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Lincoln Comes to Columbus – Again!

By Phil Stichter

Abraham Lincoln graced Columbus with his presence on three uniquely different occasions.

Lincoln's first visit to Columbus came in 1859 in the aftermath of his debates with Stephen Douglas the year before in Illinois. While Lincoln was unsuccessful in gaining the Senate seat in Congress from his home state of Illinois, his performance in the debates with Douglas gave him a certain amount of well-deserved national recognition.

The 1859 gubernatorial race in Ohio pitted William Dennison, Jr., formerly a prominent member of the Whig party and one of the founders of the Republican Party in 1856, against the distinguished Ohio Supreme Court Judge Rufus P. Ranney, a Democrat and an ardent supporter of Stephen Douglas for President. Like Lincoln and Douglas, Dennison and Ranney engaged in a series of public debates in seven different cities.

Because of the importance of this statewide election, the Ohio Democrats announced on September 1, 1859 that Stephen Douglas had been invited to speak in several Ohio cities. The announcement came as a surprise to the Republican organization and on that same day it invited Lincoln to make several speeches in Ohio "to head off the little gentleman." A second appeal was made the following day for Lincoln to speak in Cincinnati as soon as possible after Douglas was to speak there. Lincoln responded favorably to both appeals and wrote "I now have two invitations to go to Ohio. These last are prompted by Douglas' going there; and I am really tempted to make a flying trip to Columbus & Cincinnati." And so he did, by rail of course, accompanied by his wife and one of his sons.

Douglas spoke in Columbus on September 7 and Lincoln followed suit on September 16. Douglas spoke in Cincinnati on September 9 and Lincoln spoke there on September 17 after a stop in Dayton. Lincoln's first visit to Columbus is commemorated by a plaque on one of the columns on the east steps of the Statehouse (now the Atrium) where he spoke.



Dennison won the election by a margin of 13,000 votes. He served as the 24th governor of Ohio from 1860 to 1862 and the first of three governors to hold office during the Civil War. In 1864, he served as the Chairman of the Republican National Convention and in that same year Lincoln appointed him Postmaster General, a cabinet position at that time.

As a result of Lincoln's first visit to Columbus, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 were first published here in Columbus, along with his 1859 speeches in Columbus and Cincinnati. How this came to be in 1860 is a fascinating story, one to be told at another time. The role that Ohio played in bringing about the nomination of Lincoln at the Republican National Convention that same year in Chicago is another fascinating story. These two events resulted in Lincoln's second visit to Columbus on February 13, 1861 as President-Elect. While in Columbus, Lincoln first learned that the Electoral College had met in Washington, DC and had formally elected him President earlier that day. Sadly, Lincoln's third visit to the Capital of Ohio was on April 29, 1865 when the funeral train carrying his remains arrived. Over 50,000 people during a six and a half hour period that day passed through the Statehouse rotunda to pay their last respects to this extraordinary man.

And now for the rest of the story. Once again, Lincoln comes to Columbus, but this time in the form of a travelling exhibit entitled "Forever Free – Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation." The State Library of Ohio is hosting this special exhibit which opens on March 7 and will be on display at the library until April 15. Be sure to mark your calendar so you don't miss this unique opportunity to experience Abraham Lincoln!

<http://library.ohio.gov/marketing/Newsletters/TheNews/2011/February/LincolnComesToColumbus>