

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Appropriate orientation is always a desirable quality for any monograph and inasmuch as this bulletin is dated December 24 one would rather anticipate some phase of the religious element in the Lincoln story would be presented. Newspapers conscious of accentuated interest in spiritual values at this Christmas period have been giving some attention to the dedication of the rebuilt Tenth Ave. Presbyterian Church at Washington. A very valuable original manuscript, the preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, has recently been presented to the church. The Lincolns having made this communion their church home, while in the capital city, it seems timely to comment briefly on Abraham Lincoln's church attendance at the Presbyterian churches in both Springfield, Ill. and Washington, D. C. where he rented family pews.

It is evident that Abraham Lincoln's association with Presbyterian churches was influenced to some extent by his wife. Rev. John Todd was a famous Presbyterian minister and Mary Todd's grandfather and his brothers had been educated by their clergyman uncle in Virginia. The college the Todds were instrumental in establishing in Lexington, Kentucky was also under Presbyterian influence. A former minister of the Presbyterian church at Lexington, Rev. James Smith, removed to Springfield and Mary Todd Lincoln affiliated with his church, the First Presbyterian. While Abraham Lincoln was not a communicant of the church he was a subscribing member of the congregation.

In 1853 the church was involved in litigation over the payments on an organ and the church minutes book for April 26 makes these notations:

"Met pursuant to adjournment, Doct. John Todd in the chair, meeting opened with Prayer by the Chairman. . . .

"On motion Abram Lincoln, Henry Van Huff and Thomas Lewis were appointed a committee to aid Rev. James Smith in the suit now pending in Presbytery against this Church without power to appoint one of their number to attend the Presbytery.

"No further business appearing, on motion the meeting adjourned."

This same Thomas Lewis who was named on the above mentioned committee with Lincoln served as an elder, a trustee and as treasurer of the church. Some of his reminiscences about contacts with the Lincolns have been preserved. Lewis states that it was shortly after Lincoln had read a religious book *The Christian's Defense* written by Dr. Smith that Lincoln began attending the church. Lewis further stated:

"Soon afterward Mr. Lincoln asked me to rent him a pew, and I offered him one just vacated by Governor Madison, whose term had ended and who was leaving Springfield. He took it and occupied it regularly with Mrs. Lincoln, and though she had been an episcopalian, she joined our church at the first communion and I confidently believe Mr. Lincoln would have joined too had he been there." Mr. Lewis noted that Mr. Lincoln was away from home on legal business at the time and he concludes: "So he never joined the church, but he gave liberally toward its support."

The reminiscences of Mrs. Annie C. Fox which refer directly to the church attendance of Abraham Lincoln at Springfield is also of interest:

"I came to Springfield in 1856. My husband, Benjamin Fox, had been engaged in business here several years before that time. Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Fox were personal friends. They attended the same church, the First Presbyterian. The building now stands opposite the Chicago and

Alton Railroad depot. Mr. Lincoln's pew was just across the aisle from Mr. Fox's. In honor of my coming, Mr. Fox had fitted up his pew with new carpets and cushions. The first Sunday I attended church in Springfield Mr. Lincoln and I were introduced to each other. I remember Mr. Lincoln saying that he had wondered why Mr. Fox was fitting up his pew so fine, but he understood it now. Mrs. Lincoln, who was present, suggested that Mr. Lincoln himself might do a little fixing. It was not long after that before Mr. Lincoln's pew had a new carpet and new cushions.

"Mr. Lincoln was a regular attendant at church. He always paid close attention to the sermons and took an active part in the services."

Lincoln students are familiar with the contents of a letter written by Mrs. Lincoln to Mrs. Melvin at Springfield a few weeks after the Lincolns arrival in Washington. Mr. Melvin was chairman of the Pew Committee at the First Presbyterian Church and Mrs. Lincoln made this request in her letter:

"I had intended requesting Mr. Melvin to have given me a promise that on our return to Springfield we could be able to secure our particular pew to which I was very much attached and which we occupied some ten years. May I hope that we may be able to do so."

Just how soon the Lincolns started attending the New York Ave. Presbyterian Church at Washington we do not know but it would appear before the month of March 1861 came to a close they were happily situated in their new church home.

A deacon of the congregation recalls having taken "the plat of the church over to the White House for inspection. Mrs. Lincoln looked it over and selected the pew, which strangely enough, happened to be the one Mr. Buchanan had just vacated. The annual rental of the pew at the time was fifty dollars a year." Occupancy of the pew began in March 1861 and continued up to the time of Mr. Lincoln's assassination. The trustee's record book reveals that Mr. Lincoln's pew rent was paid promptly.

This is the same pew which has been preserved as a memorial and has become one of the best known religious shrines in Washington. It has been an established custom to invite the President residing at the White House to occupy the Lincoln pew on the Sunday preceding Lincoln's birthday each year.

On many visits to the church the editor of Lincoln Lore has been impressed with the emphasis placed on the significance of what is known as The Lincoln Room to be designated as the Lincoln Chapel in the newly constructed church. Apparently the President's church attendance was not confined to Sunday as the tradition seems to be well established that he often attended the mid-week service of the church. To assure him privacy Dr. Gurley, the minister, provided a seat for him in a small room leading out of the general assembly room on the first floor so that he might come and leave without being interrupted by the public.

The testimony of William Henry Roberts relative to Lincoln's church attendance is of interest. He states:

"Entering the service of the U. S. Government in the fall of 1863, the first sabbath of my sojourn in Washington City I went to the New York Ave. Presby. Church. When the time for the long prayer came, according to immemorial usage in many Presbyterian congregations, a number of the men stood up for prayer and among those upright figures I noticed in particular that of the President of the United States."