

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

NUMBER 1351

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

FEBRUARY 28, 1955

THE PLEBEIAN PRESIDENT

The anniversary month of Abraham Lincoln's birth always gives emphasis to the humble surroundings of his nativity. While the adverse conditions under which he lived in his early years have been greatly exaggerated, he was nevertheless, a man of the people, the peasantry, or even the plebians, in the better sense of its meaning. When he referred to his early history as "the short and simple annals of the poor" he was not far wrong. For this discussion, especially in the atmosphere of his natal day, we might refer to him as The Plebeian President.

An editor at Rock Island, Illinois, by the name of Thomas J. Pickett wrote to Lincoln suggesting that Lincoln be promoted for the President by the Republican press of Illinois. In Lincoln's reply on April 16, 1859, he said, "I do not think myself fit for the Presidency. I certainly am flattered, and grateful, that some partial friends think of me in that connection." It may have been this letter that Woodrow Wilson read in later years which caused him to comment, "He was not fit to be President until he actually became President" and Wilson then continued with a dissertation on Lincoln's "capacity for learning."

Salmon P. Chase, one of the candidates for the presidential nomination at Chicago wrote to Lincoln after the assembly at the Wigwam and received this reply in part on May 26, 1860, "Holding myself the humblest of all whose names were before the convention I feel especial need of the assistance of all; and I am glad—very glad—of the indication that you stand ready." To Cassius M. Clay who had been the runner-up to Hamlin in the vice-presidential race. Lincoln on the same day wrote, "The humblest of all whose names were before the convention, I shall, in the canvass, and especially afterwards, if the results shall devolve the administration upon me, need the support of all the talent, popularity, and courage, North and South which is in the party."

Even in the heat of the campaign for the presidency Lincoln did not seek to put on a false front with respect to his cultural attainments. Hon. William D. Kelly wrote to Abraham Lincoln asking permission to dedicate to the Republican candidate for the presidency a new legal work he was publishing. Lincoln replied on Oct. 13, 1860 in this manner: "Gratefully accepting the proffered honor, I give the leave, begging only that the inscription may be in modest terms, not representing me as a man of great learning, or a very extraordinary one in any respect."

Possibly there were grounds for apprehension at the time Lincoln was elected when the people recalled the distinguished men who had occupied the chief executive's chair, most of whom had come from the aristocracy. This was especially true of the first half dozen Presidents who were acknowledged statesmen of outstanding ability before they entered the White House. Just a brief fragmentary tabulation of some of their pre-presidential accomplishments may help us to visualize their nation-wide prestige.

George Washington—A surveyor at 16, Legislature of Va., Continental Congress, Chief Commander in Revolutionary War.

John Adams—Harvard U., Continental Congress, Ambassador to Holland, First Minister to England, First Vice-President to the U. S.

Thomas Jefferson—William and Mary College, Va. Legislature, Delegate to Congress, Drafter Declaration of Independence, Governor of Va., Secy. of State, Vice-President.

James Madison—Princeton U., Continental Congress, Representative in Congress, Secy. of State.

James Monroe—William and Mary College, Military Commissioner of Va., Va. Assembly, Louisiana Purchase Commissioner, Minister to England, Secy. of State.

John Quincy Adams—Harvard U., Minister to Holland, Sweden, and Prussia, successively; Senator, Secy. of State.

It may have been well for Lincoln that some of the chief magistrates who followed John Quincy Adams were not so well equipped mentally as their half dozen predecessors already mentioned. Lincoln recognized this fact in a speech on the floor of Congress when he had occasion to refer to some of them as "comparatively small men." Yet most of them had received a liberal education and many of them came from the semi-aristocratic group. They did serve as a transitional officary between the early intellectual giants and the coming of Lincoln. It will be observed however, that most of them had become distinguished before they gained the presidential chair. Some of their pre-presidential accomplishments are submitted:

Andrew Jackson—Eminent Indian fighter. Commander-in-chief of Tenn. Militia. Distinguished in Greek War. Major General in regular army. Governor of Florida Territory, U. S. District Attorney, Congressman, Senator, Judge of Supreme Court.

Martin Van Buren—Kinderhook Academy. N. Y. State Senate, Attorney General, U. S. Senator, Governor of N. Y., Secy. of State, Vice-President.

William Henry Harrison—Hampden-Sidney College, Military Commissioner 1791 with Wayne 1792, at Tippecanoe in 1811, Commander of Northwest Army, Secy. of Northwest Territory, Delegate to Congress, Governor of Indiana Territory, U. S. Representative from Ohio, U. S. Senator, Minister to Columbia.

John Tyler—William & Mary College, Va. Legislature, U. S. Congress, Governor, U. S. Senator, Vice-President.

James K. Polk—University of No. Carolina, U. S. Congress, Speaker of the House, Governor of Tennessee.

Zachary Taylor—Brevetted Major for gallant service War 1812, Lieut. Col., Colonel, Brigadier General, General, Distinguished service in Mexican War.

Millard Fillmore—School teacher, State Assembly, U. S. Congress, Comptroller of N. Y. State, Vice-President.

Franklin Pierce—Bowdoin and Amherst Colleges, Representative of N. H. Legislature, Speaker, U. S. Congress, U. S. Senate, Brig. General Mexican War.

James Buchanan—Dickinson College. State Legislature, U. S. Congress, Minister to Russia, U. S. Senate, Secretary of State, Minister to Court of St. James.

Abraham Lincoln—Ill. Legislature, U. S. Congress 1 term. Debates with Douglas.