative orders to admit no one before ten o'clock except members of Congress, and no one after that hour who does not exhibit either a letter of invitation or a ticket of admission." Beginning with the notice, "The President of the United States will be seated in front of the speaker's table in the House of Representatives, the assignments of seats for all individuals and groups were set forth with detailed instructions." Seats in the galleries were also reserved for specified groups.

Every phase of the program beginning at 12 o'clock noon is outlined. It announced "that the orator of the day, Honor George Bancroft, will occupy a seat at the table of the clerk of the House. . . . All being in readiness, Hon. Lafayette S. Foster, President of the Senate *pro tempore*, will call the two houses of Congress to order. Prayer will be offered by Rev. Dr. Boynton, Chaplain of the House of Representatives. The presiding officer will then introduce to the audience the Hon. George Bancroft, of New York, who will deliver the memorial address." After the benediction by Rev. Dr. Gray and the departure of members of Congress and guests it was announced, "The Capitol will then be open to the Public." The final paragraph in this unique pamphlet states: "The commissioner of Public Buildings, the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Senate and of the House, and the Doorkeeper of the House are charged with the execution of these arrangements."

Immediately after the House had assembled at the conclusion of the program a resolution was passed thanking the guest speaker for his address and requesting a copy for publication. On February 14, Mr. Bancroft advised that a copy of his address would be made available. The House then ordered "twenty-thousand extra copies" making this cloth bound report of the proceedings a widely circulated brochure. The members of Congress apparently received copies with their names inscribed in gilt on the cover. The copy bearing the name of "Edward McPherson," representative from Pennsylvania who was born at Gettysburg, is in the Foundation Library.

*Harper's Weekly* commented editorially on February 24: "The last solemn rite in commemoration of Abraham Lincoln has now been performed. As the historians at the Grecian games told the traditions of the country to the assembled Greeks, so the historian of the United States has recited the latest chapter of its history to the Congress and all the chief officers of this nation. The orator was most wisely chosen."