

## Lincoln Cottage Opening

Dr. Milligan, President Moe, distinguished speakers,  
ladies and gentlemen:

I am honored to be here today to bear witness to the final realization of something I have been looking forward to for several years. When the idea of restoring this historic place and opening it to the public was first proposed, I offered every encouragement. For the tens of thousands of visitors who come to Washington each year to see the historic places associated with the greatest American president, the hard fact is that the central locus of Lincoln's activity, the White House, is not only much changed since Lincoln's day, but can only be toured and seen very sparingly, and under highly controlled conditions. His office, alas, is no longer accessible to the public at all, for the reason that the actual room is no longer an office but has long been a part of the residential quarters. The restored Lincoln Cottage by contrast, offers the chance to experience a truly authentic site - the actual rooms and grounds where Lincoln lived and worked for a good portion of his presidency - and all of this in an inviting and educational context.

I confess that for me authenticity is the key - it is what Lincoln would call "the electric cord," the thing that really resonates with me. This became clear to me, for

example, when I came to a point in my work on Thomas Jefferson when I realized I needed to go to Monticello. Many times I have come to the point in studying Jefferson and Lincoln when it simply became necessary to go to the Library of Congress and consult the original documents that I was working with. I am not trying to deny the value of alternative modes of access, far from it. I love Google Earth, but it is no substitute for being there. So I am happy to be here today to salute all the people who contributed to the fruition of this great project, whose tenacity and determination have seen it through to a splendid consummation.

For my contribution to this program this morning, I want to tell a story that is pieced together from a variety of documents. It's a story about keeping promises and commitments, and while it contains its share of gaps and conjectures, I believe it tells us some important things about the Soldiers Home, Abraham Lincoln, and what made him a great statesman.

For Abraham Lincoln, the Soldiers Home was obviously a place of retreat for a man who desperately needed one, but he never needed it more in the summer of 1864. If you are familiar with this period of American history, you know that for President Lincoln, everything was going wrong. The war to preserve the Union had been grinding on for three long years and was proving stubbornly unwinnable. The public had become wearied and sickened with the unrelenting bloodshed of a long, drawn-out war that showed no signs of letting up.

It was, as James M. McPherson has called it, "the rock-bottom point of Northern morale." As a result, the President was becoming vastly unpopular, and by August it was agreed on all sides that he would not be re-elected in November. The radical members of his own party were actively plotting to replace him on the Republican ticket. This is the period when the President himself prepared a sealed memorandum spelling out what he would do upon losing the election. The story that I want to tell is from this dark and desperate time, the absolute nadir of the Lincoln administration. It's a story involving a public letter that Lincoln drafted but never sent, and it also involves a visit to the Soldiers Home by the former slave, Frederick Douglass, that never came off. But far from being a narrative of non-events, it is story that, in its own way, illuminates one of the most decisive moments of Lincoln's presidency.

August of 1864 was the time of the severest test of Lincoln as president and the closest he ever came to yielding under pressure. In addition to the military stalemate that was draining the support for the war, a misbegotten peace conference at Niagara Falls earlier in the summer had given widespread publicity to a "To Whom It May Concern" letter Lincoln had written that listed among the conditions for peace and reunion the "abandonment of slavery." This last condition raised an immediate alarm with the large body of loyalists, especially Democrats, who were supporting the President strictly to preserve the Union

and wanted nothing to do with a war to abolish slavery. Especially unfortunate was the widely-shared impression that all that stood in the way of a successful peace negotiation and an end to the bloody war was the President's offending condition about the abandonment of slavery.

As a result of all this, Lincoln came under great pressure from his own supporters to make some gesture in the way of peace negotiations that would offset the ill effect of his letter. Henry Raymond, the editor of the New York Times and chairman of the national re-election committee, thought he saw a way out of the difficulty. He urged the President to send an emissary to Confederate President Jefferson Davis to propose peace on the sole condition of reunion, leaving "all other questions to be settled in a convention." Both Raymond and Lincoln knew that Davis would reject such an offer, having recently said forthrightly that the Confederacy would settle for nothing but independence or extermination. But, argued Raymond, this refusal by Davis would take the blame off Lincoln and the Federal government, while exposing the Confederate rejection of reunion as the true obstacle to peace.

It was in the face of this pressure that built up so powerfully in August 1864 that Lincoln at first seemed to yield. An opportunity to try a new tack came in the form of letter from a Democrat who had remained loyal to the Union and supported the government and the war from the beginning. Charles D. Robinson, a Democratic newspaper editor from Wisconsin, wrote to the President protesting his

Niagara letter. "This puts the whole war question on a new basis," he wrote, "and takes us War Democrats clear off our feet, leaving us no ground to stand upon." Reading Robinson's letter, Lincoln thought he saw an opening for another of the successful public letters he had been writing in which he could explore ways to regain public approval. But to test the suitability of his solution, he decided to seek a second opinion.

Enter Frederick Douglass. Douglass was the best-known black advocate for the abolition of slavery of the time, a brilliant orator and writer, who had given up his own monthly magazine to involve himself actively in the recruitment of black soldiers. But he had previously been, a severe critic of Lincoln and his policies. Even with advent of the Emancipation Proclamation, which he hailed as "the greatest event of our nation's history," he pointedly declined to credit its author, but an interview with the President in August 1863 caused Douglass to change his mind. He had come to Washington to protest the unequal treatment that newly recruited black soldiers were suffering, such as lower pay and the inability to be commissioned as officers, but he found Lincoln well posted on these and other difficulties and ready to acknowledge and deal with them. Douglass admitted in letters and speeches soon after this interview that he was very much impressed with Lincoln's frank and friendly demeanor, as well as his honesty and sincerity. "But the best thing said by the President," Douglass wrote a friend, "was 'I have been charged with

vacillation . . . but . . . I think the charge cannot be sustained No man can say that having once taken the position I have contradicted it or retreated from it." Douglass would remember this.

At the time of their first interview, Lincoln had been working a draft of text that would be used in a public letter defending the use of black soldiers, and he added something to the end of the letter that was undoubtedly influenced by his recent interview with Douglass. Speaking of the time when peace would be restored, he wrote:

And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it.

This letter proved enormously effective in changing the public's perception of the wisdom and efficacy of employing black troops. "Nothing he ever uttered," wrote his secretaries Nicolay and Hay, "had a more instantaneous success."

For their second meeting, Lincoln had asked one of his political appointees, William P. Dole, to arrange it, and Dole duly notified him by letter the day before: "Mr Fred Douglass was expected on the 11 oclock train . . . I will

send him to you when he comes." When Douglass arrived, he and the President had a long conference, so long that Douglass remembered it had kept the Governor of Connecticut cooling his heels in the ante-room. "The President was pressed on every hand to Modify his [Niagara] letter," Douglass wrote soon after, and "to Meet this pressure he did me the honor to seek my opinion." Lincoln seems to have read Douglass the first of two surviving drafts. Both make it clear that Lincoln wanted to renew his commitment to blacks who had been freed by the emancipation, particularly those who were swelling the ranks of the Union army, and he also wanted to reopen the door to peace negotiations that his Niagara letter had effectively slammed shut. To underscore his first point, his draft quoted the very letter he had been working on a year earlier: "But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do anything for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive, even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made must be kept." To make his second point in his prospective reply to Robinson, he proposed offering peace to the Confederates on the sole basis of reunion, leaving the issue of slavery to be resolved by the courts and by votes. Douglass wrote: "Now the question he put to me was - shall I send forth this letter? To which I answered - Certainly not\_ It would be given a broader meaning than you intend to convey - it would be taken as a complete surrender of your antislavery policy."

Now this is where the Soldiers Home enters the picture. On the same day of his second meeting with Douglass, Lincoln arranged an after-hours meeting at the Soldiers Home with former Wisconsin governor Alexander W. Randall, the intermediary who had passed on Robinson's letter. Circumstantial evidence indicates that at the same time he also sent Dole to invite Frederick Douglas to join them. But Douglass couldn't come. He had promised to address a meeting, as he explains in an autobiographical fragment in his papers at the Library of Congress.

While I am telling and perhaps bragging of the relations subsisting between this great man and myself, I may say that I found one night at the door of the house of my friend John Gray with whom I was stopping the carriage of Secretary Dole with an invitation . . . from President Lincoln to take tea with him at the Soldiers Home where he then spent his nights. I have seldom allowed anything to induce me to break an engagement which it was possible for me to keep - but I have often regretted that I allowed a previous engagement to come between me and this invitation to the Soldiers home.

Because Gov. Randall invited a visiting Republican leader from Wisconsin, Joseph T. Mills, to accompany him, we have a record of what went on in the meeting at the Soldiers Home. Judge Mills wrote an extensive account in his diary

of what the President had on his mind. Like so many others, Judge Mills confessed that the Lincoln surprised him: "The President appeared to be not the pleasant joker I had expected to see, but a man of deep convictions & an unutterable yearning for the success of the Union cause." Without referring specifically to the Robinson letter, Lincoln is reported as touching on all the criticisms being used against him in the present crisis, emphasizing the indispensable role that black soldiers were playing in the war. "Abandon all the posts now possessed by black men[,] surrender all these advantages to the enemy, & we would be compelled to abandon the war in 3 weeks." His strongest statement was undoubtedly the one he wanted Douglass to hear him repeat in the presence of Republican leaders: "There have been men who have proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson & Olustee to their masters to conciliate the South. I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing."

One of the reasons for thinking that Douglass had been invited to this session, is that William P. Dole, who was the bearer of the President's invitation, is recorded in the Mills account as making a late appearance at the meeting. While Judge Mills was not aware of it, we can see that what was missing at this session was not only Frederick Douglass but Douglass's perspective on these issues, which the President presumably wanted the others to hear. Randall and Dole continued to discuss with the President succeeding drafts of the Robinson letter, but in the end Lincoln

followed Douglass's advice and offered no concessions. By the time Henry Raymond and members of his committee arrived several days later to press their plan to send an emissary to Jefferson Davis, Lincoln's resolve had stiffened. With the backing of some members of his cabinet, he convinced Raymond and the others that the proposed mission to Richmond, which would offer peace terms that did not require the abandonment of slavery, "would be worse than losing the Presidential contest - it would be ignominiously surrendering it in advance."

So we come to the end of the story. Lincoln followed the advice of the former slave and refused in the end to give even the appearance of yielding on the issue of slavery, eventually riding out the crisis that was effectively surmounted on September 2 with the fall of Atlanta. Frederick Douglass probably never realized what a valuable service he had rendered, but he never forgot how he missed chance to visit the President in the Soldiers Home. "No such opportunity had ever come to me before in this country," he wrote, "and as I look back to it - I might well have been excused by a pretty large crowd for such a meeting with Abraham Lincoln." But he kept his commitment, and he helped the President to keep his.