

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Adolphus S. Solomons: Friend of President Abraham Lincoln

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Introduction

Last month's column sketched the myriad of social programs that the Orthodox American communal worker and leader Adolphus S. Solomons (1826 – 1910) was involved in. Adolphus married Rachel Seixas Phillips (1828 – 1881), a descendant of colonial patriot families and together they had eight daughters and a son.

“In 1859, Solomons set up the publishing-house of Philp & Solomons in Washington, D.C. His company held the U.S. government's printing contracts for several years and he also managed a bookstore and maintained a photographic gallery. The book department became the literary headquarters of General Ulysses E. Grant, Supreme Court Justice Salmon Portland Chase and other dignitaries. His photographic gallery featured prominent individuals, including the last photograph of Abraham Lincoln. As a publisher, Solomons was held in such high esteem, that when Vice President Schuyler Colfax could not appear at the dedication of the Young Men's Christian Association building in the capital, Solomons was asked to substitute for him.”¹

Friend of Abraham Lincoln

Adolphus Solomons was a close friend of President Abraham Lincoln and met with him often during Lincoln's presidency. His article titled “Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln” appeared in the February 12, 1909 issue of the newspaper **The American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger**.² Below we give some selections for this article.

To know where to begin and where to end in sorting my recollections of our beloved President Lincoln is a somewhat difficult task. His memory both in gladness and in sorrow lingers with us all so heartfully, I feel as though treading on holy ground, lest my words may appear disrespectful to his sacred memory.

Where so much has been collated and written of this great man, it occurs to me that some little incidents and anecdotes of which I was personally cognizant, might have a greater interest at this time than those facts which have become matters of history.

It is well known how keen was his sense of humor - a humor so gentle and kindly that it never wounded the feelings of the most sensitive.

Solomons then goes on to relate several incidents that demonstrate Lincoln's sense of humor. Below are two of these.

On another occasion an army officer called upon the President to tender his resignation, whereupon the President said: "All right, I accept your resignation, but nothing can compensate me for the loss of you, for when you retire I will then be the ugliest man in the employment of the government" - and yet Mr. Lincoln was not ugly, for his tall, stooping, ungainly figure was forgotten in the loving expressions coming from a God-given joy of heart, which became instantly contagious.

His love for fun served to hide many an inward pang. One day I accepted an invitation to be present at a review of the First Army Corps of the Potomac under the command of General Reynolds, held near to Washington, and the driver of the ambulance in which he rode, becoming angry at his wild team of six mules, used some rather original "cuss words." Mr. Lincoln touched the man on his shoulder and said, "Excuse me, my friend are you an Episcopalian?"

The man greatly startled, looked sheepishly around, and replied, "No. Mr. President, I am a Methodist." "Well," said Mr. Lincoln, "I thought you must be an Episcopalian, because you swear just like Governor Seward, who is a very strict church warden."

The Last Photograph of Lincoln

Solomons describes the circumstances surrounding the last photograph taken of Lincoln before his assassination.

During the [18]60's our bookselling and publishing firm of Philp & Solomons, located at 911 Pennsylvania avenue in this city, had a large photograph branch in the upper part of the building under the charge of Alexander Gardner, who was well known for his celebrated "Photographic Sketch Book of the War" in two oblong folio volumes, in which Mr. Lincoln was a frequent and conspicuous figure in camp and battle fields.

One day while in his office I casually remarked that I would like very much for him to give us another sitting as those we had been favored with were unsatisfactory to us, and would he permit us to try again, to which he willingly assented.

Not long afterwards he sent word that he could "come on some Sunday," and a date was arranged, which was the second Sunday previous to the Friday night when the assassin, Wilkes Booth, in cold blood shot to death one of the most beloved men God ever created.

At the time named by appointment, he came and at my first glance I saw, with regret, that he wore a troubled expression, which, however, was not unusual at that eventful period of our country's fitful condition, and throwing aside on a chair the gray woolen shawl he was accustomed to wear, Mr. Gardner, after several squints at his general make-up, placed him in an artistic position and began his work.

After several "snaps" during which the President, while making jocular remarks had completely upset the operator's calculations, I followed Mr. Gardner into his "darkroom" and learned to my sorrow that he had not succeeded in getting even a fair expression of his (mobile, sic) [noble] countenance, and therefore was much discouraged which, however, was but a repetition of former occasions.

I courageously named the result of my investigation to Mr. Lincoln, whereupon he, noticing, perhaps, my disappointment, said to me, "Tell Mr. Gardner to come out in the open" – referring to the "darkroom" – and you, Solomons tell me one of your funny stories and we will see if I can't do better."

I complied as best I could, and the result was the likeness as reproduced in these memories.

The photograph is below.



Last Photograph of President Taken Before His Assassination

Poignant Recollections of a Dear Friend

Looking back more than fifty years after Lincoln's assassination, Adolphus Solomons wrote

The half century has well-nigh elapsed since his transportation to eternity has dispelled the mists that encompassed him while on this earth. Men now not only recognize the right which he championed, but behold in him the standard of righteousness of liberty, of conciliation and truth. In him, as it were incorporate, stands the Union, all that is best and noblest and enduring in its principles, in which he devoutly believed and served mightily to save. When to-day the world celebrates the century of his existence, he has become the ideal of both North and South, of a common country, composed not only of the factions that once confronted each other in war's dreadful array, but of the myriad thousands that

have since found in the American nation the hope of the future and the refuge from age-entrenched wrong and absolutism. To them Lincoln, his life, his history, his character, his entire personality, with all its wondrous charm and grace, its sobriety, patience, self-abnegation and sweetness, has come to be the very prototype of a rising humanity.

¹ **Guide to the Papers of Adolphus Simeon Solomons (1826-1910), undated, 1841-1966**
<http://findingaids.cih.org/?pID=364847>

² Available for download at <http://americanjewisharchives.org/exhibits/aje/details.php?id=688>