

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN AND DAVIS IN THE BLACK HAWK WAR

There has been a general acceptance of the fact that both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis in 1832 saw service in the Black Hawk War. Just how closely they were associated and what contact one may have had with the other is still a matter of conjecture. Their accepted place of meeting seems to have been Dixon's Ferry, now Dixon, Illinois. George C. Dixon has just published a genealogy of John Dixon who operated the ferry and makes this very mild and conservative claim compared with some other traditions: "Associated with Lincoln at Fort Dixon were Col. Zachary Taylor, Lieut. Jefferson Davis, Lieut. Robert Anderson, Lieut. Albert Sidney Johnson and Major John Dement."

Over against this matter of fact story of these famous men having been brought together is a tradition unearthed by Dr. Gilbert Ellis Bailey of the University of Southern California and released in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 11, 1923. The caption for the article was "When Three Presidents Met at a Dance." The setting is the home of a French trader named Pierre Bullona who had married an Indian girl and built a large double cabin on the Kellogg Trail between Peoria and Galena. A party was being held for a daughter of Bullona who was about to marry a Frenchman. To use Dr. Bailey's version of the story:

"While they were dancing a party of Army officers rode up and asked to stay over night. They were Col. Zachary Taylor, afterward President; Capt. Abraham Lincoln, and Lieut. Jefferson Davis, future President of the Confederacy, the latter fresh from West Point; and several others. Jefferson Davis was a fine dancer, but he danced too often with one of the fair maids. A jealous lover drew a knife and threatened Davis who drew a pistol to protect himself. Lincoln sprang between them and held them apart with his long arms until Col. Taylor could restore peace."

The story of a Lincoln and Davis contact in its most often used form is found in the book published in 1890, *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States, A memoir by his Wife*. A fragment from the incident related by Rev. W. W. Harsher follows: "When the Black Hawk War was begun some Illinois militia companies proffered their services. Two lieutenants were sent by (Gen.) Scott to Dixon, Ill. to muster the new soldiers. . . . A tall, gawky, slab-sided, homely young man, dressed in a suit of blue jeans, presented himself to the lieutenants as the captain of the recruits. . . . The bashful lieutenant was he who afterward fired the first gun from Fort Sumter, Major Anderson. The other lieutenant, who administered the oath was in after years the President of the Confederacy of the United States, Jefferson Davis."

Dr. Harsher, Mrs. Davis' informant, further stated that he was in Carter's Book Store in New York and repeated this story when an elderly gentleman arose and remarked that he was "Chaplain at Fort Snelling at the time and was fully able to corroborate each statement." A bystander in the store had the most valuable reminiscence to contribute if it could be relied upon as he said that "He had often heard Mr. Lincoln say that the first time that he had ever taken the oath of allegiance to the United States it was administered by Jefferson Davis." Mrs. Davis' sequel to this tradition lacks the confirmation we would like very much to have. She states, "Mr. Davis remembered swearing in some volunteers, but could not substantiate what seems a probable story."

Mrs. Davis' informant about this occurrence, Rev. W. W. Harsher, was a Presbyterian clergyman in Dixon in 1866. Mr. Frank A. Stevens who published in 1903 *The Black Hawk War*, reproduces a letter which Dr. Harsher wrote to John Dixon after visiting with General Anderson in New York in which the general confirmed the statement of "his meeting Davis and Lincoln at your house at 'Dixon's Ferry'."

Another statement made by Stevens in appendix number one of his book is of special interest for this discussion. He states that "from the days of his earliest boyhood, he believed that Jefferson Davis was the mustering officer" who first received Abraham Lincoln into the United States service at Dixon Ferry. Stevens mentions Ben Perley Poore as having heard Lincoln make this statement. But in the sketch which Poore prepared for Rice's book on *Reminiscences of Lincoln* Poore does not make this direct claim. Stevens had become convinced however, that the dream of his youth had been shattered by his own discovery that Lincoln was first mustered in by General Henry Atkinson at the mouth of Rock River on May 8, 1832. The writer of the letter bearing this evidence, Major Nathaniel Buckmaster, mustered Abraham Lincoln and his company out of service at Ottawa on May 27.*

One of the earliest printed notices of the conversation carried on between Lincoln and Anderson at the time the latter visited Washington after the fall of Fort Sumter is found in the *Life of Abraham Lincoln* by Arnold published in 1884. The author claims in a footnote to have been present at the interview. Lincoln said to Anderson: "Major, do you remember of ever meeting me before? 'No' replied Anderson 'I have no recollection of ever having had that pleasure.' 'My memory is better than yours,' said Lincoln. 'You mustered me into the United States service, as a high private of the Illinois volunteers, at Dixon's Ferry, in the Black Hawk War.'"

In a manuscript which Anderson prepared after Lincoln's death he stated that "he mustered him (Lincoln) into the service at the mouth of Fox River (Ottawa) May 29, 1832." Anderson must have made further use of his military records as he stated in a letter to E. B. Washburne dated May 10, 1870, "I also mustered Abraham Lincoln twice into service and once out." Lincoln was a private in May Iles' company when he was mustered in at Ottawa and he was mustered out of this company on June 15 at Fort Wilborn by Major Anderson.

Lincoln's third enlistment was in Capt. Early's company and occurred on the following day at Fort Wilborn, where presumably he was mustered into the service again by Major Anderson. These muster notations would be in harmony with Anderson's stating that he mustered in Lincoln twice and out once during the war. The only muster service not accounted for was the final departure of the troops at White River, Michigan, now Wisconsin.

Inasmuch as General Atkinson was at Whitewater and was responsible for the dismissal of the independent company which was mustered out it is most likely that the same General Atkinson who first mustered Lincoln into service on May 8, 1832 mustered him out on this final release on July 10, 1832. There does not seem to have been any opportunity for Jefferson Davis to have administered the oath of allegiance to Abraham Lincoln during the Black Hawk War.

*Lincoln for one day, May 27, was a member of Capt. Alexander White's company but apparently he was not mustered in or out.