



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation . . . Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, Editor
Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1499

Fort Wayne, Ind.

January, 1963

LINCOLN'S ATTENDANCE AT SPIRITUALISTIC SEANCES

According to certain questionable evidence Abraham Lincoln attended several spiritualistic séances during the period of his presidential administration. The dates of some of these séances are unreliably and indefinitely established as: December 1862, February 5, 1863, April 1863, May 1, 1863, Winter of 1863-1864 and the Year of 1864.

Despite the fact that so little factual information is available concerning Lincoln's curious interest in the cult, it is, nevertheless, true that he became acquainted with several mediums and attended their circles. Possibly his attendance at such gatherings was a means of relaxation, or an effort to understand the mysteries of the séance. Perhaps by his presence Lincoln sought to protect Mrs. Lincoln against overzealous and unscrupulous spiritualists who might have taken advantage of her during the period she was in mourning following the death of Willie.

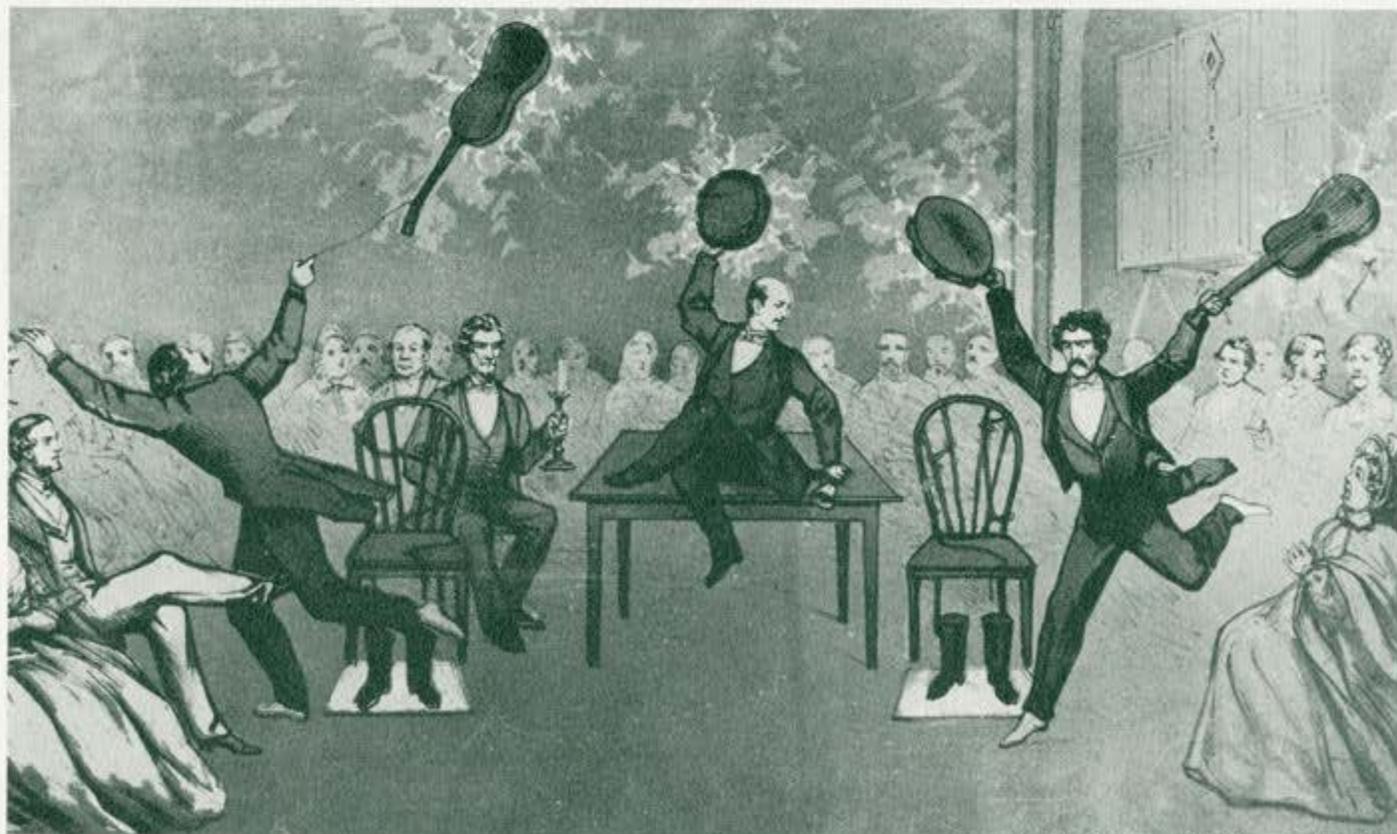
Nettie Colburn Maynard's book, "Was Abraham Lincoln A Spiritualist?", published in Philadelphia by Rufus

C. Hartrauft in 1891, must have caused a considerable stir among Lincoln students and admirers, once it appeared on the market. However, it had been preceded by other little known publications purporting that Lincoln was a spiritualist. Perhaps it was the Maynard book that prompted Jesse W. Weik (who collaborated with William H. Herndon on a life of Lincoln in 1889) to write to John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary and biographer, in 1894 regarding Lincoln's interest in spiritualism.

On November 24 of that year, Nicolay wrote Weik as follows:

"Yours of November 19th is received. I have not read either of the books you mention; but of course there will be no end to the extravagant stories invented and related about Mr. Lincoln.

I never knew of his attending a séance of Spiritualists at the White House or elsewhere, and if he ever did so it was out of mere curiosity, and as a matter of pastime, just as you or I would do. That he was in any sense



From the Lincoln Memorial University Collection

This photograph was made from the cover of a piece of English sheet music entitled, "The Dark Seance Polka," the only copy of which is in the Lincoln Memorial University collection of Harrogate, Tennessee. The picture bears the title "Abraham Lincoln And The Spiritualists."

a so-called 'Spiritualist' seems to me almost too absurd to need contradiction."

December 1862 Séance

Apparently without Nicolay's knowledge, President and Mrs. Lincoln attended a spiritualistic séance in the White House in December 1862. This was Nettie Colburn (Maynard's) first meeting with Lincoln. The circle met in the Red Parlor at eight o'clock. Others present, in addition to the Lincolns, were Mr. and Mrs. Cranston Laurie and their daughter, Mrs. Belle Miller and Mr. Daniel E. Somes. For more than an hour Nettie Colburn was under control, and she talked "upon matters that he (Mr. Lincoln) seemed to fully understand, while they (the other guests) comprehended very little until that portion was reached that related to the forthcoming Emancipation Proclamation". The medium stated that the president "was charged with the utmost solemnity and force of manner not to abate the terms of its issue, and not to delay its enforcement as a law beyond the opening of the year; and he was assured that it was to be the crowning event of his administration and his life . . ."

Mr. Lincoln and those present noticed that the "peculiar method of address" of the medium resembled the mode of expression of Daniel Webster, whose full length portrait hung above the piano.

Lincoln's parting words to Miss Colburn were "My Child, you possess a very singular gift; but that it is of God, I have no doubt. I thank you for coming here tonight. It is more important than perhaps any one present can understand." The remainder of the circle, after the President departed, lingered for an hour talking with Mrs. Lincoln and her friends.

February 1863 Séance

It has been established that the date of the second séance which Lincoln attended was the evening of February 5, 1863. This meeting was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Cranston Laurie in Georgetown. Among the guests were Congressman Somes, S. P. Kase of



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

The medium Nettie Colburn married William Porter Maynard and resided at White Plains, New York, in 1891 at the time of the publication of her book, "Was Abraham Lincoln A Spiritualist?". This photograph is taken from a miniature made in 1863.

Philadelphia, John W. Forney, the Journalist, and Dr. Fayette Hall. Mrs. Lincoln had previously made the engagement, and the President on the spur of the moment after leaving a cabinet meeting, decided to accompany her.

If Lincoln attended a cabinet meeting on February 5, 1863, it was not mentioned by Gideon Welles who during this period kept a meticulous diary. The day by day events of the administration, compiled up to date, make no mention of a visit of the President to Georgetown on the above-mentioned date.

Nevertheless, upon Lincoln's arrival at the Lauries' he was amazed to learn that they were expecting him. Miss Colburn informed the President that her "little messenger or familiar spirit" had instructed her to expect "the long brave". This surprise conditioned the President's mind to receive the strange messages and to witness the startling events that were to transpire that evening.

The President and Mrs. Lincoln, with her unidentified lady friends, entered the parlor of the Laurie home. The first thing on the program was the singing of several old Scotch airs—among them, "Bonnie Doon". Those present thought the President looked tired and haggard; in fact, the "whole party seemed anxious and troubled".

Once the singing ended, Lincoln is reported to have said, "Well, Miss Nettie, do you think you have anything to say to me tonight?" The medium replied, "If I have not, there may be others who have." Lincoln then said, "Suppose we see what they will have to tell us." According to Miss Colburn, the spirit that controlled her that evening was "Old Dr. Bamford". This spirit talked with a "quaint dialect", and in stating his subject he used "old-fashioned methods of expression". He told Lincoln, through the mediumship of Miss Colburn, "that a precarious state of things existed at the front, where General Hooker had just taken command".

To be sure, the nation had been stunned by the bloody battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862, and Lincoln had written his now famous letter to Hooker on January 26, 1863, appointing him commander of the Army of the Potomac, but no spiritualist medium was needed to apprise Lincoln of the military situation. Certainly, the spirit was not stating facts when he (Dr. Bamford) claimed that "The army was totally demoralized, regiments stacking arms, refusing to obey orders or to do duty; threatening a general retreat; declaring their purpose to return to Washington".

The spirit of Dr. Bamford advised Lincoln to "go in person to the front; taking with you your wife and children; leaving behind your official dignity, and all manner of display. Resist the importunities of officials to accompany you, and take only such attendants as may be absolutely necessary; avoid the high grade officers, and seek the tents of the private soldiers. Inquire into their grievances, show yourself to be what you are, 'the father of your people'. Make them feel that you are not unmindful of the many trials which beset them in their march through the dismal swamps, whereby both their courage and numbers have been depleted".

Lincoln is reported to have replied, "It shall be done." Then a long conversation ensued between the President and the spirit regarding the present state of affairs and the war generally. The "old doctor" assured Lincoln that he would be renominated and reelected to the presidency.

While Lincoln is reported to have reacted favorably to the idea of an immediate visit with the "demoralized army", he did not visit the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac until April 5, two months after the date given for the séance.

An interesting incident is said to have occurred at this séance. During the course of the meeting, Mrs. Belle Miller gave an exhibition of her power as a "moving medium". She caused the piano (a three-cornered grand) to "waltz around the room". Mrs. Miller had exhibited this same power at the first White House séance in December 1862, but Lincoln was not present at the time. On this occasion Mrs. Miller was able to make the piano rise and fall at will—even when standing at arms' length from it.

Lincoln is reported to have placed his hands underneath the instrument, first on one side and then on the



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

A photograph of an unidentified painting depicting Lincoln in the role of a spiritualist medium.

other, to determine whether or not some mechanical aid was involved. From all appearances, the piano was under complete control of its agent. The President is reported to have said, with a quaint smile, "I think we can hold down that instrument." Lincoln, thereupon, climbed upon it with his legs dangling over the sides. He was shortly joined by Mr. Somes, S. P. Kase and a major of the Army of the Potomac. Even with this added weight, the piano continued to rise and fall.

According to the medium (Nettie Colburn), "Mr. Lincoln expressed himself perfectly satisfied that the motion was caused by some 'invisible power'". Mr. Somes remarked that evening, "When I have related to my acquaintances, that which I have experienced tonight, they will say, with a knowing look and wise demeanor, 'You were psychologized, and as a matter of fact (versus fancy) you did not see what you in reality did see.'" To this Lincoln replied that "You should bring such person here and when the piano seems to rise, have him slip his foot under the leg and be convinced by the weight of evidence".

Miss Colburn was of the opinion that the President was satisfied that the communications he received through her mediumship "were wholly independent of my volition and in every way superior to any manifestation that could have been given by me as a physical being". In reply to Mr. Somes who inquired of the President as to what he thought was the source of the manifestations which he had experienced and heard, Lincoln replied, "I am not prepared to affirm or deny the spiritual origin or the intelligence claimed by this girl. She certainly could have no knowledge of the fact communicated to me, nor of what was transpiring in my cabinet prior to my joining this circle, nor of affairs at the front (the

Army), nor regarding transpiring events which are known to me only, and which I have not imparted to any one and which have not been made public."

April 1863 Séance

A *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette* reporter named Melton who was a friend of the medium, Charles E. Shockle, has provided a whimsical account of a spiritualistic séance that took place in the White House in April of 1863:

"Washington, April 23, 1863

"A few evenings since, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, was induced to give a spiritual soiree in the crimson room at the White House, to test the wonderful alleged supernatural powers of Mr. Charles E. Shockle. It was my good fortune, as a friend of the medium, to be present, the party consisting of the President, Mrs. Lincoln, Mr. Welles, Mr. Stanton, Mr. L— of New York, and Mr. F— of Philadelphia. We took our seats in the circle about eight o'clock, but the President was called away shortly after the manifestations commenced, and the spirits, which had apparently assembled to convince him of their power, gave visible tokens of their displeasure at the President's absence, by pinching Mr. Stanton's ears and twitching Mr. Welles's beard. He soon returned, but it was some time before harmony was restored, for the mishaps to the secretaries caused such bursts of laughter that the influence was very unpropitious. For some half-hour the demonstrations were of a physical character—tables were moved, and the picture of Henry Clay, which hangs on the wall, was swayed more than a foot, and two candelabras, presented by the Dey of Algiers to President Adams, were twice raised nearly to the ceiling.

"It was nearly nine o'clock before Shockle was fully under spiritual influence, and so powerful were the subsequent manifestations, that twice during the evening restoratives were applied, for he was much weakened; and though I took no notes, I shall endeavor to give you as faithful an account as possible of what took place.

"Loud rappings, about nine o'clock, were heard directly beneath the President's feet, and Mr. Shockle stated that an Indian desired to communicate.

"'Well, sir,' said the President, 'I should be happy to hear what his Indian Majesty has to say. We have recently had a visitation from our red brethren, and it was the only delegation, black, white, or blue, which did not volunteer some advice about the conduct of the war.'

"The medium then called for pencil and paper, and they were laid upon the table in sight of all. A handkerchief was then taken from Mr. Stanton, and the materials were carefully concealed from sight. In less space of time than it has required for me to write this, knocks were heard and the paper was uncovered. To the surprise of all present it read as follows:

"'Haste makes waste, but delays cause vexations. Give vitality by energy. Use every means to subdue. Proclamations are useless; make a bold front and fight the enemy; leave traitors at home to the care of loyal men. Less note of preparation, less parade and policy talk, and more action. HENRY KNOX.'

"'That is not Indian talk, Mr. Shockle,' said the President. 'Who is Henry Knox?'

"I suggested to the medium to ask who General Knox was, and before the words were from my lips the medium spoke in a strange voice: 'The first Secretary of War.'

"'Oh! yes, General Knox,' said the President; who turning to the Secretary, said: 'Stanton, that message is for you; it is from your predecessor.'

"Mr. Stanton made no reply.

"'I should like to ask General Knox,' said the President, 'If it is within the scope of his ability, to tell us when this rebellion will be put down.'

"In the same manner as before, this message was received:

"'Washington, Lafayette, Franklin, Wilberforce, Napoleon, and myself have held frequent consultations on this point. There is something which our spiritual eyes cannot detect which appears well formed. Evil has come at times by removal of men from high positions, and there are those in retirement whose abilities should be made useful to hasten the end. Napoleon says, concentrate your forces upon one point; Lafayette thinks that

the rebellion will die of exhaustion; Franklin sees the end approaching, as the South must give up for want of mechanical ability to compete against Northern mechanics. Wilberforce sees hope only in a negro army.—Knox.'

"Well," exclaimed the President, 'opinions differ among the saints as well as among the sinners. They don't seem to understand running the machines among the celestials much better than we do. Their talk and advice sound very much like the talk of my cabinet—don't you think so, Mr. Welles?'

"Well, I don't know—I will think the matter over, and see what conclusion to arrive at.'

"Heavy raps were heard, and the alphabet was called for, when 'That's what's the matter,' was spelt out.

"There was a shout of laughter, and Mr. Welles stroked his beard.

"That means, Mr. Welles,' said the President, 'that you are apt to be long-winded, and think the nearest way home is the longest way round. Short cuts in war times. I wish the spirits could tell us how to catch the Alabama.'

"The lights, which had been partially lowered, almost instantaneously became so dim that I could not see sufficiently to distinguish the features of anyone in the room, and on the large mirror over the mantelpiece there appeared the most beautiful though supernatural picture ever beheld. It represented a sea view, the Alabama with all steam up flying from the pursuit of another large steamer. Two merchantmen in the distance were seen, partially destroyed by fire. The picture changed and the Alabama was seen at anchor under the shadow of an English fort—from which an English flag was waving. The Alabama was floating idly, not a soul on board, and no signs of life visible about her. The picture vanished, and in letters of purple appeared: 'The English people demand this of England's aristocracy.'

"So England is to seize the Alabama finally?" said the President. 'It may be possible; but, Mr. Welles, don't let one gunboat or monitor less be built.'

"The spirits called for the alphabet, and again 'That's what's the matter,' was spelt out.

"I see, I see,' said the President. 'Mother England

thinks that what's sauce for the goose may be sauce for the gander. It may be tit, tat, toe, hereafter. But it is not very complimentary to our navy, anyhow.'

"We've done our best, Mr. President,' said Mr. Welles. 'I'm maturing a plan which, when perfected, I think, if it works well, will be a perfect trap for the Alabama.'

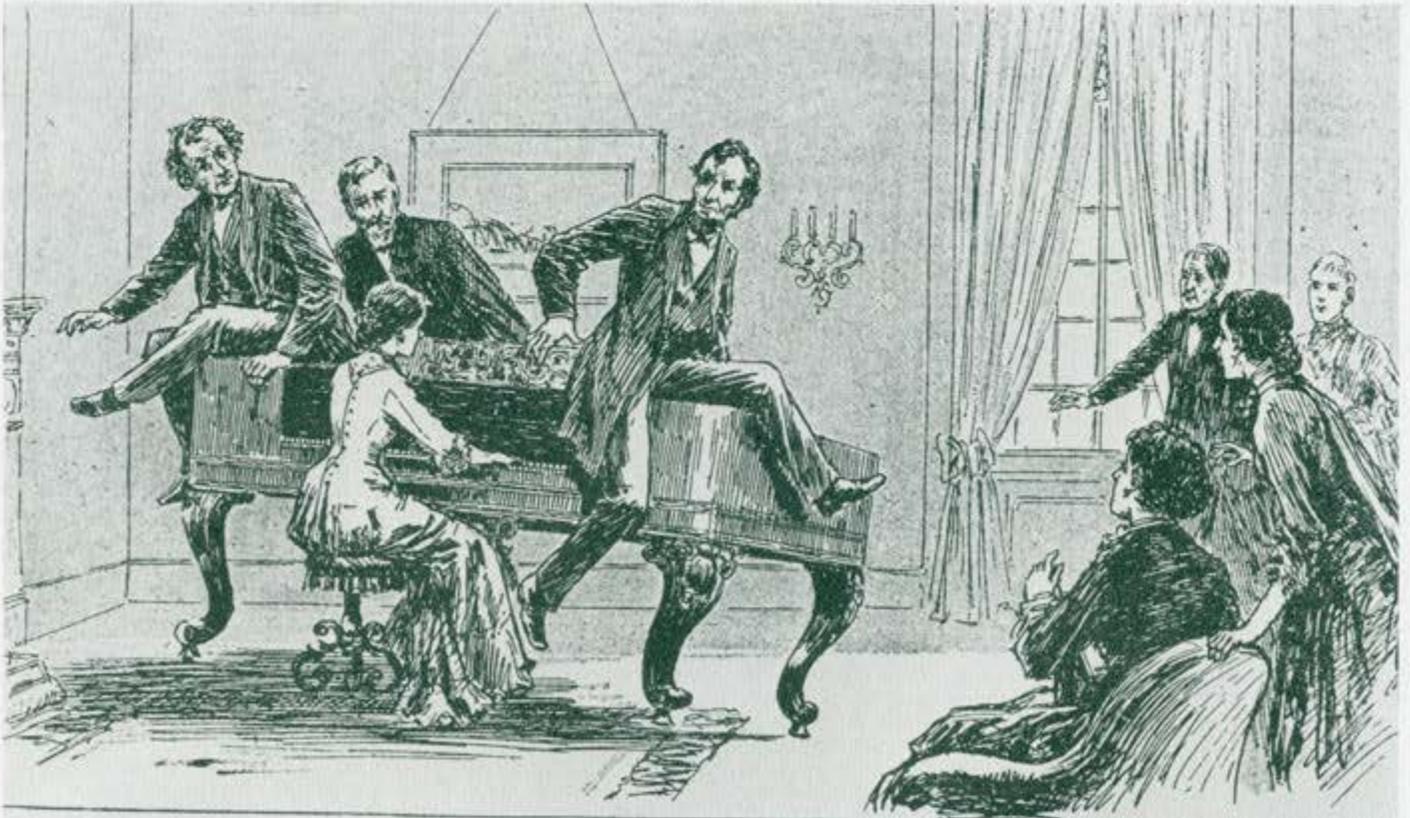
"Well, Mr. Shockle,' remarked the President, 'I have seen strange things and heard rather odd remarks; but nothing which convinces me, except the pictures, that there is any thing very heavenly about this. I should like, if possible, to hear what Judge Douglas says about this war.'

"I'll try to get his spirit,' said Mr. Shockle; 'but it sometimes happens, as it did to-night in the case of the Indian, that though first impressed by one spirit, I yield to another more powerful. If perfect silence is maintained, I will see if we cannot induce General Knox to send for Mr. Douglas.'

"Three raps were given, signifying assent to the proposition. Perfect silence was maintained, and after an interval of perhaps three minutes Mr. Shockle rose quickly from his chair and stood up behind it, resting his left arm on the back, his right thrust into his bosom. In a voice such as no one could mistake who had ever heard Mr. Douglas, he spoke. I shall not pretend to quote the language. It was eloquent and choice. He urged the President to throw aside all advisers who hesitate about the policy to be pursued, and to listen to the wishes of the people, who would sustain him at all points if his aim was, as he believed it was, to restore the Union. He said there were Burrs and Blennerhassetts living, but that they would wither before the popular approval which would follow one or two victories, such as he thought must take place ere long. The turning-point in this war will be the proper use of these victories. If wicked men in the first hours of success think it time to devote their attention to party, the war will be prolonged; but if victory is followed up by energetic action, all will be well.

"I believe that,' said the President, 'whether it comes from spirit or human.'

(To be continued in February 1963 issue.)



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

A drawing, taken from Dr. Fayette Hall's pamphlet, "The Copperhead or The Secret Political History of Our Civil War Unveiled," 1902, (M 1373), depicting Lincoln seated on the piano at the Laurie's home in Georgetown, while Mrs. Belle Miller exhibited her power as a physical medium.