

Abraham Lincoln and Rhode Island

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Abraham Lincoln spent less than two days in Rhode Island. He first visited the state on February 28 and 29, 1860 - immediately after he delivered his famed Cooper Union speech. The morning after his Monday night speech in New York City, he took a train across Connecticut and arrived in Providence in time to have dinner at the home of John Eddy, where he would spend the night. That evening, he spoke at Railroad Hall on the second floor of the railroad station in Providence. The audience was swelled to 1500 by favorable reports of his speech the night before and his debates in Illinois two years before. Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer wrote: "Lincoln was cheered from the moment he appeared at the doorway of the auditorium, and earned another burst of loud applause when the evening's chairman offered 'stirring' words to introduce 'the orator of the occasion.'"¹ Former Governor William W. Hoppin presided. Republican politician Thomas A. Jenckes, who would serve in Congress during the Civil War, introduced the visiting speaker.

"Mr. Lincoln began by alluding good naturedly to some remarks of the Press and the Post, which he had read on his way hither in the cars. Having with characteristic humor and wit, made a few comments upon the words of the Press, he proposed to take as the main subject of his speech topics suggested which the Post made from one of his former speeches," reported the *Providence Journal*. Mr. Lincoln then referred to the speech he had given in June 1858 when he accepted the Republican Senate nomination in Illinois. "He defended the position which he took in that speech, that this country cannot permanently endure half slave and half free. He gave the context in which his cited words were found, and discussed his subject with great fairness, earnestness and ability. He showed that he occupied only the ground which was taken by the founders of our government, and triumphantly vindicated himself and the Republican party against the false charges which are so unscrupulously brought against them."² The *Journal* reported: "He abounds in good humor and pleasant satire, and often gives a witty thrust that cuts like a Damascus blade...But he does not aim chiefly at fun. He strives rather to show the plain, simple, cogent reasoning that his positions are impregnable, and he carried his audience with him, as he deserves to."³

The next morning Mr. Lincoln departed Providence by train for New Hampshire - presumably changing trains in Boston. The night before, he had promised Woonsocket businessmen Lattimer W. Ballou and Edward Harris that he would give a second Rhode Island address in the middle of a series of political speeches in Connecticut the following week.

Mr. Lincoln was a man of his word. On the morning of March 8, Mr. Lincoln left New Haven, stopped in New London for a few hours, got back on a train to Providence to keep the promise he had made for a return visit. According to Percy Coe Eggleston, "The notice according this meeting...by Providence papers, had interested many people who had failed to hear Lincoln a week earlier, and a crowd of some four or five hundred with a band of music met the orator at the Providence station and accompanied him to Woonsocket. Large numbers joined the excursionists along the line of the road so that Harris Hall, the largest assembly room in Woonsocket, and one of the largest in the State, was greatly taxed to accommodate the assembled crowd. Lincoln made a powerful address and was followed by other speakers. There was plenty of music by the band, stirring campaign songs by the 'Du Dah Club' which had accompanied the excursion, and on the whole there was no end to the enthusiasm until midnight when the orator and his escort were again landed, on their return, at the station at Providence."⁴

Harold Holzer presents a different chronology for the end of that day: "Lincoln spent that night at 'Oakley,' his host Edward Harris's opulent Woonsocket mansion, and then at 8:25 the next morning, was back on the southbound 'cars.' Changing trains at Providence at 12:35 p.m., he proceeded to his next stop: Town Hall in Norwich, Connecticut..."⁵

Two months later, Republicans met for their national convention in Chicago. The Rhode Island delegation was chaired by Senator James J. Simmons, who apparently conferred on their train west with Connecticut leader Gideon Welles about New England's presidential preferences. Mr. Lincoln's visit to Rhode Island must have had an impact on the delegation, because none of the state's convention votes went to New York Senator William H. Seward, but none went to Mr. Lincoln on the first ballot either. On second ballot, three of Rhode Island's eight votes went Mr. Lincoln and on the third ballot, five went to him before his nomination was made unanimous. In the fall, Mr. Lincoln easily carried the state with 61% of the vote.

Republicans, however, split over the governorship that year. The official Republican candidate was wealthy retailer Seth Padelford, whose radical positions on slavery alienated some members of his party. The Democratic-Republican fusion candidate was William Sprague, a 29-year-old textile manufacturing heir who was more moderate on slavery issues. Sprague had more money than sense, more military ambition than political knowledge. Historian William B. Hesseltine called him "a veritable glamour boy of politics. Just past his twenty-ninth birthday, Sprague was admittedly the handsomest man in all the length and breadth of Rhode Island. He was also the richest. From his father he had inherited cotton mills that had survived without a tremor the crashes of 1857 and that were to multiply his wealth many times over with the coming of war contracts."⁶

Sprague signed up with the Providence Marine Artillery Company in the 1850s when he was just 16. As Governor Sprague had a yen for military heroism so with Ambrose F. Burnside he led his state's troops to Washington in the wake of Fort Sumter's surrender in April 1861. Lincoln biographer Isaac N. Arnold wrote that the Rhode Island governor called "the Legislature of that state together, on the 17th of [April] , tendered to the government a thousand infantry, and a battalion of artillery, and placing himself at the head of his troops, started for Washington."⁷ The state's troops nicknamed the "million dollar regiment." After their arrival in Washington, Burnside replied to instructions regarding requisitions from the War Department: "We need nothing, Sir, from the government; Rhode Island and her governor will attend to their wants."⁸ Burnside was a failed Rhode Island businessman who designed a rifle which was later used in Civil War. He had been rescued from his business failures by a job given him on the Illinois Central Railroad by former army colleague George B. McClellan. Future President Lincoln was one of the company's attorneys. With the Civil War, Burnside's old Bristol Rifle Works prospered and Burnside was recalled to the state by Sprague to head the First Rhode Island Regiment. Burnside biographer William Marvel wrote that "it is difficult to determine how much he appreciated Sprague; the young man was forever in the way, strutting about in his custom-made uniform. He had appointed numerous surplus officers to Burnside's regiment."⁹

Lincoln aide John Hay described Sprague's momentary and monetary influence in a newspaper article a few days after the fall of Sumter: "The response proves that the nation was not dead, but sleeping. From every State the answer comes, eagerly begging for the privilege of doing more than is asked of them. The Governor of Rhode Island, elected by Democratic votes, clothed with the mortal power of his position and the material power of five millions of inherited wealth, whose villages dot the Mosahssuck river for miles, who pays his servants salaries that would buy Florida, telegraphs to the War Department, that a regiment is ready at once, and that he will leave his spinning-wheels and lead them to the field in person. You cannot too highly estimate the significance of this fact. [Secretary of War Simon] Cameron instantly answered 'come.'"¹⁰

Rhode Islander George E. Smith recalled being called up by the Newport Artillery for deployment to Washington and being sent with the First Rhode Island Detached Militia under Colonel Burnside. When his unit arrived in Washington, he remembered several decades later, "our orders were to march over a route that would take us past the White House, and we were surprised to see the President and Gen. [Winfield] Scott standing at the curb. Great cheers greeted them and the two leaders answered by waving their hands. We were quartered in the Patent Office, and every day was taken up with drill and instruction in army life.

On May 2nd, we were drawn up in front of the White House to take part in a flag raising. Mr. Lincoln and his Cabinet were on the roof, and when our band played the Star Spangled Banner, the President raised the flag amid the cheers of a crowd that had gathered. It was a very inspiring sight, and I shall never forget it."¹¹

The concern that President Lincoln took in appeasing both Sprague and the state's congressional delegation is shown in a letter that he sent Sprague in regard to an appointment of a postmaster for Providence. The man recommended by Sprague subsequently became Sprague's brother-in-law:

I think I had a letter from you some time ago naming a person whom you would like to have appointed P.M. at Providence, R.I. and day-before yesterday, a gentleman urged the named of Thomas A. Doyle, as being the man whom you would like to have appointed. I write this now to assure you that while your wishes in this respect, are entitled to, and have received the highest consideration, there is a difficulty, such as I have not surmounted in any other case. It is that a different man - Walter C. Simmons - is recommended by both the Senators, and both the old Representatives of the State, and also by one of the new Representatives.

In these cases the Executive is obliged to be greatly dependent upon members of Congress; and while, under peculiar circumstances, a single member or two, may be occasionally over-ruled, I believe as strong a combination as the present never has been.

I therefore beg you to be assured that if I follow the rule in this case, as it appears to me I must, it will be with pain and not with pleasure, that you are not obliged.¹²

Sprague backed off, writing President Lincoln that his own recommendation "was written long before the present crisis. I have refused since then, to interfere with any appointments....I beg you to feel no unpleasantness for the course which your duty compels you to take..."¹³ But Sprague did make other requests - such as this appointment of "my friend General James B. M. Potter" to be an army paymaster a month later. Mr. Lincoln did his best to accommodate Sprague. What Sprague really wanted was a commission as a major general but New England's slot had already been promised to Massachusetts so Sprague was offered a slot as a brigadier general, which he declined. But the Rhode Island governor was constant in his attention to military preparations for the Civil War, writing President Lincoln the day before the surrender of Fort Sumter:

During the anticipated attack on Washington previous to your inauguration I had a messenger in constant communication with Genl Scott giving a minute detail of our military organization and requesting him to make such demands for them as the exigencies of the case should demand.

I should not now be correctly representing the public sentiment of the people of this state did I not assure you of their loyalty to the government of the union, and of their anxiety to do their utmost to maintain it. I have just returned from N Y from an interview with Gov Corwin, and now take pleasure in saying that we have a Battery of light Artillery, 6 pr. Horses & men complete, and a force of 1000 men completely disciplined & equipped, unequalled, or at any rate not surpassed by a similar number in any country, who would respond at short notice, to the call of the government in defense of the Capital. The Artillery especially, I imagine would be very serviceable to take the place of a similar number required elsewhere. I should be ready to accompany them.¹⁴

Sprague's Civil War record reached its apogee shortly thereafter at the First Battle of Bull Run. John H. Hennessey wrote that Sprague rode with Rhode Island Colonel Ambrose "Burnside, spurring forward occasionally to reconnoiter, and ultimately directing his constituents into tumultuous musketry fire on Matthew's Hill, just north of the turnpike. 'Governor Sprague was foremost in the fight and inspired the men with coolness and courage,' wrote one Rhode Islander. The governor had two horses shot from under him - probably the only sitting governor in American history to suffer that distinction."¹⁵ Sprague was infuriated by the cowardice and retreat he witnessed that day and stayed at the front when his Rhode Island regiment retreated. Alice Sokoloff wrote: "Exhausted by the battle, Sprague himself fell asleep,

hoping to be awakened by the [arrival of] fresh troops. Instead, he woke at two in the morning to total stillness. No one had come. No one was left. 'I saddled my horse, jumped the fences, and reported to Lincoln and begged him to send forward new troops which he had to stop the disorder. My petition was to no avail."¹⁶ Rhode Island troops, meanwhile, returned to "Camp Sprague." The regiment had been mustered into the service for only three months and was returned to Rhode Island shortly after the Bull Run battle.

Burnside found other military employment and stayed loyal to his friend McClellan, but his slow arrival at the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 turned a potential Union victory into a draw. Nevertheless, he was appointed to head the Army of the Potomac after McClellan failed vigorously to pursue the Confederates. He was consumed by self-doubt; he had repeatedly declined to lead the Army of the Potomac before accepting it on November 7, 1862. Historian Thomas J. Goss wrote: "The president had always been reluctant to fire a faithful subordinate, and he had admired Burnside's modesty and loyalty since the fighting at First Bull Run. Burnside had flaws, most of which he freely admitted; he also had a fighting spirit and was defeated while pressing the enemy exactly as Lincoln had been asking for throughout that long frustrating year."¹⁷ After the Union defeat at Fredericksburg in December 1862, Burnside himself was replaced in January 1863. He was transferred to command the Department of Ohio in 1863, where he arrested former Ohio Congressman Clement Vallindigham and defended Knoxville. Burnside was brought back to Virginia in 1864 where he pushed for the mining of Confederate lines which led to the ill-starred Crater offensive at Petersburg. The failure of that initiative led to his removal.

Sprague's military exploits had more lasting value - at least politically. A biographer of Sprague's future wife noted that he "was to be reelected as governor twice more, in 1861 and 1862...Sprague's dramatic and heroic role in the first months of the war would catch the people's imagination and prove an even more powerful influence than money."¹⁸ After his reelection in 1862, Sprague used his position to win a legislative election to the U.S. Senate - handing over the governorship to James Young Smith in March 1863.

Sprague continued to offer his opinions to President Lincoln, writing him when McClellan's peninsular campaign was failing in July 1862. It was the first of at least five communications Sprague sent to Mr. Lincoln that month concerning military affairs:

I would rather storm a battery than force my opinions upon you.

The critical condition of the republic emboldens me. It is in far greater jeopardy than at any previous time during the rebellion. Nothing can save us but the immediate transfer of [General Henry W.] Halleck and 50000 men, He will consent to this if he comes with them. The battlefield of the war is at Richmond. This can be done in a week or 10 days with proper energy. I volunteer to go to Halleck explain to him our critical position, or I shall go to the army of the Potomac and share its fortunes

The enemy cannot but be upon you here and in Baltimore. Your troops in the valley can oppose no successful resistance. McClellan is already hemmed in, He can hardly defend himself, this I know. New recruits are worthless now, and they will come slow. Halleck's army will unravel the snarl. Concentrate the army of Gen Pope, Burnside, McClellan and Halleck upon Richmond and the war is won, without this you are whipped in detail. The army that Halleck fought is at Richmond, why not he be there also.

Reason and the public safety demand his quickest possible action. Can the advice of your Cabinet be taken with safety? Are they not too personally ambitious to act as a unit. Selfish advice is never trustworthy. They require more of your attention than the Rebellion. Our only safety is to support *you* not your *advisers*.

Is not their individual attempt[s] to concentrate power around themselves, one great source of our ruin.

I will pardon this candor. If it, or any part, meets your approbation, see me, if not do not let me take up your time¹⁹

Sprague's political and personal life were marred by weaknesses for alcohol and women. In November 1863 the impetuous and self-indulgent Sprague wed Kate Chase, the spoiled and politically precocious daughter of Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, in a marriage based more on political appearances than personal chemistry. Kate needed the wealth and prestige of a marriage to one of America's wealthiest men; he needed contacts that could help keep his nine mills supplied with cotton and supply his need to feel important -- he was widely considered "insignificant" by Washingtonians like John Hay after they got to know him. (Hay, an 1858 graduate of Brown University, may have been President Lincoln's closest connection to Rhode Island.)

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote: "Even journalists at the time noted that outside of his fortune, Sprague possessed few attractive qualities."²⁰ One of President Lincoln's favorite journalists, Noah Brooks, wrote that Sprague "rather disappoints one who has formed an ideal Sprague from the knightly-looking portraits published of him. He is small, spruce, wears good, very good clothes, and his smooth beardless face is adorned with a pair of spectacles....He has a small, light head, showing shrewdness and calculation but not much mental power."²¹ Sprague's marriage to Kate Chase was described by historian Allan G. Bogue as "perhaps his greatest contribution to the war effort subsequent to his election."²²

One reason for the marriage, suggested biographers Thomas Graham and Marva Robins Belden was Sprague's need for help in supplying his family cotton mills with raw material.²³ However, noted Chase family chronicler Peg A. Lamphier, "the business of running A & W. Sprague may have been what brought the veil of darkness over Kate and William's budding romance. The Sprague business required cotton, which by late 1862 had become a rare commodity - rare enough that William ventured into treasonous waters to get it, and worse yet, attempted to enlist Kate's father in accomplishing the deed."²⁴ Sprague teamed up with a schemer named Harris Hoyt in a plot to extract cotton from Texas. His "Texas Adventure" involved a treasonous scheme to sell arms to Confederates in order to buy cotton; publicity about it was suppressed by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.

"The arrests of his partners caused William to frantically cover his tracks. Kate and Salmon never would have forgiven him for the disgrace of being arrested for treason, nor would the charges have been good for the Sprague business," wrote biographer Peg. A. Lamphier. "William wrote to General John A. Dix, who had charge of the matter, and claimed he had no connection to Hoyt. William told Dix that the whole matter was nothing more than a politically motivated attack on himself through his friend and cousin."²⁵

Although Sprague escaped from that imbroglio, he did not escape the disdain of Mrs. Mary Lincoln. She evidently tried to keep Sprague and his father-in-law off a White House invitation list in mid-January 1864. Secretary John G. Nicolay had to intervene: "When I came to direct the cards for the dinner, I referred the question of [the] 'snub' to the Tycoon who after a short conference with the powers at the other end of the hall came back and ordered Rhode Island and Ohio to be included in the list. Whereat there soon arose such a rampage as the House hasn't seen for a year, and I am again taboo. How the thing is to end is yet as dark a problem as the Schleswig-Holstein difficulty. [White House aide] Stod[dard] fairly cowered at the violence of the storm, and I think for the first time begins to appreciate the awful sublimities of nature. Things have subsided somewhat, but a day or two must of course bring them to a head."²⁶

Rhode Island's other senator was Henry B. Anthony, another former governor who had been elected to the Senate in 1859. Like Sprague, he was the well-born son of a cotton mill owner. Unlike Sprague, he was an accomplished orator. He was also the editor and owner of the *Providence Journal* Although relatively undistinguished during the Civil War, he went on to become the "Father of the Senate" because

of his long 25-year service. He wrote in a patronage request to President Lincoln: "I know how large are the demands upon you, and shall not complain if you are unable to grant this request, but I hope you will find it consistent with your view of the public interest to grant it."²⁷

The state's two congressmen at the beginning of the war were Democrat-Unionist George Huntington Brown and Union candidate William Paine Sheffield. They were succeeded in 1863 by Republican attorney Thomas Allen Jenckes and Nathan Dixon, an attorney and banker whose father had been a Rhode Island Senator.

About ten days before the President issued the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, Sprague and Jenckes separately urged President Lincoln to raise a regiment of black troops. Jenckes wrote: "Our Governor desires that I shall join him in the request that his 6th (colored) regiment shall be received into the service of the United State. I do so with the greatest pleasure, and I believe that nothing would give greater satisfaction to the friends of the administration, than to see this regiment bearing the flag of the United States. I would be a sign to the country that in your opinion 'a crisis' had not only 'been reached,' but 'passed', and that the paths of liberty and victory, as they have been always hitherto in our history, would henceforth be one and the same."²⁸

Presidential authorization of black troops would have to wait until 1863. He wrote Sprague on September 20: "I am sure you can no be ignorant of my strong desire to oblige you, so far as in my own judgment, I consistently can; but I can not now so do..."²⁹

Sprague initially supported his father-in-law's abortive search for the 1864 presidential nomination but chafed at additional personal and political financing for Chase. Nevertheless, Rhode Island Republicans endorsed President Lincoln for reelection in 1864. Mr. Lincoln easily carried Rhode Island's electoral votes in 1864 - by a 62-38% margin. Both President Lincoln and the Sprague-Chase marriage, however, were to be short-lived.

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