



Lincoln Lore

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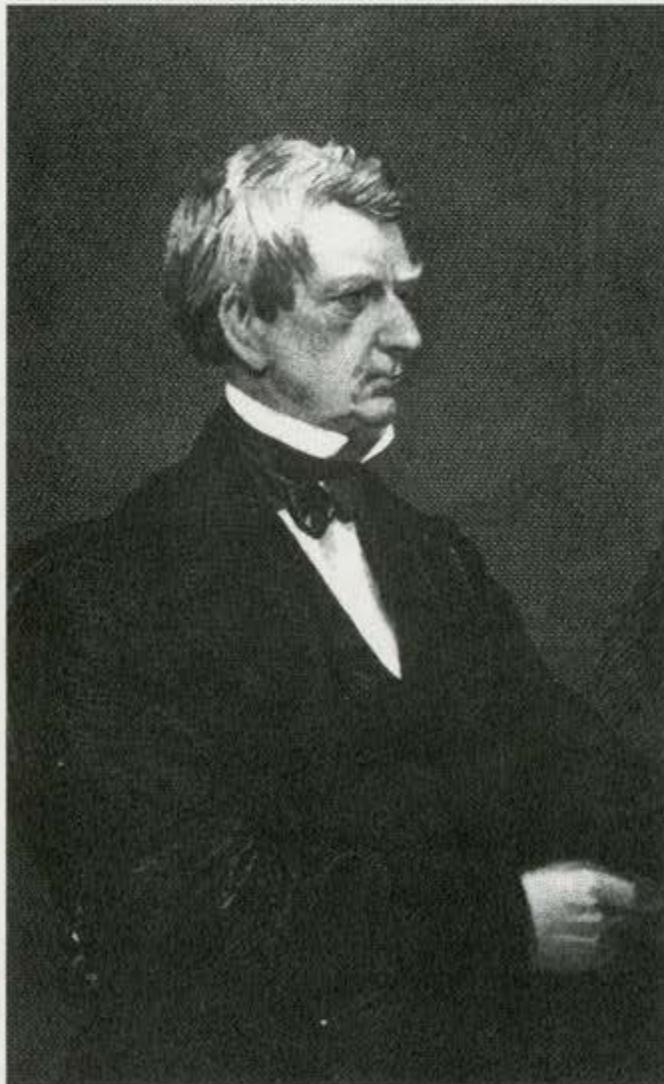
NEW LIGHT ON THE SEWARD-WELLES-LINCOLN CONTROVERSY?

Charles Francis Adams delivered a eulogy on William H. Seward in April, 1873, about six months after Seward's death. Isolated from day-to-day political developments during the Civil War by his residence in England and indebted to Secretary of State Seward for his appointment as Ambassador to England, Adams thought that Seward had been the mastermind of the Lincoln administration. His eulogy on Seward made that point clear. It also rankled Gideon Welles.

As Secretary of the Navy during the Lincoln administration, Welles undeniably occupied a better seat to observe the inner

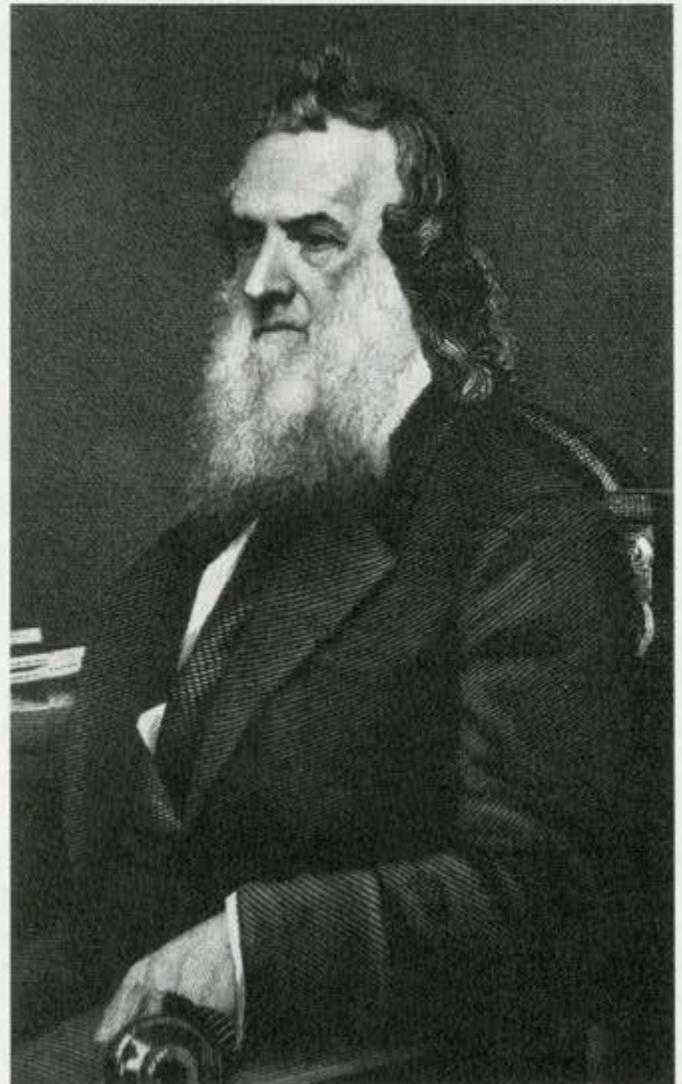
workings of the Lincoln administration. He had never liked Seward, and he possessed considerable talents as a polemical writer and delineator of acid portraits. Welles's rebuttal to Adams's eulogy appeared in a book, *Lincoln and Seward*, published in 1874. Welles, as his able biographer John Niven put it, "was the first promoter of the Lincoln legend." Seward's stock went down, never to rise above Lincoln's again.

Welles's book struck a responsive chord in George B. Lincoln, an obscure New York politician who had been Brooklyn's postmaster during the Civil War. After reading the book, he wrote a



*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 1. William H. Seward.



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Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 2. Gideon Welles.

long letter to its author. The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum acquired the letter this year, and it is published here for the first time.

Rivervale Bergin Co N.J. April 25th 1874

Hon Gideon Welles
My dear Sir

A thoughtful friend recently sent me a copy of the book called "*Lincoln & Seward*". Having thanked him for sending it, I perform now the pleasant duty—of thanking you for writing it—I read these articles as they appeared in the *Galaxy* and then promised myself to write & thank you for the timely service you were rendering to our country in correcting at once the false impression that the address of Mr Adams was giving of the relative status in public affairs of Pres. Lincoln and his Sec Mr Seward.

Mr Lincoln was my personal friend long before he came to Washington in 1861. I think I remember telling you once of the style of apartments they gave Mr Lincoln at the Astor House in March 1860, and my complaint thereat—and telling the office boys there that the time would come when they would not offer him such a room as No 17!—telling them that he was to be the next President of the United States—at which they laughed immediately—asking me if I was Crazy! I refer to this, as I recollect the remark you made to me the first time we met after the inauguration when you said—"The Astor House people found a different set of apartments for Mr Lincoln when he came on this time from those they gave him a few years ago—did they not?"

Pardon me if I devote a little time this stormy night to giving you a few of my early impressions & reminiscences of my good namesake. Had my name been Smith or Jones I would have known but little of Lincoln, about as much as the average of Smith & Jones family did previous to 1860. But my name was Lincoln—and my business interests brought me in continual contact with those who knew my namesake well and regarded him much—and my name would perpetually suggest some anecdote or fact relating to Abraham which being repeated—became after awhile to convince me that if the reputation of a man who stood so strong at home could be made national—nothing could withstand it in a competing political canvas.

In these articles before me you refer to the presentation of Mr Lincoln's name at Phil^a in 1856 for the place of Vice President—a matter that few remembered in 1860.

But when I read the account of the doings of that convention I said to myself—"That one hundred & ten votes if properly utilised will defeat Seward and nominate Lincoln!" Within thirty days thereafter I stated my belief to my intimate personal friends among whom I remember my then brilliant young friend Theodore Tilton. For the two years and more that followed I lost no opportunity when among those active in public affairs to declare my belief that Lincoln was the coming man—but I was looked upon as cracked! at least upon political subjects and then in the autumn of 1858 came the great controversy between Lincoln & Douglass—when people began to open their eyes a little; when the name of my friend was mentioned. The next winter I visited Springfield while their Legislature was in session.

I enquired who were Lincoln's partial friends and influential withal. I was told that Leonard Swett a very able Lawyer and a member of the Senate was perhaps his most influential political friend. Ascertaining that there was to be a reception at the house of the Governor (Bissell) that night I thought that my best opportunity perhaps to make the acquaintance of Swett and other of Lincoln's friends. I went expecting to meet Lincoln there himself—but he did not come. I then introduced myself to Mr Swett & told him my convictions in the matter of Lincoln as a future candidate for the Presidency and there gave him my reasons therefor. It was a small gathering—and soon I found myself surrounded by the warm friends of my namesake and then & there I proposed to them a plan of procedure which if carried out by his friends would I thought result in giving to Ill the next candidate.

It seemed a new thought to these gentlemen—for all they hoped for was to place him second on the ticket That they

thought would be easy—but to head the ticket was a new idea. Seward seemed to have the whole field. But I spoke as an Eastern man knowing that Seward was damaged somewhat by the perpetual howl of the New York Herald that he was a full fledged abolitionist! (which name he never, to the day of his death truly deserved) while on the other hand Mr Lincoln had not been in Washington to be mixed up with the *Helper Book matter* or any other matter requiring defence. One hundred & ten had declared their regard for him at Phil^a and the Douglass controversy had given Mr Lincoln a national reputation among thoughtful men.

I returned to New York by way of Columbus O. and the City of Washington—calling upon my friends at the Capital—I knew but few—but among them were Owen Lovejoy of Ill & John F. Potter of Wis. To these I declared my views—but that anybody but myself saw the thing possible—did not appear. I sought Mr Greeley and had a long talk with him, and also with Gov Morgan—who was Seward's warm friend. Gov Morgan took down from his case a copy of the doings of the Phil^a convention and read to me a speech made there by some western man—a rough subject—who had nominated Mr Lincoln there. I went to Parton to see if he would not write a life of Lincoln—but he said he had no impulse that way—while he liked the man—but he could not write without impulse! Said he could write the life of Burr whom he disliked because he had an impulse to do so.

Another year rolled around when I again found myself in the west. Carpenter in his '*Six Months at the White House*' tells the story of my finding at Naples on the Ill. River an old man by the name of Pollard Simmons who told me the story of Lincoln having lived with him while yet a young man and working—among other things at *Splitting Rails!* When Simmonds told me that story I said to myself—I would not take the vote of three small states for that fact.

In occasional letters to the *New York Tribune* & to the *Press & Tribune of Chicago* I had taken occasion to say kind words for Lincoln—but not as a Presidential candidate—and when I reached Sandoval in Southern Ill I wrote a letter to the *Press* and *Tribune* giving the facts of my interview with Mr Simmonds & also some fact concerning Lincoln which Shelby Culom (late M. C. whom few will remember) gave me in relation to the manner of his (Lincolns) studying law. These facts were taken from my Chicago letter by the *New York Tribune* and published a few days later under the head of *Personal of Lincoln*. My object was accomplished. My friend was now advertised as a *Rail Splitter* and the use made of that political war club was all that I could have reasonably asked. I think it was even better than the *Hard Cider* dodge.

I again sought Swett. He was practicing law in court at Bloomington—before Judge David Davis I again went over my programme—and when he had heard me he asked me to wait until the court adjourned for he wanted me to talk to Davis as I had done to him. This I did.

I kept busy as best I could up to the time of the meeting of the convention and finally wrote the leading communication in the *Press & Tribune* published the morning the convention met from my place of business in New York—claiming as a New Yorker that Lincoln would make a better run than Seward.

Three weeks ago I met in Chicago Mr Swett. He took me by the hand and said Mr Lincoln! you were the first man who gave us any confidence in our state that we could nominate Lincoln. He had said the same before at my house in Brooklyn.

Believing that I had something to do in giving courage to Mr Lincoln's home friends, and having furnished the *Rail Splitting* club for the party I thought you might be interested sufficiently in my story to read it.

Two little incidents I will relate which may, under the circumstances interest you. Early in January 1861 I visited my friend at Springfield. Spending an evening at his house by invitation—in the course of conversation the President remarked that he had tendered to Mr Bates a seat in his Cabinet and asked me what I thought of it I told him that I thought it a proper appointment in all respects—and especially a compliment to a class with whom Mr Bates had acted politically and who had come in with us. I then said Mr President! Pardon me if I tell you what else I would do—and then I said "were I in your place



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. Carl Schurz.

I would say to *Mr Seward* Sir!—what have I at command that you will accept? You can be my *Secretary of State* or if you prefer—the court of *St James* is at your service!—At this *Mrs Lincoln* rallied with “Never! Never! Seward in the Cabinet! Never! If things should go on all right—the credit would go to *Seward*—if they went wrong—the blame would fall upon my husband. Seward in the Cabinet! Never!” I then stated to *Madam* that she had not waited to hear the remainder of what I had to say—which was *this* “That will be your part I hope *Mr Seward* will have the sense of propriety and delicacy to say in reply” “Sir! I am a *Senator* and just now I desire nothing more.” “I do not desire to see *Mr Seward* in the Cabinet” *Mr. Lincoln* performed his part—but the sense of delicacy, & as it seemed then to me propriety was lacking upon the other side.

I may be ungenerous, but I can never divest my mind of the impression that had the result of the war been the reverse of what it was—there would been few tears to be shed by *Somebody*!

One other story & I will worry you no farther. In the early part of 1867 I was in Wisconsin, and spent a day at *East Troy* with *Hon John F. Potter*. He then related to me what occurred at the rooms of the *Sec of State* in the early part of 1861. *Schultz* name had been mentioned as a candidate for a mission abroad and one afternoon (Says *Potter*) “*Doolittle* & myself called upon the President to advance *Mr Schultz* interests.

The President said “Yes. I am in favor of giving *Mr Schultz* a foreign appointment—but the Secretary opposes it.” and begged of them to call upon the Secretary in relation to it. This seemed strange said *Potter*—for as between *Lincoln* & *Seward* at Chicago—*Schultz* was a *Seward* man. So they called upon *Mr Seward* and stated their business. *Mr S.* answered that he

was utterly opposed to sending men abroad who were exiles and whose opinions were obnoxious to those to whom they were accredited—and therefore was opposed to the appointment of *Mr S. Potter* then said to the *Sec* “—I thought we sent men abroad to represent *our* views—not *theirs*!” After exhausting all argument with the *Sec* to no avail—they arose to depart—Saying as they went that *Mr Schultz* would be disappointed at not having his cooperation in the matter. At this the *Sec.* rose in great rage—swinging his arms and rushing across the room exclaiming “dissappointed! disappointed! talk to me about disappointment! look at *Me!* simply a clerk of the President!”

You may have heard *Sec Stanton* tell this story of the Spanish Minister who called upon him one day and declared himself *thus* “*Stanton!* you have the *funniest* country here of all the earth—you have *no* government—but you move along—all the same—just as though you had.] *Stanton!* there are three things which God almighty seems to take special care of *viz* *Drunkards!* *Little children* and the *United States of America!*”

That “special care” it seems to me was our national salvation.

Sincerely thanking you for your timely labor to protect the reputation and precious memory of our mutual friend

Believe me
with great respect
Your friend
Geo. B. Lincoln

How reliable a witness was George B. Lincoln? Can we really believe a man who claimed, fourteen years after the fact, to have originated the famous “rail-splitter” image? If George Lincoln was shrewd enough to realize in 1856 that Abraham Lincoln could take the Republican nomination from Seward, he was more politically astute than most of the politicians in America—more so even than Abraham Lincoln himself. Did George Lincoln really ask James Parton to write a campaign biography in the winter of 1858-1859, months before the idea occurred to Abraham Lincoln’s political intimates in Illinois? Did Abraham Lincoln, as President-elect, really invite the would-be Brooklyn postmaster to Springfield and discuss Cabinet appointments in his presence? Would Mrs. Lincoln, whose knowledge of the intentions of her husband’s administration never appeared very strong, have been present at such a discussion? Could a small-time politician who could not recall Carl Schurz’s name accurately have possibly known the things he claimed to know? In short, was George B. Lincoln a blowhard or a knowledgeable insider?

We can never know the answer for certain, but there is some good evidence that George B. Lincoln was not a thoroughly reliable witness. The Illinois State Historical Library, for example, owns a letter from the Brooklyn politician to Francis B. Carpenter which is an admission of error in telling a story about President Lincoln. Carpenter, who had spent six months in the White House painting a canvas which celebrated the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, capitalized on his experiences after the President’s assassination by publishing reminiscences in various periodicals. Some of these were Carpenter’s own recollections, but others he gleaned from other associates of the President—including the Brooklyn postmaster. On December 19, 1867, George B. Lincoln told Carpenter: “I notice in the papers a card from Ex Governor Seymour of New York denying the truthfulness of the alleged interview between the late President Lincoln & himself—as reported in your reminiscences of Mr. Lincoln as published in the Independent of the 12th inst. Having stated this story to you—as it was given to me—*falsely* as it now appears I take the earliest moment to express my regret that I should have been the means of furnishing an item untrue in itself and offensive to all concerned.” He went on to explain that he had been fooled by the wealth of details supplied by his informant.

To his credit, George B. Lincoln did apologize to Carpenter

and allowed him to use his letter as an explanation of the error. Moreover, this incident is not enough to cause historians to dismiss all of George Lincoln's assertions of contacts with the President. In Carpenter's book, *Six Months at the White House*, published a year before the article with the Seymour story, the Pollard Simmons anecdote appeared. In addition to the rail-splitting incident, George Lincoln had also repeated Simmons's story that Abraham Lincoln had refused a surveying job offered him by a Democratic appointee as surveyor. The future President was reputed to have said, ". . . I never have been under obligation to a Democratic administration, and I never intend to be so long as I can get my living another way." Carpenter asked the President whether the story were true, and he replied: "It is correct about our working together; but the old man must have stretched the facts somewhat about the survey of the county. I think I should have been very glad of the job at that time, no matter what administration was in power." Once again, George B. Lincoln was partly in error—but only partly. He seems to have been consistently guilty of repeating stories about Abraham Lincoln without checking his sources, but he may well have repeated accurately what he heard.

Without doubt, George B. Lincoln did have some contact with his more famous namesake. He had opportunities to visit Illinois as the representative of a New York dry goods firm. Carpenter himself saw George Lincoln in the President's office on the Sunday before Lincoln's reinauguration in 1865. And several letters in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress prove that George B. Lincoln had occasional contacts with the President.

George Lincoln wrote his first letter to Abraham Lincoln on May 19, 1860, just after the Republican nominating convention. He congratulated the Republican nominee and chatted for a while about their common surname. An old Whig himself, the less famous Lincoln noted, "I have never known a Lincoln who was a *Loco Foco!* Not one—all have been Whigs to a man." In 1860, he claimed to have declared his faith in Abraham Lincoln's ability to gain the Republican nomination "East and West for near two years"—not, it should be noted, since 1856. He feared that Hannibal Hamlin "will not greatly improve the ticket anywhere that we need help—but it does not *drag*—we are safe." He closed the letter by saying, characteristically, "I am about sending to *Father Simmonds at Havana* for a couple of those 'Rails!'"

On September 22, 1860, George Lincoln wrote the nominee again, mentioning "our mutual friend [Shelby] Cullom," from whom the Brooklyn travelling salesman had obtained "some time ago a profile likeness of yourself—for which you kindly sat to gratify an enthusiastic young republican—(an ex democrat) who desired to issue from it a campaign medal." George Lincoln sent by "your worthy neighbor Mr. Alvey," who was returning to Springfield, some presents to Abraham Lincoln's children: "a few specimens of the Medals—which are here considered the best which have been issued." "Please present them as complimentary from *William Legget Bramhall* and our two sons—lads—who are 'Lincolns too,'" he wrote jovially. He also sent photographs to the boys and to Mrs. Lincoln. He concluded the letter with observations on the political scene in New York. Central New York state was safe, the Know-Nothing vote was safe, the disappointment over Seward's loss of the nomination was largely abated, and the old Southern Whigs with whom he did business thought the Union would be safe in Abraham Lincoln's hands.

After the election George B. Lincoln sent the usual recommendations for office and letters of introduction for businessmen seeking favors. President Lincoln was still seeing correspondence from George Lincoln in 1864. Like almost all politicians in New York, the Brooklyn postmaster became embroiled in the patronage controversies surrounding the New York Custom House. The Lincoln administration's Indian

Commissioner, William P. Dole, visited New York early in 1864 to investigate the controversy. After his return, George Lincoln wrote to inform him of strong sentiment for the appointment of Simeon Draper as Collector. He said that Hiram Barney, the incumbent, was very unpopular. Though he made clear his own opposition to the interests of Salmon P. Chase, he did not stress Barney's alleged pro-Chase affinities as an objection to his continuance in office. He argued, rather, that Barney was very unpopular with merchants and that mercantile people did not want a lawyer as the Collector. Lincoln also mentioned in the letter the fact that he kept a bust of the President draped in a flag in his home in Brooklyn.

George B. Lincoln was a windy old bore. Of that there can be no doubt. His letter to Welles covered seven and one-half pages of paper. His affection for President Lincoln—which grew out of the coincidence of shared surnames—was genuine, however. He did have some close contacts with the Lincoln administration. Though he tended to be somewhat uncritical in repeating stories he heard about the President, George B. Lincoln might have known what he was talking about. From all evidence political bias did not account for his willingness to think the worst of Seward. After all, the opposition to Hiram Barney was led by the Seward-Weed wing of the Republican party in New York, and he had clearly been with Seward's men in that fight. George B. Lincoln's anecdotes may be questionable, but they certainly appear worthy of further investigation.



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FIGURE 4. As late as 1863, Seward still had a reputation as the strong man in the administration.