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Letter with attachment: John B. MacHarg to Ida M. Tarbell, September 17, 1932

MacHarg, John Brainerd

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My dear Miss Tarbell:

Thinking my letter to the artist, Wall, may be of interest to you, I am sending a copy of it. I presume you know his work; the New Salem etchings are said to be the best. I have a few of the regular series which give me some enjoyment but no direct help in the work I am trying to do.

With good wishes

Sincerely yours

Miss Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th Street
NEW YORK
17 April 1932

My dear Wall:

Your request for information in regard to the Worcester Harrison house at Port Washington has introduced me to some fascinating and important problems, which I have not yet fathomed. I have visited Griffith at Fisk, Hambrecht at Madison, Bolens and a dozen others at Port Washington. I have also examined the most easily available material and will give you comments on my work so far.

Lincoln's visit to Port Washington is a firmly imbedded tradition at Port Washington. "Everyone knows about it," one man said to me, "all you have to do is to go to the history books." The best statement of the facts and traditions I have found, is that by J.E. Olson, in the Wis. Mag. of History, Sept. 1920. He quotes from the History of Washington and Ozaukee Counties, 1881, compiler not named, p. 508, giving, so far as I know, the earliest record of Capt. Beger's statement that Lincoln told him that he visited Port Washington. H.W. Bolens, an important man of the town told me that Capt. Beger told the story to him. I have signed statements from him as to this and in regard to the house. I have, however, good reason to doubt some of Mr. Bolens's statements and recollections, sincerely and almost pathetically desirous as he seems to be, to speak the truth. The Beger family is a fairly prominent one and I am working on the reliability of the testimony and the man, but at this time, I do not feel that the fact of Lincoln's visit is established. Gregory, J.C. Southeastern Wisconsin, 4 vols. Chicago 1922, vol. 2, 1187, tends to discredit it, but I am little influenced by what he has written. Griffith says he has a signed statement of an old-timer quite outside the Port Washington arena to the effect that he saw Lincoln south of Milwaukee about '35. I cannot tell what there may be in this. I have before me an unusual book by B.J. Cigrand, Abraham Lincoln, Prophet and Patriot, Aurora, Ill, 1928. It is a somewhat elaborately quarto scrapbook of his newspaper articles, reprints on fine paper, with many illustrations, never regularly issued, I think. I believe but very few copies of this collection exist. On the first page of the preface he states: "... and in 1876, when I was ten years old my father related to me how young Lincoln when broken hearted in 1835 at the death of Ann Rutledge came up the Milwaukee valley filled with its huge trees.... to find solace." This is the meat of extended elaboration of the theme. Cigrand does not impress me at all as a writer but I intend to see him this summer. I have much other material but I have given you the most significant.

My conclusion is that Lincoln's visit to Wis. in '35 is not proven by the evidence, but there is a possibility, I think, that it may be. So I shall work at it, if time allows.
The problem of the Harrison house has local interest even though Lincoln may not have visited it. I can find no picture of it of any kind. It disappeared from its original site early in the '80's. I have a signed statement from Mr. Bolens to the effect that it was moved from Main St. to Pier St. and stands there practically as it was originally. I have good reason to believe he is mistaken. A portion of the house may have been moved. A sign stating that Lincoln stopped at the house on Pier St. — known as the Blong house — aroused ridicule. The Blong family or John Blong, I should say, is very certain that his father built this house and I am inclined to believe he is right. The wing has different moldings and may have been moved from the Harrison house, but there is difficulty here for the wing has sawed joists while the upright has hewn timbers. A man named Peters, seventy years old and keen, gave me most satisfaction of the Port Washington folk. He was certain that the Blong house was built on its site and is not the Harrison house. He was certain that the Harrison house was very like the home of Capt. Beger but "finer built, better wood-work." The wing of the Blong house has old and good looking moldings, different from the upright, BUT the upright was damaged by fire at one time, so the proof is not clear. Inasmuch as "Gen." Worcester Harrison was the founder of Port Washington and a pioneer of some importance, I should like to rescue his home from obscurity and doubt, especially as Abraham Lincoln MAY have stopped there, which at present I strongly doubt, yet it is a possibility, as I have already written.

The pictures I send will show you the Beger house which is unquestioned, and the Blong house, which is called the Harrison house and the place where Lincoln stopped. I hardly think the evidence justifies the inclusion of the Harrison house in your series of engravings, yet if I can obtain certain data as to the old house — the original Harrison house — I should like to see it included with a reference to the tradition, which I am not yet ready to disregard.

I have a mass of notes and details but I have not time just now to follow up the matter. It does interest me, however, and I thank you for the good time I had with during my spring vacation.

I wish you and Mrs. wall might drop in this morning to enjoy this glorious spring day. Don't forget that the latch-string is out if you come to Colorado this summer. We are planning on a long motor trip to the coast but shall be in Colorado during Aug. and Sept., in the east during the autumn and early winter.

With all good wishes

Cordially yours