

# 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 1385

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 24, 1955

## THE MARINE WHITE HOUSE

Having just returned from a sight-seeing trip in Virginia, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* is recalling some of his visits to shrines of illustrious men and to sites of historical interest. Memorials honoring Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Lee were impressive and places like Williamsburg, Yorktown, Jamestown, Fredericksburg and Richmond stirred the memories of Revolutionary and Civil War episodes. Strange to say, however, the environs at City Point where Abraham Lincoln lived on the "River Queen," his marine White House for eighteen days, offered the most pronounced emotional appeal.

The absence of any formal recognition of the events associated with this port where the River Queen had its mooring and where Grant located his headquarters until the fall of Petersburg, eight miles away, gives full play to one's imagination. The James River flows majestically by as it did in 1865 but the docks now used commercially do not help to visualize the tall figure of the President who stepped ashore here so many times during the closing days of the war.

Just exactly one week to the day following the Saturday he was visiting the men in the military hospitals at City Point, he was lying a corpse in the executive mansion at Washington. This tragedy was accentuated for the editor of *Lincoln Lore* by standing, a few hours after the City Point visit, on the spot where Lincoln's assassin was apprehended and dispatched. One who has read carefully the telegrams which passed between Lincoln at City Point and his secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, in Washington during these days they were separated will wonder what prompted the finger of suspicion to be pointed at the secretary of war in the preliminaries and aftermath of the assassination.

The first telegram which Lincoln received from Stanton was in the form of an apology. It was dated the day the President's family, including his wife and son Tad, left Washington from the arsenal dock. Thursday, March 23. It stated in part: "I reached the arsenal with Mrs. Stanton to see you depart a few minutes after you had got under way. I hope you have reached Port Lookout safely notwithstanding the furious gale that came on soon after you started."

Apparently the River Queen stopped enroute at Fortress Monroe opposite Norfolk as Stanton received a telegram to which he replied: "I was glad to learn of your safe arrival at Fortress Monroe and hope that by this time you and Mrs. Lincoln have reached General Grant's Headquarters in health and comfort . . . The weather here is cold, windy and very disagreeable so that I think you went to the sunny south in good time . . . Compliments to Mrs. Lincoln."

The River Queen docked at City Point, Friday evening at nine p.m. and General Grant came on board to welcome the Lincolns. Stanton had appointed Capt. Penrose to accompany the President and at his request Penrose immediately telegraphed Stanton that "he had just arrived at this point safely, and is now feeling well, having had a pretty fair passage." From the decks of this watercraft the business of the nation was to be conducted and in the staterooms the plans for the consummation of the war were discussed. Furthermore it was here that important conferences were held about the reconstruction days.

Lincoln was now at the seat of military activities and on the following day rode to the front lines with Sherman and saw the army in action. Lincoln was so moved by the dead and wounded men which he saw that upon his return he could eat no supper observing that he had "seen enough of the horrors of war."

Upon returning from the front he sent a telegraph to the secretary of war advising him: "I am here within five miles of the scene of this morning's action." Apparently Lincoln did not advise Stanton that he had already been in the front lines. Even Lincoln's presence within five miles from the front caused Stanton to reply: "I hope you will remember Gen. Harrison's advice at Tippecanoe that they 'can see as well a little further off.'"

At eight o'clock Monday morning, April 3 Lincoln sent Stanton this telegram: "This morning Gen. Grant reports Petersburg evacuated; and he is confident Richmond also is. He is pushing forward to cut off if possible, the retreating army. I start to him in a few minutes." This telegram brought from Stanton a further word of caution:

"I congratulate you and the nation on the glorious news in your telegram just received. Allow me respectfully to ask you to consider whether you ought to expose the nation to the consequence of any disaster to yourself in the pursuit of a treacherous and dangerous enemy like the rebel army. If it was a question concerning yourself only I should not presume to say a word. Commanding Generals are in the line of their duty in running such risks. But is the political head of a nation in the same condition?"

Regardless of this second admonition Lincoln sent this telegram to his war secretary at five o'clock on that same Monday, April 3: "Yours received. Thanks for your caution; but I have already been to Petersburg, staid with Gen. Grant an hour & a half and returned here (City Point). It is certain now that Richmond is in our hands, and I think I will go there to-morrow. I will take care of myself."

Lincoln almost literally "took care of himself" and little Tad at Richmond as his only military escort consisted of twelve sailors who had been at the oars of the barge which brought him ashore, and four officers, a newspaper correspondent and an old negro who directed the group to the headquarters of General Weitzel, a distance of nearly two miles through the center of the city, made up the party. Apparently Lincoln completely ignored Stanton's warning. As a result we have the most unusual triumphal entry to the headquarters of an enemy which has ever occurred in all the annals of fallen cities.

One of the last telegrams which Lincoln sent to his secretary of war from the marine White House contained a dispatch from Sheridan to Grant. Two hours and a half after the telegram was forwarded to Stanton, Lincoln sent one to Grant as follows: "Gen. Sheridan says, 'If the thing is pressed I think that Lee will surrender.' Let the thing be pressed."

At a season when President Eisenhower is directing the affairs of the nation from a hospital White House at Denver it is timely to observe how Lincoln conducted the affairs of state from his marine White House at City Point.