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Lincoln's Absences From Washington

by James I. Garner

Charleston, Illinois

May 15, 1959

Lincoln's Absences From Washington

This paper was prepared in the fall of 1957 as a term project for Dr. Charles Coleman's social science 550 course.

With encouragement from Dr. Coleman and my adviser, Dr. Francis Palmer, the paper was revamped somewhat and is now submitted for consideration as a partial requirement under Plan B for the master of science degree at Eastern Illinois University.

James I. Garner
May 15, 1959

Lincoln's Absences From Washington

The life of Abraham Lincoln has been studied perhaps more carefully than any figure in history. When I was given the opportunity to add a particle of research to this study, I gratefully accepted the offer.

The paper was first submitted as part of the course requirements in Dr. Charles Coleman's class on the life of Lincoln. Research on it was begun in the fall of 1957 and the final version prepared in the spring of 1959.

When I first undertook the project of listing the number of times Lincoln left Washington while president, Dr. Coleman said such a list had not been published. Paul Angle has numerous volumes which give a day-by-day account of Lincoln several years prior to his election, but Angle's account stops at 1861. Recently Dr. Coleman informed me that a volume covering the years 1861-65 has been prepared and will be published sometime in 1960.

Research for this paper was made in Booth Library at Eastern Illinois University. The Lincoln collection there is excellent and provided what I consider to be ample sources of reference.

To assume that every absence Lincoln had from Washington is recorded here would be assuming a great deal. Lincoln was apt to move without warning, and it is conceivable that he made trips down the Potomac to visit

army installations that were not recorded by historians. I believe it is safe to assume, however, that all trips of any importance and certainly most of the other less important ones are noted in this paper.

Lincoln left Washington twenty-three times during the period February 23, 1861, the day he arrived in Washington to take office, through April 21, 1865, the day his coffin was placed on a special train for the trip back to Springfield for burial. Those twenty-three absences totaled approximately sixty-three days, only one of which was made for the express purpose of relaxation. That trip was a half-day jaunt to Mt. Vernon with a few Springfield friends in the spring of 1862.

Lincoln made three trips in 1861; nine in 1862; five in 1863; four in 1864, and three in 1865. The first absence from the Capital came in mid-May, 1861; the last in March and April of 1865.

At least thirteen of the trips were hurried one-day visits to army installations for conferences with Lincoln's generals. The most lengthy visit was the last, when Lincoln spent seventeen days at Grant's headquarters near City Point, Virginia. He left Washington March 23 and returned April 9, five days before John Wilkes Booth shot him in Ford's Theater.

During the summer months, Lincoln and his family often lived in a cottage at Soldiers' Home, three miles north of the city. These daily trips are not recorded here as absences, since life at Soldiers' Home was nothing out of the ordinary.

Chronological Listing of Lincoln's

Absences From Washington

February 23, 1861-----President-elect Abraham Lincoln arrived in Washington at six a. m. to begin his term as the 16th president of the United States. He was met at the station by Congressman E. B. Washburne of Illinois.¹

Mid-May, 1861-----Lincoln's first trip from Washington was made in May. He visited Great Falls and was absent from the White House for the entire day. The trip was made to gather some idea on the defense of Washington.² Memorandums, letters and telegrams written by Lincoln were sent from the White House each day in the month, except May 12, 15 and 19.³ The one-day jaunt could have been made on one of those days.

July, 1861-----Sometime during the latter part of July, Lincoln made a trip to an army camp at Arlington, across the river.⁴ Tarbell's reference is the lone source located in connection with this absence.

1. James G. Randall: Lincoln the President, vol. I, p. 289. Cited hereafter as Randall.

2. Randall, vol. I, p. 367.

3. Roy B. Basler (editor): The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. IV, pp. 350-391. Cited hereafter as Basler.

4. Ida M. Tarbell: The Life of Abraham Lincoln, vol. II, p. 60. Cited hereafter as Tarbell.

September, 1861-----Lincoln, Seward and McClellan took one day to confer (prior to 17th)

with General Banks on the conditions of the camps, forts and batteries under Banks' command.¹ A plan designed to stop, delay or even arrest members of the Maryland legislature was formulated in order to stop Maryland from seceding.² This visit would have been made prior to September 17, the day the legislature met.³ The date would have been after September 11, the day Lincoln met with Jessie Benton Fremont in Washington.⁴ Mrs. Fremont's husband was, at the time, one of Lincoln's top generals.

Spring, 1862-----Of the several visits made by Lincoln, only one, or possibly two, were made for the express purpose of relaxation. In the spring of 1862, Mr. and Mrs. Ninian Edwards were visiting Washington. Mrs. Edwards was Lincoln's sister-in-law. During the visit, Lincoln suggested that Mrs. Edwards make up a party of Springfield folks for a visit to Mt. Vernon. A group, including President and Mrs. Lincoln, Marshal and Mrs. Lamon, Lamon's brother, Robert, Mrs. Milton Hay, the Edwardses, and one or two others boarded a government

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1. Carl Sandburg: The War Years, vol. I, p. 329. Cited hereafter as Sandburg.
 2. Sandburg, vol. I, pp. 330-331.
 3. Sandburg, vol. I, p. 331.
 4. T. Harry Williams: Lincoln and His Generals, pp. 37-38. Cited hereafter as Williams.

Spring, 1862 (con't)-----steamer at the navy yards for the trip. The party arrived at Mt. Vernon about twelve-thirty and spent an hour and a half wandering about the gardens and mansion.¹

March 19, 1862-----When Lincoln discovered that McClellan was planning an all-out offensive on Richmond, the President went to Alexandria to talk with McClellan. Most of the discussion centered on acquiring the navy's co-operation in keeping the "Merrimac" from entering the York River.²

May 5, 1862----- Lincoln made another visit to an army installation in early May. With Stanton and Chase, the President traveled to Fortress Monroe to confer with McClellan. After reviewing the troops on the afternoon of the fifth, Lincoln, the next day, rode through the streets of the captured Norfolk and viewed the remains of the ruined "Merrimac."³ We can assume that Lincoln remained at Fortress Monroe for several days since a letter, dated May 9, and a telegram, dated May 11, carried Fortress Monroe datelines.⁴

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1. Ben Thomas: Abraham Lincoln, pp. 477-478. Cited hereafter as Thomas.
 2. Williams, pp. 75-77.
 3. Sandburg, vol. I, pp. 485-487.
 4. Basler, vol. V, p. 208.

May 23, 1862-----Lincoln continued his visits to headquarters of his generals during the latter part of May by conferring with General McDowell near Richmond. McClellan was within five miles of Richmond and Lincoln was attempting to coordinate the operations in such a manner as to insure the capture of the Confederate stronghold. McDowell joined McClellan at Whitehouse Landing on the Pamunkey River and Lincoln visited at this time.¹ Lincoln arrived back in Washington the next day. This is verified by a letter to McClellan, dated May 24, which stated: "I left General McDowell's camp at dark last evening."²

June 18, 1862-----Lincoln apparently made another hurried visit to headquarters of the Army of the Potomac in June. A letter to Governor Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, dated June 18, carries a headquarters, "A. P." dateline.³ Such a meeting with McClellan could have been held after a letter, also dated June 18, to the general indicated that the President was wanting to know more about Richmond, "if I can be informed safely."⁴

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1. Williams, p. 96.
 2. Basler, vol. V, p. 231.
 3. Basler, vol. V, p. 276.
 4. Basler, vol. V, p. 276.

June 23, 1862-----In those dark days during the summer of 1862, Lincoln was a troubled man. The armies under McClellan were not moving against the enemy; McClellan had demonstrated that he was not entirely capable of directing such a force, and the President knew a change of generals had to be made. One June day, without warning, Lincoln made a secret trip to West Point in upstate New York to seek the advice of General Winfield Scott, the man who commanded the Union armies at the start of the war but who had been retired.¹ It is probable at this meeting that the appointment of Halleck as general-in-chief was suggested by General Scott.² On the trip home, Lincoln spoke briefly at the railway station in Jersey City and told the crowd that "...my visit to Scott had nothing to do with the making or unmaking of any general in the country."³

July 8-9, 1862----- On Lincoln's next visit, he was presented the famous "Harrison Bar Letter" from McClellan at Harrison's Landing. After Malvern Hill, Lincoln decided to visit

1. John G. Nicolay and John Hay: Abraham Lincoln, A History, vol. VI, p. 2. Cited hereafter as Nicolay and Hay.

2. Nicolay and Hay, p. 2.

3. Basler, vol. V, p. 284.

July 8-9, 1862 (con't)--- McClellan and left the Capital for Harrison's Landing. ¹

The President conferred with the general and his staff for hours and was presented McClellan's letter, an elaborate plan conceived by the general concerning his ideas of broad policy in the conduct of the war. ²

October 1-4, 1862----- Two weeks after the battle of Antietam, bitterly disgusted over McClellan's hesitancy to pursue Lee's army, Lincoln moved. Without telling cabinet members and without notifying McClellan that he was coming, Lincoln started for the Army of Potomac headquarters. ³ Lincoln remained for three days and spent several hours conferring with the general. On the night of October 4, Lincoln made two speeches at Frederick, Maryland, one at "Mrs. Ramsey's house" and the other at the railway station before his train to Washington departed. ⁴ Photographs of Lincoln's visit to the army camp were made. Most notable is that of Lincoln, General John A. McClernand and Allan Pinkerton. ⁵

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1. Randall, vol. II, pp. 100-101.
 2. Randall, vol. II, p. 100.
 3. Sandburg, vol. I, p. 594.
 4. Basler, vol. V, p. 450.
 5. Sandburg, vol. I, opp. p. 592.

November 26, 1862-----Prior to the battle of Fredericksburg (Dec. 13), Lincoln, perhaps a trifle more uneasy than usual when a battle was approaching, telegraphed Burnside: "If I should be in a boat off Aquia Creek at dark tomorrow (26th) evening, could you, without inconvenience, meet me and spend an hour or two with me?"¹ Details of this meeting are lacking, but a letter from Halleck to Burnside^a month after the battle indicated that Lincoln consented to the attack solely on condition that it be accompanied by diversionary movement at the fords above town.²

April 4-10, 1863----- Lincoln and a large party left Washington in early April for a visit to the army camps. The President hoped to combine business with a few days' relaxation. In the group were Mrs. Lincoln, the Lincoln's beloved Tad, Dr. A. G. Henry, Noah Brooks, a Mr. Crawford and Attorney-General Bates.³ Lincoln and his party made the trip aboard the steamer "Carrie Martin."⁴ They arrived at Hooker's headquarters in Falmouth, Virginia, and were given cavalry escort from the pier to headquarters.⁵ Lincoln insisted on going to the nearest

1. Thomas, p. 349.

2. Thomas, p. 349.

3. Randall, vol. III, pp. 17-18.

4. Sandburg, vol. II, p. 84.

5. Randall, vol. III, p. 18.

April 4-10, 1863 (con't)---hospital tent and visiting with nearly every one of

the sick before going ahead with other business.¹ At the end of the week, the Lincoln party was escorted back to Washington by Generals Schurz and Sickles.²

May 6, 1863----- After the battle of Chancellorsville, when Lincoln had heard that Hooker had failed, the President was, according to his secretaries, "for a moment in despair."³ Reacting promptly, however, he conferred with Halleck, visited Hooker's headquarters and urged another "early movement," pointing out that it would "help to supersede the bad moral effect of the recent one."⁴ Lincoln remained at Hooker's camp for at least 24 hours since a telegram to Stanton, dated May 7, bore a headquarters dateline.⁵ The message told Stanton that the President would "be up tonight."⁶

June 13, 1863----- Lincoln attempted to meet Hooker at Acquia Creek on this date, but he was recalled by a telegram from

1. Sandburg, vol. II, p. 85.

2. Sandburg, vol. II, p. 92.

3. Randall, vol. II, p. 270.

4. Randall, vol. II, p. 271.

5. Basler, vol. VI, p. 201.

6. Basler, vol. VI, p. 201.

June 13, 1863 (con't)-----Stanton before reaching the rendezvous.¹ A telegram from Hooker to the President, advising him not to make the trip, arrived after Lincoln had left.² Thus, Stanton wired ahead and asked that the President be informed of Hooker's message.

November 18, 1863-----Lincoln journeyed to Gettysburg in the middle of November to say a few words of dedication for the cemetery which held the dead of the bloody battle of Gettysburg. Stanton proposed that the President leave Washington at six o'clock of the day of dedication, travel laboriously through Baltimore, reach Gettysburg at noon, leave Gettysburg at six in the evening and arrive back in Washington at midnight.³ Lincoln objected and the plan was changed so that the Presidential party would arrive in Gettysburg a day before the ceremony.⁴ Lincoln returned to Washington late at night on the same day he spoke.⁵

December 28, 1863-----The President made another of his one-day visits down the Potomac to visit General Marston at Point Lookout. According to his secretary, Lincoln returned about

1. Basler, vol. VI, p. 271.

2. Basler, vol. VI, p. 271.

3. William Barton: Lincoln at Gettysburg, p. 57. Cited hereafter as Barton.

4. Barton, p. 57.

5. Barton, p. 95.

December 28, 1863 (cont)-- dusk.¹ A New York Times report said Lincoln and Stanton made the trip to inspect a prison camp at Point Lookout and returned that evening.²

April 18, 1864----- To raise money for the war effort, various groups from time to time would hold "Sanitary Fairs." Lincoln made visits to two such fairs and delivered short speeches at both. In April the President journeyed to Baltimore for the sole purpose of attending a "Sanitary Fair."³ After speaking on the aspects of liberty and commending the people for aiding the war effort, Lincoln shocked the gathering with the announcement that rebel forces had just massacred some 300 colored soldiers and white officers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee.⁴

June 16, 1864----- Lincoln's second visit to a "Sanitary Fair" was made in June, this time to Philadelphia.⁵ At this meeting, Lincoln expressed his gratitude to the Sanitary Commission for doing such a commendable job treating the sick and wounded soldiers. He also commented that Grant

1. Tyler Dennett: Lincoln and the Civil War in the Letters and Diaries of John Hay, p. 145. Cited hereafter as Dennett.

2. Basler, vol. VII, p. 95.

3. Philip Van Doren Stern (editor): The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln, p. 809. Cited hereafter as Stern.

4. Stern, p. 811.

5. Stern, p. 816.

June 16, 1864 (con't)-----would never yield until Richmond had been taken.¹

Lincoln also addressed the Union League Club and spoke briefly to a crowd at the railway station. The President remained overnight in Philadelphia and stayed at the Continental Hotel.²

June 21, 1864-----Shortly after returning from Philadelphia, Lincoln apparently felt it necessary to visit Grant and Admiral Lee to check on the military situation. On June 20, the President started down the river with Gustavus V. Fox, assistant secretary of navy.³ Lincoln, according to Hay, "arrived June 23 from the front, sunburnt and fagged, but still refreshed and cheered."⁴

July 31, 1864----- Lincoln paid another visit to Grant in late July. This meeting also took place at Fortress Monroe.⁵ Details are lacking.

February 1-3, 1865----- After delegates from both sides failed to reach agreement at Hampton Roads, Lincoln and Seward traveled to the same site to meet with the three Confederate delegates to discuss terms of peace.⁶ Delegates from the South were Alexander H. Stephens, vice-president of the

1. Stern, p. 818.

2. Basler, vol. VII, pp. 397-398.

3. Dennett, p. 195.

4. Dennett, p. 195.

5. Williams, p. 329-330.

6. Thomas, p. 503.

February 1-3, 1865(cont)-Confederacy, Judge John Campbell and R. M. T.

Hunter.¹ The conference, which accomplished very little, was held under the guns of Fortress Monroe aboard the "River Queen."

March 23-April 9, 1865- Lincoln's final absence from Washington as president was made to Grant's headquarters near the close of the war. Grant had invited the President to visit headquarters for a few days' rest.² Lincoln accepted and at one p. m. on the 23rd, Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Tad, Captain Barnes and a guard, Crook, pulled away from the Sixth Street wharf on the "River Queen," and about nine o'clock the evening of the next day, tied to the wharf at City Point.³ Lincoln conferred with Grant and remained in the City Point area for more than two weeks. A telegram to Stanton refers to a visit to Richmond on April 4.⁴ Finally, the President was called back to Washington on April 9 after hearing of Seward's serious accident.⁵

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1. Thomas, p. 503.
 2. Sandburg, vol. IV, p. 139.
 3. Sandburg, vol. IV, p. 141.
 4. Basler, vol. VIII, p. 387.
 5. Basler, vol. VIII, p. 388.

April 21, 1865----- Friday morning, April 21, just six days after the death in the Peterson house on Tenth street, President Johnson, General Grant, Stanton and other Cabinet members saw the coffin placed aboard a special burial car at the Washington depot--joined by another and smaller casket--that of the son Willie, which had been disinterred and was to have burial in Springfield, Illinois, near his father. Railroad yard engines bells tolled and a far-stretching crowd stood with uncovered heads as the train of seven cars--with a scout pilot engine ahead to test the roadway--moved out of Washington for Baltimore.¹

1. Sandburg, vol. IV, p. 393.

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