

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 1325

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 30, 1954

LINCOLN, YATES AND SLAVERY EXTENSION

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL REJUVINATION—NO. 5

Among a dozen of the most important political episodes occurring in the political career of Abraham Lincoln we would include, his greeting of Hon. Richard Yates at the railroad station in Springfield, on August 9, 1854. Yates was a United States congressman from Illinois and at the close of the session was on his way to his home in Jacksonville via the state capital. We are indebted to Yates himself for a brief statement about this meeting. The story appears in a very rare pamphlet in the Foundation collection which presents a speech made by Yates at Springfield on November 20, 1860. While the principal speaker of the occasion was the newly elected Senator, Lyman Trumbull, among the other orators was the governor elect of Illinois, Richard Yates. The caption of the eight page pamphlet above mentioned is "Speech of the Hon. Richard Yates Delivered in the Wigwam, at the Springfield Jubilee, Nov. 20, 1860." That portion of the speech that deals with the episode in question follows:

"... Now the Republican party was born at 4 o'clock, on the 5th day of March, 1854, when the Kansas Nebraska Bill, repealing the Missouri Compromise, passed the Senate. ('That's so! That's so!') I know it's so, for I was there. . . .

"I refer to this history for this purpose: I had spoken and voted against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and when on my return home at the close of the long session of 1854, having published a card that I would not be a candidate for re-election, I was met at the depot in Springfield by Mr. Lincoln. He said I had taken the right course on this question, and though he could not promise me success in a district so largely against us, yet he hoped for the sake of the principle, I would run, ('That's just like Old Abe,') and if I would, he would take the stump in my behalf. I remember his earnestness, and so deeply did he impress me that the question was one worthy of our noblest efforts whether in victory or defeat, that I consented. From the circumstances I believe that the only consideration with Mr. Lincoln was a disinterested and patriotic desire for the success of correct principle."

In the autobiography which Lincoln prepared in the third person in 1860 Lincoln stated, "In the autumn of that year (1864) he took the stump with no broader practical aim or object than to secure if possible the re-election of Hon. Richard Yates of Congress." This statement confirms the Yates reminiscence and clearly states that it was his interest in Yates' return to Congress that drew him into the political arena again.

When the Abraham Lincoln Association of Springfield, Illinois was compiling its series of publications on the "Day by Day Activities of Abraham Lincoln" this comment was made under the date of July 17, 1854. "From this date until August 9 no record of Lincoln's activities have been found." *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* recently published by the same organization does not throw any further light on Lincoln's whereabouts during this interval.

Cassius Clay had given his rousing speech at Springfield on July 10 and the period intervening just preliminary to Yates' arrival might well be called Lincoln's period of political meditation. We have his word for it that he had never been so disturbed, politically, than after the repeal of the Missouri Compromise by the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska bill.

The earnestness and vigor with which Lincoln bounded back into politics after his period of political inertia which had extended over a period of six years is well set forth in his follow-up letter written to Yates nine days after the meeting at the depot. It is presented in full:

"Hon. R. Yates
Jacksonville, Ill.

Springfield
August 18, 1854.

"My dear Sir: I am disappointed at not having seen or heard from you since I met you more than a week ago at the railroad depot here. I wish to have the matter we spoke of settled and working to its consummation. I understand that our friend B. S. Edwards is entirely satisfied now, and when I can assure myself of this perfectly I would like, by your leave, to get an additional paragraph into the Journal, about as follows:

"To-day we place the name of Hon. Richard Yates at the head of our columns for reelection as the Whig candidate for this congressional district. We do this without consultation with him and subject to the decision of a Whig convention, should the holding of one be deemed necessary; hoping, however, there may be unanimous acquiescence without a convention."

"May I do this? Answer by return mail. Yours, as ever,

A. Lincoln."

Yates came on to Springfield three days later and while he had formerly sent out notice he would not be a candidate for re-election, finally consented to run. That same week Lincoln visited Yates at Jacksonville and the following day he and Yates attended the Scott County Whig Convention at Winchester. Here Lincoln gave his initial speech on the Nebraska question which was to bring him within a few days into direct contact with Douglas, the author of the divisive instrument.

Word soon got around that Lincoln was on the political war path again and speeches were made by him within a few days at Jacksonville, Carrollton and Bloomington. Douglas now having returned to Illinois and scheduled to speak at Bloomington refused to enter into joint debate there with Lincoln on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The climax of the early efforts on Lincoln's part took place at Springfield while the State Fair was in progress. Douglas spoke on Tuesday, Oct. 3 and Lincoln on the following day. Of course, Lincoln heard the speech of Douglas who was present for Lincoln's address and occasionally interrupted Lincoln. As soon as Lincoln was through Douglas made a reply. Possibly this informal debate with both pro and con arguments and a rebuttal set the form for the famous debates to follow four years later.

Not only did Lincoln utilize the open forum in his attack on the repeal of the Missouri Compromise but through personal interviews, editorials, and especially correspondence, he carried on a sustained drive against the opposition as this opening sentence in a letter to a Democrat, John M. Palmer on Sept. 7, 1854 illustrates: "You know how anxious I am that the Nebraska measure shall be rebuked and condemned everywhere."

The month of August, 1854 not only marks an epoch in the life of Abraham Lincoln but the whole history of America was changed by the decision of the then little known Illinois lawyer which brought about his political rejuvenation.