LINCOLN'S LAW OFFICE

BY HENRY B. RANKIN.

The last Lincoln law office deserves at this time some intimate recognition of its locality, appearance and the part that it had in Lincoln's life. This office was the center of Lincoln's legal, political and literary activities in this city. Volumes could have been written of what took place there, had there been such a competent, gossiping scribe as Boswell, always present to take notes of what transpired. The stately Myers building now rises above its former site.

The Lincoln law office was up a flight of stairs so narrow that two people walking abreast rubbed elbows. The room was plainly furnished, yet with Lincoln's presence there, and the many friends and callers who thronged it by day, and not infrequently by night, it was the most interesting office royal of all the public rooms I ever was privileged to frequent. It was a plainly furnished back room on the second floor. The two windows looked out on a flat one-story warehouse roof, coated with tar and pebbles. On hot summer days the tar softened, and the breeze, if there happened to be any, wafted a powerful resinous odor into the room.

The office furnishings were far from elaborate. A large table in the middle of the room; two good-sized book-cases with compartments for filing and ample shelving for books —one stood on the west side between the two windows, the other midway on the south wall. The door into the office was fitted on the upper half with a window-sash divided by 8x10 glass to furnish from the office what light the entrance hall had. A rod at the top of this carried rings attached to a curtain for closing when "no interruption" was desired.

It is now over seventy years since I began passing daily under the swinging sign "Lincoln and Herndon" going up and down the stairway, into and from this back room located in what was then a two story building. This was the law office of Abraham Lincoln for the last seventeen years he spent in Springfield. A bronze tablet marks the former site of this office.

It was my privilege, for several of those later years, to share in that office its routine as a student and enjoy the personality and instruction of the most remarkable man of his century.

Lincoln, when in this little office, was more easy in manner and unrestrained in all respects than at any other place I ever saw him. Here he was his most genial self and welcomed every class of people who came to call, with his best southern hospitality, for, as he would say, if mention was made of time lost: "They honor me by calling in to see me socially, professionally, or politically and they should not go out thinking less of me than when they came in."

Picture him in his office as he was in 1856-1861. As yet he had almost no grey hairs, his weight was about one hundred and eighty pounds, and his face was clean shaven. Wrinkles across his forehead and the deep curved lines on his cheeks had already marked the man of fifty. His neck was neat and trim, bearing with dignity the head sculptors have since modeled so variously. His body movements were rather slow, not in the least nervous or impulsive. His manner of reading and conversing was always impressive. He read aloud sometimes and in this, as in his conversation, he spoke slowly. He had the peculiar habit of using his head and neck in reading or public speaking, for gesticulations.

The end of Lincoln's presence at the law office came the evening of Feb. 10, 1861. I recall Abraham Lincoln's passing that night for the last time out of his office and down the narrow stairway to the street. On the following morning he departed from Springfield on his mission into the strange, strenuous, sacrificial life that has embalmed his memory to forever endure in the heart of the ages.

It was at a time when dark clouds filled the political and national skies, bursting at last into a storm of bitter hate and bloody war. This had become inevitable. When that hour of need had struck—it was from this office there came a man fully prepared by years of study for those fateful hours. An honest, tall, gentle, strong man — heroic and sad, who was constitutionally called by his fellow countrymen from this office and placed at the helm of state to preserve our National Union. In that time of political turmoil and civil revolution, he guided his country safely through blood and fire and tears with a steady unshaken faith in God and man.

Through those long years of battles his endurance, his fertility of resources, his magnanimity, his patience, were sorely tried, and never found wanting. Never rash, never vindictive, keeping a kind heart and an open mind, toward friend and foe, he became more firm "in the right, as God gave him to see the right," under each successive disaster.

It was not the opportunity, nor the stress of great occasions, such as the delivery of his speech in the Illinois state capitol on "The House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand"; nor the debates with Douglas that followed it; nor the opportunity before a New York audience at the Cooper institute; that accounts for, or explains the progressive developments of Lincoln.

It was not Salem, Springfield, or Washington; it was neither Stuart, Logan, Herndon, Douglas, Baker, Hardin, or the able men in his cabinet; Seward, Stanton, Chase and others who surrounded him in so many capacities—both civil and military—during his presidency, who can have the credit of prominence in the making of Abraham Lincoln; much as these places and some of those men may have contributed to it.

Amid, after and beyond all these influences and those times and men that he there moved among, and rising beyond all comparisons with them, we clearly discern the unique and exclusive personality of Lincoln himself. These localities and eminent men have had other partners and students and colleagues, but none other such as Lincoln arose from their associations. The waters of the Sangamon have flowed by the places Lincoln's name has made historic for three quarters of a century since, but they have borne no message of such personality as Lincoln's into the world's wide seas to refresh and inspire the common people of all climes and colors.

No other human personality towers higher in the admiration of mankind, or casts so benign a light upon the character and destiny of our republic. He stands today the most unique and unforgettable figure in our history, and one of the mighty spirits of the race.

Henry B. Rankin.

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