

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LAST FOURTH OF JULY

One of the objectives which has directed the choice of subjects for consideration in *Lincoln Lore* has been to make the discussions timely. This has been achieved by cognizance of current events and utilizing seasonable atmosphere. For example: The Fourth of July falling on Sunday this year, many of the patriotic ceremonies were conducted on Monday, July 5, the date of this bulletin. The question is proposed, what were Lincoln's activities on the last Fourth of July he was privileged to observe?

During the Independence Day season in 1863 with the Gettysburg battle won and Vicksburg surrendered to the Union, the prospects for a speedy conclusion of the war seemed probable. It was the most glorious Fourth of July the nation had experienced since 1776. But on July 4, 1864 Confederate General Early was marching on the capital city and Washington within a week was to be under seige for the first time during hostilities. The nation had also reached a financial crisis and one writer called those early July days "the darkest hours of the war."

There were no dramatic episodes on July 4, 1864 comparable to those a year earlier. Some incidents of importance did occur, however, which made Lincoln's last Independence Day a memorable one. Lincoln was a consistent reader of the *Daily Morning Chronicle* published at Washington and we may assume that at breakfast, or soon after, the paper was in his hands. The leading editorial was captioned, "The Anniversary." Apparently the President would be put in the proper frame of mind for the festivities by these editorial suggestions:

"A year ago today, and the smoke was covering the hills around Gettysburg . . . To us it was the most sublime of anniversaries for on that day—so dear to every American—we had shown to the world that we knew our power and how to make it triumphant. Therefore, this Fourth day of July is to us a new Anniversary—a new Sabbath. The memories of the olden time, the dear records and traditions of our struggle for Independence are interwoven with the grander and more magnificent deeds now transpiring. . . . We begin the new year with confidence and hope." The implication that the American New Year's Day was July 4, the birthday of the nation, would please the President. In the same editorial this passage referred to the chief executive: "It will probably be the last year of the war. Having given Mr. Lincoln a term of strife and probation and tearing down, we shall give to him before a new anniversary comes to us again a term of peace and experience and building up."

One of the casualties occurring on the Fourth of July about which Lincoln learned was the injury of Secretary of State William Seward. The news dispatch stated: "About dusk Monday evening, while the secretary was riding along the avenue in his carriage, a rocket carelessly fired, struck him over the right eye, but fortunately did not injure him seriously. The escape from the loss of his eye was a narrow one."

A brief endorsement bearing the date July 4, 1864 is a grim reminder of the fact that this was Abraham Lincoln's last Fourth of July. The writing virtually dismissed his police protection as he states, "I believe I

need no escort and unless the secretary of war directs, none need attend me."

Possibly the most important conference in which Lincoln was engaged during the day was one with William Pitt Fessenden who succeeded Salmon Portland Chase. The appointment was made on July 1 but Fessenden immediately remonstrated and on July 2 prepared a letter of refusal from which the following excerpt is made: "After much anxious, not to say painful reflection I feel compelled to decline the appointment of Secretary of the Treasury conferred upon me yesterday." Fessenden then set forth his reason for rejecting the offer, based primarily on his poor health.

He took the letter in person to deliver to the President but its contents were anticipated and Fessenden gives us the President's reaction in these words: "If it was a letter declining to accept the Treasury, he would not receive it." The President finally persuaded Fessenden to withhold the letter until after Congress adjourned. Friends immediately began to bring pressure to bear on Fessenden and Secretary Stanton's viewpoint is typical of many other persuasive comments. Fessenden told Stanton that because of impaired physical condition the task "would kill me." Stanton replied, "Very well, you cannot die better than in trying to save your country." The nation at that very time was on the verge of financial collapse.

Fessenden was back at the White House on Independence Day for another conference with the President and accepted the portfolio. Lincoln prepared a little known memorandum dated July 4, 1864 which he handed to Fessenden. It was a sort of gentlemen's agreement as to working relations between the chief executive and the new cabinet member. The introductory sentence opened, "I have today said to Hon. W. P. Fessenden, on his assuming the office of Secretary of the Treasury, that I will keep no person in office in his department against his expressed will, etc." Also in the memorandum the President expresses a desire with respect to the secretary to make his position agreeable to him." Possibly this diplomatic victory of Lincoln on July 4, 1864 by securing the services of the well qualified Fessenden was as important in the area of financial circles as was the Gettysburg and Vicksburg victory in the field of military effort during the previous Fourth of July season.

The first session of the Thirty-eighth Congress closed about noon on this eighty-eighth anniversary of the nation's natal day. This fact brought to the attention of the President many last moment duties including the signing of several bills and the vetoing of others. Especially the act of Congress which he approved on this last day which gave the President power to call out additional troops was acted upon immediately by issuing a Proclamation. Before the Congress adjourned a resolution was passed requesting the President to appoint a day of fasting and prayer. This was done on July 7, setting apart the first Thursday of August for that purpose. Lincoln also must have been putting the finishing touches on his Proclamation suspending the Writ of Habeas Corpus which was issued the following day. There is no indication that Lincoln made any public address on the glorious fourth although he was the presidential nominee for the new Union Party.