Lincoln letters posted on Library of Congress web site

Shannon Jones
10 May 2000

The first selection of a planned posting of some 20,000 letters to and from Abraham Lincoln are now available on the Library of Congress (LOC) web site [http://www.loc.gov]. The initial batch, 2,200 letters, posted in February, date mainly from 1849 to 1865. A large portion relate to Lincoln's 1858 run for the US Senate against Stephen Douglas and the presidential election campaign of 1860.

The letters, many of which are transcribed and annotated, provide fascinating reading material and provide a fresh look at the life and times of the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. It is a tribute to the power of the Internet that these letters, formerly available only on microfilm, are now accessible to millions. A much larger release is planned for October 2000.

The letters come from the Robert Todd Lincoln collection in the Library of Congress, which is the main collection of Lincoln's papers. Lincoln's outgoing correspondence is contained in the Roy P. Basler edition of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*.

Most of the correspondence in the LOC collection are business and political letters to Lincoln. The LOC web site, however, contains a number of important Lincoln documents, including drafts of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address.

The collection does not contain letters between Lincoln and his wife, Mary. After her husband's death she burned them.

The current release contains correspondence to Lincoln through the year 1860. Following Lincoln's election in November 1860 his mail increased enormously, swelled by office seekers, those offering advice and support, and various cranks and lunatics. Some 15,000 of these letters are preserved, but only a few have been made available in the initial LOC posting.

Naturally, not all of the correspondence is of equal interest. Many letters are dry and concern the mundane nitty-gritty of capitalist politics—office seeking, horse trading of votes and self-promotion. However, in large numbers of these letters one can sense the great passion that animated millions of people during the period leading up to the Civil War.

In August 1858, after hearing Lincoln debate Douglas, a supporter wrote, “I had the pleasure of hearing your discussion at Ottawa [Illinois] with Judge Douglas, and in common with every Republican I have heard express himself, think you in most respects proved his superior...

“But allow me to say that, until you shall explicitly answer his question, to wit: ‘for or against receiving any more slave states,' ‘abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia,' ‘fugitive slaw law' & etc., I think, before a popular assembly, he will from this source derive considerable advantage.”

A letter dated November 1859, signed by L.L. Jones and 13 others, urged Lincoln to speak in Lawrence, Kansas, the center of forces opposed to the expansion of slavery into the territory. Virtual civil war conditions existed in Kansas as a result of attempts by pro-slavery forces to terrorize free-state men.

“My object in addressing you, is to invite you, and earnestly solicit you, to visit our City and to speak here.

“This I do in behalf of the many Republicans here, to whom the mention of your name is as a ‘house-hold word.' You live in their minds and hearts, and your coming will kindle a stronger enthusiasm for our Party and Principles—if that be possible—than has ever hitherto burned here, in this the centre and the core of Free Principles in our Territory.”

On July 11, 1860, in the midst of the presidential

© World Socialist Web Site

campaign, David Wilmot wrote Lincoln, “I cannot feel doubt of the result. The confusion of Babble has fallen upon the counsels of the enemies of Freedom. They are doomed through their great inequities, and by the inexorable law of Heaven, to defeat, shame & humiliation. The moral and political power of the party of Slavery is broken, and no patched up arrangements of its leaders, were such a thing possible, can save it from its doom.” (Wilmot was the author of the famous Wilmot Proviso, which sought to ban slavery in the lands taken by the US from Mexico.)

In a letter dated November 10, 1860, young Helen Haskell of Illinois wrote Lincoln: “I am so overjoyed to hear you are elected for the Presidency that I can not express my delight any other way than by writing to you. I have been looking forward impatiently ever since your nomination to the sixth of November (election), in hopes you would be elected. Though I am a little girl, I realize the curse of slavery, and want slaves to be kept from the territories, and I believe you are the only candidate that will do it. When I read about those noble men that formed the Constitution, I want it carried out—and we all know, they were opposed to slavery.”

After his election Lincoln received numerous letters warning him against real and imagined threats against his life. In September 1860, Oliver H. P. Parker of Philadelphia wrote a letter to Lincoln expounding details of what would today be called a “conspiracy theory” regarding the Southern slave-holding power and the deaths in office of Whig Presidents William H. Harrison and Zachary Taylor. He warned Lincoln to guard his life against a possible assassination plot by slaveowners.

“Now Sir,” he wrote, “in my humble opinion it will require on your part, if elected, the greatest vigilance and precaution to preserve your life and health, and it is to that end, that I weight to give you due warning of what I fear will be your end unless you are most watchful and vigilant on that subject.”

The letters reveal considerable confusion and contradictions in the thinking of wide layers. An example is this letter from a Connecticut man to Lincoln dated July 29, 1860: “I am not hostile to your election, though You are represented to be an abolitionist and in sentiment I am a pro-Slavery man. I would if I could have my way, authorize Slavery in New England and importation of African servants.

“The agitating question of slavery as it Exists in these U.S. has distracted the counsels of this nation long enough. You are reported to have said that the country could not remain a united people, one-half Bound and the other free, that all must be alike, and I agree with your reported sentiment.

“I am willing You should try the experiment. I do not believe you can effect emancipation. If you can, I have no obj. I only wish all sections to be alike. I want the Experiment tried, abolish Slavery if you can. If you find you cannot, as I am sure you will do, then let us have the other as it will then be the last expedient.”

It is to be hoped that the wider accessibility of historical documents made possible by the Internet will encourage increased interest in historical questions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site