

2008

February



President's Day – February 18th

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Abraham Lincoln and Freemasonry

by Paul M. Bessel, November 1994

Abraham Lincoln was not a Mason, but he possessed and displayed all the important qualities of Freemasonry: faith, hope, and charity, belief in God, the equality of all people, and the ability of each person to improve. He came into contact with many Masons and Freemasonry was a greater influence in society then than today. What, then, was his view of Masonry, and would he and Masonry have benefited from his membership? Why did he not become a Mason? How did Masonry affect his life and career?

Lincoln's Attitude Toward Freemasonry --

How Lincoln and Freemasonry Would Have Benefited from his Membership

Direct evidence about Lincoln and Masonry

The Grand Lodge of Illinois recessed their meeting being held during the 1860 Presidential campaign to call on Abraham Lincoln, a candidate in that election, and he is reported to have said, "Gentlemen, I have always entertained a profound respect for the Masonic fraternity and have long cherished a desire to become a member..."

When a Mason told Lincoln in a conversation during that campaign that all his opponents were Freemasons, especially noting that Stephen A. Douglas was an early member of the Masonic lodge in Springfield, Lincoln's home town, and he was not, Lincoln replied, "I am not a Freemason, Dr. Morris, though I have great respect for the institution."

After Lincoln's death, the Grand Master of Masons in the District of Columbia, Benjamin B. French, who had been a friend of Lincoln's, wrote to the editor of *The Masonic Trowel*, who was also the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Illinois, "He [Lincoln] once told me how highly he respected our Order and that he at one time had fully made up his mind to apply for admission into it..."

Brother French also wrote to the Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New York, in response to a similar inquiry, "President Lincoln ... once told me, in the presence of MW Brother J.W. Simons, that he had at one time made up his mind to apply for admission to our Fraternity but

he feared he was too lazy to attend to his duty as a Mason, as he should like to do, and that he had not carried out his intentions...."

Carl Sandburg said, in a chapter about Lincoln's political activities in his biography of Lincoln, "Though not a Mason, he [Lincoln] had at hand a personal copy of the bound 'Proceedings of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Illinois,' being reports of conventions of the Masonic order for the years 1851-1857."

Why Lincoln should have been a Mason

There are many reasons for Lincoln to have had a positive view of Freemasonry. A qualification to become a Mason is a belief in a Supreme Being, while leaving it to each one to decide exactly what religious beliefs to hold, and Masonic ritual includes many references to the Bible and the concept of spiritual rebirth. Lincoln, too, had a fervent belief in God. He was an avid student of the Bible, and included Biblical references in many of his writings and speeches, the most famous being his second Inaugural address, and he regarded the entire subject of religion as a matter of individual conscience. Lincoln could have been expected to have been attracted to Freemasonry's attitude of support for religion combined with strong support of freedom of religion and conscience for all people. Spiritual rebirth was one of the special concepts alluded to in Lincoln's Gettysburg address.

One of the fundamental tenets of Masonry is that it seeks "to make good men better." This belief would have appealed to Abraham Lincoln, who desired to see the best in people and to see that each individual could advance in life as much as possible. Likewise, the Masonic support of equality and the brotherhood of all people were also fundamental ideals with Lincoln. Masonry examines the meaning of death, and Lincoln frequently meditated on this. Freemasonry, in the 1800's even more than now, focuses on philosophy -- what are the long-term purposes and goals of our lives. Lincoln, who talked of America as being the beacon of hope for mankind and who said the goal of the Civil War was to insure that free government would survive in the world, would have been interested in this Masonic tradition.

There are more mundane reasons to think that Abraham Lincoln should have been a Mason. Freemasonry and other fraternal organizations are typical places for politicians to become well known. Lincoln was one of the most ambitious politicians of his on his day,

and had become a Mason more people might have come to know and appreciate his legal abilities. Another reason to think Lincoln should have wanted to become a Mason is his desire for fellowship. Lincoln enjoyed the company of other men and strongly desired acceptance from society. He should have welcomed the opportunity to be with men who are such close friends as to consider themselves Masonic brothers. He would have had the opportunity to share humorous stories, discuss philosophical issues, and exchange information about their experiences. Lincoln enjoyed politics in all its senses, and he would have likely risen to a prominent office within Freemasonry. That would have satisfied his ambition in some way, as well as helping him achieve prominence in the community. It would have shown, as Lincoln did in other ways, that one born without any likely prospects for success in life could achieve much that even those who were more high born did not.

Lincoln's relations with individual Masons

Lincoln's idol in politics was Henry Clay, a U.S. Senator and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, candidate for President several times, and one of the most influential Americans of the first half of the 1800's. Henry Clay was the Grand Master of Masons in Kentucky in 1820-1821. It should be noted, though, that in 1830 and 1831, during the height of the influence of the Anti-Masonic Party in American politics, Clay said he had been inactive for many years. Clay was then seeking the Presidency. He might have helped his chances by specifically denouncing Masonry, but he refused to do that. Since Henry Clay was Lincoln's role model in politics, it would be reasonable to expect that Lincoln would have been influenced by Clay's Masonic involvement -- rising to the level of Grand Master of Kentucky, and Clay's refusal to denounce Masonry even when that action could have helped him politically -- to join the Masons and seek a leadership position, if only to help himself politically.

It is well known that Lincoln demonstrated magnanimity even toward his enemies, asking in his second Inaugural address for "malice toward none and charity for all" and desiring an easy peace and for the leaders of the Confederate government to be allowed to escape rather than being arrested and condemned, and his visits and friendly comments to Confederate wounded. Lincoln searched for reasons to reverse the decisions of court-martials calling for executions. Freemasonry also played a role in alleviating the harshness of the Civil War, and this probably came to Lincoln's attention and may have affected his own

attitudes to some extent. Masons from both sides got together to exchange information, assist wounded from the other side, and arrange for Masonic burial services for fallen enemies. Some soldiers even escaped death because of their Masonic affiliation. Lincoln and his colleagues who were Freemasons demonstrated charity toward others even while engaging in all-out combat to accomplish goals they felt were worth fighting for -- to maintain democratic government and to prove that people could govern themselves.

Abraham Lincoln was never a Mason, but it is likely that Masonry had some positive influences on him, and he on Freemasonry. His political philosophy was affected by Masonic ideals through the Masonic influence on the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. His spirit of charity during the Civil War was probably affected to some extent by hearing how Masons in the war helped each other while maintaining their ideals. Lincoln was helped in his personal life and his political activities by Masons, from his days in New Salem through the rest of his life. Without overreaching, Masons and all who study Lincoln can rightly take some satisfaction from the involvement of Abraham Lincoln, a non-Mason, and Freemasonry.

For a complete outlook on Lincoln and Masonry Try the following web site <http://bessel.org/lincmasn.htm>

