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Lincoln In Connecticut

Stopping By On Way To Greatness

Future President Pressed Antislavery Theme In 1860 Visit

By LEWIS E. LEHRMAN

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In the week after Abraham Lincoln's speech at Cooper Union in New York on Feb. 27, 1860, the future president passed through Connecticut on the way to visit his son at Exeter, N.H. Lincoln agreed to stop in Hartford on his return. By the time he arrived in the Connecticut capital on March 5, speaking requests had piled up as a result of the publicity that the Cooper Union address received across New England. Republicans wanted to hear Lincoln's antislavery message to rally support for state elections in April.

Rather reluctantly, Lincoln spent the rest of the week in Connecticut and Rhode Island. These six days were Lincoln's only real exposure to the people and politics of Connecticut. Soon after he arrived in Hartford, Lincoln met newspaper editor Gideon Welles, whom Lincoln would appoint, one year later, secretary of the Navy. He also met his Hartford host, Gov. William A. Buckingham, who was facing a difficult re-election campaign that spring.

Years later at the White House, Lincoln would keep Gov. Buckingham waiting while he met with black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. "This was probably the first time in the history of this Republic when its chief magistrate found occasion or disposition to exercise such an act of impartiality between persons so widely different in their positions and supposed claims upon his attention," recalled Douglass.

Lincoln used his 1860 speeches to continue the campaign against the expansion of slavery, which he had begun in the fall of 1854. In Peoria on Oct. 16, he gave the great anti-slavery speech against the Kansas- Nebraska Act, which repealed the 1820 prohibition on slavery in the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase. Although he would receive the Republican nomination for president in mid-May, Lincoln was still a dark horse candidate. Much more prominent was Lincoln's longtime Illinois rival, Sen. Stephen A. Douglas.

At Hartford's city hall, Lincoln told an overflow crowd that "the slave question is the prevailing question before the nation. ... Hardly any other great question, however important it may have appeared, has been before the country several years, that had the power so to excite the public mind as this question of slavery."

Lincoln did not have time to prepare the kind of formal written text he had used at Cooper Union, but he drew on the history of slavery he had been researching for years.

Lincoln understood that slavery was a Northern as well as a Southern problem: "The entire value of the slave population of the United States, is, at a moderate estimate, not less than \$2 billion [in 1860 dollars]. This amount of property has a vast influence upon the minds of those who own it. The same amount of property owned by Northern men has the same influence upon their minds. In this we do not assume that we are better than the people of the South — neither do we admit that they are better than we. We are not better, barring circumstances, than they." Both North and South were responsible for American slavery.

The difference then between the North and South, Lincoln repeatedly emphasized, was that one region regarded slavery as wrong and the other did not. The next night, Lincoln addressed another overflow crowd — this one at Union Hall in New Haven. Again, Lincoln captured the crowd with his appeal to reason and patriotism. Lincoln explained that he did not know what to do with slavery where it legally existed in the Southern states, but was determined not to let it spread into new territory.

Lincoln stood four-square behind economic opportunity for all. "I want every man to have the chance," he told his New Haven listeners. "And I believe a black man is entitled to it — in which he can better his condition — when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system."

Lincoln followed up with appearances in Meriden and Norwich and a side trip to speak at Providence and Woonsocket, R.I. He ended the week in Bridgeport. Within a year of Lincoln's speech in Hartford, he would be inaugurated as the 16th president of the United States.

• **Lewis E. Lehrman of Greenwich is chairman of The Lincoln Institute (www.abrahamlincoln.org) and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point."**

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