

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1324

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 23, 1954

LINCOLN, C. CLAY AND THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL REJUVINATION—NO. 4

Cassius M. Clay was Kentucky's most passionate and aggressive anti-slavery exponent. His father was a cousin of Henry Clay but there was no spirit of compromise in Cassius. On July 10, 1854, one month after ex-President Fillmore's visit to Springfield, the fiery relative of the pacificator arrived in the state capital of Illinois for an address on the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

He was cordially welcomed by Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln as an intimate friend of the Todd Family. When Cassius was a student in Transylvania University at Lexington the main dormitory of the institution burned to the ground and the students found lodging in the homes of the people. Cassius, whose people then lived in Madison County, secured accommodations in the home of Robert Todd and here he became acquainted with their daughter Mary who married Lincoln. In a brief sketch of the early days Cassius said that "I was on very agreeable terms with the Todd family, who were always my avowed friends during my antislavery career."

Cassius Marcellus Clay later entered Yale where he graduated in 1832. He came under the influence of William Lloyd Garrison and imbibed much of the abolition philosophy of the reformer. He entered politics in Kentucky and was elected to the legislature. On June 3, 1845 he issued at Lexington the first number of *The True American*, an anti-slavery paper. Threatened by mob violence he fortified his office with two four pounder brass cannon, loaded and mounted them breast high in his office, wore a bowie-knife and kept a brace of pistols in the mouth of his grip sack which he kept at his feet by his desk.

The editor of *Lincoln Lore* while a student at Transylvania University remembers distinctly a story about Cassius Clay which William Townsend uses in his interesting volume *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town*. This is the version used by Townsend:

"At one of the villages near Lexington, large posters announced that no anti-slavery speeches would be permitted under penalty of death. Some of the citizens sent for Clay and promptly, at the appointed hour, with his old gray carpetbag on his arm, he walked unattended down the center aisle of the packed court-room, mounted the rostrum and calmly faced the muttering, jostling crowd.

"For those who support the laws of our country,' he announced in an even, steady voice, 'I have this argument,' and he placed a copy of the Constitution on one end of the table. 'For those who believe in the Bible, I have an argument from this,' and he placed a copy of the New Testament on the other end of the table. 'And for those who regard neither the laws of God or man'—the speaker paused and fixed his dark piercing eyes upon the most threatening group in the audience—'I have this argument,' and he laid a brace of long black-barreled pistols with his bowie-knife on the table in front of him. Then he plunged, without interruption, into his speech."

Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln must have had some anxiety about the coming of Cassius Clay to Springfield. Upon his arrival the secretary of state refused him permission

to speak in the state house which denial put Cassius in a perfect mental attitude for the occasion. The people assembled in Mather's grove where the present state house now stands. Clay first upbraided the civil authorities for refusing permission to use the public building and stated that "even in his own state—a slave state—the common courtesy of citizenship had never been withheld from him, no court-house or state-house door had ever been shut in his face."

The principal part of Cassius Clay's speech was on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and he concluded his argument with these words: "Strike at the monster aggressor (slavery) whenever it could be reached under the Constitution. . . . An organization of men of whatever politics, of Free Soilers, Whigs and Democrats, who will bury past animosities and, repenting past errors which all have been guilty of, unite in hurling down the gigantic evil which threatens ever our liberties. When men violate the Constitution, put them down. Repeal unconstitutional enactments, restore liberty to Kansas and Nebraska. Slavery must be kept a sectional and liberty a national institution, and then the Ship of State will again set forward in her glorious career of Constitutional Liberty."

Apparently the visit of Cassius Clay to Springfield greatly aroused Lincoln and later he prepared an editorial for the local press based on Section 14 of the Kansas-Nebraska Law which statute aroused every anti-slavery man in the nation. This is the paragraph which brought about the political rejuvenation of Abraham Lincoln:

"That the constitution, and all the laws of the United States which are not locally inapplicable, shall have the same force and effect within said territory of Nebraska as elsewhere in the United States, except the 8th section of the act preparatory to the admission of Missouri into the Union, approved March sixth, eighteen hundred and twenty, which being inconsistent with the principles of non-intervention by congress with slavery in the States and Territories as recognized by the legislation of eighteen hundred and fifty, commonly called the compromise measures, is hereby declared inoperative and void; it being the true intent and meaning of this act not to legislate slavery into any territory or State, nor to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the constitution of the United States: Provided, that nothing herein contained shall be construed to revive or put in force any law or regulation which may have existed prior to the act of sixth of March, eighteen hundred and twenty, either protecting, establishing, prohibiting, or abolishing slavery."

We shall never know just how much Clay's talk contributed to Lincoln's decision to re-enter politics in the following month of August. In after years in referring to this visit to Springfield, Clay remarked, "Lincoln gave me a most patient hearing. I shall never forget his long ungainly form and his ever sad and homely face. . . . I flatter myself, when Lincoln listened to my animated appeal for universal liberty for more than two hours, that I sowed good seed in good ground, which in the providence of God in good time produced good fruit."