

Lehrman: Lincoln, a journalist from Connecticut and a horse

Connecticut Post

Published: Thursday, May 20, 2010

by Lewis E. Lehrman

Private [Henry E. Wing](#) was mustered out of the [Union army](#) on crutches. The Connecticut native had been badly wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg of December 1862. Wing, who had abandoned the study of law earlier in the year to fight in the Civil War, returned home to Litchfield to recuperate with his family.

After rehabilitation at home, the crippled young man in 1863 sought employment as a journalist -- first for the [Hartford Evening Press](#), then for the Norwich Bulletin and later for the [New York Tribune](#). In 1864, the 20-year-old Wing moved south to begin work as a Tribune war correspondent in Virginia.

Conferring with his three fellow Tribune reporters after the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1863, the mustachioed reporter volunteered to make his way back to Washington to file a story on the battle. "As the youngest, I knew the task naturally belonged to me." Wing also knew the trip would be difficult and dangerous.

Before he left Union headquarters, however, Wing had a private conference with General [Ulysses S. Grant](#). After replying affirmatively to the Union commander's question about whether Wing intended to head for the capital, Grant "in a low tone" told Wing: "Well, if you should see the President, tell him from me that, whatever happens, there will be no turning back."

Wing's 70-mile trip back to the capital was a dangerous obstacle course in which he alternately pretended to be a Confederate messenger and a Union supporter. He told Confederates from [John Mosby's](#) cavalry that he was on a mission to report the Confederate victory to sympathizers in Washington. They provided him with an escort for part of the way until his disguise was exposed and Wing spurred his horse across the Rappahannock River.

Abandoning his horse, Wing reached [Union Mills](#), Virginia, where a Union telegraph operator was stationed. Wing almost despaired of getting his dispatch on the telegraph wires, which were restricted to military use. He therefore sent a telegram to the War Department which was met with a reply demanding that Wing reveal what he knew of the recent battle. Wing sought to negotiate that information in exchange for an exclusive dispatch to the Tribune. Secretary of War [Edwin M. Stanton](#) responded with orders to arrest him. "Of course that settled it," wrote Wing later. "I would not have told him one little word to save my life."

At that point, President Lincoln intervened with Wing over the telegraph and "accepted my terms without hesitation, only suggesting that my statement to my paper be so full as to disclose to the public the general situation." Providentially, Lincoln had been at the War Department's telegraph office, which he often visited for the latest news from the war front. "Standing by the operator at Union Mills, I dictated the half-column dispatch which appeared in the Tribune on the morning of Saturday, May 7, 1864. Mr. Lincoln, with his characteristic thoughtfulness for the public interests, arranged for the transfer to [the Associated Press](#) of a short summary of the news, and thus the anxiety of the whole country was set at ease."

The President had a unique relationship with Civil War journalists. He often disdained the advice and criticism of newspaper editors even as he courted their Washington correspondents.

A Union Army train took Wing on the final leg of his travel to Washington. The dirty, disheveled reporter arrived at the White House after midnight. Navy Secretary [Gideon Welles](#), former editor of the Hartford Evening Press, presented Wing to the rest of the cabinet and President Lincoln. After Wing had made his report and the Cabinet was dispersed, Wing asked to deliver a personal message to the President.

Wing's message -- "General Grant told me to tell you, from him, that, whatever happens, there is to be no turning back" -- greatly reassured the commander-in-chief in the light of the defeat of the Union army at the Battle of the Wilderness.

"Mr. Lincoln put his great, strong arms about me and carried away in the exuberance of his gladness, imprinted a kiss upon my forehead," Wing later wrote. The President asked what he could do for the journalist, who responded that he wanted to go back to get his horse Jesse: "I said I'd come back to get him, and I never lie to horses, Mr. President." Wing later wrote: "That early morning interview with Lincoln was the beginning of a strong friendship accorded to me, a mere boy, by that wonderful man."

The President provided Wing with a train and military escort to retrieve Jesse, who was like Lincoln a native of Kentucky. When Wing brought the horse to the White House for a party of journalists, Lincoln asked Wing if he could ride Jesse.

As Wing prepared to leave the grounds that day, Lincoln told him: "You will be coming to Washington sometimes and remember this, that when you do I want you always to come and see me. It is an order. You are to tell me all you hear and see."

Wing, who went on to be a Methodist minister in Iowa, kept his promises - to horses and to presidents.

Lewis E. Lehrman, of Greenwich, is co-founder of the Gilder-[Lehrman Institute of American History](#) and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008).