

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE PRELIMINARIES

The last of the seven scheduled Lincoln-Douglas debates took place on the 15th of October 1858, so this season of the year might be an appropriate time to review the preliminaries which brought about the "Battle of Giants."

An "old farmer" in Macon county may have furnished the inspiration that drew Lincoln out of his political inertia in the sensational campaign of 1858 and drove him to take the initiative in setting up the famous debates with Douglas. At any rate it was W. J. Usery of Decatur, secretary of the Macon County Republican Club, that relayed the "old farmer's" statement to Lincoln and urged the series of debates.

Douglas with his profusely decorated train, a cannon and a brass band, moved into the Illinois State Capital, home of Lincoln, and on the afternoon of Saturday, July 17, 1858 addressed a large concourse of people in Edward's Grove. That night in the State House Lincoln delivered the "House Divided Speech" to a group made up of Republicans. The startling contrast in campaign methods aroused Lincoln's friends and by the following Monday, July 19, critical letters began to reach him as is revealed by correspondence preserved in the Robert Lincoln Collection of manuscripts in the Library of Congress.

Two of the batch of letters Lincoln received dated July 19 came from Decatur and the one from W. J. Usery containing the criticism of the "old farmer" is printed in full:

In talking with an old farmer who is strong for a man by the name of L. he used the following language: "Douglas is taking advantage of Lincoln. He gets his friends to give him receptions, visits a place with a sort of superior air like that of a conqueror, takes the field ostentatiously to defend his course, really to make votes for U. S. S. He takes the crowd in the daytime, when he is through the trains carry off the Douglasites while Lincoln talks to confirmed Republicans who hold over, or in other words Douglas takes the crowds and Lincoln the leavings." This is the substance of his language and contains a hint too good to be lost. If Douglas desires to canvass the state let him act the honorable part by agreeing to meet you in regular debates giving a fair opportunity for all to hear both sides. You will please excuse this meddling with your business, my only excuse is that your business in this particular case is mine also. It struck me at the time I heard this remark alluded to, that Douglas was rather getting the start of you and if you would make a proposition for a canvass immediately you could stop the prestige of these triumphant entries which he is making. You can have no excuse nor can your friends for giving your public receptions—Mr. Douglas has this excuse and will use it against you.

That very same day another letter was written at Decatur by Ansel Tupper, an admirer of Lincoln who advised him that during the past week, "An attempt has been made to conjure the American Whigs by the distribution of some cartloads of Crittenden's speeches under Douglas' frank." From Carlinville, also on the same day July 19, George W. Woods wrote: "We are convinced that Mr. Douglas does not intend to canvass the state in connection with yourself."

After receiving these letters, with many more of the same tenor, and having the speaking appointments of Douglas before him, Lincoln went to Chicago to confer with members of the Republican State Central Committee of which Norman B. Judd was chairman. Appar-

ently Lincoln was there by July 22. On Saturday, July 24, Lincoln prepared his first letter to Douglas and before it was mailed returned home leaving it with Edward D. Baker, who was also in Chicago, to deliver to Mr. Judd. Later in the day Baker wrote a note to Lincoln stating:

"Have seen Judd and we will attend to your friend D. this afternoon and will telegraph Monday."

This is the letter Lincoln wrote:

Chicago, Illinois, July 24, 1858.

Hon. S. A. Douglas.

My dear Sir: Will it be agreeable to you to make an arrangement for you and myself to divide time, and address the same audiences the present canvass? Mr. Judd, who will hand you this, is authorized to receive your answer; and, if agreeable to you, to enter into the terms of such arrangement. Your obedient servant,

A. Lincoln.

A copy of the above letter was retained by Judd and under it he made this notation!

"Delivered the original of which the above is a true copy to the Hon. S. A. Douglas at Chicago on the 24 July, 1859, and received from him that he would send me down an answer when he sent down his mail Monday morning.

N. B. Judd."

On the very same day Douglas received Lincoln's letter, Douglas wrote Lincoln a long letter limiting the places he would meet Lincoln to a city in each one of seven congressional districts. Upon arriving in Springfield from Clinton on the evening of July 28 Lincoln first read the letter from Douglas. A note by Lincoln bearing the date of the following day carried his acceptance of the terms laid down by Douglas in his correspondence.

The delivery of this letter resulted in one or two episodes which have been somewhat colored by provincial viewpoints. On the very day Lincoln wrote his reply to Douglas he started for Monticello where Douglas was to speak in the afternoon and Lincoln in the evening. On the way back from Monticello to Bement where Douglas was being entertained by F. E. Bryant, Lincoln and his friends, travelling from Bement to Monticello, met Douglas and his large contingent. Some conversation occurred between Lincoln and Douglas about the letter to Douglas which Lincoln then had in his pocket, but for some reason it was not delivered at this time.

The tradition now most generally accepted states that when Lincoln came back from Monticello late that same evening, to take the midnight train from Bement to Springfield, he stopped at the home of Mr. Bryant where Douglas was staying, delivered the letter and conferred with him about other details of the debates. This house where they are said to have met has now become a historic shrine.

However, if the letter was presented in person by Lincoln to Douglas on the evening of July 29, it is strange that Douglas in his reply to it would write on July 30: "Your letter dated yesterday . . . was received this morning."

Regardless of just how and when the Lincoln correspondence reached Douglas, of this fact we may be sure, that the final note sent to Lincoln by Douglas, which set the dates for the debates, was written in the Bryant home in Bement, Illinois on July 30, 1858.