



Lincoln Lore

Number 1800

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor
Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.
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February, 1989

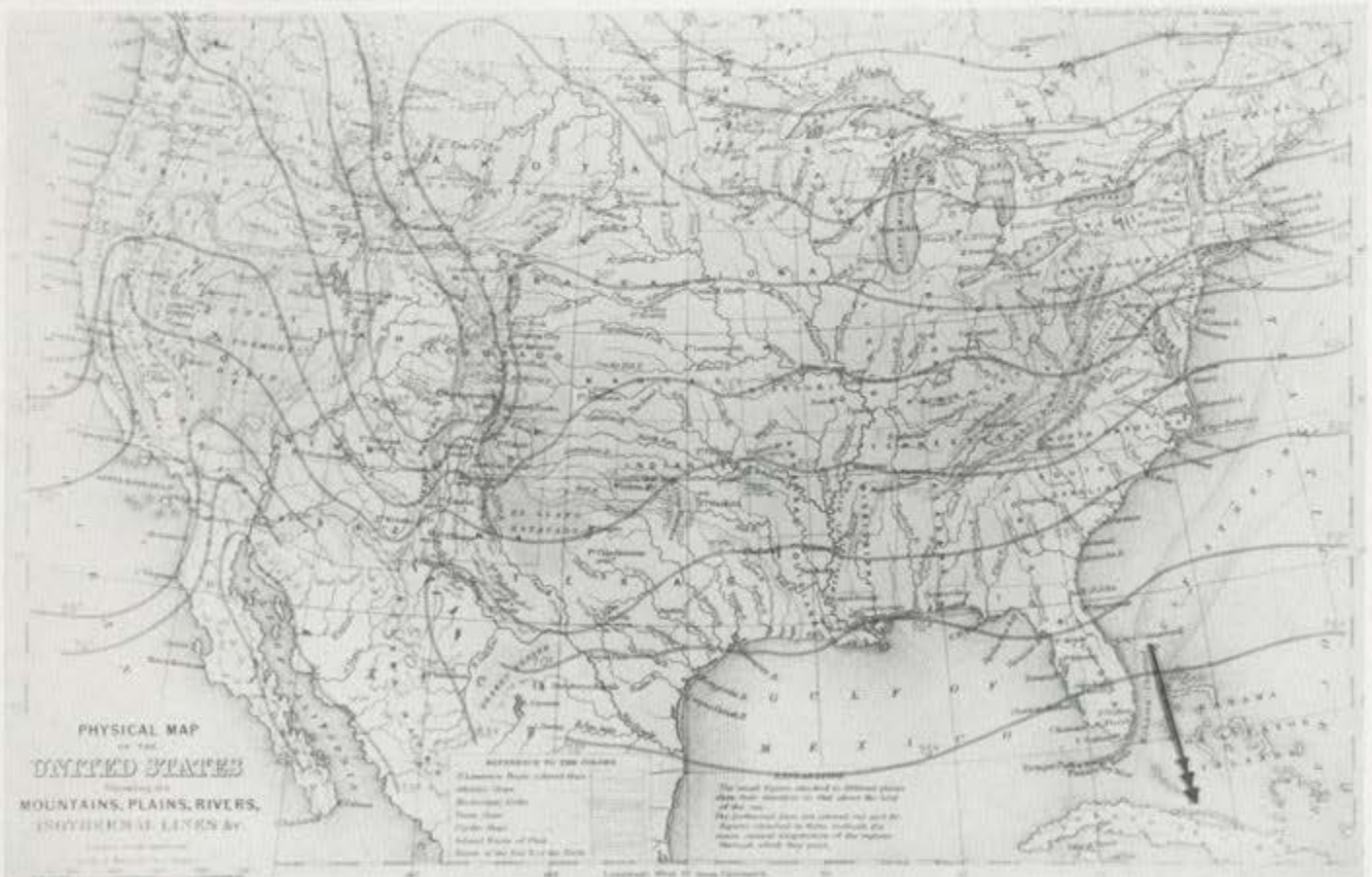
A CHRONOLOGY OF THE *TRENT* AFFAIR (Part I)

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

Captain Charles Wilkes was well known in 1861 for having led the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842, a 85,000 mile survey of the Oregon coast and about 280 islands of the South Pacific. He must have been equally well known among his colleagues in the Navy for his cruelty and insubordination. During the expedition he had treated his men severely and used flogging much more than standard Navy practice dictated (as when he had three men flogged for refusing to reenlist). Also, he had burned several South Pacific villages in retaliation for theft and for the murder of two of his officers. In the latter case, he only consented to halt the killing after the survivors made a show of begging and crawling before him. The Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, described

Wilkes as "very exacting towards others, but . . . not himself as obedient as he should be."

All of which may explain why Wilkes was not given an important command at the outbreak of the war. Indeed, he was sent to Africa to collect a ship stationed there (the U.S.S. *San Jacinto*) and return her to Philadelphia for repairs. Disregarding his orders to return immediately, Wilkes cruised along the African coast hoping to capture a stray Confederate ship. Giving up after a few weeks, he moved on to the West Indies. On October 30 he arrived in Havana and discovered that the newly appointed Confederate envoys to England and France, James Murray Mason and John Slidell, were waiting there for the arrival of a British mail packet, the *Trent*, which would take



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FIGURE 1. From an 1863 geography schoolbook. Arrow marks location of the *San Jacinto's* encounter with the *Trent*. Contemporary sources refer to the "Bahama Channel" (now the Straits of Florida). Note too, the "Great Fremont Basin" (now the states of Nevada and Utah).

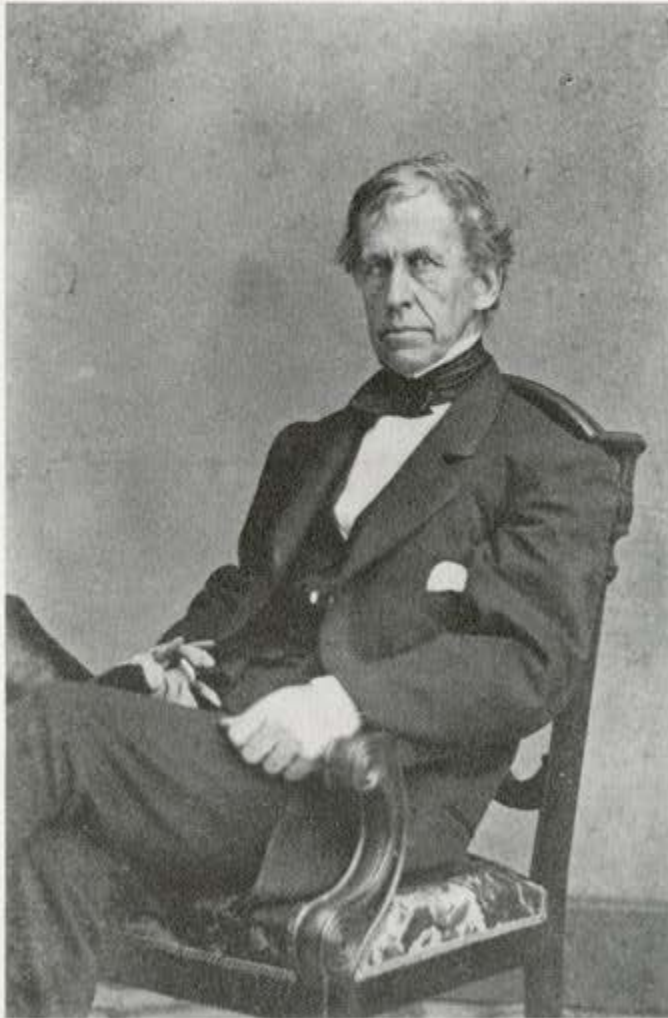
them to their assignments in Europe.

Having failed in his earlier attempts for glory, Wilkes decided to try to intercept the *Trent* and seize the Confederate ambassadors before returning to Philadelphia as ordered. On November 8, 1861, Wilkes' *San Jacinto* met the *Trent* in the center of the Bahama Channel near the Paredon del Grande lighthouse. Wilkes ordered Lieutenant D. M. Fairfax to board the *Trent*, remove the two Confederates and their papers, and take the ship as a prize.

Fairfax boarded the ship and seized Mason, Slidell, and their secretaries (after a scuffle with some of the passengers and with Mathilde Slidell, John Slidell's daughter). When the *Trent's* captain refused to turn over the ship's papers to Fairfax, the only way to remove the papers was to take the ship as a prize. Because Fairfax was concerned that England might declare war over such an action, he convinced Wilkes to allow the *Trent* to go on its way. Furthermore, as Fairfax pointed out to Wilkes, holding the *Trent* as a prize would unfairly inconvenience the innocent passengers, and it would also dangerously reduce the *San Jacinto's* crew just as they were preparing to enter Confederate waters.

As the *San Jacinto* sailed north with the prisoners, Wilkes collected, from his officers and the two Confederate envoys, statements describing how the capture took place. These are published in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* . . . (ser. I, vol. I), and make entertaining reading. For example, one of Wilkes' officers complained about the rude comments the *Trent's* passengers made "evidently intended for our benefit":

"Did you ever hear of such an outrage?" . . . "This is the best thing in the world for the South." . . . Did you ever hear of



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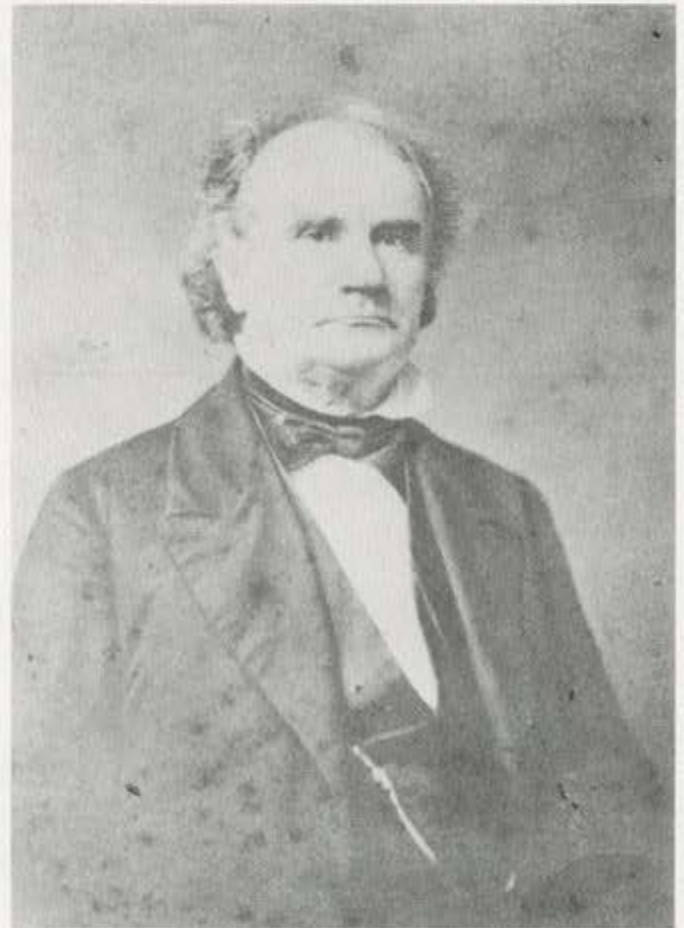
FIGURE 2. Charles Wilkes.

such a piratical act?" "Why this is a perfect Bull Run." The packet of statements also recorded Wilkes' and Fairfax's gentlemanly conduct. Even Mason and Slidell, having been assigned the captain's cabin and having feasted on sherry and oysters, had to admit that they had "uniformly been treated with great courtesy and attention." Unfortunately, the question of the prisoners' treatment would not be an issue when news of the capture reached the British and American governments.

The news did not reach most Northerners until November 16 (Saturday) when the first stories appeared in the afternoon newspapers, and by Monday, almost every Northern paper was describing Wilkes as a hero. With the war going badly for the North, Northerners were hungry for some kind of Union victory, and Wilkes' capture of the two Confederate diplomats seemed like what they were waiting for. Lincoln was less enthusiastic, predicting that the Confederates might turn out to be "white elephants:" more trouble to keep than they were worth.

The British Minister to the United States, Lord Lyons, described American public opinion as being "very much pleased at having . . . insulted the British flag." In fact the American enthusiasm over the *Trent* affair reinforced Lyon's fears about the American government. Lyons had been warning his superiors for months that the American government might create a pretext for war with England as a way to unite their own country, and he became even more concerned after Lincoln appointed William Henry Seward to be Secretary of State. For Lyons, Seward was the epitome of American politicians who pandered to the "mob." He was brash and rude, and he was also inexperienced in foreign policy; furthermore, he appeared to have designs on Canada, a British possession.

According to Lyons, the *Trent* affair was a blatant example of the way Seward (and the American government) made



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FIGURE 3. James Murray Mason.

political capital out of insulting England. It also reflected the Americans' complete disregard for England's honor and for the possibility of English retaliation or war. In May, Lyons had warned the British Foreign Secretary that whenever the British tolerated an insult from the Americans, the Americans were encouraged to go a little farther the next time. Thus, it was imperative for the English government to convince the United States that there was a point beyond which they would not tolerate insults. In his earliest reports about the *Trent* affair, Lyons suggested that this latest insult might be where England should draw the line, and he further suggested that the British should make a show of force in response to the insult. However, since the Atlantic cable was not functioning in 1861, Lyons' first dispatch did not reach England until December 1.

News reports of the *Trent* affair first reached England on November 27; the journalists reacted angrily, calling it an outrage and an "unendurable" insult. The most damaging rumors were those alleging that the Lincoln administration had ordered Wilkes to ignore international law and seize the men from an English ship. Lord John Russell (British Foreign Secretary) and Lord Palmerston (Prime Minister) scheduled a cabinet meeting for November 29 to decide how to respond to the incident. Before the meeting, Russell asked Charles Francis Adams (the American Minister to England) about the rumors, but Adams had to admit that he knew nothing about the incident. In fact, he did not receive any useful information about it from Seward until more than two weeks later.

In addition to the regular cabinet members, several legal experts had been asked to attend the meeting to give advice. The experts declared that the seizure had been illegal under international law, explaining that a ship's captain did not have the authority to determine the fates of passengers on neutral

ships. That authority properly belonged only to a prize court judge, and thus, Wilkes *might* have been justified if he had taken the ship (and the Confederates' papers) to an admiralty court to be judged. However, since Wilkes ignored the courts and took the law into his own hands, the British government could be justified in demanding reparations.

Based on this opinion, and influenced by the newspapers and rumors, the cabinet members determined to send the American government an ultimatum and to meet again the next day to draft it. By the next day tempers had cooled a bit, and the cabinet amended and reworded the original draft, softening the harsh language. Nevertheless, the resulting dispatch insisted that the Americans release their captives and make an apology for Wilkes' "insult to the British flag." In another dispatch, Russell instructed Lyons to close the British Legation in Washington and return to England if the demands were not met within seven days.

With a mail steamer being held in the harbor waiting for the diplomatic dispatch, Lord Russell asked Queen Victoria to give her opinion of the draft as soon as possible. The Queen, however, had other responsibilities that night, and so her husband, Prince Albert read the dispatches and composed her response. Suggesting that the cabinet's note was too brusque, he provided the Americans with an honorable way out: his addition assumed that the Americans had not intended to insult England, and expressed "a hope that the American captain did not act under instructions, or, if he did, that he misapprehended them." The cabinet agreed to the proposed changes, and Russell added further orders to Lyons: Lyons should emphasize the importance of releasing the captives more than the apology, and he could tell Seward about the



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FIGURE 4. John Slidell.



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FIGURE 5. Napoleon Bonaparte III.

ultimatum before actually delivering it. In sum, Russell explained, the British were willing to go to war if necessary, but they would prefer to work out a peaceful solution.

The modified note, as well as Russell's instructions to Lyons, left England on December 1, and later that day Russell received Lyons' first report of the affair. Reading Lyons' note made the English leaders even firmer in their resolve to go to war rather than ignore the insult, and they immediately began making preparations for war.

As soon as Édouard Thouvenel (the French Minister of Foreign Affairs) learned the specifics of Russell's dispatches, he sent instructions to Henri Mercier, the French Minister in Washington, telling him to support the British demands. Many Americans hoped that the dispute could be taken to France for arbitration, but Napoleon III had sided with England as early as November 28, even before he learned all the details of the incident. If the incident led to an Anglo-American war, France would benefit from England's opening the blockade; furthermore, France had always supported the rights of neutrals (England in this case), as had the United States. Although Americans living abroad soon learned the news, those living in the United States continued to hope for French support as much as three weeks after Napoleon III made his decision.

During the first part of December, Adams was convinced that Anglo-American relations were so bad that Seward might recall him at any time, and his son, Henry Adams, thought the situation "would have gorged a glutton of gloom." Seward, especially, was the focus of rumors and newspaper stories describing American designs against the English. The English had long connected Seward with a threat to Canada, and because Lincoln was little known in Europe, many Europeans assumed that Seward had complete control of foreign policy. For example, the *London Morning Chronicle* described Lincoln as "a feeble, confused, and little-minded mediocrity," and Seward as "the firebrand at his elbow." Lyons' suspicions of

Seward reinforced these assumptions among the diplomatic corps.

Then, on Monday, December 16, the newspapers carried a story that temporarily distracted the British people from Seward and diplomatic affairs: Prince Albert had died on Saturday, December 14, of typhoid fever. Later, when Queen Victoria was preparing to send his papers to the archives, she made a melancholy notation on his draft of the corrections to Russell's November 30 dispatch.

This draft was the last the beloved Prince ever wrote; he was very unwell at the time, and when he brought it in to the Queen, he said: "I could hardly hold my pen."

Throughout the rest of December, Queen Victoria was overcome with grief as was her household and even many of her cabinet members, including Lord Palmerston. Thus on December 16, when Adams received an important dispatch from Seward, he had to arrange for an interview with Lord Russell instead. Although Seward had not known about the British reaction to the affair, he had unwittingly made exactly the statement needed to conciliate the British.

In Russell's office on December 19, Adams read Seward's statement that Wilkes acted "without instructions and even without the knowledge of the Government." When Adams asked Russell what position England was taking on the *Trent* affair, Russell showed him the ultimatum he had sent to Lyons. To Adams' great relief, Russell suggested that Seward's statement about Wilkes' having acted without authorization could serve as the required apology.

When Adams returned to his office, he was pleased to write to Seward that all he needed to do to avoid war was release the captives. Although Adams was encouraged, there was no way of knowing how the government in Washington was reacting to Russell's dispatch. Because the trans-Atlantic voyage took more than two weeks, people in London could expect to wait almost a month and a half to learn what the Lincoln administration's response would be.



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FIGURE 6. Prince Albert.

FIGURE 7. Queen Victoria.