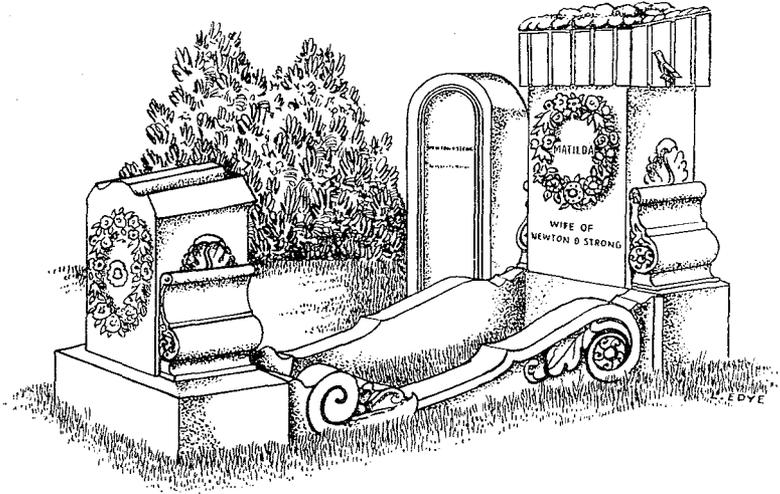




From the statue in the Pennsylvania State Museum.

OF A TOMB IN THE READING CEMETERY AND THE LONG SHADOW OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

By J. BENNETT NOLAN



FOREWORD

THIS tale carries with it the aura of a great name, the name of the Emancipator President. Its recital is evoked by a grave, a grave under the maples on the slopes of Charles Evans Cemetery in the upland town of Reading in Pennsylvania. The setting is well chosen, for no necropolis in our Commonwealth has a more commanding site. The cemetery stands upon a wooded knoll, its circling avenues ending in recurring vistas of mountain and river, the grand rolling sweep of the central Berks plain. Just behind the Gothic entrance stands the statue of the founder, a courtly figure in the high stock and tight breeches of the Mexican War period, the benevolent lawyer, Charles Evans.

This grave with its ornate pediment deftly carved by a craftsman long gathered to his fathers, Hargraves of Philadelphia, lay

unnoticed and almost forgotten through the gathering decades. The stone bears the name of Matilda, born Edwards, beloved wife of Newton Deming Strong, with the date of her death, February 5, 1851. The woman who sleeps beneath, a personage of rare qualities of heart and mind, was born far out on the banks of the Ohio. She is remembered now because in her winsome youth she attracted the attention, perhaps the love, of Abraham Lincoln.

Next rises the stone of the husband, Newton Deming Strong, a Yale graduate, once a member of the Reading bar, who died August 8, 1866, in St. Louis, Missouri, and directed that his remains be brought back and interred beside those of his wife. His epitaph, that of the couple perhaps, might be summed up in the terse statement that the bright promise of youth never came to fulfillment and that early ambitions turned to ashes in the mouth.

Ten thousand books, pamphlets, and articles have been written upon the life of Abraham Lincoln, more we are told than of any character except Jesus of Nazareth and possibly Napoleon. We who dwell in Reading, proud of the traditions of a romantic town, prize the episode herein related not only because it illustrates still another phase in the career of a transcendent man but also because it provides an additional tie to bind him with our community. For by strange chance the grave of this woman who once engrossed the youthful fancy of the future President lies in the ancestral country of the Lincoln family.

Many pioneer families pulled up stakes and left Berks County in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Wading across Schuylkill with their heavily laden Conestoga wagons, they took the trail which led over the Alleghenies to the newly opened territories of the west, Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois. Young Daniel Boone, guiding the family ox cart down the Owaton Creek, took his last look at Monocacy Hill in 1749. Some of the DeTurks of Oley left in 1769, some of the Schaeffers of Maxatawny in 1770.

In the fall of 1765 while the sumachs were reddening on the south slope of Neversink Hill, the farmer John Lincoln left his farm by the river in Exeter Township, Berks County, and struck out for the Susquehanna and the west. A fateful journey this for John and his family. His son, Abraham, was murdered by the Indians in a clearing near his Kentucky cabin while the grandson Thomas looked on in horror. Thomas in turn was to leave a son named, not after his grandfather, but after his great uncle Abraham,

once Commissioner of Berks County, a name which was to reverberate down the corridors of immortality.

President Lincoln vaguely knew that his ancestors came from Berks. When he was in Washington in 1848 as a Whig member of the Thirty-First Congress, he wrote to his cousin, Dan Lincoln, for some data concerning the family in its Pennsylvania days: "What was your grandfather's Christian name? Was he a Quaker? At what time did he emigrate from Berks County to Virginia?" The religion of his ancestors seems to have given Lincoln some concern. Writing in this same year, March 6, 1848, to another cousin, Solomon Lincoln, he said, "We have a vague tradition that my grandfather went from Pennsylvania to Virginia and that he was a Quaker."

Despite the family tradition, few in Berks County knew or recked much about Abraham Lincoln until he was nominated for the presidency at the Wigwam in Chicago in 1860; then it was suddenly discovered that he was in a sense a native son. Carl Schurz was dispatched to Reading to preside at a Republican meeting. Editor and lawyer, John S. Richards (as enthusiastic a Republican as he had once been an ardent Whig), translated the Cooper Union speech into German for campaign purposes, beseeching the voters to remember a candidate "whose family is racy of our soil." This sentimental appeal had its effect. Berks County, the Gibraltar of Democracy, which four years before in the Buchanan-Fremont campaign had given "Old Buck" a plurality of seven thousand, was lost by Abraham Lincoln and carried for Stephen A. Douglas by a beggarly seventeen hundred votes.

The jubilant Republicans, regarding this as a virtual victory, sent a formal invitation "signed by prominent citizens," as the *Berks and Schuylkill Journal* put it, to the President-elect to visit Reading on his way to inauguration. However, when Mr. Lincoln arrived at Harrisburg in February, 1861, upon his journey from Springfield to the White House, the escorting Pinkerton detectives discovered threats of assassination; Lincoln made a furtive nocturnal leap to Washington. No opportunity for a ceremony of welcome in the good town of Reading—the Citadel of Democracy.

Four years later came the last review of the Grand Army on Pennsylvania Avenue. The President sat shivering in the tribune until the Pennsylvania regiment known as the "Bucktails" marched

by. Attracted by the height of the drummer boy, Lincoln beckoned him over while the defile halted.

“How tall are you?”

“Six feet four inches.”

“Just about my height. Who are you?”

“Sergeant Mahlon Shaaber from Reading, Pennsylvania.”

“Reading! That’s in Berks County where our old home is. When I get a little time I’m coming up to see it.”

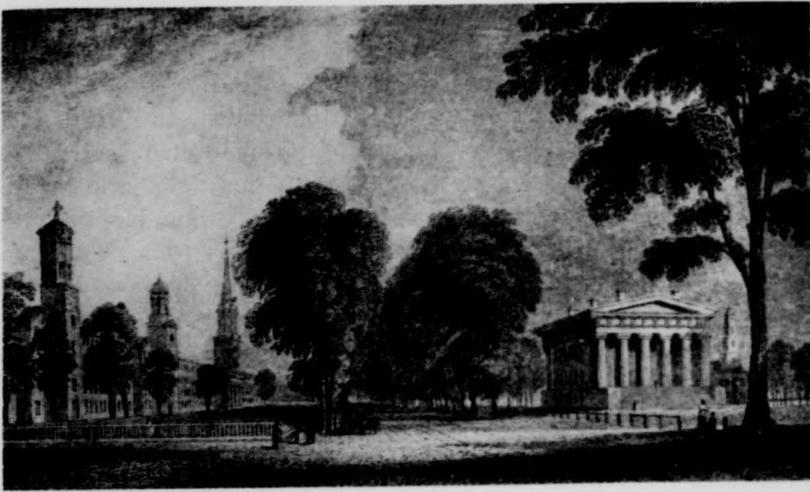
He never came; Booth’s bullet precluded that. But had he come to Berkshire, Mr. Lincoln might have found little retrospect of his family. The present lordly Abraham Lincoln Hotel was of course not in existence. The ancestral stone farm house by the Schuylkill lay unmarked until long afterwards. Only in the archives of the court house would he have found the documentary evidence of the Lincoln family’s sojourn. And there he would have read the jury list of 1773, still preserved, with the unflattering appraisal of his great uncle Abraham from whom he had been named.

No. 3. Abraham Lincoln. A country-born Englishman.
An illiterate man and apt to be influenced by the pleadings of lawyers: apt to be Intoxicated with Drink.

An inauspicious genesis, this, for a name that was to ring down the ages!

So, had the President been permitted to carry out his half-formulated intention, the journey to Reading might have been one of disappointment. And it is curious to think that he might have found his closest tie with the county-seat of his forbears in the grave under the maples where sleeps the woman who was the subject of his youthful regard.

The wraith of this same woman, Matilda Edwards Strong, flutters through the background of many Lincoln biographies. Little was known of her, little at least in comparison with our knowledge of other maidens who enlisted Lincoln’s youthful passing attention. So, with the gathering decades, Matilda’s personality became more and more nebulous, in the end almost apocryphal. It is our present effort to lift the curtain, after the lapse of a century, and draw the theme of the present essay from her career and from that of the man whom she eventually married.



Yale College and the State House, New Haven, Connecticut. From an old engraving.

YALE—1831

When Doctor Jeremiah Day presided at the graduation of the Yale class of 1831, he had been president for fourteen years. As the class filed in before him for the last time, Doctor Day fumbled with his sonorous Latin scroll of greeting and regarded the members doubtfully. Not that the scholastic record of the class had been bad; it could scarcely be that, for one of the graduates was a future president of Yale, Noah Porter, and another the celebrated missionary, Peter Parker, who was presently to carry the gospel out to China. President Day had attended some of the debates of the Phi Alpha Society in their rooms on Orange Street and had been impressed with the fervor and thoroughness of the orations there delivered.

However, despite these satisfactory evidences of erudition, it could not be denied that the class of 1831 were for the most part contumacious rebels. It was they who had concocted the celebrated Bread and Butter Rebellion of 1828, a sore grievance to a much-tried faculty. Perhaps there was some truth in their plaint that the substance which they were asked to spread upon their daily ration of bread at the college commons was distilled from whale oil. Nevertheless, Doctor Day thought the matter might have been settled without publicity harmful to the college.

But, whatever were the Doctor's misgivings, there was one figure in the front row of the graduates upon whom his glance lingered with gratitude and admiration. Newton D. Strong, registered in his first years from Somers, Connecticut, and in his last year from Reading, Pennsylvania, was an honor man, second in his class and Phi Beta Kappa as well became his Yale background. His father, the Reverend William Lighthouse Strong, had been an outstanding member of the class of 1802. His brother, William Strong the second, had graduated in 1828. At this very period of the graduation ceremonies William was studying in the New Haven law school which the Honorable David Daggett had founded in 1826.¹

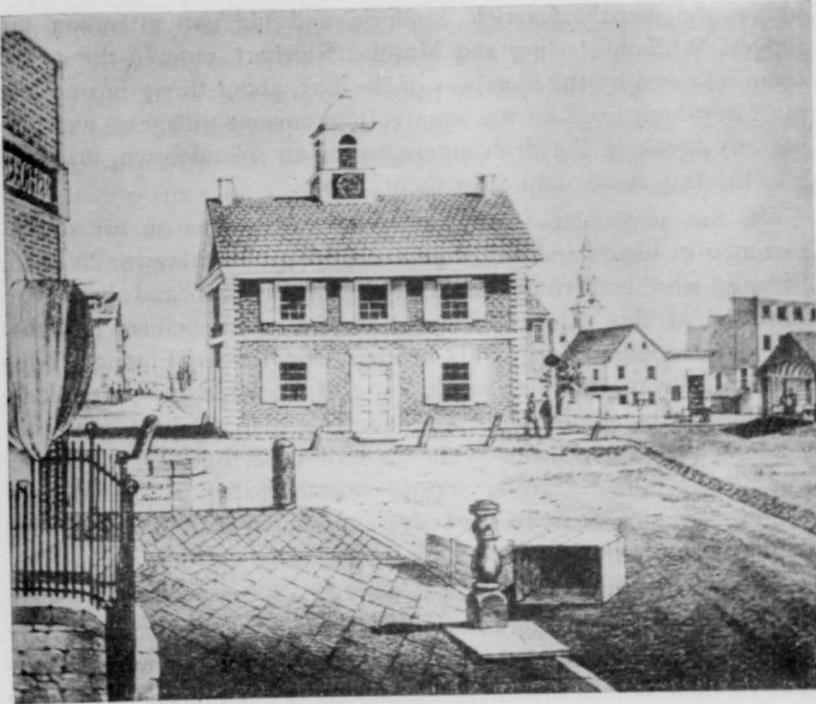
William, previous to his return to the law school in Burlington, New Jersey, had been teaching and pursuing his law studies in the town of Reading in Pennsylvania. President Day, a good appraiser of men, predicted that he would rise high; but even he could not foresee the heights which this ambitious young law student was to attain. No one dreamt that he would become Justice both of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and of the Supreme Court of the United States, and that as a member of the Electoral Commission of 1877 he would send Rutherford B. Hayes into the White House instead of the amiable Samuel J. Tilden whom the nation had given so large a popular plurality.

The graduating thesis of Newton Strong has not been preserved to us, but there are two outstanding facts to be deduced from what data we have. First, there is the circumstance that he was already spending his vacation summers in Reading, the Pennsylvania-German town, which his brother William, on the advice of the illustrious Horace Binney, had selected as his residence. Secondly, that his roommate in South Middle College (now Connecticut Hall) by whose side he marched that morning in the academic procession, was Junius Hall, later of Alton, Illinois.² These details may explain why Newton was originally admitted to the Bar of Reading and also why he afterwards elected to move westward to begin his professional career.

President Porter intoned his list in alphabetical sequence. "Newtonius Demingus Strong. Omnibus ad Quos Praesentes Literae

¹ The Daggett Law School was not formally integrated into the University until 1846.

² The two classmates returned for the reunion of August, 1845, at New Haven. Hall died at Boston in 1851 in his forty-first year.



Old Court House in Penn Street, Reading. Erected 1762, removed 1841.
 Courtesy Historical Society of Berks County

pervenerint." Newton clutched his diploma and descended from the platform. His father, the pastor, up from Somers for the great day, looked after him admiringly. This was a boy to be proud of, a lad with a future.

READING—1835

On the morning of August 4, 1835, the bell in the old Court House, in the center of the Penn Square of the village of Reading, was ringing with insistent clang. That same bell had rung for notable events, for the death of King George the Second, for the signing of the Declaration of Independence when King George the Third was losing thirteen colonies, for the surrender of Cornwallis and, in mournful cadence, for the death of Washington.

On the present occasion no event of similar import impended; the bell was simply ringing to announce the opening of the combined courts of Berks, Lehigh, and Northampton. The presiding

judge, the courtly Garrick Mallery, and his two attendant lay judges, William Darling and Mathias Reichert, entered the courtroom followed by the members of the Bar, about thirty in number, most of whom lived on the square. The curious villagers, welcoming any break in the drab monotony of an inland town, crowded into the tiny courtroom after them.

On this particular summer morning there was an air of expectancy in bench and bar. The rumor went that lawyer William Strong, who had come down from Connecticut and had been admitted at this same Reading Bar two years before, intended to move the admission of his brother, Newton D. Strong. Judge Mallery, always affable, would on this occasion be particularly gracious to the admission of a fellow Yale man, he having himself graduated at New Haven in the class of 1812. Besides, the gossip went that William Strong was a constant caller at the Mallery residence paying court to the judge's charming daughter, Priscilla, whom he afterwards married.

There was no more popular member of the Berks Bar than William Strong although he was a Readingite of comparatively short residence. Most of the lawyers still used the "Dutch" vernacular in their homes and were suspicious of "Yankees," a generic name given to outsiders of all nationalities. William had gracefully accepted this situation and made himself fluent in the local patois. To practice the dialect he had established an office in the outlying village of Kutztown and walked there twice a week. He was already prominent at the Presbyterian Church, in the Militia Company, the Library, and all village activities.

As for young Newton Strong, he was no stranger in Reading where he spent his last long college vacation. The villagers speculated as to his intentions. He was to tutor another year at Yale. After that would he remain in Reading and practice with his brother in the office on North Callowhill Street next to the Episcopal Church, or would he seek other fields of endeavor?

The court convened and the candidate presented himself at the Bar. Judge Garrick Mallery nodded benignly; the oath was administered; Newton became a member of the Bar of Reading in Pennsylvania. Perhaps at the announcement of his admission the young lawyer had not fully made up his mind as to his future field of practice. There was, however, a certain urge towards a

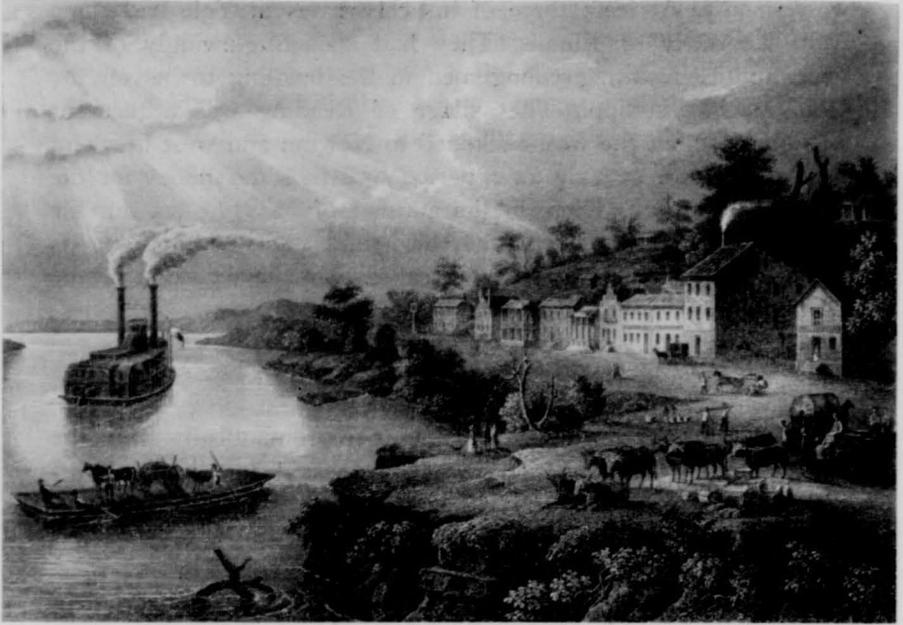
western city. At least three of his classmates in Yale had come from Kentucky or Illinois. They had spoken glowingly of the opportunities awaiting young men in the bustling towns on the Ohio and Mississippi. The village of Reading was a pleasant enough place but the west beckoned to Newton and west he went. He was to tutor at Yale for a period to earn some money for the westward journey. Then, in the autumn of 1839, he set out for the stage-coach trip over the Alleghenies and the monotonous weeks on an Ohio river steamer,³ always in the direction of the setting sun.

ALTON—1839

The town of Alton on Mississippi rises romantically from the flat ground by the river, the present business district, to the bluff where are located the better class residences. When the Sulpitian missionaries from Montreal paddled past the site, it was encumbered by the wigwams of a Kickapoo village. By 1839 this same site was occupied by a thriving community of two thousand with warehouses, steamboat wharves, and other evidences of prosperity. The citizens confidently predicted that their town would be chosen as the state Capital, that it would surpass St. Louis as an *entrepôt* for river commerce. Altogether it appears to have been a most promising place for a young eastern lawyer to locate in.

Newton Strong arrived at Alton just after the village had been injected into public notice through the so-called Lovejoy riots. The Reverend Mr. Lovejoy, an abolitionist from New England, had set up an anti-slavery printing press. The fanatical pro-slavery folk of Alton raided the press and shot Mr. Lovejoy. Whether Newton took any part in this controversy is not clear. As a rigid Congregationalist with a New England background he certainly had abolitionist tendencies. Consequently he may well have been embarrassed to find that his old Yale classmate, Junius Hall—now installed in active practice at Alton and the neighboring county seat of Edwardsville—was one of the counsel for the defense of the Lovejoy rioters.

³ When Colonel Benton, in August, 1839, came to Alton to deliver a fiery speech against the railroads, he announced that he had come from the east by "the only way possible," the descent of the Ohio river.



Alton on the Mississippi.

For when the river packet from St. Louis deposited Newton Strong at Alton wharf, he did not lack for a welcome and a law partner; Junius Hall was already occupying offices in Second Street "in Riley's building over C. C. March's store."⁴ Junius seems to have been an impulsive quixotic boy ever eager to defend forlorn causes like those of the persecuted sect of Mormon. He was one of the earliest advocates of the free school system in Illinois. A partnership must have been agreed upon before Newton left the East for, beginning June 6, 1840, advertisements begin to appear in the *Alton Telegraph* and *Whig Advertiser* announcing the legal association of Strong and Hall—curiously enough, not Hall and Strong. In one announcement of a Commissioner's Sale the name of additional counsel appears—Abraham Lincoln of Springfield.⁵

It was during these early days in Alton that Newton became associated with Cyrus Edwards, so prominent in Illinois politics

⁴ *Alton Telegraph*.

⁵ *Alton Telegraph*.

and civic affairs. A man of means, too, for he gave ten thousand dollars, a large sum for the period, to Shurtleff Baptist College. Politically the two men would be congenial, for Newton was a Whig and Edwards had been the Whig candidate for Governor of Illinois in 1838, his cause being materially furthered by the rattling good campaign speeches of lawyer Abraham Lincoln, then hailing from New Salem. It was the nearest that the Whigs ever came to winning the state governorship, the Democratic candidate (Irish frontiersman Carlin) being elected by a very small plurality. The Democrats, frightened perhaps by the closeness of the call, took their revenge by defeating Abraham Lincoln for the Speakership of the Assembly—this in spite of the fact that the legislature showed a Whig majority in enrollment.⁶

The business connection between Newton Strong and Cyrus Edwards inevitably led to an invitation to the Edwards home on the bluff where a good-looking (the Strong men were all handsome) young lawyer from the east with a Yale background would be very welcome. And at this mansion, the hand of destiny ever over his shoulder, Newton met his future wife, Matilda Rachel Edwards, eldest daughter of his host.

No likeness appears to survive of Matilda. We have only the biographer Barton's statement that she was tall, willowy and a blond.⁷ She was the eldest of six children born at Elkton, Kentucky, to Cyrus Edwards by his first wife, the lovely Nancy Reed, a reigning belle of her days. So Matilda was nine years old when her father first brought her to Alton to live, twelve years old when her mother died, and fifteen when Cyrus was re-married to Sophie Loomis. When she first met Newton Strong she was in her eighteenth year and already an assured hoyden, confident of her ability to navigate the matrimonial sea and having, as she thought, several ports under her lee. She had attended classes at the Monticello Female Seminary near Alton, of which her father was a trustee, and was a cultivated and sprightly young lady.

Then in the summer of 1840 Matilda got an invitation to visit the family of her cousin, Ninian Edwards, at Springfield. This opportunity must have appealed to the imagination of a landward-

⁶ Three of the Whig legislators were kidnapped by the unscrupulous Democrats and not brought back until after the election.

⁷ It is likely that Matilda was tall because her father, Cyrus Edwards, was exactly Lincoln's height, six feet four inches.

bred girl. Alton was not too exciting and Springfield (despite the protest of the Alton politicians) had just been made the state capital. There were rumors of great doings in the social line, of cotillions and balls. At the Edwards house in Springfield Matilda would have the companionship of Mrs. Edwards' sister, Mary Todd, who was visiting there from Lexington; altogether the prospect was an alluring one.

How far had a love affair between Matilda Edwards and Newton Strong progressed when she left for Springfield? And what did Newton mean when he subscribed himself in the programme of the reunion of his Yale class in 1840 as "about to be married?" Certainly Matilda regarded herself as fancy-free during her stay in Springfield. Indeed, her written references to Newton are tinged with the respect due to an older man rather than with any suggestions of love.

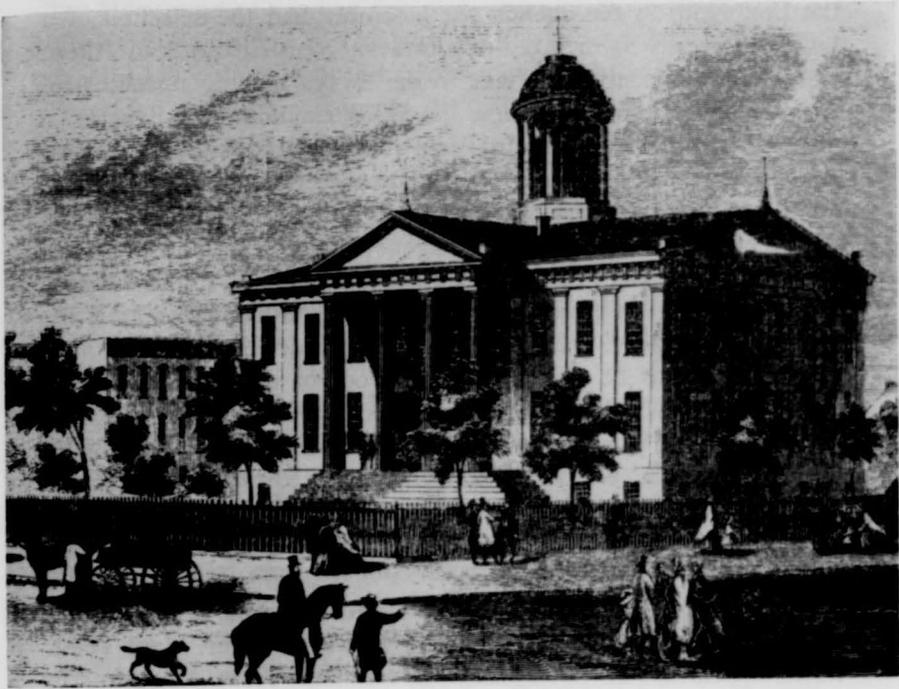
It is interesting to know that when Matilda and her father mounted to the Springfield stage, Newton Strong rode with them. A fourth companion was lawyer Joe Gillespie of Alton, a crony of Abraham Lincoln and remembered now as the man who jumped with Lincoln out of the window of the Legislative Hall at Springfield to prevent the Democrats from achieving a quorum. All too few of Matilda's letters survived, but we are fortunate enough to have one describing this journey.⁸ It is written to her brother Nelson, then a law student in Newton Strong's office. This is what Matilda wrote:

My dear brother

When we bade adieu to the outlines of our fair Alton the first day was the most unpleasant one I ever passed. Crowded as I was up in one corner with the weight of all three of the gentlemen upon me, you can imagine what I really suffered.

When we alighted for the night I was quite lame and besides this I was compelled through the day to *sit looking and acting my very prettiest*. The first night we stopped I had a very nice room to myself with the exception that the floor above was rather too thin for one of my glib tongue. As soon as the gentlemen retired, the landlady came in and I, to win her good will, exclaimed "what dirty creatures these men are, they have spit all

⁸ Original in possession of Colonel Edwards M. Quigley of Louisville, Kentucky.



Old State House, Springfield, Illinois.

over your nice floor." This speech, Mr. Strong and Mr. Gillespie had the kindness to repeat to me next morning.

The next day I traveled more comfortably and when I halted for the night I was in so fine a humor that I was supposed to be a young wife taking a bridal tour. The good landlady had very *Strong* suspicions. . . .

From which sprightly recital we may assume that an attachment between Matilda and Newton had already begun to develop, even before her arrival at Springfield.

SPRINGFIELD—1840

In the winter of 1839-40 when the citizens of Springfield knew definitely that the capital of Illinois was to be removed to their city from Vandalia, there was much rejoicing. The Presbyterian church was hastily altered for the Representatives, stoves being installed and the floor covered with saw-dust "to deaden the debate." The Methodist church was renovated for the Senate. As

the first item on the agenda the assembly had the selection of a United States Senator. Matilda's father, Cyrus Edwards of Alton, whose life-long destiny it was to be always making unsuccessful bids for higher office, was now the Whig candidate for Senator.

As a part of the general jubilee a cotillion was planned to which all of the legislators, their wives and sweethearts, were invited. Upon the elaborate printed invitations for this event appear the names of the sponsors and "managers" under whose auspices the cotillion was given. Amongst these, standing out in symbols of fire in their import to posterity, are the signatures *Abraham Lincoln* and *Stephen A. Douglas*. Another signature upon this cotillion program, one to be bound into the woof of our tale, is that of Ninian W. Edwards, nephew to Cyrus, cousin to Matilda.

No one could live in Springfield at the period without knowing of the Edwardses. Ninian and his wife, born Elizabeth Todd, lived in a mansion near the site of the present Illinois Centennial Building. They entertained charmingly and their invitations were much prized.⁹

To this house in this same winter of 1839-40 came an entrancing visitor from Lexington. She was Mrs. Edwards' sister, Mary Todd, whose appearance in Springfield was a notable event. Mary was in her twenty-second year, pretty and vivacious, with chestnut hair and lovely blue eyes. The Springfield folk whispered that she had been educated at Mrs. Mentelle's fine finishing school near Lexington in Kentucky, and that she could speak a fluent French. "A beautiful girl with many party frocks," as one half envious contemporary description runs.

It was not surprising that all the young bucks crowded to the Edwards house and amongst them a gaunt, tall, reserved youth who had moved his law office from New Salem to Springfield. This same lawyer, Abraham Lincoln by name, was no stranger in the Edwards mansion. Ninian Edwards, who had sat with him in the Illinois legislature said long afterwards, "Lincoln came to my house nearly every Sunday for four years."¹⁰

Abraham was soon a frankly confessed suitor at the knees of pretty Mary Todd. To be sure, no one took his suit very seriously,

⁹ For a blithe account of a gay evening at the Edwards mansion see the *Quincy Whig* of January 23, 1840.

¹⁰ Deposition of Ninian W. Edwards made for Herndon, Library of Congress.

for Mary might have had her pick of many more eligible swains. There was Stephen A. Douglas, for instance, debonair and well-groomed, a rising Democrat, already addressed as Judge Douglas.

As for young Mr. Lincoln, he had behind him a background which might appeal to a romantic young lady: had served as captain in the short-lived Black Hawk War and had done four terms in the State Legislature. On the other hand, his antecedents savored of the plebeian and he shared a modest bed over Joshua Speed's store; it was intimated that he had unpaid debts. Curious to relate, however, and to the surprise of all Springfield, Mary Todd's rather fickle attentions began to definitely center, not on the imperious Mr. Douglas, but upon the homely uncouth rail-splitter who had hung out his shingle in Hoffman's Row.

Soon an engagement for marriage, while not formally announced, came to be regarded as an accepted fact. Mary's rich relatives, at first rather amused by her choice, finally shrugged their shoulders resignedly and acquiesced in the advent of the former flat-boat man into their aristocratic family circle. This acceptance was tinged with a certain regret, since the background of the more humble Lincolns was not to be compared with that of the Edwardses or of the Todds. However, Mary's relatives knew full well that she was hot-tempered and obstinate. Besides, there was a vague possibility that Mr. Lincoln really had a career impending. Mary was convinced of it, for she confidently asserted that Abraham would one day be President of the United States.

At this point, probably in the second week of November, 1840,¹¹ the Alton stage stopped before the Edwards mansion and deposited Matilda Edwards with a trunk full of new dresses. Mary Todd took to her at once and wrote to Mary Levering in Baltimore: "Mr. Edwards has a cousin from Alton spending the winter with us, a most interesting young lady. Her fascinations have drawn a concourse of beaux and company around us." And again, "I know you will be pleased with Matilda Edwards, a lovelier girl I never saw."

Young Jim Conklin, attracted like all the Springfield swains to the Edwards parlor, adds his tribute. "The Legislature have dispersed. Whether any persons regret it I cannot pretend to say. Miss Todd and her cousin Miss Edwards seem to form the grand

¹¹ Matilda's first letter from Springfield, apparently written just after her arrival is dated November 30, 1840.

centre of attraction. Swarms of strangers who had little else to engage their attention hovered around them, to catch a passing smile."

Abraham Lincoln, a daily caller, we may assume, at his fiancé's home, met Matilda in due course. Then suddenly came a break in the idyll between Abraham and Mary Todd. Lincoln stayed away; the engagement was tacitly broken. "Poor Lincoln! How are the mighty fallen," wrote Conkling to Mary Levering. Lincoln even considered leaving Springfield and North America. He asked his law partner, John T. Stuart, then in Congress, to get him the position of consul at Bogota in Colombia (New Granada they called it then) in South America.

It was inevitable that the gossips of Springfield should associate the break with the arrival of Matilda Edwards. How much Matilda attracted Abraham must after the lapse of a century remain largely in the realm of conjecture. William E. Barton, the biographer of *The Women Lincoln Loved*, composed his work on the site of the Edwards mansion, talked with descendants of the parties concerned, and searched all original sources of information. This is his view of the matter.

To the home of her cousins, Ninian W. and Elizabeth Todd Edwards, Matilda went. That was in 1840, and rather late in the year, about the time that Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd were beginning to chafe a little within the bonds of their engagement. In the critical period of her engagement to Abraham Lincoln, Mary Todd had as her roommate in the Edwards house, a potential rival, Matilda Edwards.

Stephen A. Douglas was in town, and he was unmarried and unattached. He had always admired Mary Todd, and it was believed that he would have been glad to marry her. He still was attentive to her at parties and levees and balls. He was a graceful dancer, and she loved to dance.

The next time Mary Todd went dancing with Stephen A. Douglas, practising the wicked waltz Springfield had seen at the circus, and Mary looked over her shoulder, Abraham Lincoln was not looking at her at all. He was talking to Matilda Edwards.

Next an attempt was made to divert Stephen A. Douglas from Mary to Matilda. Douglas fell madly in love with Matilda and is said to have proposed. She refused him, and never slackened her pace.¹²

¹² William E. Barton, *The Women Lincoln Loved*, Indianapolis, 1927.

All this of course is Barton talking, and talking a century after the event. More competent evidence is to be adduced from the correspondence of Lincoln's law partner and "Boswell," William H. Herndon, a credible witness when not under alcoholic inspiration. Herndon, after all, was a personal observer of the drama unfolding at the Edwards mansion, and he was certainly convinced that Lincoln's fondness for Matilda Edwards was the cause of the estrangement with Mary Todd. Writing to Ward H. Lamon in reminiscent mood, February 25, 1870, Herndon refers to "testimony" given to him by Miss Edwards, and states that "Mrs. Lincoln and Miss Edwards gave me information."¹³

Herndon even went so far as to take the affidavits of Mary's sister, Elizabeth Edwards, and of her husband, Ninian. Mrs. Edwards would naturally be embarrassed to testify in a delicate situation affecting her own sister and her husband's cousin. While deprecating Matilda's influence over Abraham, she leans to the theory that Abraham was temporarily insane. "In his lunacy he declared he hated Mary and loved Miss Edwards. This is true and yet it was not his real feelings. A crazy man hates those he loves when not himself."¹⁴

Ninian W. Edwards' deposition made for Herndon, September 22, 1865, is even more definite in the statement that Lincoln, temporarily at least, was in love with Matilda. The biographers, Lamon and Matheny, share in this hypothesis; but perhaps the most positive testimony is given by a man in whom Mr. Lincoln seems often to have confided. This was William O. Stoddard, Secretary to the President during the war years. Stoddard definitely blames the break between Abraham and Mary upon Matilda's influence.¹⁵ So that it may moderately be stated that any writer upon the life of Lincoln who ignores or minimizes the incident is discounting the evidence of contemporary and credible witnesses.

Reverting to the theme of our narrative, Lincoln, solitary and embittered, continued to sulk and then, sometime in the autumn of 1841, Matilda went back home. Her visit at Springfield had endured for "say a year," to quote her hostess, who had probably found her a pretty handful. However, in spite of the length of her

¹³ Affidavit of Mrs. Ninian W. Edwards made for Herndon, September 27, 1887. Library of Congress.

¹⁴ Library of Congress.

¹⁵ William O. Stoddard, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 1884.

stay, Matilda never lost the liking and respect of her relatives. Her own view of the matter, one perhaps natural to a girl of her age, may be expressed in the statement which Burton attributes to her: "Matilda declared that if the young men like her it was no fault of hers, and if Mary Todd could not keep her lover after she had him, she need not expect any help from other girls."

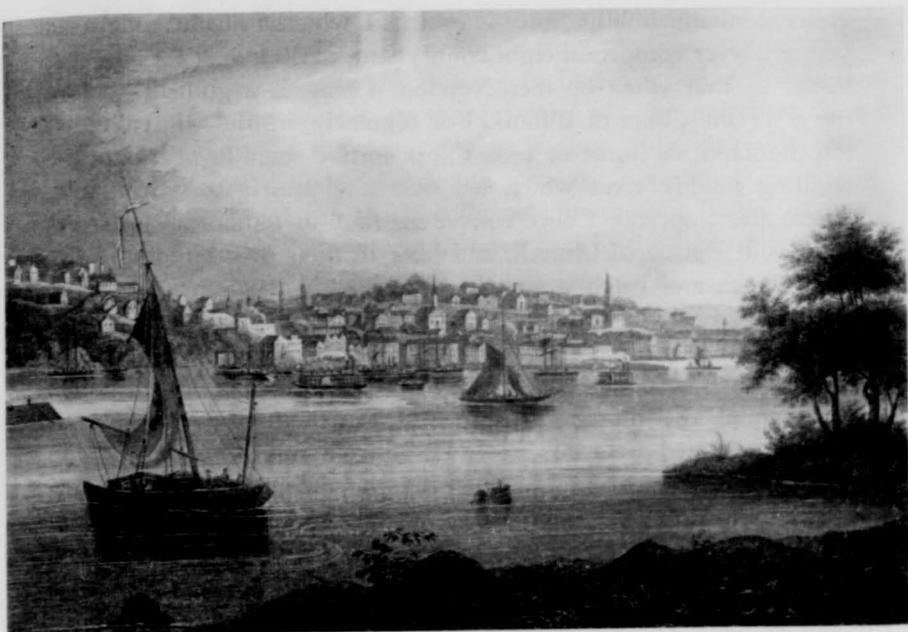
So Matilda returned to Alton and there was an immediate and notable clearance in the atmosphere at Springfield. Gradually the relations between Abraham and Mary improved. On November 4, 1842, "at candlelight," before an improvised altar in the Edwards home the Reverend Charles Dresser "in canonical robes" married a somewhat bewildered bridegroom to a comely bride. Abraham's age is given at thirty-three, Mary's at twenty-three. Wrote Lincoln five days later to the Shawneetown lawyer, Samuel D. Marshall, "Nothing new here, except my marrying, which, to me, is a matter of profound wonder."

ALTON—1841

When Matilda Edwards returned to Alton, in the late autumn of 1841, the rumor of her brilliant whirl in Springfield had preceded her. It was said that not only had she refused her hand to Stephen A. Douglas but that she had rejected the wealthy merchant Joshua Speed. As to Matilda's affair with Abraham Lincoln, the Alton gossips took little stock in that. They knew Lincoln well, for he had often spoken at Whig rallies in Alton.¹⁶ The sandbar, just beneath Alton bluff was to be the place chosen in 1842 for his opera-bouffe duel with long swords against the Irish schoolteacher, Shields. Lincoln's campaign speeches always drew a crowd because he told such good stories, but a girl of Matilda Edwards' background would certainly look higher.

But, with all of Matilda's talents and advantages, the fact remains that after her Springfield visit three years elapsed and she was still not engaged or married. By 1844 she was in her twenty-third year; most western girls married much younger. It is evident from such of Matilda's letters as have survived that in this interval she was seriously considering the suit of Newton Strong. In May of 1842, while Newton was away from Alton, riding the circuit,

¹⁶ At Alton, October 15, 1858, on a platform beside the old city hall was staged the last of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates.



Alton on the Mississippi.

she writes to her brother Nelson Edwards: "I had no idea that I would miss Mr. S's society and kind attentions as I do. I do admire and esteem him very much." And there is a suggestion that a marriage might have been concluded earlier if the struggling lawyer had been surer of his financial status. Again addressing her brother in the August of 1842, Matilda wrote: "Everyone complains more and more about hard times. Mr. Strong says he doesn't know how he can get through. He has the 'hypo' horribly." Perhaps "Mr. Strong" was not too downcast, for on the very day of Matilda's lugubrious missive he delivered the main address to the graduates of Shurtleff College, upon which occasion Matilda's father, Cyrus, handed out the diplomas.

Newton, of course, was no longer young. Thirteen years had rolled by since his graduation at New Haven and he remained a bachelor. Nevertheless he was hoping for the best and waiting for Matilda. He had heard, of course, of her triumphs in Springfield and was delighted when she came back to Alton unattached. He could learn most of the details of Matilda's visit from Abraham Lincoln who came sometimes to Alton and was associated with

Newton in much litigation. The circuit which Lincoln rode as a young lawyer comprised eight county seats; Alton was not amongst these, so that when he met Newton it was in arguments before the Supreme Court of Illinois. For regularly, in mid-winter, Newton mounted his horse or took the primitive stage to negotiate the winding muddy road which led over the prairie to Springfield, where the Supreme Court convened, first in temporary quarters in the old Episcopal Church, and later in their own building.

In the case of *Fitch v. Pritchard*, argued in the Supreme Court, February 1, 1843, Newton Strong appeared for the plaintiff, Abraham Lincoln for the defendant. In the mortgage foreclosure of *Martin v. Edwards*, February 8, 1843, Strong and Lincoln represented the mortgagors. In the proceeding of *Johnston v. Weedman*, tried February 7, 1844, Lincoln for the plaintiff, won against Newton Strong representing the defendant. On January 10, 1845, again in the Supreme Court, Newton and Abraham were associated as counsel for the defendants in the case of *Craig v. Helm*. In 1846, just before Newton's departure for the east he was concerned with Lincoln in two cases. In *Taylor v. Bailey* (Illinois reports. File No. 1626. Not reported in Richards) Lincoln appeared for the plaintiff and Strong for the defendant. In *Warner v. Helm* (6 Illinois 220) Lincoln and Strong appear for the plaintiff.¹⁷

All this legal connection between Strong and Lincoln led to a political affiliation; for Newton, abandoning the Democratic principles of his distinguished brother, William, had thrown in his fortunes with the Whig party of Illinois. At a meeting held at Edwardsville, in 1841, we find him nominating Abraham Lincoln for governor of Illinois. Then followed the suggestion of office for himself. He must have had a degree of self-confidence, for as early as February 26, 1841, he had the effrontery to have his name submitted to a politically hostile legislature as State's Attorney for Madison County. He was roundly beaten, the Democrat, Underwood, getting seventy-two votes to Newton's forty-one. However, his name was now before the public—his hat was in the ring.¹⁸

¹⁷ These notations of cases in which Abraham Lincoln and Newton D. Strong were jointly concerned are taken from Harry E. Pratt's *Lincoln Day by Day. 1840-1846*, Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, Illinois.

¹⁸ The details of Newton Strong's brief political career are gleaned from the columns of the *Alton Telegraph* and *Sangamon Journal* of Springfield.

Then, some months later, Newton was mentioned at an Edwardsville Whig conference as the nominee for Congress, and actually got one vote. So it is not surprising to find him, May 18, 1844, announced as the winner in the primary for the selection of a Whig candidate for the Assembly, defeating Billy DeWolfe, formerly of Bristol, Rhode Island, and Brown University.

The passer-by at the Whig rally held in the old Eagle Tavern at Alton, October 2, 1844, might have caught the lusty refrain:

In Alton and in Madison
The Whigs are now combining
To give their strength to Henry Clay
With noble Frelinghuysen
And Newton Deming Strong, my boys,
We'll hail him loud and long.
With Harry and with Theodore
We'll vote for N. D. Strong.

All this notoriety and popularity could not but have a favorable effect upon Newton's suit for the hand of Matilda Edwards. Besides, Matilda was no longer in the first bloom of youth and may have attained a reflecting age. So, on September 24, 1844, at Cyrus Edwards' mansion, Woodlawn, in Upper Alton, Newton and Matilda were married.

After Strong's election to the Legislature, the young bride accompanied her husband to Springfield for the opening of the session. It was her first trip to the Capital since that memorable journey of 1840. At Springfield the Strongs met the Abraham Lincolns now installed in their new house at Eighth and Jackson Streets. Whether there was any embarrassment in the meeting of the two girls, Matilda and Mary, who had been roommates four years before at the Ninian Edwards mansion, we do not know, but it is certain that the couples met often at the many entertainments of that gay winter of 1844-45.

It is scarcely within the scope of this narrative to dwell upon the routine of Newton Strong's career in the Assembly. It is noteworthy, however, that the only example which has survived to us of Strong's "Attic eloquence" which evoked the admiration of the Bars of Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Missouri, is contained in the Legislative Journal. The Democratic legislators at Springfield, apparently not having enough local business to occupy their minds, reached out to criticize what they alleged was narrow-minded

religious prejudice in their sister state of New Hampshire. This was really a covert attack upon the Whigs, since the Democratic party of the period prided itself upon its religious liberality. Newton D. Strong voiced a manly protest against this intrusion into the affairs of another commonwealth, ending with the Websterian expression, "Harmony and good feeling amongst those of us who prize the interest of Illinois more than the mere call of petty party politics should preclude the passage of this measure."

Meanwhile, there had been some notable changes in the law office over March's store in Alton. Junius Hall, tiring of the monotony of the life in Alton, removed to St. Louis in midsummer of 1844, and opened a law office with Horatio Bigelow. Newton was left alone with his law student, Matilda's cousin, Nelson Edwards. However, a lucky chance was to provide him with a new and capable partner.

Lewis Parsons, destined to serve as a Major General in the Civil War and to die in his eighty-ninth year in southern Illinois, was a member of the Yale class of 1836. He had been wandering about through western New York, Ohio, and Kentucky, keeping store, teaching school, and pursuing his law studies. Happening to arrive at St. Louis in the late spring of 1844, he learned that on that same day there was to be a rally and reunion of the Yale men who found themselves settled far out there on the nation's western fringe. Newton Strong had come down from St. Louis and was presented to Parsons. By evening a partnership had been concluded and the legend, *Strong and Parsons*; succeeded to that of *Strong and Hall* over the door of the office at Alton. Parsons threw himself enthusiastically into the life of Alton, married Sarah Edwards, a cousin of Matilda, and wrote letters home extolling the advantages of life in the western village, even asserting that "the academic building of Shurtleff College, near Alton, is finer than any at Yale or Cambridge."

So, with success in politics and a well-arranged law office, a happy future loomed before Newton and Matilda. It is probable that they might have remained contentedly in Alton for the rest of their lives had it not been for a development in the town of Reading twelve hundred miles to the eastward, that development being the election of Newton's brother and legal preceptor, William Strong, as Congressman from Berks County. This in the autumn of 1846.

William had grown notably in wealth and position since the day when he had proposed Newton before the Bar of the old Court House in Reading. Although a comparatively young lawyer, he represented the rich Eckert brothers, influential ironmasters. As borough solicitor he had drafted a code of regulations for the village of Reading, which was shortly to be elevated into a city. He had many and important clients.

And now, elected to Congress where he was to serve for four years, William Strong looked about him for a partner who might care for and conserve his extensive legal practice while he was to be absent in Washington. His first thought, naturally, would be of Newton. What terms for a temporary partnership he offered his brother, we do not know, but they must have been generous, for Newton, in spite of his favorable prospects in Alton, promptly accepted.

As the Strongs mounted the gangplank of the river steamer on the first step of their long journey to the east, the Madison militia were drilling on Alton levee. At anchor, hard-by, lay the side-wheelers which were to convey the troops down Mississippi for the Mexican campaign. General Zachary Taylor had crossed the Rio Grande.

RETURN TO READING—1846

Before the advent of the East Penn Railway, travelers from Harrisburg intending for Reading and the east, presented themselves at six o'clock in the morning at Matthew Slough's Tavern on Third Street. Here on a certain September day in 1846 a couple booked for transit and took their places on the box. These were Mr. Newton D. Strong, late of Alton in Illinois, and his wife, Matilda; they had descended the evening before from the new railway from the west.

As the stage rolled eastward, the travelers, fresh from the monotony of the plains, admired the rolling scenery of the Lebanon Valley. Newton pointed out the construction work of the new Union Canal; brother William, he knew, was interested in the canal. He could scarcely divine that a decade later William was to serve on the first board of directors of the East Penn Railroad, following this same route, that he was to make the speech of dedication and impressively wheel out the first barrow of dirt.

Coming down the steep hill in what is now West Reading, the



West view of Reading from Yeager Hill, 1840, by J. A. Devore.

Courtesy Historical Society of Berks County

bride from Illinois caught her first glimpse of the long covered bridge spanning the Schuylkill and the red brick village encircled by lordly mountains, a striking sight for a prairie-born girl. The little courthouse in the square where Newton had been sworn in as a lawyer was gone, and an imposing new courthouse loomed on Prince Street, only the thoroughfare was now called Sixth Street. The market houses, under whose arches Newton had often rambled in his vacation days from Yale, amused at the strange guttural inflection of the country folk, still occupied the square. DeBorbon's new Mansion House stood at the corner once tenanted by Finney's Tavern.

Where, one speculates, did Newton and Matilda live in Reading? Brother William, a widower at the time, his first wife, Priscilla Mallery, having died three years before, was living with his children on North Callowhill Street. The pair from Alton may have moved in with their brother. But as Newton never acquired any real estate in Reading there can be no certainty as to his residence.

The Appearance Docket of the Berks Court reveals Newton

as plunging immediately into active practice, sometimes for himself, sometimes with his brother, his first proceeding of record being *Stitzel v. Stitzel* in the April term of 1847. It is a great tribute to the attainments of William Strong as a lawyer that very soon after his admission to the Reading Bar he secured two outstanding clients, the new Philadelphia and Reading Railway and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Newton Strong, evidently doing his brother's business, appears in several cases for the railroad from 1847 to 1851, during the time when William was serving in Congress.

THE TWO CONGRESSMEN:
WASHINGTON—1848

The old Hall of Representatives, rebuilt in 1828 after having been burned by the British during the War of 1812, was a pleasing, attractive chamber. The members could loll comfortably on the red leather seats and listen to the forensic entertainment afforded by the giants of the epoch.

Here on a certain April afternoon in 1848 sat Abraham Lincoln, sole Whig representative in the Illinois delegation, sprawled in his chair with his long legs extending into the aisle. The ferocious Locofoco campaign orators were wont to jibe that he had been a failure as a congressman just as he had been unsuccessful as a lawyer. And one of his fellow representatives describes him as "a droll honest amiable fellow who could have been crowned the champion story-teller of the Capitol."

This was a dubious appraisal at best, but Mr. Lincoln was half inclined to join in it. He knew that his constituents back in Illinois were terming him a second Benedict Arnold because of his protest against the Mexican War; it was not likely that he would be returned to Congress. Also, his domestic affairs had not gone too well. He had been married six years to Mary Todd and she had borne him two fine boys. However, she had now left Washington and gone back to Lexington in a tantrum. This left Abraham two alternatives for spending his lonely evenings. He could go to Caspari's bowling alley, or he could read in his dismal room at Sprigg's boarding house (just where the Congressional Library now stands).

Pondering in his seat in the Hall of Representatives, Lincoln's



Hall of the House of Representatives, 1851.

thoughts were diverted to memories of the woman whom he might have married in Mary's place, gentle Matilda Edwards now living with her husband, Newton Strong, at Reading in Pennsylvania. For here in Congress Lincoln had a continuous reminder of Matilda. Seated opposite to him in the Democratic ranks was Matilda's brother-in-law, the honorable William Strong, member from Berks County.

There was no suggestion of failure in the assured slant of William Strong's leonine head; his erect bearing was worthy of one who had served as Captain of the Washington Greys of Reading. He it was, a few weeks before, who had been the first to raise the prostrate form of ex-President John Quincy Adams from his adjoining chair when the latter was stricken with fatal heart attack during a sitting of the House.¹⁹ Strong was the chairman or member of many important committees, an admired and respected man who would go high.

Lincoln and Strong had met some weeks before at a reception

¹⁹ John Quincy Adams was stricken February 21, 1848.

and Christmas dinner given to the members of the Congress at Coleman's Hotel by the citizens of Washington.²⁰ Did they at one of their meetings chat about Matilda? It would seem so, for Mr. Lincoln sat down to write to Mary in Lexington.

A day or two ago Mr. Strong, here in Congress, said to me that Matilda would visit here within two or three weeks. Suppose you write her a letter and enclose it in one of mine and if she comes I will deliver it to her, and if she does not, I will send it to her.

Most affectionately,
A. Lincoln²¹

It is not probable that the idea of her husband pursuing an intimacy with a girl who had caused her such jealous qualms a short time before appealed to Mrs. Lincoln. However, Mary's reply, while ignoring the suggestion of the sending of a letter to Matilda, gives no sign of any irritation. The woman who subsequently bore with stoicism the news of the successive deaths of her three brothers all fighting in the Confederate ranks cannot be denied a measure of self-control. But, while she wrote nothing about Matilda, Mrs. Lincoln did intimate that she would like to come back east. Abraham, perhaps with a thought to his unpaid bills, temporized and said that she might come "if she would be a good girl." There the matter ended for the moment.

In June Lincoln journeyed up to Philadelphia for the Whig Convention. He was then nearer to the home of his forefathers and the residence of Matilda than at any other time in his life. We would like to think that he took the new railroad train and went up to Reading for a short visit, but unfortunately there is no evidence in support of so engaging a thesis.

Whether Matilda and Newton came to Washington in that

²⁰ Lincoln and Strong met again at President Zachary Taylor's inaugural ball, March 5, 1849. Mr. Strong, diverted in spite of his Presbyterian inhibitions, describes the occasion as "hilarious." As for Congressman Abraham Lincoln, he was still searching for his hat at four o'clock in the morning, and then set out bare-headed for the long trip to Capitol Hill. The outgoing President Polk, forgotten in the general jubilee, was accompanied down to his river steamer by the faithful James Buchanan. Polk's diary describes the night as "stormy."

²¹ Original formerly owned by Oliver R. Barrett, Chicago, Illinois. Lincoln to Mrs. Lincoln, April 16, 1848. This was one of the so-called "Bonfire letters" rescued by a neighbor when Mrs. Lincoln was burning her papers in the gutter before leaving Springfield for the White House.

spring of 1848, to visit Congressman Strong, and whether they saw Lincoln, remains undetermined. There was, however, an aftermath in the relations of the two congressmen who sat opposite to each other under the dome of the old Capitol. This came sixteen years later in the October of 1864 when Abraham Lincoln had become President of the United States and Strong was serving as Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. The death of Chief Justice Taney of the United States Supreme Court caused a vacancy which Lincoln seriously thought of filling by the appointment of William Strong. In the end, however, political reasons dictated the selection of Salmon P. Chase. Strong finally attained the Bench of the nation's highest tribunal by appointment of President Grant in February, 1870.

THE PASSING OF MATILDA :
READING—1851

Assuming that Matilda and Newton moved in with Judge Strong on Callowhill Street upon their arrival in Reading, they must have found a residence of their own after November, 1849, for in that month Judge Strong took as his second wife, Rachel Bull, of Lancaster. This marriage occurred a few months after the death of the Congressman's son, William, the "Christmas child" of 1840 upon whom such fond hopes were centered.

A search of the Reading press of the period, while not revealing Newton's actual dwelling, shows him as active in municipal affairs. He served on the committee of reception when Governor Shunk visited Reading, September 4, 1847. He signed a protest against the proposed cutting up of Berks County and the formation of a new county with Kutztown as its capital. He sat on the tribune when Odd Fellows' Hall was dedicated, October 26, 1847.²² As the pious son of a good clerical father, he was constant in his attendance at the new Presbyterian church on South Fifth Street. In this same church Matilda renounced the Baptist affiliations of her youth and adhered to the religion of her husband, December 15, 1847.²³

In the period of which we write it is much easier to trace the doings of a husband than of a wife. Femininity was not stressed;

²² Newton, during his short stay at Alton, acted as President of the Lyceum.

²³ Archives of First Presbyterian Church of Reading, Pennsylvania.



Residence of the Hon. William D. Strong, Reading. Reconstructed from a photograph in the Historical Society of Berks County.

indeed, the grandmothers of most of the women of the epoch had not been able to write their names. So it is not surprising that we have few details of Matilda Strong's everyday life in Reading. She had her household duties, of course, and her church. Also she was a member of the Benevolent Society, which maintained a soup kitchen on Franklin Street and of which Mrs. Henry Muhlenberg was president. For recreation there were lectures, and occasionally

strolling bands of Thespians gave a play. In winter one skated on the Schuylkill; in summer there were picnics to Rose Valley or Mineral Springs as we say now. Also it would appear from Abraham Lincoln's letter, already quoted, that Newton and Matilda may have visited their brother, the Congressman, in Washington.

This brings us to midwinter of 1851, when the couple made their fatal trip to Philadelphia, the reason for their going being unknown. Perhaps they went for medical attention, as there were no hospitals in the village of Reading at the period. Our only certainty is the startling tragic development that, while in Philadelphia, Matilda died from an undisclosed disease. John Ritter, editor of the *Adler*, first conveyed the news to the German-speaking population of Reading: "Starb. Zu Philadelphia am Freitag Morgen, ziemlich ploetzlich Matilda, gattin von Newton Deming Strong Esq. von Reading in ihren besten jahren."²⁴ The phrase "ziemlich ploetzlich" or "quite suddenly" indicates that Matilda had not been gravely ill when she left Reading.

John S. Richards, the gifted editor of the *Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, shocked with the rest of the community, sat down to pen one of the most notable tributes ever given to a woman in the long history of the press of Reading.

The sudden death of this most esteemed lady has awakened an unusual degree of sorrow in the circle of her friends. Her gentle temper, her conciliatory manners, and the sweetness of her heart made her dear to all who knew her.

The memory of such as she cannot perish and it will be long ere her many friends shall cease to think of her virtues and grieve for her early death.²⁵

What rare qualities of mind and heart must this woman have possessed to so stamp her personality upon our community after only four years of residence!

They brought Matilda up on the railway and buried her at three o'clock on a snowy Sunday afternoon. The grief-stricken husband directed the inscription still to be read on her tomb-stone: "She will not return to us but we will go to her."

How long Newton stayed in Reading after Matilda's passing is

²⁴ *Readinger Adler*, February 11, 1851.

²⁵ *Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, February 8, 1851.

not certain. His last appearance of record in the Berks Courts is in December Term of 1851. Then in January of the succeeding year he is noted as being elected as a director of the new Cotton Mill on South Ninth Street. He probably left Reading in the summer of 1852.²⁶

When the lawyer went out for his farewell visit to the cemetery, the willows were sprouting with the advent of spring; the finishing touches were being put upon the entrance whose planning had been of such interest to the philanthropic founder. There were few graves as yet and Matilda's stone stood out prominently. As the bereaved husband lingered by it the words of John Ritter's obituary came to his mind, "In ihren besten jahren."

Matilda had indeed died "in her best years."

THE LITTLE GIANT—1852

The honorable Stephen A. Douglas, Senator from Illinois, sat by his window at DeBorbon's Mansion House in the town of Reading in Pennsylvania. It was a warm late-summer evening, Saturday, September 4, 1852.²⁷ Beneath him in the spacious square, the Senator could see the roofs of the long market houses and the three speakers' stands erected for the great political rally of the morrow. The tribune at Fourth Street had been reserved for German-speaking orators, and even now Mr. Douglas caught the refrain of the Philadelphia *Maennerchor* ("every man a Democrat" as the Reading *Gazette* naively boasted) who had been brought up by special train of twenty-four cars for the rally.

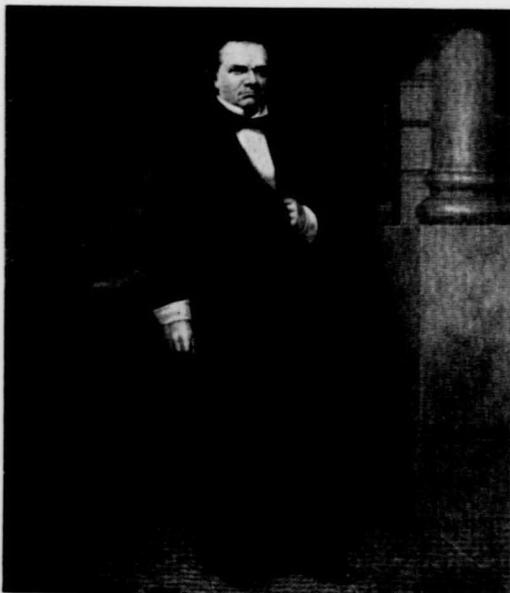
This meeting was to be the climax in a century of steadfast Berks Democracy. It was intended as a crushing answer to the malicious Whigs who had played a trump card by bringing Daniel Webster to speak in the new Court House on Sixth Street.²⁸ The local Democrats had affected to belittle Mr. Webster's fervent oration, but there was no denying its effect. Even the prized mayoralty of Reading was now occupied by the printer George Getz, a life-long Whig.

Accordingly the loyal Berks Democracy, under the leadership

²⁶ Newton D. Strong was admitted to the bar of St. Louis February 10, 1853.

²⁷ Reading *Gazette and Democrat; Berks and Schuylkill Journal* of Reading, Pennsylvania.

²⁸ *Berks and Schuylkill Journal* of Reading, Pennsylvania.



of Congressman J. Glancy Jones of Morgantown, planned the present rally upon a stupendous scale. It was confidently announced that ten thousand visitors would crowd the Penn Square. Governor Bigler of Pennsylvania was coming over from Harrisburg accompanied by Governor Lowe of Maryland and Governor Toucey of Connecticut. Three United States Senators had accepted; George Mifflin Dallas, ex-Vice-President of the United States, was to speak; James Buchanan of Lancaster was to preside. Only a few weeks intervened before election day. If the Democrats were to elect Franklin Pierce as President, they must carry Pennsylvania.

Much thought had been given to the selection of the principal speaker. First choice, of course, fell upon the "Little Giant," foremost orator of the period, the peerless Stephen A. Douglas, but there was some doubt as to how Mr. Douglas' much prized presence was to be secured. Newton Strong of the Reading Bar and his wife, Matilda, had known Douglas in Springfield and often spoke of him. But Matilda was dead and Newton, a disconsolate widower, had gone out west, no one knew exactly where. Remained, then, only William Strong who had served with Douglas in Congress. Mr. Strong had just declined an almost certain election to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, pleading the calls of his profes-

sion; however, his political influence was still great. He wrote to Mr. Douglas and Mr. Douglas came to Reading.

Now on the evening of the great day, as Senator Douglas sat listening to the chorus of the jubilant Democracy below him, he was at peace with all the world. The next presidential nomination, that of 1856, was practically in his grasp. Buchanan, the most potential Democratic rival, was to be sent off as Ambassador to the Court of St. James, out of harm's way. Then if Douglas were once nominated, who should seriously contest his election? The Whigs were disorganized and discouraged. There was talk, to be sure, of a new party—*Republican* it was to be called—but their bid for power was negligible. The doors of the White House stood wide open.

Senator Douglas had only one regret in his visit to Reading and it was not of a political nature. That same evening he, Mr. Buchanan, the Governors, Vice-President Dallas, and other distinguished guests, were to be entertained by Mr. William Strong at his new home on Penn Street above Sixth. A pity that his old friends, Newton and Matilda Strong, would not be there. The Senator lifted his glance above the crowded square to the hill-top a mile away, the site of the new cemetery, its encircling walls only half finished. There slept Matilda, cut off in the bloom of her radiant youth. What an unhappy chance that she was not here to gossip about the old days in Springfield, to hear of his own aspirations for a brilliant future, a career which at one time it had seemed possible she might share.

THE WIFE OF THE PRESIDENT—1861

Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the President of the United States, stood on the platform of the Outer Station of the Philadelphia and Reading Railway at Reading. It was the morning of August 17, 1861.²⁹ She was proceeding to Allentown and Long Branch, taking her two boys, William³⁰ and Tad, for some sea bathing. Ordinarily the party would have proceeded by the shorter, direct route across New Jersey, but that line was choked with troop trains rushing

²⁹ Mrs. Lincoln's visit is reported in the *Reading Gazette and Democrat*.

³⁰ William was the lad whom the New York *Herald* sarcastically dubbed "Prince William" in the rather unkind article on Mrs. Lincoln's visit to Long Branch.



Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, William, and Thomas. From a photograph by P. Butler of Springfield, Illinois. New York Public Library.

south for the Virginia campaign; so Mrs. Lincoln was compelled to take the round-about course by Reading and Allentown.

This same Outer Station found itself injected into a glare of war-like publicity. Trim zouave regiments from New England were passing through, their uniforms suggestive of the French campaigns in the Crimea and Italy. These American zouaves were exuberant and confident, assuring the townspeople of Reading that they would soon be over the Rappahannock and into Richmond, and this a few weeks after the appalling news from Manassas.

As if to complete the war-like suggestion there rolled on to the siding of the Outer Station a carload of Rebel prisoners. No suggestion of martial array or natty grey uniforms, crimson sashes or waving plumes, only a miserable nondescript crew whining for food and a chew of tobacco. Mr. Knabb, editor of the *Reading Gazette*, went out with the rest to view the enemy and was not impressed: "They were miserably clad in coarse faded and tattered butternut. Many were Irish and some German."

And here in this welter of martial preparation was Mrs. Lincoln waiting her connection for Allentown with some impatience. It was warm. The boys were restless and William in particular, the lad who was to die in the White House a few months later, was feverish. Mrs. Lincoln gazed about her in contemplative mood. So this was the town of Reading to which Newton and Matilda Strong had removed from Alton. Somewhere here Matilda lay buried: Stephen Douglas had seen her grave. How times had changed since the old Springfield days. Douglas had just passed away. Before his death he and Lincoln, lifelong opponents, had become fast friends. Mrs. Lincoln, emerging from the White House that very day, had noted that it was still decked in mourning by presidential order.³¹ Report ran that Douglas had died almost penniless. Indeed, if Mrs. Lincoln had chanced to see a copy of the *Reading Gazette*, she would have noted an appeal for his widow.

Contributions for Judge Douglas' Widow

In view of the insolvency of Judge Douglas' estate a number of gentlemen of all parties are asking contributions for the widow and child. Subscriptions from Reading may be sent to

Hon. William M. Hiester.

And Mrs. Lincoln's brother-in-law, Ninian W. Edwards, once so prosperous and courted, at whose house she and Matilda had visited, had also fallen upon evil days. President Lincoln, writing with grave courtesy but little trace of cordiality to the man under whose roof he had been married, said:

³¹ The order really came from Secretary of State Seward at Lincoln's suggestion.

My dear Sir:

It pains me to speak of your being ruined in your pecuniary affairs; I still hope you are injured only, not ruined.³²

Times had indeed changed!

Now while Mrs. Lincoln walked to and fro along the platform a group of Reading ladies appeared to greet her and to remark that while six presidents had visited Reading³³ the town had never before been honored by a presidential consort. The ladies could not but be pleased with their distinguished visitor, for the woman who chatted so amiably that summer morning in Reading still bore a resemblance to the winsome Mary Todd of the Springfield era. The mental and physical alteration which so transformed her later years set in some months afterward.

Most of the Reading group had known Matilda Strong and were aware of her former intimacy with the President's wife. But, although some of the ladies survived until quite recently, they had no recollection of Matilda's name being mentioned that morning at the Station. They only remembered a woman dressed in summer white with crinoline and bonnet and two restless boys disporting about her; the actual details of the conversation had long escaped them.

The only positive statement that can be made is that on that same August morning, while Mrs. Lincoln was tarrying at Reading, a harassed haggard man in the White House was signing his name to a proclamation of importance and defiance:

I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do hereby declare that the inhabitants of the seceded states are in a state of insurrection against the United States and that all intercourse between them and citizens of other parts of the United States is unlawful and forbidden.

³² Ninian came on to Washington in 1861, rather hard up, it would appear, and asked Lincoln for a job. He complained to Herndon that the President was anything but cordial and showed no interest in the people back home. "Mrs. Edwards said he was heartless." Herndon papers, Library of Congress. The President finally gave his brother-in-law a quartermaster appointment, only to be embarrassed by reports of maladministration, even speculation.

³³ The Presidents in the order of their visitation to Reading were Monroe, John Adams, Washington, Buchanan, Harrison, Van Buren.

THE YEAR OF CRISIS—1863

The course of Newton Strong after he left Reading, a heart-broken widower, to once more embark upon the legal career in the west remains uncertain. The records of the St. Louis Bar Association show him engaged in practice with his partner and cousin George P. Strong. The archivists of the Association seem to assume that he remained in St. Louis until his death in 1866. This, however, is a mistaken assumption as there is no doubt that he came back to Reading in the spring of 1863, and attempted to re-establish the practise which he had abandoned eleven years before. The best evidence of this return is the appearance of ten weekly advertisements in the *Reading Gazette*, beginning March 14, 1863, stating that Newton D. Strong had resumed the practice of the law at an office on Court near Sixth.

Just why Newton came back to Reading we do not know. It may well be that, with the advent of the Civil War, St. Louis was not an agreeable place of residence for a man with New England antecedents. Secession feeling ran high in the city on the Mississippi and there was dissension and some rioting. Newton's partner, George P. Strong, left his office to become a colonel in an Iowa regiment. Legal procedure was at a low ebb; and Strong returned to Reading.

There were no longer any family affiliations for the lawyer in our Berks capital. William Strong had accepted a seat on the bench of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, and now lived in Philadelphia.³⁴ His departure had been much regretted and when, at the farewell Bar banquet given in the fall of 1857, the chairman had announced that, "In all the history of our country there is no record of a stranger coming into our midst who so engrossed our affections and our regard," the roar of applause had reverberated through the Penn Square.

There had been another, a third Strong brother at the Berks Bar. This was Sammy Strong, formerly a preacher in Connecticut. When Sam's health gave way he had come down to Reading with his wife and child. He helped out in brother William's office, read law, and was finally admitted. Then he died in April, 1856. His widow and child lived on for a time in a house on North Sixth

³⁴ Justice Strong, upon his removal to Philadelphia, lived first at 2027 Walnut Street, later a short distance to the westward at 2047 Walnut Street.

Street, but had moved away from Reading before Newton's return.³⁵

This was a strangely altered town of Reading to which Newton Strong returned in 1863, a community of turmoil, marching troops, and military preparation. Whether Newton's advertisements in the *Gazette* brought him much business may well be doubted. The Appearance Docket of the local courts, which in previous decades had been so punctuated with the magic name of Strong, show only one entry for Newton D. Strong, a petty ejection proceeding, First August Term, 1863. A sad after-climax for the able lawyer who had held his own against Abraham Lincoln in the Supreme Court of Illinois.

Just once does Newton come into the limelight of local publicity. That was in midsummer of 1863 when Lee marched over the mountain wall for the Gettysburg campaign. As the ominous tidings of the Rebel advance, the raids of Stuart's cavalry, the capture of York, and the threat to Harrisburg poured in, our Reading citizenry rushed to arms. Detachments of volunteers were hastily raised and equipped; practically all of the able-bodied members of the Berks Bar enrolled.³⁶ Newton Strong's name does not appear on this list, but it must be remembered that he was 53 years old at the time and scarcely fit for active service.

The Bar meeting called, September 12, 1863,³⁷ for the usual expression of condolence was well attended, with half of the participants in uniform. Newton Strong took a prominent part in the organization of this meeting and offered the principal resolution. It is surprising that Newton should have so engrossed the procedure when we realize that two of the participants, Warren J. Woodward and Hiester Clymer, were nominees for the Governorship of Pennsylvania, and a third, J. Glancy Jones, had just returned from his post as minister to Austria.

After this bar meeting the mists of obscurity close in once more

³⁵ Courtly old Henry W. Smith delivered the Bar eulogy for Samuel Strong, describing him as "a man endeared to us not only by the ties of our profession but by the softer amenities of social life." These Strong brothers always left their mark!

³⁶ The lawyers who enrolled for the Gettysburg campaign were: Henry Van Reed, Geo. J. Eckert, A. K. Stauffer, E. H. Shearer, C. Oscar Wagner, Francis Schmucker, Chas. A. Leopold, Daniel E. Schroeder, J. Bassler Boyer. Law students enrolled were: Louis Richards, Joseph P. Matthews. J. Warren Tryon, F. M. Banks, Edwin Shalter, D. Young Jones.

³⁷ *Reading Gazette and Democrat*, September 12, 1863.

upon the restless harried spirit of Newton D. Strong. As there are no further references to him either in the local press or in the Court records, we must assume that, disappointed in his plan to reestablish himself in a law practice in Reading, he returned to St. Louis.

ST. LOUIS—1866

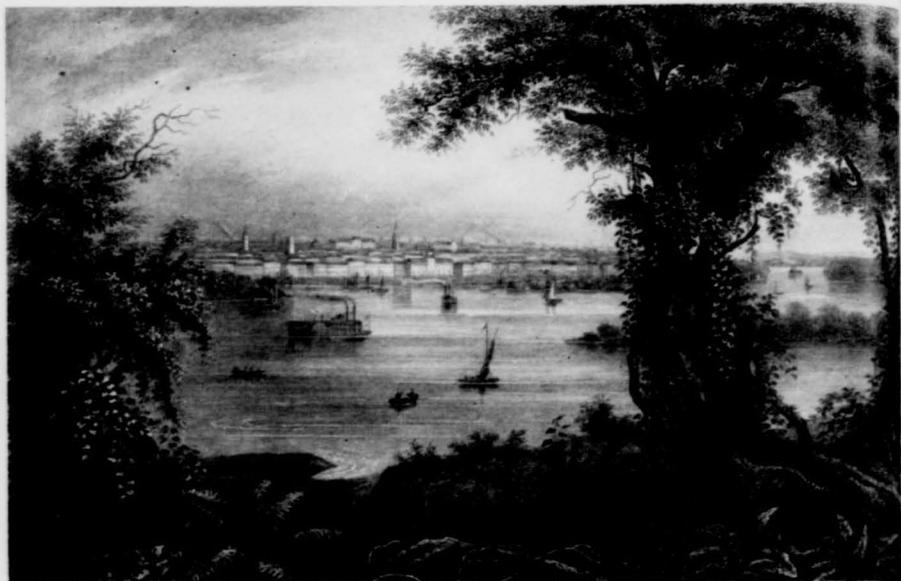
There was no more popular member of the Bar of St. Louis in the post-bellum days than Judge W. Van Ness Bay. He had enjoyed a long and honorable career as barrister and had served on the bench and in the Federal Congress. Perhaps he is best remembered by his book, *Reminiscences of the Bench and Bar of Missouri*,³⁸ a gossipy chronicle still read with interest.

In his latter years Mr. Bay was frequently called upon to compose obituaries for deceased barristers, and certainly no one could perform the task better. It was midsummer in 1866 and the Judge was about departing for a fishing trip up the Missouri, when he received a request to write the Bar resolution of Mr. Newton Deming Strong, who had died in St. Louis on August 8.

Mr. Bay sighed, postponed his outing for the moment, and let his thoughts ramble back through all the years in which he had known Newton Strong and his distinguished brother, the Congressman and Justice. Newton, he reflected, was man of attainments and wide reading, but of late he had not been the best of company. It seemed that he could never shake off the memory of the wife whom he had loved so well and who now lay buried in some eastern cemetery. Lawyer Bay had known Matilda in the old days at Springfield, just as he had known Mary Todd; but the picture evoked by Mary's name was not a pleasant one. She was now the hysterical widow of the great President, pestering the Senate with her demands for a pension, railing against the niggardliness of republics, and offering her old clothes, and Mr. Lincoln's, to second-hand dealers on the Bowery in New York. There were rumors that she might have to be committed to a madhouse. Better to be cold in the grave like Matilda.

Why, Bay wondered, had Newton not applied to President Lincoln for some appointment? By all accounts the lawyer had not been too prosperous in his later years and Lincoln usually

³⁸ F. H. Thomas and Company, St. Louis, 1878.



St. Louis, Missouri.

took care of his friends. Even old Herndon, who always came into court with a bottle sticking out from his coat tails, had been made State Bank Examiner.³⁹ Ninian Edwards, when adversity overtook him, had been appointed Captain of Subsistence, whatever that meant. Newton Strong would have been satisfied with anything, Indian Claims Agent or a minor territorial appointment, and he could certainly have used the emoluments of the office.

The Judge drew his chair up to the desk and dipped his pen. His memorial is still preserved in the archives of the Bar of St. Louis.

Newton D. Strong came West in 1852 and settled in St. Louis. His reputation acquired in Illinois followed him to St. Louis and secured for him a commanding position at the Bar. In 1853 he formed a partnership with his cousin George P. Strong, Esq. The loss of his wife in 1851 threw a cloud of sorrow and disappointment over his remaining years and he devoted much of his time to the cultivation of his taste for general literature. He was a thorough-read lawyer fitted particularly for the dis-

³⁹ The appointment was made by Governor Bissell at Lincoln's suggestion.

cussion of legal questions before an Appellate Court. Few men possessed a more thorough comprehension of political events and when the Rebellion broke out he took an open and decided stand for the Union.

This obituary was duly filed of record by the Bar Association. A committee of lawyers escorted the coffin to the train upon which it was shipped to Reading. Then Judge Bay went on his fishing trip and Newton D. Strong was speedily forgotten in the city of his adoption.

POST OBIT

In the years just after the close of the Civil War, many Reading lawyers were beginning to maintain offices apart from their dwellings. The older generation of barristers had usually met their clients in crudely transformed parlors. Among the lawyers to adopt the new practice of a separate office was John S. Richards, Dean of the Berks Bar and former editor of the *Berks and Schuylkill Journal*. Mr. Richards installed himself in a one-story building, half log, half stone, in the former Liberty Alley, Court Street, as it was now beginning to be called.⁴⁰

Here sat lawyer Richards on a certain August morning of 1866 reading the obituary column in the *Journal* which he had so long edited. He was reading with regret of the death in St. Louis of his old friend and colleague, Newton D. Strong. Mr. Richards sadly reflected that although he was four years Newton's junior in admission to the Bar, he was the only member of that period still alive, and in active practice. There was William Strong, to be sure, but he was on the appellate bench of Pennsylvania now and lived in a fine sandstone residence at 2043 Walnut Street in Philadelphia.

And now Newton was dead. How long was it after Matilda's passing? Richards began to calculate. Fifteen years perhaps; Newton must have been only fifty-seven at the time of his death. What a delightful cultivated companion he had been—and an excellent lawyer although he never had much practice.

Then suddenly Mr. Richards felt a twinge of conscience. A half forgotten legal proceeding in which he and Newton had been

⁴⁰ Mr. Richards' office was at No. 527 Court Street.



HON. WILLIAM D. STRONG

associated many years before came to his mind. The fee had been paid after Newton had left Reading and Richards had pocketed it. And from all accounts Newton's last few years had not been too prosperous; it was whispered that Justice Strong was paying the expenses of bringing the body back from St. Louis. More and more embarrassed, John Richards sat down and wrote a check which he sent on to Justice Strong in Philadelphia.

The reply in the firm bold calligraphy of Justice Strong is before the writer.

John S. Richards, Esq.

I have received yours enclosing your check for twenty-five dollars which I shall apply as it should be applied.

It was very thoughtful of you and like yourself to remember a transaction between Newton and yourself, so old, and to deal so generously by him.

My poor brother left almost literally nothing except some debts which I have paid. I think there are none now remaining.

Thank you for the kind feeling you express for me. I reciprocate it fully.

Ever truly yours,
W. Strong

One must sadly reflect that here, rather than in the bombastic periods of the St. Louis Bar resolution, is the true memorial of Newton Deming Strong. No suggestion of a successful career, only unpaid debts, disappointments, and the hope deferred that maketh the heart sick.



AFTERWORD

The sands are run in our narrative hour-glass; this brief epic of the pulsing life of a century ago now concludes. Without the Lincolnian suggestion it might not rate the telling. But, although the bond connecting our community with Olympus is a frail one, it is all we have. Had Lincoln lived he might have strengthened the tie by a visit to Berkshire. That was the reflection of those few of our devoted Reading folk who journeyed up to Harrisburg,

April 29, 1865, as the presidential funeral train lay in the Pennsylvania station. They were taking their last look at the great emancipator who promised to visit the county of his forbears, but could never come.

There they lie on the slope of Charles Evans, this couple who once knew Lincoln well. Hard by is the imposing sarcophagus of their brother, Justice William Strong, fitting monument for the eminent jurist who shaped the course of the Electoral Commission of 1877 and altered the political destiny of our nation. No such suggestion of importance attaches to the tombs of Newton and Matilda. All we can say of them truthfully, is that they played their parts well and bravely on our little local stage. Be that at once their epitaph and their eulogy.



Courtesy, Charles Evans Cemetery

LAFAYETTE:
A NEWLY-DISCOVERED PORTRAIT



This sketch of the Marquis de Lafayette was drawn from life by John Parsons Foote of Cincinnati, when the Marquis visited that city in 1825, in the course of a tour which also included Pittsburgh, Erie, and other intervening communities of western Pennsylvania. The drawing is now in the possession of Mrs. Clement Grubb Smith of Harrisburg. Information about it was supplied to the present owner by her grandmother, Catherine Amelia Foote (Mrs. William Howard Comstock), daughter of the artist.