



# Lincoln Lore

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## Congressman Abraham Lincoln Witnessed The Death-Stroke of John Quincy Adams February 21, 1848

As a member of Congress (30th Congress, 1st Session) Abraham Lincoln witnessed, on February 21, 1848, the death-stroke of the venerable John Quincy Adams in the House of Representatives. The session that day had been taken up with myriad legislation pertaining to public lands, patents, navigation, post roads, state boundaries and military affairs. However, it was not until Lucien B. Chase of Tennessee asked the consent of the House to offer a resolution extending the thanks of Congress to nine military officers of the Mexican War that violent partisan politics divided the Whigs and the Democrats.

Chase's resolution included the names of General D. E. Twiggs, Brevet Major General W. J. Worth, Brigadier General James Shields, Major General John A. Quitman, Brigadier General Franklin Pierce, Major General G. J. Pillow, Major General R. Patterson, Brigadier General Persifer F. Smith and Brigadier General George Cadwalader. The fifth paragraph of the resolution follows: "That these victories (enumerated in the first four paragraphs), following each other in quick succession, and wrung from the enemy under all circumstances, create a doubt which to admire the most, the skill and gallantry of the commanders or the indomitable courage of the soldiers, which prompted the band of heroes to press forward into the heart of the enemy's country, overcoming every obstacle, scattering the armies of Mexico like chaff before the wind, until the most signal triumphs are crowned by the possession of the far-famed 'Halls of the Montezumas'".

The resolution further provided that gold medals be struck with devices emblematical of the series of brilliant victories achieved, and that one be presented to each of the generals named in the resolution. Furthermore the President of the United States would be requested to communicate these resolutions to the generals who would in turn issue orders that they be read before the several corps of the army.

When Mr. Chase moved a suspension of the rules to allow him to introduce the resolutions, there were 110 yeas and 54 nays. Both Adams and Lincoln voted nay. To the Whigs of the House these resolutions smacked of partisan politics for the elevation and glorification of certain Democratic heroes. Then, too, the National Whig Party had never fully approved of the Mexican conflict. "Mr. Polk's War" was the focal point of attack by those who were opposed to territorial expansion, who were antagonistic to slavery and who harbored a resentment over the President's opposition to internal improvements, as well as by those who favored a high protective tariff.

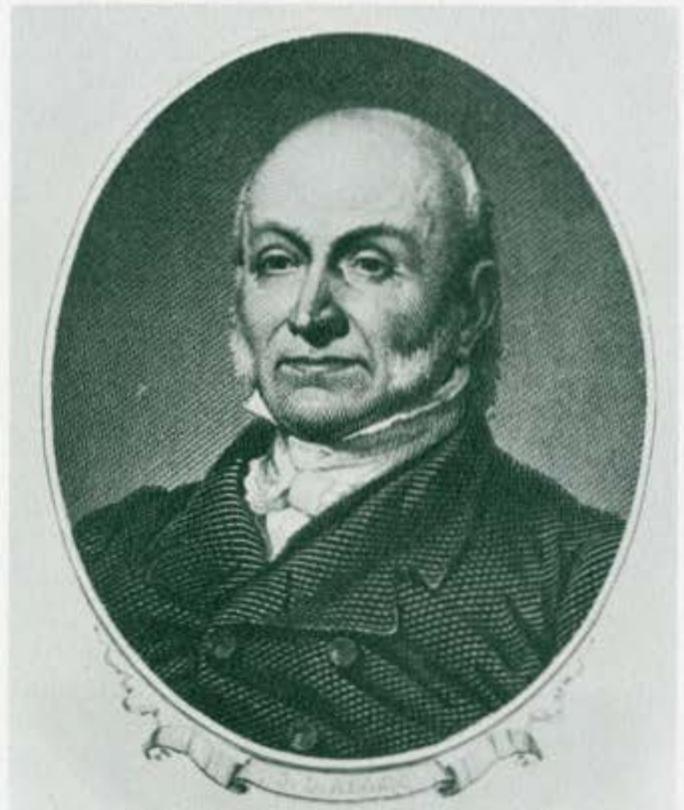
As two-thirds of the members voted in the affirmative, the rules were suspended. Thereupon the resolutions were received and read for the first time. There next ensued considerable bickering and the usual parliamentary tactics either to pass or to defeat the bill.

When the query, "Shall the main question be now put?" was brought to a vote, there were 98 yeas and 86 nays. Again Adams and Lincoln voted nay. William H. Seward in his biography, "The Life and Public Service of John Quincy Adams", stated that when Adams voted (he was the first to answer the call of his name) nay, he re-

plied in an "uncommonly emphatic tone of voice". It was the last vote he ever cast.

Then when certain parliamentary procedures were being carried out by the Speaker and the Clerk, several gentlemen sprang from their seats to assist the member from Massachusetts. Adams appeared to be in the agonies of death and was sinking from his seat to the floor. He was immediately borne to the rotunda of the Capitol building for the benefit of purer air, and afterwards to the Speaker's room. During this distressing scene, Mr. Adams was assiduously attended by many members of the House. Once the confusion subsided, the House hastily adjourned.

The news of Adams' stroke was quickly sent to the members of the Senate, then in session. Mr. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, with great feeling said: "I am called



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation Collection

John Quincy Adams

July 11, 1767 - Feb. 23, 1848

John Quincy Adams' four year term as the Sixth President of the United States came to an end in March, 1829. In 1831 he was sent to Congress as a representative from Massachusetts and served eight terms or a period of seventeen years lacking ten days. Perhaps his greatest contributions to the country were made while he served as Secretary of State under James Monroe.

on to make a painful announcement to the Senate. I have just been informed that the House of Representatives has this instant adjourned under the most afflictive circumstances. A calamitous visitation has fallen on one of its oldest and most valuable members — one who has been President of the United States, and whose character has inspired the highest respect and esteem. Mr. Adams has just sunk down in his chair, and has been carried into an adjoining room, and may at this moment be passing from the earth, under the roof that covers us, and almost in our presence. In these circumstances the whole Senate will feel alike, and feel wholly unable to attend to any business. I therefore move the immediate adjournment of the Senate." The Senate adjourned.

On Tuesday, February 22, 1848, the House convened at twelve o'clock, the usual hour. The proceedings were marked with deep solemnity and sadness. The Reverend Henry Slicer, the Congressional Chaplain, "performed the duties of his office with unusual impressiveness and tenderly and delicately attended to the venerable sage who lay in an adjoining room, unconscious of all earthly concern, on the verge of eternity".

This was Washington's birthday. Before Adams had suffered his stroke, Congress had made elaborate plans for a celebration of the First President's birthday. Lincoln of the House, and Stephen A. Douglas of the Senate were named the Illinois members of a board of managers for the staging of a "National Birth-night Ball". This was re-scheduled for March 1st because of the Sixth President's illness.

During the course of the House session on February 22nd the Speaker "deemed it proper to state to the House from the chair that his venerable colleague, John Quincy Adams, was still in a state of unconsciousness in the Speaker's room, and, in the opinion of his medical advisers, was rapidly sinking". With a motion for adjournment Mr. Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio suggested that the Journal of February 21st state the cause of its early adjournment. The Speaker was in agreement and directed the Clerk to record the melancholy circumstances.

As Mr. Adams still lay within the walls of the Capitol in a perilous condition, the Senate adjourned shortly after it convened on February 22nd, but not before Mr. John Davis of Massachusetts made a few felicitous remarks concerning the eminently distinguished Mr. Adams whom he considered to be one of the illustrious men of the country.

On Wednesday, February 23rd, after an appropriate prayer by Chaplain Slicer, and the reading of the Journal for February 22nd, the House adjourned on the motion of Mr. Daniel M. Barringer of North Carolina (during Lincoln's term in Congress he shared a desk with Barringer). The Senate, not being so deeply affected by Mr. Adams' illness, conducted a considerable amount of business.

Adams died at 7:30 P.M. on Wednesday, February 23rd, in the Speaker's room, and on the following day the House conducted a memorial service in his honor. The Speaker, Hon. Robert C. Winthrop, addressed the House and was followed by Mr. Charles Hudson of Massachusetts, Mr. Isaac E. Holmes of South Carolina, Mr. James McDowell of Virginia, Mr. William A. Newell of New Jersey, Mr. Frederick A. Talmadge of New York and Mr. Samuel F. Vinton of Ohio. Mr. Hudson, who followed the Speaker in his eulogy of Adams, moved the following resolutions:

"Resolved, That, this House has heard with the deepest sensibility of the death in this Capitol of John Quincy Adams, a member of the House from the State of Massachusetts.

"Resolved, That, as a testimony of respect for the memory of this distinguished statesman, the officers and members of the House will wear the usual badge of mourning, and attend the funeral in this Hall on Saturday next, at twelve o'clock.

"Resolved, That a committee be appointed to superintend the funeral solemnities.

"Resolved, That the proceedings of this House in relation to the death of John Quincy Adams be communicated to the family of the deceased by the Clerk.

"Resolved, That this House, as a further mark of respect for the memory of the deceased, do adjourn to Saturday next, the day appointed for the funeral." Mr. Newell made the following additional resolution:



Photograph made from cut in Albert Shaw's book, "Abraham Lincoln — His Path to the Presidency," Vol. 1, page 143.

This early cut depicts John Quincy Adams at the moment he was stricken with paralysis in the House of Representatives on February 21, 1848. Most accounts of his death indicate that he never regained consciousness. However, Adams' last words are said to have been, "This is the last of earth: I am content."

"Resolved, That the seat in this Hall just vacated by the death of the late John Quincy Adams, be unoccupied for thirty days, and that it, together with the Hall, remain clothed with the symbol of mourning during that time."

Next, Mr. Talmadge made the following resolution:

"Resolved, That the Speaker appoint one member of this House from each State and Territory as a committee to escort the remains of our venerable friend, the honorable John Quincy Adams, to the place designated by his friends for his interment."

All of the above resolutions were unanimously agreed to. The Speaker appointed the following, chosen without regard to political affiliation, to constitute a committee of thirty:

- |                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mr. Talmadge, of N. Y.       | Mr. Gentry, of Tenn.       |
| Mr. Wilson, of N. H.         | Mr. Wentworth, of Ill.     |
| Mr. Ashmun, of Mass.         | Mr. R. W. Johnson, of Ark. |
| Mr. J. A. Rockwell, of Conn. | Mr. Cabell, of Florida     |
| Mr. McIlvaine, of Penn.      | Mr. W. Thompson, of Iowa   |
| Mr. Ligon, of Md.            | Mr. Hammons, of Me.        |
| Mr. Barringer, of N. C.      | Mr. Collamer, of Vt.       |
| Mr. Lumpkin, of Ga.          | Mr. Thurston, of R. I.     |
| Mr. A. G. Brown, of Miss.    | Mr. Newell, of N. J.       |
| Mr. Schenk, of Ohio          | Mr. J. W. Houston, of Del. |
| Mr. Meade, of Va.            | Mr. Holmes, of S. C.       |
| Mr. Hilliard, of Ala.        | Mr. Phelps, of Mo.         |
| Mr. Morse, of La.            | Mr. C. E. Stuart, of Mich. |
| Mr. French, of Ky.           | Mr. Kaufman, of Texas      |
| Mr. C. B. Smith, of Ind.     | Mr. Tweedy, of W. T.       |

Lincoln was appointed to a House committee to superintend the funeral solemnities. This information is gleaned from a letter dated June 1, 1848 which Lincoln wrote to the Reverend Henry Slicer, a Methodist minister and the Chaplain of the Senate. He stated that "the House ordered the raising of two committees, one, of Arrangements, number indefinite, the other, thirty in number, to attend the remains of Mr. Adams to Massachusetts." Lincoln was appointed to the Arrangements Committee. However, by some mistake, "a committee of thirty was appointed by the Speaker, as a Committee of Arrangements." At the first meeting the mistake was discovered and the members being too numerous for convenience, the work was delegated to a subcommittee. Lincoln was not a member of the subcommittee.

On Thursday, February 24th, the Senate devoted a considerable amount of time to business, but concluded the session with eulogies on Adams by Mr. John Davis of Massachusetts, and Mr. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Mr. Davis introduced three resolutions that were unanimously adopted:

"Resolved, That the Senate has received with deep sensibility the message from the House of Representatives announcing the death of the Honorable John Quincy Adams, a representative from the State of Massachusetts.

"Resolved, That in token of respect for the memory of the deceased, the Senate will attend his funeral at the hour appointed by the House of Representatives, and will wear the usual badge of mourning for thirty days.

"Resolved, That, as a further mark of respect for the memory of the deceased, the Senate do now adjourn until Saturday next, to the time appointed for the funeral."

The Subcommittee of Arrangements made elaborate preparations for the funeral which was held on Saturday, February 26, 1848. A reporter for the *National Intelligencer* (*The Congressional Globe*, March 1, 1848, page 389) provided the following descriptive scene:

"At an early hour men in uniform might be seen hastening to their respective places of parade, while numerous groups of citizens and strangers were flocking from all directions toward the Capitol.

"By a judicious arrangement, the doors of that vast building were thrown open to the gathering multitudes, while those of the Hall of the House of Representatives, where the funeral ceremonies were to take place, were closed to all but the members and officers of the House. The ladies' gallery was rapidly filled up, all gentlemen without distinction being peremptorily excluded. A certain portion of the semicircular gallery (usually occupied throughout by gentlemen only) was partitioned off for the accommodation of a very large choir of singers, selected from those of the several churches of the city.

"The Hall was shrouded in black, and presented a very solemn appearance. This part of the arrangements was executed with great taste and judgment by the officers of the House, under the suggestion and kind supervision of a distinguished lady. The figure of History, especially, (whose graceful form surmounts the clock, holding in her hands a tablet and a pen,) was robed with consummate taste and judgment, the black drapery covering her entire person, with the exception of the arm holding the recorded pen, whose alabaster whiteness, in strong contrast with the surrounding stole, had a fine effect; heightened as it was by the attitude of the head, which, turning towards one side, happened to have its countenance in the very direction where stood the vacant seat of Mr. Adams, as if in the act of recording the solemn circumstances of his death. That seat, by order of the House, was draped in the deepest mourning, and, by the fact of its vacancy, recalled every beholder to the blow which had there fallen, like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky. The portraits of Washington and of Lafayette, on either hand of the chair, were covered over with thin crape, casting a melancholy dimness over the features, without entirely concealing them, the frames being covered with a deeper black. The effect of this, too, was very fine, most truly representing what would have been the feeling of both those distinguished men, if alive to witness

Honourable Willie B. Mangum

and

Richard W. Thompson.

Washington 8 April 1842

Gentlemen

I have received with deep sensibility your kind invitation in behalf of the members of both houses of Congress, friends of Mr. Clay, who propose to give him a dinner in this city on Saturday next, in testimony of their high respect for his patriotism, his public and private virtues, to participate with them upon this interesting occasion.

Sympathizing cordially with all the friends of Mr. Clay in both houses of Congress, in the respect and regard for his public services, and personal virtues, I should with much pleasure have associated with them, in this honorary testimonial of these gentlemen, but for the advanced age and infirm health, which have for years interdicted my attendance at all public entertainments — a necessity, from which, if I could be permitted to indulge myself with any exception, I should eagerly availed myself of this occasion to make it.

I am with perfect,

your friend and fellow-citizen

John Quincy Adams

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation Collection  
This original letter reveals that John Quincy Adams was in failing health in 1842. He suffered his first stroke on November 19, 1846 while walking on the streets of Boston. After a period of four months he recovered sufficiently to take his seat in the House on February 16, 1847.

Military escort of Cavalry and Infantry, of Washington and Alexandria.

Band.

The Chaplains of both Houses of Congress.

Physicians who attended the deceased.

Committee of Arrangements.

Pall-Bearers:

Hon. J. J. McKay, N. C.	} The Corps	Hon. Truman Smith, Con.
Hon. Linn Boyd, Ken.		Hon. J. R. Ingersoll, Penn.
Hon. J. C. Calhoun, S. C.		Hon. T. H. Benton, Mo.
Chief Justice R. B. Taney,		Hon. Justice J. McLean,
General George Gibson,		Com. Charles Morris,
Hon. W. W. Seaton,		Hon. Thos. H. Crawford.

Mr. J. F. Harvey, Conductor of the Car.

The family and friends of the deceased.

The Senators and Representatives from the State of Massachusetts, as mourners.

The Sergeant-at-Arms of the House.

The House of Representatives of the United States, preceded by their Speaker and Clerk.

The other officers of the House of Representatives.

The Sergeant-at-Arms of the Senate.

The Senate, preceded by their President and Secretary.

The other officers of the Senate.

The President of the United States.

The Heads of Departments.

The Judges of the Supreme Court of the United States, and its officers.

The Judges of the Circuit and District Courts of the District of Columbia, and its officers.

The Diplomatic Corps.

The Comptrollers, Auditors, and other Heads of Bureaus of the several Departments of the Government, with their officers.

Officers of the Army and Navy at the seat of Government.

Members of Maryland Legislature.

The Corporations of Washington and Alexandria.

The Columbia Typographical Society.

Officers and students of Georgetown College.

Officers and students of Columbia College.

Literary Institutions.

Fire Companies of the District.

Odd Fellows.

Citizens and Strangers.

From *The Congressional Globe*, March 1, 1848

Order of the Adams funeral procession enroute to the Congressional Burying Ground, Washington, D. C.

the solemn scene; for Washington gave the deceased his first commission, and Lafayette embraced him in his arms when taking his last adieu of America.

"The members gradually arrived and filled up their seats in the Hall, a portion, however, being reserved for the Senate.

"The space in the central area, in front of the Clerk's table was furnished with seats for the Judges, the Cabinet, the Diplomatic Corps, and the Committee of Arrangements, consisting of one member from each State of the Union; while, in its centre, stood a table, covered with a black velvet pall, to support the corpse.

"Officers of the Army and Navy, as they entered the Hall, had seats assigned them next in the rear of the Foreign Ministers. By an unfortunate omission, no seats were reserved for the Clergy; but as a number of them arrived, not only from the city, but from Baltimore, Alexandria, and several from Massachusetts, they were conducted by the officers of the House to favorable positions.

"The members of the Diplomatic Body arrived severally, from time to time, and not in a body: some of them

manifested their respect for the solemn occasion, and for the presence of the assembled authorities of the nation, by appearing in their full official dresses, with their respective orders and decorations, while others seem to have deemed it more appropriate to appear in simple black. The contrast could not but strike the eye."

On the day of the Adams funeral the House and Senate met in joint session. The day was set apart "for rendering to the remains of the deceased patriot and statesman, the last human tribute." *The Congressional Globe*, March 1, 1848, page 389, provides a vivid word description of the proceedings:

"The Speaker having taken the chair, the Journal of Thursday was read. Soon after, the Senate entered, preceded by their presiding officer. He took his seat on the left of the Speaker. As the Senators passed up the centre aisle and took their seats, the Speaker and members of the House rose, and continued standing till they had taken the seats assigned them. Soon after, the President of the United States entered the Hall, and was received by all in like manner, while he took his seat on the right of the Speaker. The members of the Cabinet occupied seats in front of the Senators, and opposite to the Foreign Ministers. The Judges of the Supreme Court, preceded by their officers, passed up to seats on the right of the Clerk's desk. The relatives of the deceased were next conducted to a position reserved for them on the extreme left. Next entered the members of the Legislature of Maryland, preceded by the officers and chaplain of that body — the Legislature, sitting at Annapolis, having passed resolutions to attend the funeral. Next entered the corporate authorities of Washington, headed by their respective officers, who were conducted to places by the officers of the House. At length came the body, escorted by the Committee of Arrangements, and followed by the delegation of Massachusetts as mourners. The Speaker, the President of the Senate, the officers of both Houses, the members of the Committee of Arrangements, the pall bearers, and attendant physicians wore white scarfs. The whole assemblage being thus at length completed, the deep silence of expectation pervaded the Hall. Not a rude sound, and scarce a sound of any kind, was to be heard among the waiting thousands who crowded the galleries and lobbies in every spot where a human being could find room to stand.

"The Chaplain of the House, the Rev. Mr. Gurley, then rose and read an appropriate portion of Holy Writ, and addressed the throne of Heavenly Grace in a meek and devout prayer.

"He then read a hymn which had been selected for the occasion, and which was sung with admirable skill and impressive effect by the choir. As the wailing notes swelled and sank away in melancholy cadence, their placid, stilling, and solemnizing effect was obvious to the eye, in the countenances of the listening auditory, and prepared them for the address which followed, from these words in Job, 'And thine age shall be clearer than the noonday; thou shalt shine forth, thou shalt be as the morning; and thou shalt be secure, because there is hope.' — (Chapter xi. 17.)

"The address was followed by a closing hymn and the Apostolic benediction, when the funeral procession began to be formed, the corpse was borne out of the Hall, the several public bodies fell into their place, passing in succession along the board aisle and through the north door into the Rotundo, and so out on the eastern portico, and down the great flight of steps to the open area in front, where carriages were in waiting to receive them.

"The procession then moved in the following order (see illustrative cut) to the Congressional Burying Ground, where the body was deposited, but in a few days is to be removed to Quincy."

While the whole proceedings were conducted with decorum and dignity, there was one unfortunate omission. No seats were reserved in the House Chamber for members of the Clergy, a number of whom had come from Baltimore, Alexandria and the State of Massachusetts. Although favorable seats were provided for them by officers of the House, the awkward situation did not go unnoticed.

On May 30th Lincoln received a letter from the Chaplain of the Senate taking him to task for his exclusion from a part in the services.

(To be continued in the April, 1963, issue)