

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S MAIDEN SPEECH BEFORE CONGRESS

Congressman Abraham Lincoln, the lone Whig from Illinois, wrote a letter to William Herndon at Springfield on January 8, 1848 in which he mentioned his maiden speech in Congress. Apparently Herndon had inquired about his speaking before the legislative body and Lincoln replied.

"As to speech making, by way of getting the hang of the House I made a little speech two or three days ago on a post-office question of no general interest. I find speaking here and elsewhere about the same thing. I was about as badly scared, and no worse, as I am when I speak in court. I expect to make one within a week or two, in which I hope to succeed well enough to wish you to see it."

Inasmuch as the Post Office Department is very much in the current news just now this would seem to be an appropriate time to mention the initial congressional speech of Lincoln's which was made on behalf of the committee on Post Office and Post Roads of which he was a member. It was delivered on January 5, 1848 after Lincoln had been a member of the Lower House about a month.

The special order of the day set for one o'clock was a joint resolution "concerning the transportation of mail from Washington south." The House resolved itself into a Committee of the Whole with Caleb Smith of Indiana in the chair. Smith, it will be recalled, became Secretary of the Interior in Lincoln's first administration.

The *Congressional Globe* reports Lincoln's address and records his opening remarks as follows: "Mr. Lincoln said he had made an attempt some few days since to obtain the floor in relation to this measure, but had failed. One of the objects he then had in view was now in a great measure superseded by what had fallen from the gentleman from Virginia who had just taken his seat. He begged to assure his friends on the other side of the House, that no assault whatever was meant upon the Postmaster General . . . that the Committee on the Post Office was composed of five Whigs and four Democrats and their report was understood as sustaining, not impugning the position taken by the Postmaster General. That report had met with the approbation of all the Whigs and all the Democrats also, with the exception of one, and he wanted to go even further than this."

At this point in the address the reporter puts this notation in brackets ("Intimations were here informally given to Mr. L. that it was not in order to mention on the floor what had taken place in the committee"). The speech of Mr. Lincoln is then continued as follows: "He then observed if he had been out of order in what he had said, he took it all back, (a laugh) so far as he could. He had no desire, he could assure gentleman, ever to be out of order—though he could never keep long in order."

This little pleasantry which had brought a laugh may have sufficed for the moment but it must have hurt Lincoln deeply to feel that in his very first speech before

his associates he had committed a breach of procedure. The following day one of the speakers had occasion to mention Lincoln's infringement of the rules in these words:

"The gentleman from Illinois (Mr. Lincoln) had yesterday thought to go into what occurred in committee in connection with this subject. He regretted that the gentleman should so far have trespassed, unintentionally he had no doubt, upon the rules of the House; but as he stated that every member on that committee, of both political parties—that all those with whom he was associated united in support of the resolution he thought proper to notice the remark."

At this point Mr. Grogging was interrupted by Mr. Lincoln as reported by the *Globe*: "Mr. Lincoln here interposed, and (Mr. G. Yeilding) said that the gentleman had misunderstood him. He had said a majority of one party and the whole of the other had supported the resolution in committee."

Mr. Grogging, however, did not let the matter rest there and stated that he had hoped that the question before the House "was one of those subjects which would be brought forward during this session of Congress in which no party feeling could or would be exhibited."

Mr. Lincoln chose to direct his attention mainly to the legal aspects of the case and in the course of his remarks commented: "Now I ask the lawyers in this House (I suppose there are some)." The reporter indicates that this question brought "a laugh." Lincoln then continued by presenting his view of the legal aspects of the case. This discussion also backfired and when Mr. Root took the floor he directed some of his remarks to Lincoln's argument, as recorded by the reporter:

"He (Root) differed in opinion as to the law which governs this matter from the gentleman from Illinois who had just addressed the committee. He was not about to inflict upon the committee a law argument. This whole matter was treated by the gentleman from Illinois precisely as if the House were sitting as a court of equity, having before them the railroad company, the Post Office Department, and such of the good people of the United States as were interested in the expedition of this mail."

When the proceedings of the house for January 5, 1848 are read one must draw the conclusion that Lincoln could not have been very happy about his maiden speech. He had been out of order, criticized for ejecting a court scene into the proceedings, accused of presenting one illustration that was not parallel with the case, and ridiculed for one of the conclusions he had drawn about the railroad's method of procedure.

It is not likely that any one on the floor of the House that day could have anticipated that the lone Whig from Illinois, who was not well informed about the rules of the House, and Andrew Johnson, who had preceded Lincoln in a harangue against the Smithsonian Institution, would in 1864 become President and Vice President, respectively, of the United States of America.