

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S UNIQUE PHRASEOLOGY

Students in general are agreed that the reading of the Bible day by day in the cabin home of Abraham Lincoln during his early childhood days was largely responsible for his simple but beautiful language. It is also recognized that Lincoln used more quotations from the Scripture than any other literature, which gave his diction a Biblical flavor. There is one other book to which he had access in his youth, however, which has not been given the attention it deserves in attempting to discover the source of his unique phraseology. On his way to be inaugurated President, he stopped for an address before the New Jersey legislature and in the introductory portion of his remarks he made this statement, "Away back in my childhood the earliest days of my being able to read I got hold of a small book. . . . *Weems' Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there given of the battlefields and struggles for the liberties of the country and none fixed themselves upon my imagination *so deeply* as the struggle here at Trenton, New Jersey."

Weems' Washington which he acquired from his schoolteacher, Andrew Crawford, should not be confused with *Ramsey's Washington*, damaged by rain when borrowed from Josiah Crawford many years later. Unless one is very familiar with the Weems book he will not be able to appreciate how greatly Lincoln's mode of expression was patterned after this early biographer; not in one particular, but in many. Lincoln was undoubtedly influenced by Weems' peculiar use of the adverb "so" in qualifying some other adverb or adjective, which immediately strikes the reader as unique. Here are a few instances noted when it is used in the first few pages of Weems' book:

"*So brutish* a practice . . . *so great* their ambition . . . *so keen* was their passion . . . *so uncommon* for war . . . *so mean* a dress . . . *so completely* confounded . . . *so shameful* a decision . . . *so well* deserved . . . *so great* were his fears . . . *so confident* of success . . . *so great* was the dread . . . *so harrassed* my heart . . . *so idled* away . . . *so dignified* with virtue . . . *so quickly* tarnished . . . *so wonderful* a manner . . . *so heartily* beloved . . . *so powerful* an armament."

This figure of speech used with such profusion by Weems seems to have been utilized by Lincoln when he was in a meditative mood. It appears most often in his carefully prepared manuscripts and especially in his personal correspondence where his feelings have been stirred. It occurs less in his business letters and his extemporaneous speeches, although it was used in the previously mentioned Trenton address in which he referred to Weems. Some of Lincoln's better known writings of the presidential years will be used to exhibit this literary peculiarity, although his very earliest compositions abound in the use of the adverbial expression.

The first inaugural, as might be expected, exhibited many cases of interest. In the March 4, 1861 address he states: "Before entering upon *so grave* a matter as the destruction of our national fabric . . . will you hazard *so desperate* a step . . . will you risk the commission of *so fearful* a mistake? The first message to Congress on December 3, 1861 spoke of "*so vast* and *so sacred* a trust as the free people have confided in them."

The year 1863 in which the Gettysburg Address was delivered was especially rich in literary expressions. During the month of July in a proclamation issued Lincoln asks divine aid "to subdue the anger which has . . . *so long* sustained the needless and cruel rebellion" and "to guide the counsels of the government with wisdom adequate to *so great* a national emergency." The first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation issued on Oct. 3 referred to the bounties "which are *so constantly* enjoyed" and also other gifts "which are of *so extraordinary* a nature."

This proclamation was written about the time that the Gettysburg address was in preparation in which he talked about a nation "*so conceived* and *so dedicated*" and also emphasized the cause for which those who fought there had "*so nobly* advanced." Three weeks after Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg he presented on Dec. 8, 1863 his annual message to Congress in which he paid a tribute to the men in the ranks "who have thus far borne their harder part *so nobly*" and "*so well*."

This same sentiment is carried over into 1864 when he issues a proclamation for prayer on July 7 in which he suggests is "*so solemnly*," and "*so earnestly*" and "*so reverently*" recommended. Again on Oct. 20 the President urged that prayer be made for the many brave soldiers who have "*so often*" and "*so gallantly* periled their lives in battling the enemy."

As has been suggested, it is in correspondence where he had opportunity for reflection that we discover a more liberal use of this adverbial phrase. Here also limited space will allow but a few illustrations selected from some of his better known personal letters.

The letter of condolence written to the father and mother of Col. Ellsworth on May 25, 1861 on the loss of their son contains these expressions: "*so much* of promised usefulness to one's country . . . have rarely been *so suddenly* dashed . . . The honors he labored for *so laudably*, and in the sad end, *so gallantly* gave his life." Mrs. Susannah Weathers, a distant relative, sent Lincoln a present on December 4, 1861 which he described in his letter of thanks as "a pair of socks *so fine*, and soft, and warm." The letter to Conkling on Aug. 26, 1863 expresses this fine sentiment in its conclusion: "Peace does not seem *so distant* as it did. I hope it will come soon; and come to stay and *so come* as to be worth the keeping in all future time."

On the very same day, November 21, 1864, Lincoln wrote two letters in which he used the adverb "so" in his characteristic manner. Although his letter to John Phillips, an elderly man in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, contained but 100 words we find the adverbial approach four different times as follows: "You acted *so honorable* a part . . . a citizen *so venerable* . . . served *so long* and *so well*." It was on this same day that Lincoln wrote a Massachusetts widow Lydia Bixby of Boston. In this famous letter of condolence he mentions the "loss of a grief *so overwhelming*" and concluded with a comment on the pride she must feel "to have laid *so costly* a sacrifice on the altar of freedom."

NOTE: Italics used in adverbial clauses are the editor's.