



Lincoln Lore

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Congressman Lincoln's Social Contacts In Washington, D. C. (December 6, 1847 — March 4, 1849)

Editor's Note: The recent discovery of an invitation in the broadside file of the Lincoln National Life Foundation's library led to the preparation of this article for *Lincoln Lore*. The rare broadside is an invitation to the National Birth-Night Ball, of which Lincoln was one of the managers, to be held on February 22, 1848, but unfortunately postponed until March 1, due to the illness and death of John Quincy Adams.

On December 6, 1847, when Abraham Lincoln took his seat in the Thirtieth Congress of the United States, as a Representative of the Seventh District of Illinois, he probably gave little thought to the social life of the Capital. Very few members of Congress were accompanied by their wives; and most of the balls, parties, receptions and outings were sponsored by government officials rather than by members of Congress.

The social life of Washington during the administration of James K. Polk has been described as "merry, if somewhat rural." In fact, the instability of Washington society made a deep impression upon foreigners who were assigned by their governments to the small capital city of 34,000 inhabitants. While Polk was President, the levees at the White House took on an austerity that repelled. There was no dancing or refreshments of any kind. Under Sarah Childress Polk the Executive Mansion sank into austere and immaculate order. John Fairchild, a United States Senator from Maine, went on record as to the uninteresting presidential levees. He wrote that "I'd rather be whipped than go" but he went from a sense of duty if not good politics.

Lincoln was an exception among congressmen in that his wife and two sons, Robert and Edward Baker, accompanied him. They arrived in the Capital late in the evening of December 2, 1847. They secured temporary lodging at Brown's Hotel which was originally known as the Indian Queen Hotel. Later, they secured rooms at Capitol Hill at Mrs. Benjamin Sprigg's boarding house in Carroll Row, two squares east of the Capitol building. Mrs. Sprigg's boarding house was situated on the present site of the Library of Congress. Here, John T. Stuart, John J. Hardin and Edward D. Baker had lived when they served in Congress from Lincoln's Illinois district.

It was customary at this time for Congressmen to board in small clubs or messes, somewhat on the order of students in college towns. The Washington newspapers of Lincoln's Congressional period are filled with advertisements inserted by boarding house keepers, usually widows, informing the public that they could accommodate a "mess of members with pleasant cham-

bers." Lincoln's messmates were Pennsylvania representatives John Blanchard, John Dickey, A. R. McIlvaine, James Pollock and John Strohm. With the exception of Pollock, who later became governor of Pennsylvania, these men achieved little distinction. Lincoln apparently recognized Pollock's ability because in 1861 he appointed him the director of the mint at Philadelphia.

Three other congressmen at Mrs. Sprigg's were Elisha Embree of Indiana and P. W. Tompkins of Mississippi, men of little note, and Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio, who was "for twenty years (1838-1859) the most distinguished anti-slavery leader of the House." In 1861 Lincoln, during the first year of his presidential term appointed Giddings consul general to Canada, an office he held until his death. All nine of the congressmen were members of the Whig Party.

Other fellow boarders were Duff Green once a member of President Andrew Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet," Nathan Sargent, a journalist, who wrote under the pen-name of Oliver Oldschool, and Dr. Samuel C. Busey of Washington. Sargent served as sergeant-at-arms in the House of Representatives, and historians are indebted to Dr. Busey for his "Personal Reminiscences and Recollections."

Mrs. Lincoln and the two children stayed several months at Mrs. Sprigg's boarding house but she appeared to be very retiring and was seen only at meal time. Of course, she must have been quite busy taking care of two small children. Robert was four years old and "Eddie" was a year and a half. Apparently, she made some friends (and maybe enemies) because Lincoln wrote her (April 16, 1848) after she returned to her father's home in Lexington, Kentucky, that "All the house — or rather, all with whom you were on decided good terms — send their love to you. The others say nothing."

One evening in middle January of 1848, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln attended the performance of the "Ethiopian Serenaders" at Carusi's Saloon, (salon) which was the old Washington Theatre. We can glean from Lincoln's letter of July 2, 1848 to Mrs. Lincoln in Lexington that their attention that evening was diverted from the "Ethiopian Serenaders" to two girls of easy virtue wearing black fur bonnets and who were never seen in close company with other ladies.

Naturally as a Congressman's wife Mrs. Lincoln took little part in the social life of the Capital City. This may account for her return to Lexington as early as April, 1848.

CALENDAR

1847

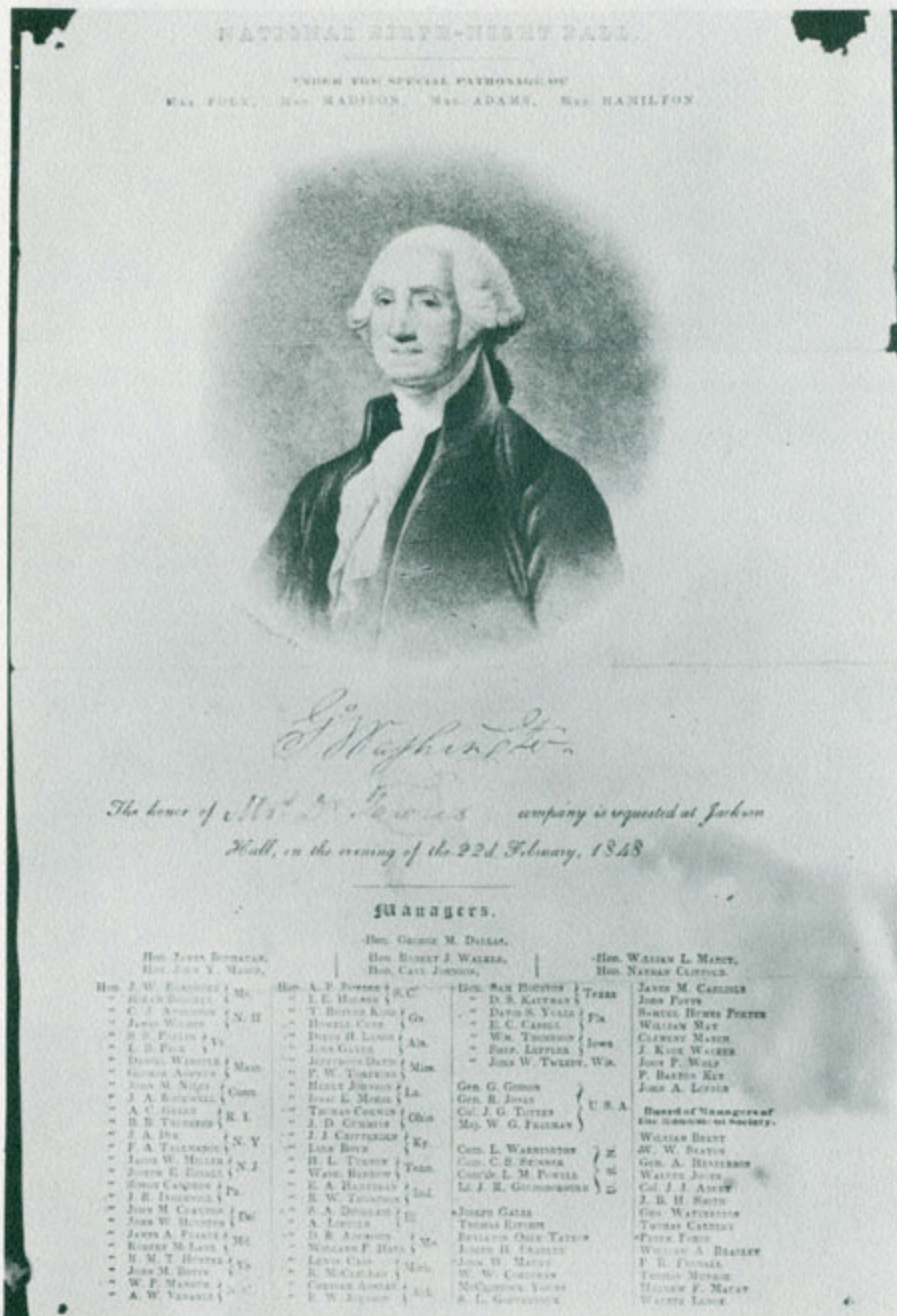
- Dec. 2 The Lincolns arrive in Washington, D. C.
- Dec. 6 Lincoln takes oath as Representative.

1848

- April Sometime in April Mrs. Lincoln and children leave Washington for Lexington, Kentucky.
- June 6 Lincoln leaves Washington to attend Whig National Convention in Philadelphia, Pa.
- June 10 Lincoln addresses ratification meeting at Wilmington, Delaware.
- June 11 Lincoln returns to Washington.
- July 23 Mrs. Lincoln and two sons arrive in Washington.
- Aug. 24 Lincoln spoke at a bi-partisan meeting at Seneca, Maryland.
- Aug. 26 Lincoln spoke at Rockville, Maryland.
- Sept. 9 Lincoln and family about this date leave Washington for a speaking tour in New England.
- Sept. 28 Lincoln visits Niagara Falls with family.
- Oct. 10 Lincoln and family arrive in Springfield, Illinois.
- Dec. 7 Lincoln arrived in Washington to attend Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress.

1849

- March 4 Last day in Congress.



From the Lincoln Life Foundation
 This original invitation (7 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches) to the National Birth-Night Ball of February 22, 1848, is addressed to Mrs. Towle (identity unknown). Lincoln's name appears 51st on the list.

Before Mrs. Lincoln returned to her relatives, her husband was appointed as one of the two Illinois managers (Stephen A. Douglas was the other one) of the National Birth-Night Ball which was "under the special patronage of Mrs. Polk, Mrs. Madison, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Hamilton. This appointment of a semi-official nature was likely the first opportunity the Lincolns had to enter the higher social life of the city. The appointment was certainly not made because Lincoln was eager to serve, but largely because he was the only Whig Congressman from Illinois. Even this was a dubious honor because there were 104 other managers.

The National Birth-Nite Ball was in honor of George Washington and was scheduled to be held at Jackson Hall on February 22, 1848. Unfortunately the ball had to be postponed until March 1, due to the sudden attack suffered by John Quincy Adams on February 21, which led to his death on February 23. Did Congressman Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln attend? In all likelihood, but there are no records to substantiate their attendance.

Alone in Washington Lincoln sometimes joined the

crowd on the capital terrace when band concerts were given on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons (sometimes evenings) to those who wished to listen to the music played by the Marine Band. This was a custom established by the Tylers and, on the broad, gravelled walks and on the grass, the elite (including Senators and Representatives) gathered for social, political or even cultural reasons.

On July 2, 1848, Lincoln wrote his wife that he had attended the concert in the capital grounds the day before and "the attendance was rather thin." In fact, he wrote that "the interest in it, is dwindling down to nothing." On this particular occasion Lincoln's attention was again diverted away from the music to the same two girls he saw at Carusi's wearing the black fur bonnets. He wrote Mrs. Lincoln that "one of them was attended by their brother, and the other had a member of Congress in tow . . ."

Mrs. Lincoln must have regretted missing the ceremonies in connection with the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument. This brilliant affair was held on July 4, 1848. The parade was a mile and a half long, made up of executive officials, congressmen, military companies, fire companies, fraternal organizations and school children. They marched to the site where Robert C. Winthrop, Speaker of the House, delivered the principal address. On the speaker's platform were seated Mrs. Alexander Hamilton and Mrs. James Madison, and all the beauty, fashion and culture of the many States and District of Columbia was in evidence. Nothing to equal this fourth of July celebration had ever taken place before in the city. Lincoln, of course, marched in the parade with the congressional procession.

Another diversion of the Whig Congressman from Illinois was bowling. Near Green's Row there was a bowling alley in James Casparis' Hotel, known as the Congress Hall Refectory, that was often frequented by the statesmen on Capitol Hill. Lincoln never developed very much skill in bowling, but he played the game with great spirit and zest. Win or lose, he was always in good humor. Here he often indulged in his favorite pastime of story-telling, adding much to the merriment of the crowd that always gathered around to hear him.

One of Lincoln's favorite loafing places was the post-office of the House of Representatives. According to Ben: Perley Poore, he even had a favorite seat "at the left of the open fireplace." There, "tilted back in his chair, with his long legs reaching over to the chimney jamb" he told stories from an endless repertoire and they were "always pertinently adapted to some passing event." Poore wrote that "it was refreshing to us correspondents, compelled as we were to listen to so much that was prosy and tedious, to hear this bright specimen of western genius tell his inimitable stories especially his reminiscences of the Black Hawk War."

On July 23, 1848 Mrs. Lincoln and the two boys arrived in Washington from Lexington, and on September 9, the entire family left Washington for Mr. Lincoln's speaking tour of New England. This was an extensive tour, lasting one month. The Lincolns reached home on October 10. There is some question whether or not Mrs. Lincoln and the children accompanied the Congressman throughout the entire tour. She did on one occasion express a desire to go "to New York or Boston, or travel

the lake route." Perhaps she remained in those cities which particularly appealed to her while Lincoln spoke in some dozen different New England communities. One source of information indicates that Mrs. Lincoln joined her husband in Albany, New York. If so, she may have had the pleasure of meeting the future President, Millard Fillmore. Her husband did. It is also of interest to add that the Lincoln's visited Niagara Falls and returned to Chicago from Buffalo by way of the lake route, aboard the steamer *Globe*.

Lincoln returned to Washington on December 7, 1848 to attend the Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress. Christmas was probably a lonely season for Lincoln, but his life in the Capital may have been enlivened by an invitation to a complimentary dinner held at Coleman's Hotel on December 20. "A portion of the two Houses of Congress and one or two other guests" attended. The newspaper reports do not provide a guest list, but there is good reason to believe that the only Whig Congressman from Illinois would receive an invitation.

Lincoln found his boarding house messmates quite congenial and they would often linger all evening at the dinner table discussing politics and the measures transpiring in the Thirtieth Congress. One such meeting took place on January 11, 1849, when the congressmen at Lincoln's mess (Dr. Samuel C. Busey in his "Personal Reminiscences" stated that Lincoln did not stay at Mrs. Sprigg's during the short session) lingered at the table discussing the amendment which he proposed to be attached to the resolution of December 21, instructing the committee on the District of Columbia to report the bill abolishing slavery in the district.

Lincoln may have been invited to attend Speaker Robert C. Winthrop's party honoring President-elect Zachary Taylor. A large number of members of both Houses of Congress and other distinguished persons received invitations. Lincoln's name is not mentioned in the press as being among those present, but he may have accepted the invitation of February 27, 1849. Perhaps he received Winthrop's invitation because he was an ardent Whig and supporter of General Taylor.

As stated before, Lincoln was often invited to social gatherings or chosen as a member of social committees because of his political affiliation with the Whig Party. This may account for his appointment as a manager to make the necessary arrangements for President Zachary Taylor's inaugural ball. The ball was to be held in an "extensive saloon" newly built on Judiciary Square. At an evening meeting, held by the subscribers at Willard's Hotel on January 27, 1849, Lincoln was elected to the board of managers. The board of managers, after their election, held a meeting at Capp's Pavilion on the evening of January 31, 1849. It is assumed that Lincoln was active in both of these meetings.

We know for sure that Lincoln did attend the Taylor Inaugural Ball which was held on Monday, March 5, 1849. Mr. Lincoln was accompanied by Elihu B. Washburne and a few others that made up his party. The event was a brilliant success and they remained at the ball until three . . . o'clock in the morning. When Lincoln went to the cloak room, he found his cloak but after an hour's search he failed to find his hat. Washburne described the disconsolate Lincoln "taking his cloak on his arm, he walked into Judiciary Square, deliberately adjusting it on his shoulders, and started off bareheaded for his lodgings. It would be hard to forget the sight of that tall man and slim man, with his short cloak thrown over his shoulders, starting for his long walk home on Capitol Hill at four o'clock in the morning without any hat on."

These social events were all part of Lincoln's education for his own presidency when his social conscious wife would see to it that the social austerity of the Polk administration, as she vividly remembered it, would not be retained in the Lincoln administration. Then, too, perhaps in the future the Lincolns in the White House would look benignly upon those struggling young congressmen and their wives who were socially ambitious and hoped to be accepted in fashionable governmental circles.

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS PUBLICATIONS

(Continued from the January Issue)

34th Congress/1st Session/Senate/Rep. Com./No. 282/ In The Senate Of The United States/August 11, 1856 . . . Mr. Douglas made the following/Report [To accompany bill H. R. 75]/The Committee on Territories, to whom was referred a bill from the/House of Representatives, for "An Act to reorganize the Territory of/Kansas, and for other Purposes," beg leave to report (Caption Title). Pamphlet, 5 5/8 x 9, 11 pp.

In The Senate of The United States, August 11, 1856/ Mr. Douglas made the following/Report./[To accompany bill H. R. 75]/The Committee on Territories, to whom was referred a bill from the House of Representatives, for "An Act to reorganize the Territory of/Kansas, and for other purposes," beg leave to report. (Caption Title). Pamphlet, 5 1/2 x 8 3/8, 16 pp. (Variant)

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(Continued to the March Issue)

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Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Arnold Gates, 289 New Hyde Park Road, Garden City, New York; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louis Avenue, Northridge, California; E. B. Long, 708 North Kenilworth Ave., Oak Park, Ill.; Ralph G. Newman, 18 E. Chestnut Street, Chicago, Ill.; Kenneth A. Bernard, Boston University, 725 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Mass.; Clyde C. Walton, Jr.; Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.; Judge Warren L. Jones, U. S. Court of Appeals, Jacksonville, Fla.; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 636 Union Arcade, Davenport, Iowa. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above addresses or to the Lincoln National Life Foundation.

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