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Lincoln and the Harlan Family

By J. RAYMOND CHADWICK*

Abraham Lincoln's life and decisions were influenced by the close friends of his day, one of the most outstanding of whom came from Iowa. I refer to none other than the friendship which existed between Lincoln and James Harlan, the first Republican senator from the state of Iowa. President of Iowa Wesleyan, 1853-55, during which he built "Old Main" Hall, and being elected in 1855 to the United States Senate, James Harlan was well acquainted in Washington circles when Abraham Lincoln arrived as President-elect. While the country was awaiting the inauguration of Lincoln a new and warm friendship began between him and Harlan. In selecting his first cabinet Lincoln sought the advice of Senator Harlan whom he had met only once before. During the years of the war the friendship between them deepened, so that at the second inaugural the Iowa Senator was chosen as an escort for Mrs. Lincoln; and Miss Mary Harlan was among the distinguished group surrounding the President.

Senator Harlan was also intimately connected with the President on the occasion of his last public appearance. It was only three days before the assassination. The President had announced that he would speak from the White House and a large audience gathered in front of the executive mansion. When the President ceased speaking, there were calls for Senator Sumner, but he was not present, and then Harlan was loudly called for.

Another indication of the close relationship between Senator Harlan and President Lincoln is revealed in the fact that Lincoln appointed Harlan as Secretary of the Interior in the spring of 1865, and even though Lincoln was assassinated before Harlan assumed the

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duties of this office, he filled it with distinction from May 15, 1865 to July 27, 1866, when he resigned because of his opposition to the policies of Johnson's administration.

The close personal quality of this friendship between James Harlan and President Lincoln is revealed in the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln and Mr. and Mrs. Harlan often took drives together out into the country surrounding Washington, D.C.

The last drive which they took together was shortly after the fall of Richmond, when they crossed the Potomac river into Virginia through a country devastated by war. This drive, says Senator Harlan in his autobiographical papers, has become to me historical not only because it was the last drive of this nature which President Lincoln took, but also "because he had suddenly become, on the fall of Richmond and the surrender of the Confederate Army at Appomattox, a different man from what I had ever seen in him. His whole appearance, poise and bearing had marvelously changed. He was in fact transfigured. That indescribable sadness which had previously seemed to be an adamant element in his very being, had been suddenly exchanged for an equally indescribable expression of serene joy as if conscious that the great purpose of his life had been achieved. . . . Yet there was no manifestation of exultation or ecstasy. He seemed the very personification of supreme satisfaction."

This close friendship between Senator Harlan and President Lincoln was recognized by the Senator's associates, when he was chosen a member of the Congressional Committee to escort the body of Lincoln, after his assassination, to Springfield, Illinois.

A few weeks later Harlan presided over a meeting of citizens who were interested in erecting a monument to Lincoln. An organization was formed and James Harlan was chosen president.

But why were these two men such close friends? Why did Lincoln seek the counsel and advice of James Harlan on many occasions? They were kindred spirits.

They had much in common. To use the words of Edwin Markham:

"Born of the ground,
The great west nursed them on her rugged knees."

The education of each was very meager. Lincoln, as we know, had three books in his library as a boy, *Aesop's Fables*, *Weem's Life of Washington* and the *Holy Bible*. Harlan, likewise at the age of 14, saw for the first time a large collection of books in the Public Library of Park county, Indiana. After examining the wonderful volumes, he secured a few volumes to take home with him, and thus began his search for knowledge.

Both of these men were lawyers; they were also pioneers in the field of human rights. Each of them believed in education for all and placed human rights uppermost in their scale of values. Harlan, like Lincoln, continually raised his voice against the further extension of slavery, and when the war came he firmly supported the government in its measures to preserve the union. With Lincoln, he shares the credit for securing the freedom and enfranchisement of an oppressed race.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the state of Iowa paid high tribute to the memory of James Harlan in 1907, when Congress passed a law authorizing each state to select the names of two of its illustrious sons, statues of whom would be placed in the National Statuary Hall in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., Iowa designated James Harlan as "worthy of being selected as one of the citizens of Iowa whose statue shall be placed in the said National Statuary Hall."

The ties between the families of these two outstanding Americans, James Harlan and Abraham Lincoln, continued on in a very real sense of the word, long after Lincoln's death, through the union of the two families in marriage. On September 24, 1868, Mary Harlan, the only one of James Harlan's four children that lived to maturity, married Robert Todd Lincoln,

the only one of Abraham Lincoln's four children to reach adulthood.

After Harlan retired from the senate in 1873, he returned to his home in Mount Pleasant. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Todd Lincoln often visited him there. His three grandchildren, Mary Lincoln, Abraham (Jack) Lincoln, and Jessie Lincoln were his pride and joy. On one occasion in September, 1883, he had the three grandchildren stand against a closet door while he recorded the name and height of each on the central panel. This door is now a precious treasure of Iowa Wesleyan college.

The continuing strength of the Harlan-Lincoln friendship is further revealed in a very interesting and unique manner.

Robert Todd Lincoln inherited slightly more than \$100,000.00 from his father, Abraham Lincoln. With this he built up an estate of \$3,300,000.00 in our medium of free enterprise, one of the greatest blessings of America.

Upon the death of Robert Todd Lincoln in 1926, his entire estate came into the possession of his wife, Mary Harlan Lincoln. In the early thirties she sought the counsel of Frederick Towers, attorney of Washington, D.C., in making her will. After making certain bequests to individuals, there remained \$2,100,000 which she desired to set up as a trust fund, the interest from which would go to her descendants so long as there was any issue of blood. Furthermore, Mrs. Lincoln said she wanted the trust fund to be divided, when there was no more issue of blood, one-third going to the American Red Cross, one-third to the Christian Science church of Boston and one-third to be used to create a memorial to her father. Mr. Towers made the suggestion that her father, James Harlan, had one thought, day or night, and that was Iowa Wesleyan College. The comment was true, for Mr. Harlan had been twice president of Iowa Wesleyan and had remained a trustee of the college to the day of his death in 1899. After due

consideration, Mrs. Robert Todd Lincoln concurred that a gift to Iowa Wesleyan would be a fitting memorial to her father, James Harlan, and instructed Mr. Towers to designate the last third of the trust fund for this purpose.

At the present time the trust fund has appreciated so that it is valued at more than \$3,000,000. The youngest heir is Robert Todd Beckwith, grandson of Robert Todd Lincoln and Mary Harlan, whose age is 55 and no children. The next heir is his sister, Mary Beckwith, 61, and no children; and the third heir is Lincoln Isham, another grandchild, cousin of the first two named, who is 67 years of age and no children.

Thus, in the course of human events, since there is no further issue of blood besides the three living great grandchildren of Abraham Lincoln and James W. Harlan, the trust fund will be divided and Iowa Wesleyan College will receive at least \$1,000,000.00. This will be a significant gift; but even more significant is the fact that it will be the only college in the world ever to receive any of Abraham Lincoln's money, at least in any substantial amount, through his son, Robert Todd Lincoln. Yea more, how appropriate that it should be a memorial to Lincoln's close friend, James Harlan.

The desire to perpetuate the spirit of that union, as well as the memory of the two families has prompted Iowa Wesleyan College to recently launch a program for the restoration and refurnishing of the Harlan House adjacent to its campus in Mount Pleasant where Senator Harlan lived. This will be a fitting memorial to the memory of James Harlan, first Superintendent of Public Instruction for Iowa, first Republican senator from Iowa, first cabinet member from Iowa and fast friend of Abraham Lincoln; as well as an appropriate recognition from Robert Todd Lincoln, outstanding businessman and public servant; and a worthy shrine symbolizing the spirit of Abraham Lincoln and James Harlan, great pioneers of the Middle West who went "from prairie cabin up to Capitol."

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