

Documents

LETTER From TANNER

The

AMERICAN HISTORICAL

REVIEW

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5. *The Assassination of President Lincoln, 1865.*

THE following letter, now in the possession of Mr. Hadley H. Walch, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, son of the man to whom it was addressed, was brought to the attention of the *Review* by Professor C. H. Van Tyne. The writer, Hon. James Tanner, now residing in Washington, where since 1904 he has been register of wills for the District of Columbia, kindly consents to its publication. Born in 1844, Mr. Tanner enlisted early in the Civil War in the 87th New York Volunteers, and lost both legs at the second battle of Bull Run.

In 1864 [he writes] I attended Ames's Business College, Syracuse, New York, for the purpose of studying shorthand. Henry F. Walch, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was a fellow student of shorthand and we kept up a desultory acquaintance for some years. That winter of '64 I came to Washington to take a clerkship in the War Department. Walch continued his study and perfected himself in shorthand and was for many years, I think, reporter in the courts at Grand Rapids, Michigan.¹

Mr. Tanner remembers writing the letter to Walch. On the same day or the day preceding he wrote to his mother a long letter of similar purport. From that letter, which afterward came into his possession, a paragraph is quoted in an account by him of President Lincoln's death, in the *New York Sun* of April 16, 1905; this quotation is repeated in David M. DeWitt's *The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 270.

Ordinance Office, War Department,
WASHINGTON, April 17, 1865

Friend Walch:

Your very welcome letter was duly received by me and now I will steal a few minutes from my duties in the office to answer it.

Of course, you must know as much as I do about the terrible events which have happened in this city during the past few days. I have nothing else to write about so I will give you a few ideas about that, perhaps which you have not yet got from the papers.

Last Friday night a friend invited me to attend the theatre with him, which I did. I would have preferred the play at Ford's Theatre, where the President was shot, but my friend chose the play at Grover's, which was "Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp."² While sitting there witnessing the play about ten o'clock or rather a little after, the entrance door was thrown open and a man exclaimed, "President Lincoln is assassinated in his private box at Ford's!" Instantly all was excitement and a terrible rush commenced and someone cried out, "Sit down, it is a ruse of the pickpockets." The audience generally agreed to this, for the most of them sat down, and the play went on; soon, however, a gentleman came out from behind the scenes and informed us that the sad news was too true. We instantly dispersed.

¹ Mr. Walch occupied that position from 1869 till his death in 1920.

² Grover's, or the New National Theatre, still called by the latter name.

On going out in the street we were horrified to learn that Mr. Seward had been attacked and severely injured while in bed at his house. Myself and friend went up to Willard's,² which is a short distance above Ford's, to learn what we could, but could learn nothing there. The people were terribly excited. Ford's Theatre is on Tenth St. between Willard's and F. Grover's is on the Avenue near Fourteenth St. and just below Willard's; it is about four blocks up from Ford's. My boarding house was right opposite Ford's Theatre. We then got on the cars and went down to Tenth St. and up Tenth St. to Ford's and to my boarding house. There was an immense throng there, very quiet yet very much excited; the street was crowded and I only got across on account of my boarding house. The President had been carried into the adjoining house⁴ to where I board; I went up to my room on the second floor and out on the balcony which nearly overhangs the door of Mr. Peterson's house. Members of the cabinet, the chief justice, Generals Halleck, Meiggs, Angur and others were going in and out, all looking anxious and sorrow-stricken. By leaning over the railing I could learn from time to time of His Excellency's condition, and soon learned that there was no hope of him. Soon they commenced taking testimony in the room adjoining where he lay, before Chief Justice Carter,⁵ and General Halleck⁶ called for a reporter; no one was on hand, but one of the heads in our office, who boarded there,⁷ knew I could write shorthand so he told the General so, and he bade him call me, so he came to the room and asked me to come down and report the testimony. I went down and the General passed me in, as the house was strictly guarded, of course. I went into a room between the rear room and the front room.⁸ Mrs. Lincoln was in the front room weeping as though her heart would break. In the back room lay His Excellency breathing I know not how, and with every breath a groan. In the room where I was were Generals Halleck, Meiggs, Angur and others, all of the cabinet excepting Seward, Chief Justice Chase and Chief Justice Carter of the District of Columbia, Andrew Johnson⁹ and many other distinguished persons. A solemn silence pervaded the whole throng; it was a terrible moment. Never in my life was I surrounded by half so impressive circumstances. Opposite me at the table where I sat writing sat Secre-

² Willard's Hotel.

⁴ The Petersen house at 433 (now 316) Tenth Street, still standing, in which the present occupant, Mr. O. H. Oldroyd, has for many years preserved his Lincoln Memorial Collection.

⁵ David K. Carter, chief justice of the supreme court of the District of Columbia.

⁶ Mr. Tanner tells the editor that the name of Halleck was written by mistake; it was Major General C. C. Augur, then commanding the department of Washington.

⁷ It was Albert Dammert, afterward of some prominence as the contractor for the cards.

⁸ The house was two rooms deep, but with an L. The President had been on a bed in the L. room on the first floor, here designated as the rear room. There is a diagram of the house in Nicolay and Hay's *Abraham Lincoln*, X, 300, and a diagram and a picture in Oldroyd, *Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, pp. 10, 11.

⁹ Mr. Tanner thinks that this was an error; that Johnson was not present; here is evidence that the Vice President came in for a brief period.

tary Stanton writing dispatches to General Dix and others, and giving orders for the guarding of Ford's and the surrounding country. At the left of me was Judge Carter propounding the questions to the witnesses whose answers I was jotting down in Standard Phonography. I was so excited when I commenced that I am afraid that it did not much resemble Standard Phonography or any other kind, but I could read it readily afterward, so what was the difference? In fifteen minutes I had testimony enough down to hang Wilkes Booth, the assassin, higher than ever Haman hung.¹⁰ I was writing shorthand for about an hour and a half, when I commenced transcribing it. I thought I had been writing about two hours when I looked at the clock and it marked half past four A. M. I commenced writing about 12 M. I could not believe that it was so late, but my watch corroborated it. The surrounding circumstances had so engrossed my attention that I had not noticed the flight of time. In the front room Mrs. Lincoln was uttering the most heartbroken exclamations all the night long. As she passed through the hall back to the parlor after she had taken leave of the President for the last time, as she went by my door I heard her moan, "O, my God, and have I given my husband to die," and I tell you I never heard so much agony in so few words. The President was still alive, but sinking fast. He had been utterly unconscious from the time the shot struck him and remained so until he breathed his last. At 6:45 Saturday morning I finished my notes and passed into the back room where the President lay; it was very evident that he could not last long. There was no crowd in the room, which was very small, but I approached quite near the bed on which so much greatness lay, fast losing its hold on this world. The head of the bed was toward the door; at the head stood Capt. Robert Lincoln weeping on the shoulder of Senator Sumner. General Halleck stood just behind Robert Lincoln and I stood just to the left of General Halleck and between him and General Meiggs.¹¹ Secretary Stanton was there trying every way to be calm and yet he was very much moved. The utmost silence prevailed, broken only by the sound of strong men's sobs. It was a solemn time, I assure you. The President breathed heavily until a few minutes before he breathed his last, then his breath came easily and he passed off very quietly.

As soon as he was dead Rev. Dr. Gurley, who has been the President's pastor since his sojourn in this city,¹² offered up a very impressive prayer. I grasped for my pencil which was in my pocket, as I wished to secure his words, but I was very much disappointed to find that my pencil had been broken in my pocket. I could have taken it very easily

¹⁰ Mr. Tanner writes, "Various witnesses were brought in who had either been in Ford's Theatre 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*, Mr. Alfred Cloughly, Colonel G. V. Ruthertford, and others. . . . Through all the testimony given by those who had been in Ford's Theatre 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 Mr. 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."

¹¹ See the diagram in Nicolay and Hay.

¹² Rev. Dr. Phineas D. Gurley, of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

she spoke very favorably for reporting. The friends dispersed, Mrs. Lincoln and family going to the White House, which she had left the night before to attend the theatre with him who never returned to it but lay in his coffin.

Secretary Stanton told me to take charge of the testimony I had made, so I went up to my room and took a copy of it, as I wished to have both my notes and the original copy which I had made while I was in the house. They will ever be cherished monuments to me of that awful night and the circumstances with which I found myself so unexpectedly surrounded and which will not soon be forgotten.¹³

On Saturday night I took the copy I had made to the Secretary's house, as he was asleep I did not see him, so I left them with my card. I thought, you know, I would not regret the time and money I have spent on this copy if it never brought me more than it did that night, for that brought me the privilege of standing by the deathbed of the most remarkable man of modern times and one who will live in the annals of his country as she continues to have a history.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated will have a good picture of the building made celebrated by this sad event on that evening. I saw the picture made by the artist of the theatre, and it was very correct, indeed. He also sketched the inside of the room where the President died, also the outside of the building, as well as the adjoining buildings on both sides.

You will see the house I board in has a balcony along the front of the two rooms on the second floor; I occupy both of those rooms.¹⁴ You can imagine the feeling here by judging of the feeling in your place, only it is the more horrifying from the fact that the President died in our midst and was universally beloved by the People.

This morning there was published in the Chronicle the statement of the witnesses whom I reported, Mr. James B. Ferguson.¹⁵ You doubtless see it in your papers as it is most important. I have an article in the paper which is gaining ground here, and that is that the assassin had a purpose in the theatre, and that the President was invited there for the express purpose of assassinating him. The theatre is very strictly guarded now night and day.

Very truly your friend,
JAMES TANNER.

6. W. E. Gladstone to Sir Frederick Bruce, 1866.

THE following letter, addressed on February 5, 1866, by Mr. Gladstone, then chancellor of the exchequer, to the British minister in Washington, Sir Frederick Bruce, was found by Dr. Paul Knapp.

They were subsequently bound in a volume, and presented by Mr. Tanner to the Union League Club of Philadelphia, of whose Lincoln Memorial Collection they now form a part.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly for April 20 has drawings, by Albert R. Tanner, of the scene in the President's box at Ford's Theatre, and of the scene in the room where he died, the issue for May 20, of the exterior of the theatre and the Petersen house, showing also the house next door, and its balcony.

Washington Morning Chronicle. Testimony of Ferguson, who kept a room adjoining the theatre, is also in Benn Pitman's edition of the *Trial of the conspirators*, pp. 70-77.

JACKSON AND THE MISSIONARIES

IN his splendid work entitled *The Supreme Court in United States History*, II, 228-229, Mr. Charles Warren prints a supposed letter by President Jackson to "The American Board of Missionaries". This letter is apparently copied by Mr. Warren from Seymour Dunbar's *History of Travel in America*, II, 506, which quotes it from the *St. Joseph Beacon*, of South Bend, Indiana, of September 29, 1832. The concluding part of the last sentence is, according to Mr. Warren, a "characteristically pungent comment by Jackson" that missionaries are, "'by their injudicious zeal (to give it no harder name), too apt to make themselves obnoxious to those among whom they are located'".

Having doubts, I wrote to the Rev. Dr. James L. Barton, senior secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who writes that, in the early correspondence of the Board over the Cherokee incident, all of which has been preserved, there is no letter from President Jackson, nor any indication whatever of any communication from him except what is contained in the following letter from Lewis Cass addressed to William Reed, chairman of the Prudential Committee of the Board, and dated from the Department of War, November 14, 1831.

Sir:

I have received and submitted to the President the memorial of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (transmitted in your letter of the 3d inst., and I am instructed by him to inform you that, having on mature consideration satisfied himself that the Legislatures of the respective states have power to extend their laws over all persons living within their boundaries, and that when thus extended, the various Acts of Congress providing a mode of proceeding in cases of Indian intercourse inconsistent with these laws become inoperative, he has no authority to interfere under the circumstances stated in the memorial.

I have the honor to be

Very respectfully

Your obedient servant,

LEW CASS.

Led by a reference to the matter in a typewritten monograph on "Official Newspaper Organs and their Activities, 1835-1837", submitted in competition for the Justin Winsor Prize by E. M. Eriksson, I have found in Jackson's official organ, the *Globe*, for October 22, 1832, the following editorial statement:

We are now authorized to declare, in the most positive manner, that the President did not write the letter in question; and we also assert,

that the disparaging sentiment with regard to Missionaries generally, is as unjustly imputed to him as the writing of the letter itself. The President never believed that Missionaries were "*apt to make themselves obnoxious to those among whom they were located*"—on the contrary we have heard him often express the opinion, that for the most part, they have obtained a great influence over the barbarous nations whom they are sent to enlighten, which has always proved salutary when confined to the objects of their religious calling, as the ambassadors of Christ.

The editorial also referred to "the reported disavowal of the Board of Commissioners, with regard to having received such letters". On October 24, the *Globe* printed a very long editorial entitled the "Missionaries", vehemently asserting that the letter was forged, and stating that "this forgery has been imposed on immense numbers of good and pious persons in every section of the Union. It has been published in almost all the opposition papers, and circulated in myriads in Maine and other States on the eve of elections, in little handbills not larger than the palm of the hand". The editor adds that "the National Republicans, who have propagated it, make no effort to detect the felon".

It is curious that ninety years after the issue of this forged letter, it should appear again and deceive a careful historian; while all record of the denial of its authenticity seems to have disappeared from the records of the American Board.

BERNARD C. STEINER.

LINCOLN AND CATHOLICISM

In "An American Protestant Protest against the Defilement of Free Art by Roman Catholicism", recently circulated by the million, Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying:

Unfortunately, I feel more and more, every day, that it is not against the Americans of the South alone I am fighting. It is more against the Pope of Rome, his perfidious Jesuits, and their blind and bloodthirsty slaves . . . that we have to defend ourselves . . . It is to popery that we owe this terrible Civil War. I would have laughed at the man who would have told me that before I became President. . . . Now I see the mystery.

Students are perfectly well aware that no such quotation is to be found in the works of Lincoln, they know that the spirit of the quotation is contrary to the whole character of Lincoln's thought and expression, they are familiar with the fact that on its face it is not less absurd to attribute such a statement to Lincoln, than it is to accuse the papacy of such a position. Are they equally conscious

of the danger that lies in the fabrication of such forgeries? All men of prominence after death are liable to such misrepresentation. At the present time, however, and in the United States, Lincoln is the chief victim. Many similar inventions are being continually circulated under his name, in order to attach his great prestige to this cause or that, and the general public is not in a position to tell the true from the false.

Is it not the duty of historians to meet this current falsification? It is not easy to see how such a duty can ordinarily be performed. In the case of so invaluable a national asset as Lincoln, would it not be possible to establish a pure gospel, and to bring out a definitive edition of his writings and sayings?

CARL RUSSELL FISH.

DOCUMENTS

Marbois on the Fur Trade, 1784

For the following documents we are indebted to Miss Shirley Farr, who found them in Paris, in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and brought copies to Washington. In those which the designation of the first is Correspondance Politique, Etats-Unis, vol. 28, no. 102; it occupies ff. 206-271 in the volume, and is a despatch, dated September 30, 1784, and numbered 395, from François de Marbois, chargé d'affaires of France in the United States, afterward called Barbé-Marbois, to the Comte de Vergennes, minister of foreign affairs in Paris. The second, sent as an enclosure in the first, is no. 103 in the same volume, occupying ff. 272-286, and is a memoir on the fur trade as it was carried on through central New York in 1784, with suggestions for French participation in it, the information having been collected by Marbois when attending, with Lafayette, the negotiations with the Six Nations carried on at Fort Schuyler (Stanwix) that autumn by commissioners of the Continental Congress. It is thought that readers will be interested in the picture the memoir gives of the status and methods of the fur trade at this precise period, 1784, when as a result of the treaty of peace and its settlement of boundaries the Americans saw a chance of capturing the trade.¹

François de Marbois (1745-1837)² was born in Metz, the son of a director of the mint there, entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1768, was secretary of legation at Ratisbon, then chargé d'affaires at Dresden and at Munich, and came out to America with Luzerne in 1779 as his secretary of legation. President Stiles describes him in that year as "a learned Civilian; a Councillor of the

¹ It occupies thus an intermediate position between the account given in 1780 by Charles Grant to Haldimand, printed in G. C. Davidson, *The North West Company* (Berkeley, 1918), pp. 256-259, and *Can. Arch. Report*, 1888, p. 59-61, and that which Inglis submitted to Grenville in 1790, Davidson, pp. 272-274, or that of Count Andriani, 1791, in La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Voyages* (1799), II, 216-232. See also McGill to Hamilton, 1785, in *Can. Arch. Report*, 1890, pp. 56-58. The earlier history of the New York fur trade is well sketched in Professor McIlwain's *Waxall's Abridgment* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. xxv-lxxxvi.

² His biography is given by Comte Siméon in a eulogy before the House of Deputies, Jan. 17, 1838, *Archives Parlementaires*, CXV, 56-60; the article in *our Biog. Gén.* is mainly based on this.

