LINCOLN DEATHBED SCENE RECALLED

James Tanner, Who Recorded Notes Near Martyr's Chamber, Tells of Tragedy.

Wash. D. C. Sun. Star 7/12/25

"The surgeon general gently crossed the pulseless hands across the motionless breast and rose to his feet.

"Rev. Dr. Gurley stepped forward and, lifting his hands, began: 'Our Father and Our God——'

"My pencil point caught in my coat and broke, and the world lost the prayer—a prayer which was interrupted only by the sobs of Stanton as he buried his face in the bedclothes.

"'Thy will be done' in subdued and tremulous tones floated through that little chamber.

"Mr. Stanton raised his head, the tears streaming down his cheeks, as he sobbed out the words, 'He belongs to the ages now.'"

Such is the word picture of the final scene at the deathbed of Abraham Lincoln as given by one of the last eyewitnesses to survive—a young War Department clerk, who had been summoned hastily from the next house to take shorthand notes of the words of the witnesses brought before Secretary Stanton as he organized the hunt for the assassin.

Friend Reveals Copy.

James Tanner, for many years register of wills of the District of Columbia, wrote out an account of what he saw and heard in the house that night that throws much new light on this important incident in American history. Some time before his death last year he presented a typewritten copy of his account to a personal friend, who has placed it in the hands of The Evening Star. So far as is known, no part of it previously has been published.

Mr. Tanner's account appears to settle an issue of fact over which there has been much debate—whether Vice President Johnson was at the bedside at any time during the night. He states possitively that Mr. Johnson was not present, and that the place at the foot of the bed where he is represented to have been sitting was occupied by Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Tanner's manuscript follows:

The Passing of Abraham Lincoln.

"Among all the characters who loomed large in the public mind from 1861 to 1865, one came to stand apart and alone in supremacy, finally recognized almost unanimously the world over as without a peer. It took the perspective of many years to enable us to get a correct view of the greatness of his character, his transcendent intellectual endowment, the utter unselfishness of his purpose, his absolute devotion to the interests of the Nation which had called him to its leadership and the great agony endured by his loving, gentle heart as he staggered under his awful burden, an agony never equaled since the Savior of mankind passed the night in the Garden of Gethsemane.

"Our people have shown in a thousand ways and particularly in his recent centennial, that every atom relating to the life of Abraham Lincoln is of intense and continuous interest to them, and because of this and because of the fact that I was a spectator of the final scene of the supreme tragedy of that time on the morning of April 15, 1865, I pen these lines.

"At that time I was an employe of the Ordnance Bureau of the War Department and had some ability as a shorthand writer. The latter fact brought me within touch of the events of that awful night. I had gone with a friend to witness the performance that evening at Grove's Theater, where now stands the New National. Soon after 10 o'clock a man rushed in from the lobby and cried out, 'President Lincoln has been shot in Ford's Theater.' There was a great confusion at once, most of the audience rising to their feet. Some one cried out, 'It's a ruse of the pickpockets; look out.' Almost everybody resumed his seat, but almost immediately one of the cast stepped out on the stage and said, 'The sad news is too true—the audience will disperse.'

Steward Reported Killed.

"My friend and myself crossed to Willard's Hotel and there were told that Secretary Steward had been killed. Men's faces blanched as they at once asked, 'What news of Stanton? Have they got him too?' The wildest rumors soon filled the air.

"I had rooms at the time in the house adjoining the Peterson House, into which the President had been carried. Hastening down to Tenth street, I found an almost solid mass of humanity blocking the street and the crowd constantly enlarging. A silence that was appalling prevailed. Interest centered on all who entered or emerged from the Peterson House and all of the latter were closely questioned as to the stricken President's condition. From the first the answers were unvarying—that there was no hope.

"A military guard had been placed in front of the house and those adjoining, but upon telling the commanding officer that I lived there, I passed up to my apartment, which comprised the second story front of the house. There was a balcony in front and I found my rooms and the balcony thronged by the other occupants of the house. Horror was in every heart and dismay on every countenance. We had just about a week of tumultuous joy over the downfall of Richmond and the collapse of the Confederacy, and now in an instant all this was changed to the deepest woe by the foul shot of the cowardly assassin.

"It was nearly midnight when Maj. Gen. Augur came out on the stoop of the Peterson House and asked if there was any one in the crowd who could write shorthand. There was no response from the street, but one of my friends on the balcony told the general there was a young man inside who could serve him, whereupon the general told him to ask me to come down as they needed me. So it was that I came into close touch with the scenes and events surrounding the final hours of Abraham Lincoln's life.

Heard Mrs. Lincoln's Sobs.

"Entering the house I accompanied Gen. Augur down the hallway to the rear parlor. As we passed the door of the front parlor the moans and sobs of Mrs. Lincoln struck painfully upon our ears. Entering the rear parlor, I found Secretary Stanton, Judge David K. Cartter, chief justice of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia; B. A. Hill and many others.

"I took my seat on one side of a small library table opposite Mr. Stanton, with Judge Cartter at the end. Various witnesses were brought in who had either been in Ford's Theater or up in the vicinity of Mr. Seward's residence. Among them were Harry Hawk, who had been Asa Trenchard that night in the play, 'Our American Cousin'; Alfred Cloughly, Col. G. V. Rutherford and others. As I took down the statements they made we were distracted by the distress of Mrs. Lincoln, for though the folding doors between the two rooms were closed, her frantic sorrow was distressingly audible to us.

"She was accompanied by Miss Harris of New York, who, with her fiance, Maj. Rathbone, had gone to the theater with the President and Mrs. Lincoln. Booth, in his rush through the box after firing the fatal shot, had lunged at Maj. Rathbone with his dagger and wounded him in the arm slightly. In the naturally intense excitement over the President's condition, it is probable that Maj. Rathbone himself did not realize that he was wounded until after he had been in the Peterson House some time, when he fainted from loss of blood, was attended to, his wound dressed and he taken to his apartments. He and Miss Harris subsequently married.

"Through all the testimony given by those who had been in Ford's Theater that night there was an undertone of horror which held the witnesses back from positively identifying the assassin as Booth. Said Harry Hawk, 'To the best of my belief, it was John Wilkes Booth, but I will not be positive,' and so it went through the testimony of others, but the sum total left no doubt as to the identity of the assassin.

"Our task was interrupted very many times during the night, sometimes by reports or dispatches for Secretary Stanton but more often by him for the purpose of issuing orders calculated to enmesh Booth in his flight. 'Guard the Potomac from the city down,' was his repeated direction. He will try to get South. Many dispatches were sent from that table before morning, some to Gen Dix of New York, others to Chicago, Philadelphia, etc.

"Several times Mr. Stanton left us a few moments and passed back to the room at the end of the hall where the President lay. The doors were open and sometimes there would be a few seconds of absolute silence when we could hear plainly the stertorous breathing of the dying man. I think it was on his return from the third trip of this kind when, as he again took his seat opposite me, I looked earnestly at him, desiring yet hesitating to ask if there was any chance of life. He understood and I saw a choke in his throat as he slowly forced the answer to my unspoken question, 'There-is-no-hope.' He had impressed me through those awful hours as being a man of steel, but I knew that he was dangerously near a breakdown.

Johnson Not Present.

"During the night there came in, I think, about every man then of prominence in our national life who was in the Capital at the time and who had heard of the tragedy. A few whom I distinctly recall were Secretaries Welles, Usher and McCullough, Attorney General Speed and Postmaster General Dennison, Assistant Secretaries Field and Otto, Gov. Ogleby, Senators Sumner and Stewart, and Gens. Meigs and Augur. I have seen many asserted pictures of the deathbed scene and most of them have Vice President Andrew Johnson seated in a chair near the foot of the bed on the left side.

Mr. Johnson was not in the house at all, but in his rooms in the Kirkwood House.

"With the completion of the taking of the testimony I at once began to transcribe my shorthand notes into longhand. Twice while so engaged, Miss Harris supported Mrs. Lincoln down the hallway to her husband's bedside. The door leading into the hallway from the room wherein I sat was open and I had a plain view of them as they slowly passed. Mrs. Lincoln was not at the bedside when her husband breathed his last. Indeed, I think it was nearly if not quite two hours before the end when she paid her last visit to the death chamber, and when she passed our door on her return, she cried out, 'Oh! my God and have I given my husband to die!'

"I have witnessed and experienced much physical agony on battlefield and in hospital, but of it all nothing sunk deeper in my memory than that moan of a breaking heart.

Witnessed Last Scenes.

"I finished transcribing my notes at 6:45 in the morning and passed back into the room where the President lay. There were gathered all those whose names I have mentioned and many others, about 20 or 25 in all, I should judge. The bed had been pulled out from the corner and owing to the stature of Mr. Lincoln, he lay diagonally on his back. He had been utterly unconscious from the instant the bullet ploughed into his brain. His stertorous breathing subsided at 22 minutes after 7 o'clock. From then to the end only the gentle rise and fall of his bosom gave indication that life remained.

"The Surgeon General was near the head of the bed, sometimes sitting on the edge thereof, his finger on the pulse of the dying man. Occasionally he put his ear down to catch the lessening beats of his heart. Mr. Lincoln's pastor, Rev. Dr. Phineas D. Gurley, stood a little to the left of the bed. Mr. Stanton sat in a chair near the foot on the left, where the pictures place Andrew Johnson. I stood near the head of the bed and from that position had full view of Mr. Stanton across the President's body. At my right Robert Lincoln sobbed on the shoulder of Charles Summer.

"Stanton's gaze was fixed intently on the countenance of his dying chief. He had, as I said, been a man of steel throughout the night, but as I looked at his face across the corner of the bed and saw the twitching of the muscles I knew that it was only by a powerful effort that he restrained himself. The first indication that the dreaded end had come was at 22 minutes past 7, when the Surgeon General gently crossed the pulseless hands of Lincoln across the motionless breast and rose to his feet.

Prayer Lost to Public.

"Rev. Dr. Gurley stepped forward and lifting his hands began, 'Our Father and our God.' I snatched pencil and notebook from my pocket, but my haste defeated my purpose. My pencil point (I had but one) caught in my coat and broke, and the world lost the prayer—a prayer which was only interrupted by the sobs of Stanton as he buried his face in the bedclothes. As 'Thy will be done. Amen,' in subdued and tremulous tones floated through that little chamber, Mr. Stanton raised his head, the tears streaming down his cheeks. A more agonized expression I never saw on a human countenance as he sobbed out the words, 'He belongs to the ages now.'

"Mr. Stanton directed Maj. Thomas M. Vincent of the staff to take charge of the body, called a meeting of the cabinet in the room where we had passed most of the night and the assemblage dispersed.

"Going to my apartment, I sat down at once to make a second longhand copy for Mr. Stanton of the testimony I had taken, it occurring to me that I wished to retain the one I had written out that night. I had been thus engaged but a brief time when hearing some commotion on the street, I stepped to the window and saw a coffin containing the body of the dead President being placed in a hearse which passed up Tenth street to F and thus to the White House, escorted by a lieutenant and ten privates. As they passed with measured tread and arms reversed, my hand involuntarily went to my head in salute as they started on their long, long journey back to the prairies and the hearts he knew and loved so well, the mortal remains of the greatest American of all time, bar none."