PHILADELPHIANS GREET THEIR PRESIDENT-ELECT—1861

By Joseph George, Jr.*

WHEN Philadelphians learned that President-elect Lincoln planned to stop at a number of cities on his way to his first inauguration, they were determined to invite him to visit the City of Brotherly Love. Lincoln intended to stop in Philadelphia anyway, but the city wished to make the visit "official." On February 11, 1861, a special session of the Common Council of Philadelphia was held to discuss a proposal to invite the President-elect to the city. The proposal read, in part, as follows:

Resolved, by the Select and Common Council of Philadelphia, that a special Committee of five members from each branch of the Council be appointed to invite the Honorable Abraham Lincoln to visit Philadelphia on his way to Washington, and to extend to him the hospitalities of the city; and also, to make such arrangements as will afford her citizens an opportunity of tendering him their respect. . . .

Although one member of the council opposed the resolution, considering Lincoln's election "a great calamity," the proposal carried, and the various committees were duly appointed to welcome the honored guest. A special committee journeyed to Cleveland to meet Lincoln, and these officials invited him to be the guest of the city. Philadelphia was the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the city of William Penn and Benjamin Franklin. In a time when the old Union was in serious

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jeopardy of being destroyed by dissident Southerners already preparing a rival government at Montgomery, Alabama, Abraham Lincoln readily consented to stop at Philadelphia as the guest of its citizens. His tight schedule permitted an overnight stay that would fall on the anniversary of the birthday of America's first President.  

As Philadelphians prepared for the official visit, one particularly enterprising business firm saw an opportunity to promote the sale of its product. Inserted in a daily newspaper was a notice, seemingly a news dispatch, which read as follows:

Mr. Lincoln, en route for Washington—News from him—the President elect started yesterday, from his home in Illinois, for Washington. We have seen a private telegraphic despatch from him to a gentleman in Philadelphia, written at the moment of his departure from home. It ran in this wise:— "I will reach Philadelphia about the 20th instant. Have prepared for me, by the time of my arrival, one of the elegant suits for which the Brown Stone Clothing Hall of Rockhill & Wilson, Nos. 603 and 605 Chestnut street, above Sixth, is so famous.

A. Lincoln."

There is certainly no evidence that Lincoln ever sent that telegram. However, three years later, the Rockhill & Wilson firm did present President Lincoln a suit of clothing. During the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair, in June, 1864, perhaps with a guilty conscience, Rockhill & Wilson donated "an elegant suit of garments made to [Lincoln's] measure." Lincoln accepted the gift, probably unaware of the earlier advertising.

Not all Philadelphians looked forward to the visit of the President-elect with enthusiasm. The opposition press had followed Lincoln's speaking tour, reporting his activities and speeches, beginning with the impressive farewell address to his Springfield neighbors. He noted in his remarks, as he was about to leave home, that he was aware of the terrible burden placed on his shoulders as he prepared to assume the role of the Presidency.

2 Inquirer, February 18, 1861. For Lincoln's formal acceptance of the invitation, see Lincoln, Collected Works, IV, 216.
4 Morning Pennsylvania, February 12, 1861.
5 Lincoln to L. J. Leberman, July 15, 1864, Lincoln, Collected Works, VII, 442.
This speech brought tears to the eyes of Lincoln and his audience. A few days later, speaking in Columbus, Ohio, Lincoln almost nonchalantly remarked that "there is nothing going wrong," and that "there is nothing that really hurts anybody." These sentiments suggested a glaring contradiction that disturbed many who were already predisposed to dislike the President-elect, and who were concerned with the secession of several Southern states. The Philadelphia Morning Pennsylvanian, an anti-Republican daily, found in Lincoln's speeches adequate reason not to welcome the President-elect:

No man [the Morning Pennsylvanian editorialized] ... has as heavy responsibilities resting upon him as Mr. Lincoln, and no man save himself treats them with such unseemly levity. Our country in its miseries has found a wag instead of a sage, a coarse joker instead of a statesman.— Our people are oppressed by a sense of impending calamity. ... Europe stands aghast at the appalling spectacle we present, and in the midst of it all he, who like a prophet of evil, foretold the irrepressible conflict and is about to become the instrument for the fulfilment of his own prediction, incapable either of feeling or of understanding the state of affairs, gives himself up to mirth and mockery, and throws off wretched jokes. ... He has deported himself like an idiot. He started from Springfield in such gloom and despondency that he begged the innocent villagers to pray for him. With tears in their eyes they promised to do so. The cars had borne him but a few miles before the weeping traveler laughs at the idea that there is anything to pray for. Says he, "nothing is going wrong—nobody is suffering." "The crisis is only an artificial one." Has Mr. Lincoln suddenly gone crazy? ... [He] stands before the American people as a gigantic harlequin, laughing at their fears and mocking at their calamities. ... It is a scandal and a shame that the destinies of this great country, and that too, in a most perilous crisis, should be in the keeping of so incapable a man.

Fortunately, the majority of Philadelphians did not share the views of the Morning Pennsylvanian. On the day the President-elect was to arrive, the Evening Bulletin probably expressed the

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6 Ibid., IV, 190-191.
7 Ibid., IV, 204.
8 Morning Pennsylvanian, February 18, 1861.
sentiments of a vast majority of Philadelphians. "It is a happy coincidence," the Bulletin noted, "that Mr. Lincoln should be in Philadelphia on the day when our thoughts are all recurring to the great man of the Revolution." The Bulletin was certain that "standing amid the scenes of trial of the Republic when it was young," Lincoln would derive strength and courage to face the difficulties that awaited him in Washington. "We can promise him," the Bulletin concluded, "the generous support of all Pennsylvania in every honorable endeavor he may make to preserve the Union and to restore peace to our now distracted nation."

Because Lincoln's stay in Philadelphia would fall on Washington's Birthday, it was decided that the President-elect would participate in the flag-raising ceremonies at Independence Hall (the old State House). The flag to be raised included thirty-four stars, the additional star welcoming the entrance into the Union of Kansas, and the thirty-three others defiantly refusing to acknowledge the Confederate government now established in Montgomery, Alabama.

The afternoon before Washington's Birthday, Lincoln arrived at the Kensington railroad station, after having addressed the New Jersey legislators in Trenton. Philadelphians were as enthusiastic for Lincoln on February 21, 1861, as they were in the autumn of 1860, when they had voted overwhelmingly in support of his party. As the train neared the station, a special salute of thirty-four guns was fired. Wisely, the site chosen for the firing was an open field three-quarters of a mile from the depot. This distance was sufficient to prevent horses from becoming frightened.

Philadelphians were eager to view the President-elect, and thousands jammed the streets leading to the depot. So great was the number of spectators that the services of the police were necessary to prevent the throng from crowding one another. Near the station itself, two large awning posts were knocked over, and two large panes of glass in a nearby drug store were shattered.

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10 Ibid.
11 Manyunk Star and Roxborough Gazette, February 23, 1861. Mr. W. Jerome Harter of Erie, a graduate student at Villanova University, called this reference to my attention.
12 Press, February 23, 1861.
Indeed, so great was the crowd waiting to view the honored guest that the usual hazards accompanied the scheduled activities. The *North American and United States Gazette* complained that pickpockets had reaped a bountiful harvest, even though the Philadelphia police had thinned their ranks by detaining five or six in the station houses on suspicion.

To cite one example of their villainy, the newspaper recorded the misfortune of one citizen who was robbed of three hundred dollars in gold at the time Lincoln arrived at the station. It appears that the gentleman was accompanied by a little boy. The boy was anxious to see the guest of honor. The citizen lifted up the boy as high as he could, and while he was holding him in his arms, the thief, apparently, committed "his act of plunder." Some of the more noted pickpockets, fortunately, were known to the police because their "daguerreotype likenesses" were affixed to the walls of the "Rogues' Gallery" at the central police station. "A capital institution, that Rogues' Gallery," commented the newspaper.13

But, despite pickpockets, the scheduled events would continue. The Lincoln party was greeted, upon arrival, by mounted police and public officials. The President-elect was placed in an open barouche drawn by four white horses. A large procession was then formed to take the honored guest to quarters reserved for him at the Continental Hotel.14 Although the procession did not include many military personnel—the general commanding the militia was not a Republican and refused to call out his troops15—it nevertheless received a tremendous ovation. One newspaper described the procession as follows:

The route was passed over with uniform plaudits from the multitude. . . . Every piazza, balcony, and window presented just that array of female charms that Philadelphia, and Philadelphia only, can with equal lavishness produce. American flags glittered everywhere, and handkerchiefs were waved in honor of Old Abe,—as if instead of entering upon a field of trial, he were retiring upon laurels already won. The air that in the morning was so bland and genial, however, grew rapidly cold, and

15 *Inquirer*, February 22, 1861.
a dense bank of . . . clouds, shedding occasional flakes of snow, obscured the sun. . . . At several points on the route, beautiful bouquets of exotics were passed by fair hands into the carriage of the President-elect. One of these, a floral gem of rare beauty, was tied with broad white satin ribbon, inscribed in inch-long characters, "Preserve the Union."18

Finally, the procession arrived at the Continental Hotel. A huge throng had anticipated the ceremony that would be held on the balcony of the hotel, and the streets and hotel itself were crowded—so much so that Lincoln had great difficulty making his way to the balcony to receive the official city greetings, tendered by the mayor. When he did reach the balcony, Lincoln was greeted by a roar "like the mighty shout of Niagara as it leaps into the fathomless abyss."17

In response to the welcoming address of the mayor, the Illinoisan made a brief speech in which he assured his listeners that he was happy to be in Philadelphia, where he could "listen to those breathings arising within the consecrated walls where the Constitution . . . and the Declaration of . . . Independence were originally framed and adopted." He added that he had never asked for anything that did not breathe from those walls. "All my political warfare," he maintained, "has been in favor of those teachings." And he concluded: "May my right hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if ever I prove false to those teachings."18

Unfortunately, Lincoln was understood by very few. The newspaper accounts assure us that the crowd was so noisy that the speaker could scarcely hear his own words. Even the room leading to the balcony was so filled with talkative office seekers that "quiet reporters were scarcely able to understand a word" uttered by the guest of honor.19

At the conclusion of his speech, Lincoln requested an opportunity to rest, and his visitors reluctantly withdrew. The President-elect then went to an adjoining room that contained his family and where he intended to break a fast that had lasted since nine o'clock

17 Ibid.
18 Inquirer, February 22, 1861.
that morning. As he was about to join his family, however, Lincoln explained to the gathering:

I must now get some refreshment, gentlemen. After that I shall be glad to shake hands with all of you that I can. But there are sufficient people out here to keep me shaking hands for six hours. I will shake as long as I can shake, and then will content myself with a look that will answer the same purpose. That's the way I have done in other places, where large crowds of people have called upon me, and so I must do here.20

Fortunately, before the Lincoln family retired to dinner, a newspaperman was able to see all of them, and his brief comments are worth reading:

Our reporter [the North American and United States Gazette noted] had an opportunity of seeing them all, from the little eight year old boy up to Master Robert, ... now journeying with his parents to Washington. The boys are fine-looking fellows, but lack the polish of city-bred boys. For all that, they are fine looking, and even handsome lads, and decidedly resemble their mother rather than Mr. Lincoln. As to Mr. Lincoln, we never before placed the proper estimate upon the picturesque-ness of whiskers, to which adornment Mr. Lincoln probably owes more than any other man now living. Mr. Lincoln's portraits are all without whiskers, and all particularly homely. Mr. Lincoln with whiskers is anything but the reverse of well-looking. His beard should never again be laid aside—with it he is a fine looking personage.21

After refreshments, Lincoln was obliged to listen to a delegation from the city of Wilmington invite him to visit the Delaware metropolis. In a brief speech, he graciously declined, pleading a busy schedule as his justification.22 Following this brief ceremony, he was again subjected to shaking hands with visitors who thronged the reception room. At 10:30 p.m. a fireworks display was exhibited near the hotel. The piece was in the shape of an arch with a shield beneath. The arch bore the inscription, "Welcome to Abraham Lincoln," and the shield contained the words, "The Whole Union." The guest of honor fought his way toward the

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Inquirer, February 22, 1861.
windows to watch the display, but we are told that he was "physically unable to force a way through the crowd." Defeated, he leaned for support against a piano and resumed shaking hands with all the ladies present. Then, he "tottered" to his room, exhausted. Outside the door a "Committee of Working Men" and the Executive Committee of the Republican Club stubbornly waited, determined not to leave until they had been received. At eleven p.m. they withdrew, convinced that Lincoln had finally retired.23

Thus ended the first day of Lincoln's visit to the City of Brotherly Love.

Friday, February 22, 1861, the next day, would produce the highlight of the visit. After a previous day of tiresome activity, the President-elect nevertheless was obliged to rise early. He was due at Independence Hall at seven a.m. When he was ushered into the hall to greet the Philadelphia City Council and honored guests, one observer noted that Lincoln's "manly and honest face betrayed the emotion" which he felt in that consecrated room—"that shrine of all that is dear to American hearts." Lincoln was indeed deeply impressed, and he responded to the welcoming remarks of a Philadelphia official with one of the finest impromptu speeches he ever made:

I am filled [he said] with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which spring the institutions under which we live. . . . I can say . . . that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. . . . I have often inquired of myself, what

23North American and United States Gazette, February 22, 1861. Apparently, after the fireworks display, and before retiring for the evening, Lincoln was secretly informed by Allan Pinkerton of the Baltimore Plot to assassinate him. Norma B. Cuthbert, ed., Lincoln and the Baltimore Plot, 1861. From Pinkerton Records and Related Papers (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library Press, 1959), 64-65. Also "unofficial" but equally important, sometime during the day Lincoln had several conversations with Pennsylvania Republicans on the subject of a cabinet position for Simon Cameron. See Charles M. Segal, ed., Conversations with Lincoln (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1961), 76-78.
great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was . . . something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.24

Enthusiastic applause greeted these remarks, and then Lincoln was led from the hall directly to the platform outside to raise the flag. Again the spectators assembled in the square greeted him warmly. He briefly assured them that he was honored to participate in the ceremonies. After the Rev. Henry Steele Clark offered a prayer, all but two or three dignitaries retired from the platform. Lincoln, with overcoat off, grasped the halyards to draw up the flag. The Scott Legion, comprised of veterans of the Mexican War, and apparently Republicans, presented arms. The flag, still folded, rose to view. According to one correspondent: “As [the flag] rose and rose, it unfolded, and by the time it reached the peak, the glorious ensign of the republic floated . . . magnificently in the pure air, without a single star erased, or a stripe polluted.” The band played The Star Spangled Banner, and the roar of cannon fired in the square mingled with the shouts of the excited and noisy throng.25 One Philadelphian, somewhat unimpressed, described the occasion in a diary entry as follows: “Somewhat cloudy but pleasant. [We] went to the State House in the morning before 7 o’clock to see Abraham Lincoln raise a flag above the State House at 7 o’clock, and swing to the breeze the stars and stripes. Such a dense crowd I was never in before, and never wish to be in again.”26

After participating in this ceremony, Lincoln returned to his hotel, and at 9:30 a.m. boarded the train that would take him to Harrisburg to address the Pennsylvania state legislature.

In general, Philadelphians were impressed by the presence of the President-elect among them, and this made the tiresome stop at Philadelphia worthwhile. One newspaper editorialized that in its opinion “the impression already made by Mr. Lincoln on Philadelphia’s citizens induces them to place very great confidence in him.” The editorial ended: “We are glad to be able to assure ourselves that the man chosen to the Presidency is truly eminent,

24 Inquirer, February 23, 1861.
is conscientious in a high degree, is careful, solicitous to know all
that may relate to his duty, and firm when his line of duty is
defined.”

A private citizen, who had not voted for Lincoln, found hope
in Lincoln’s speeches reasserting that the federal government had
overwhelming force, and he believed that perhaps Lincoln at the
head of the government would have the determination and courage
to apply it. By 1864 this private citizen would be an enthusiastic
and loyal follower of Lincoln and his party.

But the President-elect could not convert the opposition. The
Morning Pennsylvanian in describing Lincoln’s arrival noted
sneeringly that “Negroes were delighted and turned out in un-
usual numbers.” The newspaper also recorded that newsboys were
“clamorous,” crying, “full length likenesses of Old Abe at only
three cents.” The paper added, probably with satisfaction, that
“the trade did not seem to be brisk.” Later, in summarizing Lin-
coln’s visit to the City of Brotherly Love, the Morning Pennsyl-
vanian bitterly concluded that never before was Independence
Hall “so desecrated as it was on that occasion—the 22nd of Feb-
uary, the birthday of Washington—by the President elect of the
United States.” For in Lincoln’s patriotic address on that occasion
the newspaper could only find “sentiments which, if adopted as
the sentiments of the people, would make the flag the banner of
a negro government.” Thus had the Declaration of Independence
sunk low in the estimation of some Americans.

From Philadelphia Lincoln went west to Harrisburg. Then,
hurriedly and secretly, he returned to Philadelphia, speeding on to
Washington, to avoid the threatened difficulties in Baltimore. After
Philadelphia the tempo of the President-elect’s life quickened
noticeably. After Philadelphia the journey would no longer be
accompanied by a holiday spirit. Lincoln’s only trips, after Feb-
uary 22, 1861, would be determined by the war. A prescient
railroad conductor in West Philadelphia, on the morning of Wash-
ington’s Birthday, 1861, would have called out: “’Board, for Har-
riskburg, Baltimore, Washington, Antietam, City Point, Ford’s
Theatre.”

* Sidney G. Fisher, “Diary,” entries for November 6, 1860, February 21,
  22, 23, 1861, and June 16, 1864, MSS, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
* Morning Pennsylvanian, February 22, 1861.
* Ibid., February 25, 1861.