

Aurora, Ill., March 2, 1920.

Miss Ida M. Tarbell,

New York City,

Dear Madam:

The announcement of your new book, "In Lincoln's Chair," is a sure sign of your continued interest in the life of the emancipator. It emboldens me to call to your attention what seems to be a neglected incident in that life. I will relate as briefly as possible the incidents leading up to the incident.

In August, 1846, President Polk sent to Congress a message vetoing a bill that made ^pappropriations to the extent of \$1,378,450 for the improvement of certain rivers and harbors. There were at that time two schools of political thought in the country. One school, called strict constructionists, held that Congress had no power to do what the Constitution did not specifically ^lauthorize. Internal improvements were not, in so many words, authorized, and therefore appropriations for that purpose were unconstitutional. The other school held to a more liberal construction of the powers granted to Congress by the Constitution. That instrument gave to Congress power "to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several States." Under this power it was contended that appropriations for internal improvements were constitutional. President Polk was a strict constructionist, and his message was an argument along the lines held by that school of political thought.

The veto aroused great opposition throughout the country, and

particularly in the North and West. The people of the growing lake ports, Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, and the sections tributary to them, were especially angry. A movement was at once set on foot to voice the popular sentiment for internal improvements. A preliminary organization was effected, which called a convention to meet in Chicago July 5, 6 and 7, 1847. In the way of reflecting popular interest in a subject, no convention ever held in the country was a greater success.

Chicago at that time was a rather rough frontier town, with a population of about 16,000. Not a single line of railroad had yet reached the city. Entrance into and exit from it had to be made by sail or steam on the lake, or by carriage or horseback on land. That, under such circumstances, the question of internal improvements should have brought to the little city a crowd conservatively estimated at 20,000, nearly one-half of whom were certified delegates, is certainly marvellous. Chicago was quite unable to take care of the crowd. Its hospitality had the cordial character of a new, proud, ambitious and terribly self-conscious community. But it was simply overwhelmed. Thousands of visitors camped in the streets. Hundreds found accommodations in the lake vessels that brought them to the city. The convention held its meetings in a big tent, politely called a "Pavilion."

The convention was scarcely less remarkable for the character and position of many of its delegates than for the numbers in attendance. Its permanent president was Edward Bates, an eminent lawyer of St. Louis, a candidate for the Republican nomina-

tion for President in the convention of 1860, and Attorney General in the cabinet of President Lincoln. From New York came David Dudley Field, justly considered one of the country's leading lawyers, a member of a family famous for its achievements in many lines of endeavor. One of his brothers was a Justice of the United States Supreme Court; another was the promoter of the first ocean telegraph cable; a third was the editor of a very successful religious paper.

Other delegates from New York were Horace Greeley, then just rising into fame as the editor of the most influential journal the country has ever known; and Thurlow Weed, editor of the Albany Journal, one of our early political bosses, one of the best of his kind, and the Guide, counsellor and friend of William H. Seward.

The wonderfully eloquent Tom Corwin, Governor of Ohio, just elected United States Senator, was a delegate, and took an active part in the proceedings. Other delegates from Ohio were Gov. Bebb, and former Governors Warren and Morrow. Stanley Matthews, later a United States Senator, and Justice of the United States Supreme Court, came also from Ohio.

There were present a score or more of future Congressmen, young men eager to represent a young and growing country, and perhaps not less than a dozen actual or potential Governors of States.

Illinois was represented by many of its ablest citizens. Several counties sent more than fifty delegates each. Farnsworth,

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future Congressman from the Kane county district, Washburne, destined to represent the Jo Daviess district, and Long John Wentworth, already in Congress from Chicago,--these and many others then unknown to fame, were there. From Sangamon county came Abraham Lincoln.

One Illinoian was conspicuous by his absence--Stephen Arnold Douglas. The "Little Giant" had a few months before been elected United States Senator from Illinois. He was possibly a strict constructionist. In any event, it is probable that he did not care to begin his Senatorial career by antagonizing the administration.

Letters were received from some of the most distinguished men in the country. Daniel Webster wrote a 3000-word letter, in which he argued with great power the constitutional right of Congress to appropriate money for internal improvements. Henry Clay wrote a cordial letter commending the purpose for which the convention was assembled. Letters were also received from ex-President Van Buren, from Senator Lewis Cass, and Senator Thomas H. Benton.

Abraham Lincoln took a modest but most ^{effective} ~~efficient~~ part in that convention. It was his first visit to Chicago. The previous fall he had been elected to Congress, the only Whig representative from Illinois. By political affiliation he was an internal improvement man. He was therefore in hearty sympathy ^{with the views} which the convention had been called to express. It was the first opportunity that he had ever enjoyed to appear on what might be called

a national stage. He there had the chance to measure himself with some of the big men of the country. David Dudley Field was there to hold the convention in check if possible. He made an able speech, counselling conservative action and moderate statement. But the convention was in no mood for moderation. Lincoln was called upon to answer Field. This he did, as Mr. Greeley says, "briefly and happily." *C. S. - 5*

Possibly, Miss Tarbell, you are familiar with these facts. In that case this letter will seem like bringing coals to Newcastle. If you do know them I can but wonder that in your interesting Life of Abraham Lincoln no mention is made of them. And the wonder grows as I discover that not a single biographer of Lincoln makes the slightest mention of this convention, and Lincoln's part in it. Nicolay and Hay are silent on the subject. Lamon and Herndon, his friends and partners, make no mention of it. Nor does any of Lincoln's numerous biographers. Yet it seems to me that the opportunities he there enjoyed had an important influence in his mental development.

It is a little singular, too, that no writing of Lincoln himself has been preserved in which he mentions his attendance and experience at the convention. In a letter to Orville H. Browning, dated June 24, 1847, he does say: "I am preparing to go to the River and Harbor Convention at Chicago." This letter is brought to light in "Uncollected Letters of Abraham Lincoln," compiled by Gilbert A. Tracy, and published in 1917. You are, of course, familiar with this volume, since you wrote the introduction.

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If Lincoln's presence at the River and Harbor Convention has escaped your notice, and if you have therefore given no thought to its influence on his life, abundant and irrefragable proof can be furnished of the statements here made. Indeed, you can easily satisfy yourself as to the main facts by reference to the files of the New York Tribune during July, 1847. Mr. Greeley wrote fully to his paper about the convention and about many of the delegates.

This is a long letter to be inflicted on you by a stranger. I have been moved to write by the opening sentence of your introduction to the Tracy volume: "All that concerns Abraham Lincoln is dear and sacred." Having in mind that sentiment, so tenderly expressed, I have thought that Lincoln's part in the convention of 1847 has been too long neglected.

Very respectfully,

James Shaw