



Lincoln Lore

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THE ANTIETAM AFFAIR

Abraham Lincoln's alleged Antietam battlefield statement, "Now, Marshal, sing us 'Picayune Butler' or something else that's funny," cost the administration tens of thousands of votes in the 1864 Presidential campaign. The so-called battlefield episode depicted Lincoln "as the prime mover in a scene of fiendish levity more atrocious than the world had ever witnessed since human nature was shamed and degraded by the capers of Nero and Commodus."

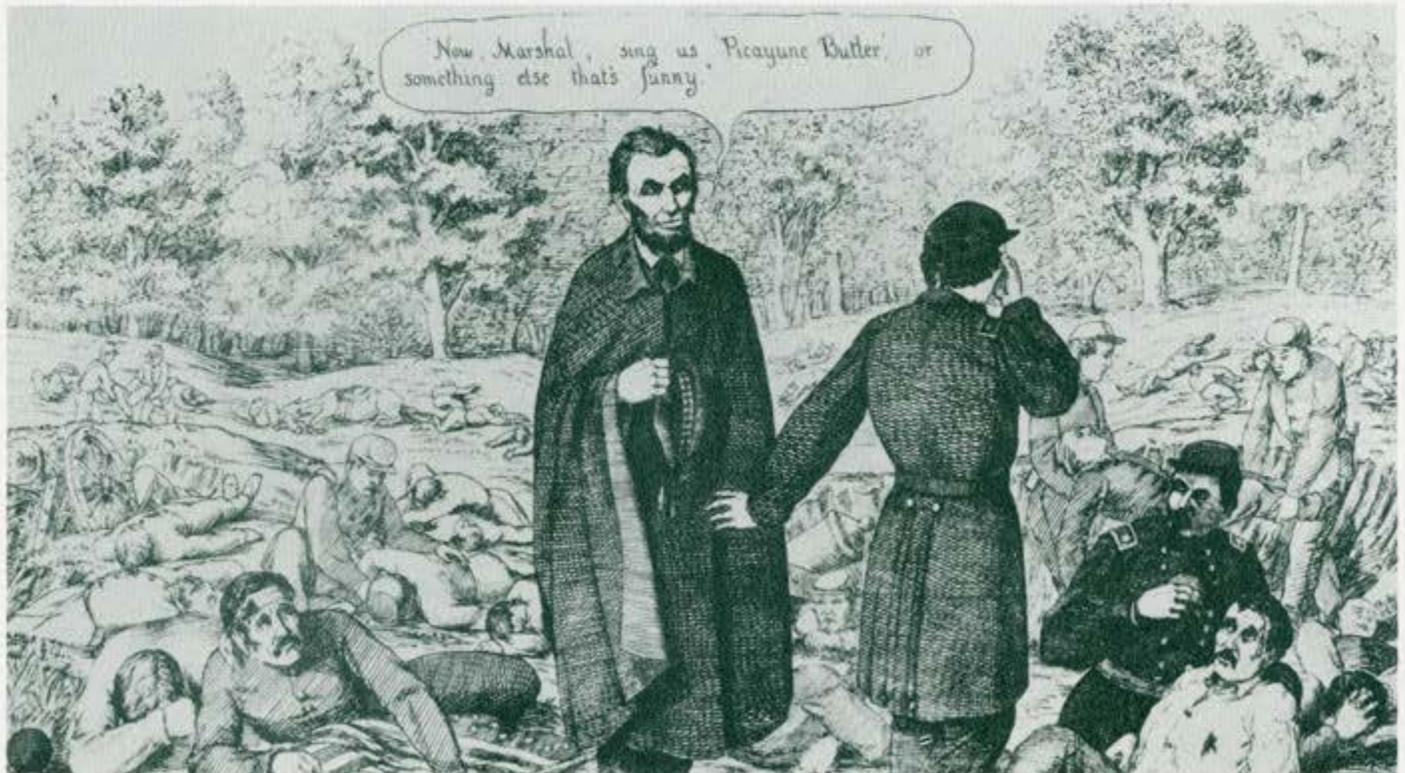
It was the New York *World* of September 9, 1864, that carried the most virulent article on the false episode. However, the song-singing was a topic for several Copperhead newspapers "almost daily for . . . three months." While the story had appeared in an abbreviated form as early as 1862, it was not until after Lincoln's nomination as the Union candidate that it was given much attention. True to form, political stump-speakers went about "stuffing the ears of men with these false reports" during the election year of 1864. Meanwhile, abusive letters by the hundreds were received by the innocent parties. Even cartoonists derived great glee by depicting Lincoln in the act of "fiendish levity." At the same time, the Democratic candidate, McClellan, was pictured as pronouncing his displeasure with such proceedings as song-singing.

Lincoln visited the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac on October 3, 1862. Early that morning he reviewed General Ambrose E. Burnside's corps and cavalry near the Antietam battleground. At noon President Lincoln and General George B. McClellan rode in ambulances three miles to Bakerville, Maryland, for the review of the cavalry and troops of General Fitz John Porter's and General William B. Franklin's corps. It was during this three-mile ride that Marshal Ward H. Lamon sang several comic ballads which later resulted in great public criticism of the President.

On September 10, 1864 Lamon received the following letter from A. J. Perkins:

"Dear Sir,—Enclosed is an extract from the New York *World* of Sept. 9, 1864:—

One of Mr. Lincoln's Jokes.—The second verse of our campaign song published on this page was probably suggested by an incident which occurred on the battle-field of Antietam a few days after the fight. While the President was driving over the field in an ambulance, accompanied by Marshal Lamon, General McClellan, and another officer, heavy details of men were engaged in the task of burying the dead. The ambulance had just reached the neighborhood of



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

The title of this cartoon indicates that the artist was thinking of the Antietam episode in connection with the forthcoming Presidential election of 1864.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

WARD HILL LAMON

Copy of an original photograph, size 14 x 16 inches, made in Washington about 1836.

Lamon was born in Winchester, Va., January 6, 1828, and spent his boyhood in Bunker Hill, West Virginia. He came to Danville, Illinois in 1847 to study medicine under an uncle, Dr. Theodore Lemon. Changing his plans, he studied law in the office of Judge Oliver L. Davis and spent one winter in a law school in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1852 he became the local law partner of Abraham Lincoln and the two maintained offices in the Barnum building, on the present site of the First National Bank Building. In 1856 he was elected prosecutor for the Old Eighth Circuit, when the partnership was dissolved and he removed to Bloomington, the home of David Davis, the Circuit Judge. In 1860 he was re-elected, but resigned in February, 1861, when the Circuit was reduced by the separation of the five southern counties. Joseph Cannon was chosen prosecutor of the southern district, at a special election. Lamon was active in the campaign for nomination of his friend for the presidency. He spent the night preceding Lincoln's nomination in forging admission tickets to the Wigwam, and the hall was filled with Lincoln partisans while the Seward supporters were parading. Their din helped along the Lincoln stampede. Lamon accompanied Lincoln to Washington, and as Marshal of the District of Columbia, acted as his personal bodyguard. It is generally believed that had he not been absent in Richmond, Virginia, on a secret mission for the President, Booth would not have had opportunity for the assassination. Lamon was Marshal of the Day at Gettysburg, and after leading the parade, introduced his friend when he delivered his famous address. After the death of Lincoln, Johnson offered Lamon the position of post-master-general in his cabinet, which offer was declined. Lamon died in Martinsburg, West Virginia, May 7, 1893, and is buried in the village cemetery. Nearby is the grave of General Henry Lee, of Revolutionary War fame.

A biographical sketch entitled "Lincoln and Lamon: Partners and Friends" by Clint Clay Tilton appeared in the Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society for 1931.

the old stone bridge, where the dead were piled highest, when Mr. Lincoln, suddenly slapping Marshal Lamon on the knee, exclaimed: 'Come, Lamon, give us that song about Picayune Butler; McClellan has never heard it.' 'Not now, if you please,' said General McClellan, with a shudder; 'I would prefer to hear it some other place and time'

This story has been repeated in the New York 'World' almost daily for the last three months. Until now it would have been useless to demand its authority. By this article it limits the inquiry to three persons as its authority,—Marshal Lamon, another officer, and General McClellan. That it is a damaging story, if believed, cannot be disputed. That it is believed by some, or that they pretend to believe it, is evident by the accompanying verse from the doggerel, in which allusion is made to it:—

"Abe may crack his jolly jokes
O'r bloody fields of stricken battle,
While yet the ebbing life-tide smokes
From men that die like butchered cattle;
He, ere yet the guns grow cold,
To pimps and pets may crack his stories,' etc.

I wish to ask you, sir, in behalf of others as well as myself, whether any such occurrence took place; or if it did not take place, please to state who that 'other officer' was, if there was any such, in the ambulance in which the President was 'driving over the field (of Antietam) whilst details of men were engaged in the task of burying the dead.' You will confer a great favor by an immediate reply.

Most respectfully your obedient servant,

A. J. Perkins."



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Lincoln in McClellan's tent at Antietam, Maryland. Photograph by Alexander Gardner, October 3, 1862. In 1864 McClellan was nominated as the Democratic candidate for the Presidency. (Meserve No. 43)

This letter caused Lamon a great deal of anxiety, and along with his own draft of a suitable reply he submitted it to the President. Lamon described the draft which he prepared as follows: "The brutal directness and falsity of the 'World's' charge, and the still more brutal and insulting character of the doggerel with which it was garnished, impelled me to season my reply to Mr. Perkins's letter with a large infusion of 'vinegar and gall'"

After Lincoln carefully read both letters, he advised Lamon not to publish his reply because "it is too belligerent in tone for so grave a matter." Lincoln pointed out to Lamon that "there is a heap of 'cussedness' mixed up with your usual amiability and you are at times too fond of a fight." Lincoln advised Lamon to "simply state the facts as they were." Whereupon Lincoln decided that he himself would answer the charge "without the pepper and salt," and taking up a pen he wrote the following:

"The President has known me intimately for nearly twenty years, and has often heard me sing little ditties. The battle of Antietam was fought on the 17th day of September, 1862. On the first day of October, just two weeks after the battle, the President, with some others including myself, started from Washington to visit the Army, reaching Harper's Ferry at noon of that day. In a short while General McClellan came from his headquarters near the battle-ground, joined the President, and with him reviewed the troops at Bolivar Heights that afternoon, and at night returned to his headquarters, leaving the President at Harper's Ferry. On the morning of the second the President, with General Sumner, reviewed the troops respectively at Loudon Heights and Maryland Heights, and at about noon started to General McClellan's headquarters, reaching there only in time to see very little before night. On the morning of the third all started on a review of the third corps and the cavalry, in the vicinity of the Antietam battleground. After getting through with General Burnside's corps, at the suggestion of General McClellan he and the President left their

ONE OF MR. LINCOLN'S JOKES.

The second verse of our campaign song published on this page was probably suggested by an incident which occurred on the battle-field of Antietam a few days after the fight. While the President was driving over the field in an ambulance, accompanied by Marshal LAMON, General McCLELLAN, and another officer, heavy details of men were engaged in the task of burying the dead. The ambulance had just reached the neighborhood of the old stone bridge, where the dead were piled highest, when Mr. LINCOLN, suddenly slapping Marshal LAMON upon the knee, exclaimed: "Come, LAMON! give us that song about 'Picayune Butler.' McCLELLAN has never heard it." "Not now, if you please, Marshal," said General McCLELLAN with a shudder. "I would prefer to hear it some other place and time."

Courtesy of The New York Historical Society, New York City.

A newspaper clipping taken from *The World*, New York, Friday, September 9, 1964 concerning the Antietam episode.

horses to be led, and went into an ambulance or ambulances to go to General Fitz John Porter's corps, which was two or three miles distant. I am not sure whether the President and General McClellan were in the same ambulance, or in different ones; but myself and some others were in the same with the President. On the way, and on no part of the battle-ground, and on what suggestions I do not remember, the President asked me to sing the little sad song that follows, which he had often heard me sing, and had always seemed



From the Ostendorf Collection

A photograph of President Lincoln visiting General McClellan's headquarters (Army of the Potomac) on October 3, 1862. This photograph was taken by Alexander Gardner on a stereo camera the same day as the "song-singing." The men shown in the extreme left of the photograph are Buck Juit, Ward Hill Lamon and Ozias M. Hatch. Why did Lamon sit while all the other men, including the President, stood? He might have been seated by the photographer because of his great size, being almost as tall as Lincoln, thus not conflicting with the President and giving the photograph better composition. (Meserve No. 47—Ostendorf 0-65).

to like very much. I sang it. After it was over, some one of the party (I do not think it was the President) asked me to sing something else; and I sang two or three little comic things, of which 'Picayune Butler' was one. Porter's corps was reached and reviewed; then the battleground was passed over, and the most noted parts examined; then, in succession, the cavalry and Franklin's corps were reviewed, and the President and party returned to General McClellan's headquarters at the end of a very hard, hot, and dusty day's work. Next day, the 4th, the President and General McClellan visited such of the wounded as still remained in the vicinity, including the now lamented General Richardson; then proceeded to and examined the South-Mountain battle-ground, at which point they parted,—General McClellan returning to his camp, and the President returning to Washington, seeing, on the way, General Hartsoff, who lay wounded at Frederick Town.

"This is the whole story of the singing and its surroundings. Neither General McClellan nor any one else made any objections to the singing; the place was not on the battlefield; the time was sixteen days after the battle; no dead body was seen during the whole time the President was absent from Washintgon, nor even a grave that had not been rained on since it was made."

While writing this statement Lincoln fully intended for Lamon to copy it in his own hand and to send it to Perkins as his "refutation of the slander." The Lincoln statement was written about September 12, 1864, less than two years after the alleged episode had occurred.

Lincoln had a unique way of handling slanderous statements. He ignored them. When someone called these alleged reports to Lincoln's attention with the explanation that he was being discredited in the campaign, he said, "There has already been too much said about this falsehood. Let the thing alone. If I have not established character enough to give the lie to this charge, I can only say that I am mistaken in my own estimate of myself. In politics, every man must skin his own skunk. These fellows are welcome to the hide of this one. Its body has already given forth its unsavory odor."

Upon second thought Lincoln said to Lamon, "You know, Hill, that this is the truth and the whole truth about that affair; but I dislike to appear as an apologist for an act of my own which I know was right. Keep this paper, and we will see about it." Lamon kept the paper and used it in private correspondence, but it was not published until 1895 in his "Recollections of Abraham Lincoln 1847-1865" which was edited by Dorothy Lamon (Teillard) and published by A. C. McClurg. A second edition was published by the editor in 1911. The original autograph document (except for Lamon's signature) is the property of the Henry E. Huntington Library of San Marino, California.

In the Lamon book the author analyzed Lincoln's simple explanation: "Mr. Lincoln did not ask me to sing 'Picayune Butler'. No song was sung on the battle-field. The singing occurred on the way from Burnside's corps to Fitz John Porter's corps, some distance from the battle-ground, and sixteen days after the battle. Moreover, Mr. Lincoln had said to me, 'Lamon, sing one of your little sad songs,' . . . I knew well what Mr. Lincoln meant by 'the little sad songs.' The sentiment that prompted him to call for such a song had its history, and one of deep and touching interest to me. One 'little sad song'—a simple ballad entitled 'Twenty Years Ago'—was above all others his favorite."

Lamon continued: "He had no special fondness for operatic music; he loved simple ballads and ditties, such as the common people sing, whether of the comic or pathetic kind; but no one in the list touched his great heart as did the song of 'Twenty Years Ago.' Many a time, in the old days of our familiar friendship on the Illinois circuit, and often at the White House when he and I were alone, have I seen him in tears while I was rendering, in my poor way, that homely melody. The late Judge David Davis, the Hon. Leonard Swett, and Judge Corydon Beckwith were equally partial to the same ballad. Often have I seen those great men overcome by the peculiar

charm they seemed to find in the sentiment and melody of that simple song. The following verses seemed to affect Mr. Lincoln more deeply than any of the others:

'I've wandered to the village, Tom; I've sat beneath the tree

Upon the schoolhouse play-ground, that sheltered you and me:

But none were left to greet me, Tom, and few were left to know

Who played with us upon the green, some twenty years ago.

'Near by the spring, upon the elm you know I cut your name,—

Your sweetheart's just beneath it, Tom; and you did mine the same.

Some heartless wretch has peeled the bark,—'twas dying sure but slow,

Just as she died whose name you cut, some twenty years ago.

'My lids have long been dry, Tom, but tears came to my eyes;

I thought of her I loved so well, those early broken ties:

I visited the old churchyard, and took some flowers to strew

Upon the graves of those we loved, some twenty years ago.'"

This was the song that Lincoln requested and the one that Lamon sang for him in the vicinity of the Antietam battlefield. At the time Lincoln was weary and sad, and the singer knew that the song would deepen his depression. Noting his melancholy mood, Lamon did what has been described as "a well timed rudeness of kind intent" by assuming a comic air and by "singing . . . a snatch from 'Picayune Butler' which broke the spell of 'the little sad song' and restored somewhat his accustomed easy humor."

The "Picayune Butler" song was innocuous. It was a blackface minstrel comic song designed to be sung rapidly with banjo accompaniment. No one ever thought to call it "obscene" until the report got out that Lincoln reveled in it. Three of its five verses follow:

"Ob all de gals I eber did see,
Miss Lucy Neal was best to me,
Yah-ha.

She chased de bulgine out of breaff,
And dat's what caused Miss Lucy's deaff,
Yah-ha.

Young folks come here to take a walk,
And wid dar lubs to hab some talk,
Yah-ha.

The ladies ask, 'Am dat a fac?
Is dem gemmen really black?'
Yah-ha.

I'se gwine some day to buya farm,
An a band of niggers I'll take along,
Yah-ha.

An ebry day we'll sing dis song,
Ob Picayune Butler come to town,
Yah-ha."

The staccato chorus had swing and repetition, and was completely without meaning:

"Picayune Butler comin', comin',
Picayune Butler come to town!
Aho, Aho, Aho.
Picayune Butler comin', comin',
Picayune Butler come to town!"

Little did Lincoln or Lamon realize that this jigtime song would have such repercussions on the political situation in 1864, that the incident of the song-singing would be colored and magnified to humiliate the President and to glorify his opponent. "Picayune Butler" became a formidable weapon indeed. (See Lincoln Lore No. 230, "The Antietam Song Singing", September 4, 1933)