

The Truth About the Bixby Letter

Dr. Barton Believes Lincoln Actually Wrote to Mrs. Bixby, But Thinks That Any Existing Copies Are Forgeries

By WILLIAM E. BARTON

THE letter of President Abraham Lincoln to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, of Boston, extending to her his own and the nation's sympathy in the loss of her five sons given in defense of the Union cause, stands alone in the history of the English language. When President Woodrow Wilson had occasion to write a letter of sympathy to the mothers of the American marines who were killed in the Vera Cruz affair, he conferred with Honorable Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, and both felt unequal to the occasion. By agreement Secretary Daniels, acting with consent and in the name of the President, sent to each of these mothers a copy of Lincoln's letter. Woodrow Wilson was no mean master of the English tongue, and had a just estimate of his own ability to say what needed to be said and say it well. But he confessed his own inadequacy in the presence of Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Bixby.

The question has recently been raised whether President Lincoln really wrote the letter, or whether it was a forgery. Several reasons are given for the doubt.

First, the original cannot be found. It was said to be in the collection of J. Pierpont Morgan, but it is not there. Several persons have claimed to own it, but on examination their copies prove to have been mechanical reproductions. It is affirmed in many quarters that the original is framed at Oxford University in England, either in the Bodleian Library or in Brasenose or Baliol College, but it is not there. Oxford wishes that it were there, and would give much to own it, but the university authorities are compelled to tell American tourists that they have never seen it. F. Lauriston Bullard, of the Boston *Herald*, was recently in Oxford, and his discovery that the Bixby letter was not where he had expected to find it has raised the question of its whereabouts. No answer has come to this inquiry. Lincoln's letter to general Joseph Hooker recently sold at auction for more than \$10,000. It would be worth \$25,000, probably, to any one who could find the Bixby letter in an attic trunk and who would be willing to part with it. But it cannot be found. Furthermore, the facsimiles vary

slightly from each other, and it is doubtful whether they could have been made from the same original.

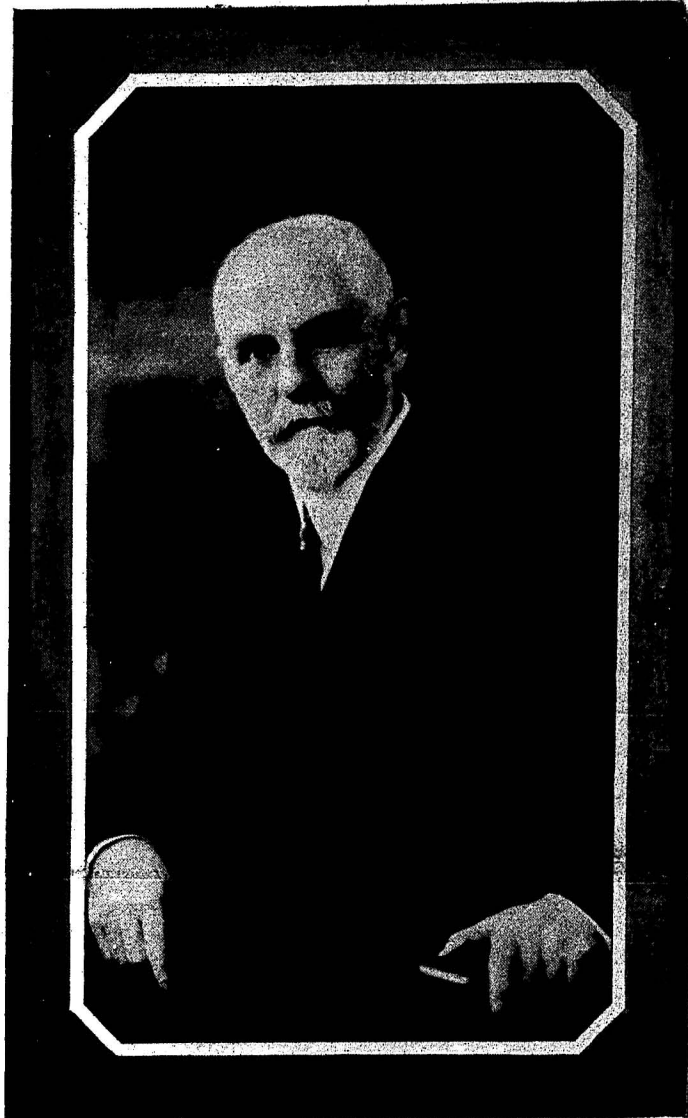
I am asked to answer the questions raised in this matter, and I am glad to be able to do so.

The text of the Lincoln letter to Mrs. Bixby is genuine. It is supported by a considerable amount of documentary evidence. It was written by request of Governor John A. Andrew, of Massachusetts, on a recommendation of Adjutant General William Schouler. I have examined all the correspondence in this case, and have photostat copies which are before me as I write. Lincoln wrote the letter and the text was published in the Boston newspapers within a week after it was written.

I am sorry to say, however, that I am not convinced of the genuineness of any of the reproductions. I have increasing doubt whether any of them are genuine. The story of possible forgery here is an involved one, and my own first judgments have undergone marked change as the result of this investigation. Frankly, I doubt, not only the present existence of the Bixby letter, but question seriously whether any of the pretended facsimile reproductions were made from a genuine original. I think them a forgery made for commercial purposes.

But the text of the letter is genuine. Lincoln actually wrote it.

The question does not end there. When I first looked into this matter a good many years ago, I made a rather shocking discovery. So far as I know, my *Life of Lincoln* is the only book that tells the truth about this letter,



William E. Barton, well-known authority on Lincolniana.

and in that the story is condensed.

Mrs. Bixby did not lose five sons in the Union Army. Lincoln was misinformed. If he had known the truth he would not have written the letter.

The information which Adjutant General Schouler furnished to Governor Andrew, and which Governor Andrew passed on to the War Department with the request that Lincoln write the letter to Mrs. Bixby, gave the following as the list of her sons, with their regiments and the dates of their death:

"1. Sergeant Charles N. Bixby, Company D, 20th Regiment Massachusetts Infantry, mustered in, July 26, 1862; killed at Fredericksburg, May 3, 1863.

"2. Corporal Henry C. Bixby, Company K, 32nd Regiment, mustered in, August 5, 1862; killed at Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.

"3. Private Edward Bixby, recruit for 22nd Massachusetts Volunteers. 'He ran away from home, and was mustered in the field. He died of wounds at Folly Island, South Carolina.