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Letter: John E. Iglehart to Ida M. Tarbell, December 18, 1926

Iglehart, John E.

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Miss Ida Tarbell,
New York.

Dear Miss Tarbell:

Confirming my talk with you during the past week in relation to the work of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, embracing as you know the eight Counties of Southwestern Indiana, all of which were created out of old Knox County and which have in an important degree a common history in which lie much of the primary sources of Indiana history, as you know, prompt me to state in writing the substance of my talk with you, adding to that statement sufficient detail to make the statement clear to whoever shall read it. This Society is now about seven years old and has had at work during that period a number of workers born and reared in the various local communities where they now live, whose ancestors lived in the same territory, which includes the territory in which Abraham Lincoln lived from 1816 to 1830, from the period when he was seven until he was twenty-one years of age. In an accurate sense, it may be said that the immediate ancestors of the workers of this Society lived in the same environment at the same period of time in which Abraham Lincoln lived, if we take as a proper statement of the limit of that immediate environment the statement of Abraham Lincoln himself to Mr. Leonard
Swett, one of the leaders of the Illinois Bar, that he, Lincoln, had got hold of and read every book he heard of within a radius of fifty miles of the farm in Spencer County on which he lived. This statement, while quite broad but taken as true in substance has (with all the rivalry that has existed among various investigators and historians and writers relating to Lincoln's history in Indiana) never been questioned. That radius of 50 miles included and still includes New Harmon, Evansville, Princeton, Vincennes, Washington, Indiana, Rockport, and Corydon, which was the capital of Indiana Territory for some years before Lincoln came into the State, and was also the capital of the State of Indiana in 1825, when the capital was removed to Indianapolis. During this period, Vincennes and Corydon were places of residence of an able body of men, many of whom were members of the first Constitutional Convention who drafted the Constitution of 1816, and these residents included a number of the leading Commonwealth builders of Indiana, men of College training and of Atlantic Coast culture, who came of mature age into Indiana at its beginning. There was published at Vincennes during the time that Lincoln lived in Indiana, the Western Sun, a weekly newspaper, the file of which is still in existence, which throws a light upon this inquiry, of very great value. Without that newspaper file, the history of the State of Indiana could never have been written, as it has been written, and
indeed a very important part of the history of the old Northwest territory has been either found or added in the narrative by the facts stated in the files of that paper. Before this Society was organized in January, 1920, there had been, as will appear from this statement, a good deal of work done at the right time in the right place, and by the right persons to obtain evidence relating to Lincoln's life in Indiana from persons then living who had intimately known Abraham Lincoln. I have never found in any one place a proper statement of this work; a part of it is scattered through several histories, but a proper view of this subject has never been presented to the public, as far as I know. Without attempting to go into great detail, I call attention to the work of Dr. Loger Esary, who has written a great deal of early history of this section, which necessarily deals with what I call the unwritten history of Southwestern Indiana, and when this is produced it necessarily embraces the unwritten history of the environments of Abraham Lincoln.

The value of the evidence of this kind may be greater or less. Some of it is of supreme value. All of it has probative value and a good deal has circumstantial evidence, and where much of this evidence is gathered, all of it pointing in the same direction, evidence which in itself might seem to have slight weight, becomes of greater value, and where a great volume of
circumstantial evidence points all the same way, it is usually accepted as proving the case in the absence of contradiction. Such, I believe is the value of practically all of, or rather a great deal of, the history of Southwestern Indiana, which has been gathered from many sources, and to which many references are made in our publication, which require further detail work to be fully stated.

Dr. Esary published particularly one article to which I refer, the title of which is "The Hoosier Aristocracy", in which he describes the ordinary agricultural and backwoods life of the body of people who settled Southern Indiana, including the territory embraced in this Society, and I know of no other place where so full and accurate description of the people and their lives and their characteristics can be found as in this article. Mr. William Fortune, in his Princeton address, having had his attention particularly called to this paper, makes a reference to it to which I call attention. Mr. George R. Wilson, of Indianapolis, was born and reared in Southwestern Indiana, and has been a student of the primary sources of Indiana history, practically all of his mature life, and has accumulated some fifty or more volumes of typewritten record of facts and instances, with proper references relating to the primary sources of Indiana history. He has published a number of most valuable articles, all of which relate to the primary sources of Indiana history.
Judge Roscoe Kiper, of Boonville, has from his early childhood been a resident of this section, and has been a student in particular of the environments of Abraham Lincoln, and has published a paper, read before the Conference of the Indiana Historical Societies, which is found in Bulletin No. 17, of our State Historical Bulletin, in which he has given a condensed history of the life of Lincoln in Indiana, together with sound and mature views of interpretation, which coincided with practically all of the writers who lived in this section as to the interpretation of the facts relating to the life of Lincoln in Indiana.

Mrs. Bess V. Ehrman, of Rockport, is in a degree the successor of General James C. Veatch, whom we find undoubtedly did work on this investigation as early as 1881, and I think he was at work earlier. Mrs. Ehrman's work in this Society during the past seven years has been large and important, and in a single paper published about two years ago she presented a substantial summary of work done by members of this Society during the existence of this Society, but such list while extensive and very interesting was not exclusive and did not embrace by any means all of that kind of evidence which has been produced in this section - a considerable amount of it before the organization of this Society.

I have not in this line named some of our very ablest
contributors, and shall not attempt to make it exclusive, nor to give preference to others over them, because they are not named in this letter; the field is too extensive.

As to my own work, the greater part of it has not been published. The details of current work and the supervision of the work of this Society have occupied so much of my time that I have delayed final finishing and releasing a number of papers relating to the primary sources of Indiana history, and I only mention one - "The History of the First British Settlement in Indiana", about which you have spoken so fully in your last book, in Chapter 12, relating to the awakening of Abraham Lincoln.

I emphasize particularly in fact that these writers in this historical work were, with slight exception, born and reared in Southwestern Indiana, among the same class of people who knew and were known by Abraham Lincoln when he lived there. The knowledge of such writers in connection with work of this kind will be valued and appreciated by all persons familiar with this class of work, and I place the greatest value upon it as qualification of our workers.

Dr. Barton in his "Soul of Abraham Lincoln" particularly emphasizes the value of this qualification of investigators and interpreters in describing his own qualifications for such work, and he correctly states the value of such knowledge of such records.

In my talk with you I emphasized what I called the new literature - first, the Turner Doctrine, as it is universally
recognized among our leading American historical writers, in which the Frontier is interpreted as the most potent single force in American history. This subject I have dealt with more fully in my last printed address No. 3, Volume 8, of the reports of the Indiana Historical Society. The influence of the moving Frontier upon the backwoodsman has been so fully described and recognized that I merely refer to it, but state that this influence has been practically ignored in all of the histories of Abraham Lincoln. Of course Lincoln as a Frontiersman, and as a backwoodsman has been discussed and the fact has been emphasized by many writers, but the application of the doctrines of the Turner interpretation, also, elaborated much more fully by Dr. Frank L. Paxon, have to my knowledge never been properly applied to nor elaborated upon in determining the effect of the Frontier upon Abraham Lincoln. This rich field is a necessary one to be considered and has been dealt with in the literature of this Society and belongs to what I call the new literature of the History of the West, and for that matter of the history of the Frontier.

Mr. James Truslow Adams has applied the doctrine of the moving Frontier to the History of Revolutionary New England, as he calls it, and has in that book acknowledged full credit to Dr. F.J. Turner, as the author of the frontier doctrine as it is now recognized in the interpretation not only of Western history, but of American history. Even the Atlantic Coast States were at the beginning a Frontier, and a recent writer of ability in Canada has
recognized the application of the Frontier doctrine to Canada, as well as to the United States.

One significant point cited by Turner in dealing with what he calls the "Rise of the New West", is that there existed in Lincoln's time, and the same exists today in a degree modified by a population from other parts of the country, a transitorial zone north of the Ohio River; in the Southern portion of what was known as the old Northwest territory, but at the time of which he writes (1819-1829) there had settled on the North side of the Ohio River in Ohio and Indiana and Illinois, a population of Southern origin, and in a map printed by Turner in his "Rise of the Middle West", this territory shows exactly where this transitorial zone extended and it embraced the territory in which Lincoln and his family, including his son, Abraham Lincoln, lived, and also embraced that portion of Illinois to which the Lincoln's moved in 1830, so that in effect Abraham Lincoln never lived out of the transitional zone described by Turner, after he came to Indiana at the age of seven years. The character of this population had much to do with Abraham Lincoln in many ways, and I have never heard the subject anywhere discussed, but it is worthy of most careful consideration.
I omitted in referring to a portion of our workers to mention Rev. J. Edw. Murr, D. D., who was born and reared in Harrison County, of which Corydon was the county seat and among the people of that county were the children and grandchildren of one of the Lincolns, who were relative of Abraham Lincoln. He was intimate with them. As a minister he lived, traveled and preached from the time of his maturity in this immediate section including Spencer and Perry Counties at times where there still lived during Mr. Murr's active work in this investigation a number of elderly people who knew Abraham Lincoln. He interviewed in his work a very large number of men and women who knew Abraham Lincoln and did it not as an outsider who came in for a few days, in research and historical work, but as a neighbor and friend and pastor of the church to which some of the most important witnesses mentioned belonged. Among others was Wesley Hall, whose testimony is of supreme value in connecting Abraham Lincoln, the companion and associate of his youth with the very valuable library, both law and literary, of John A. Breckenridge, who lived near Boonville and who was related to the distinguished family of that name, which has given so many distinguished men to public service in the United States, especially in Kentucky.

I have been at pains to have Dr. Murr make more specific his statements in regard to some of these witnesses so as to obviate the objection of super-critical writers who seem disposed to challenge everything presented to them,
which relieves Abraham Lincoln's youth from the charge of
association with nothing but the commonest minds and persons.

Wesley Hall's testimony together with that of John
Pitcher who lived at Rockport during Lincoln's time and with
whom Lincoln is shown conclusively to have been intimate and
who was one of the great trial lawyers of Indiana, who was
educated and admitted to the bar, in Connecticut, about 1817
or 1818 and came direct to Spencer County. Settle the question
of Abraham Lincoln's opportunities as to books, Dr. Murr, as
you know, published a history of Abraham Lincoln in Indiana
representing something like the result of twenty years research
conducted as I have indicated for which there is no parallel
in all the Lincoln literature. The value of this history I
need not discuss except as to say there is no such other paper
in existence and Dr. Murr is a man of ability, reliability,
in the highest standing and has filled some of the leading
pulpits in Methodism in Indiana and is at the present time
District Superintendent (a title formerly known as Presiding
Elder) in the Methodist Church at New Albany, Indiana. As
stated, these instances of our workers taken from a very wide
field are not intended to be exclusive, as we have some other
very able workers who have done very important work.

At the meeting of our Society at Princeton, Indiana,
in November, 1925, Mr. William Fortune, some forty-four years
subsequent to the time when as a young man he had under the
immediate instruction and direction of General James G. Veatch
travelled over Spencer County and interviewed the then living men and women who had known Abraham Lincoln, delivered a two-hour address which is subsequently carefully revised in the notes of the stenographer and Miss Anna C. O'Flinn also made an oral address giving a description of how she, in 1895, had repeatedly visited the various parts of Spencer County, spending a number of weeks there in interviewing persons then living who had known Lincoln and in taking photographs, something over one hundred in number. She also narrates how she was directed to Mr. S. S. McClure and how he purchased from her the result of her work and employed her to continue her investigation and how the result of her work was used by you (Miss Tarbell) in the history of Abraham Lincoln, published in McClure's magazine in 1895 and 1896.

These two most interesting addresses presented to me a line of facts of which I had not heard or known and since then for about a year, I have been earnestly investigating, with a view to give a narrative of this procedure with a number of interesting attendant circumstances which throw light upon the character and the value of this work. This investigation by me has been prolonged because I have been unable to finish it as completely as I wanted and have not been able to get all the facts I have sought in relation to General Veatch but at an early time, I expect this to be accomplished and in my address also made at Princeton at the time mentioned I expect when my Princeton address is finally
revised to deal with these matters so as to present an interesting account of these researches made directly or indirectly under General Veatch. I should say that General Veatch was one of the ablest men in Southern Indiana, with a fine war record, born and reared in the transitional zone north of the river, he and his parents belonged in the transitional zone and came into it as did the early population of the territory and State of Indiana, and whether he knew Abraham Lincoln in his youth or not I do not know, but he knew him well during the Civil War, concerning which Mr. Fortune speaks in his address.

Rounding up this matter in the very limited time and space I have, to deal with so important a subject, it seems that General Veatch, as early as 1881, at least began the systematic research mentioned and I have some very valuable letters from him to Miss O'Flinn, which will be published, dealing with his relation to the matter and the correct method of conducting the work. When I began the work with this Society, about seven years ago, I did not know of the Veatch investigation nor of that made by Mr. Fortune and Miss O'Flinn though I had heard in a general way that Mr. Fortune had made some investigation but that he had never given it to the public and it was only through the most urgent persuasion on my part that I got Mr. Fortune to come to Princeton to deliver that talk and it was through my personal efforts that Miss O'Flinn also made her address at the same time. It seems, therefore, that the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society worked wholly independently in its work, without any reference
to or knowledge of the work of Miss O'Flinn, of Mr. Fortune
or of General Veatch, but I have used a figure to express my
idea in regard to the work of these two different forces, that
it was not unlike the work in the building of the Hoosac
Tunnel, where two sets of workers worked from opposite sides
independently of each other but when they met in the center,
their work was a completed and perfect one and so at this time,
while our work is not completed and there will be years yet of
cumulative work, we have progressed to that point where it may
be said that there has been created a new literature by the
members of this Society and by the work of our workers before
the organization of this Society, as well as some other similar
work in the direction of writing, as we call it, the unwritten
history of Southwestern Indiana, its people and their institu-
tions, having given special attention to the fact that this
work, as I have said, necessarily involved writing the history
of the environments of Abraham Lincoln. No such body of litera-
ture exists anywhere nor can it ever be produced and in this
literature must be found the proper interpretation of the life
of Abraham Lincoln, from the time he was seven to the time he
was twenty-one years of age.

Sincerely

John E. Shepard