

Abraham Lincoln on Homesteads and Land Speculation

excerpt from Robert H. Browne, *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*, , 1907, pp. 80-

Vol. 1, pp.

from Vol. 2, pp. 80-

Mr. Lincoln could have achieved and won success in many directions, especially in fortune-making, and have reached more than ordinary success among so many willing and helping friends. However, he steadily declined anything of the kind, chiefly because it would have taken his attention from the main purpose of his life. His success in his profession, when established, gave him the means of comfortable living. He could have won a fortune, as many did about him. He was frequently advised by friends to do so, but he always found more pressing duty, and declined....

On one occasion, some time in 1856, he came into the private room in the rear of Mr. Gridley's bank. He laid about one thousand dollars on the table. Taking up a part of it, he handed the remainder, about nine hundred and forty dollars, to Mr. Gridley, saying: "I have collected more than I expected to-day. I would take it home with me if I was going there; but I am going to Chicago, and will leave it with you for the present." Mr. Gridley was a true friend of Lincoln's, and one of the most anxious that he should be "making more money." So taking the money, very pleasantly he said: "I know of a very good quarter section of land in the southwest part of the county. It belongs to a non-resident, who is anxious to sell it. It can be had for about \$1,200, and is worth fully \$1,600. It will sell for double that price within a year. I will, if you like, invest your sum here mentioned, and take care of it for you. I think you will double your money on it in a year, or perhaps less. Indeed, I will guarantee that much, if you desire, as you know I have several times wished to do as much as this. It will not bother me, and I will be glad to do it."

Mr. Lincoln turned uneasily in his chair, and facing Mr. Gridley with a pleasant but thoughtful look, replied about as follows: "Mr. Gridley, you know that I am deeply grateful for your disposition to favor me, and for the many kind and considerate evidences of it, which do not let me forget it, were I disposed to do so. I am thankful to you, for I appreciate what you do and continue to do for me in so many unselfish ways that no one knows of save myself. Nevertheless, I must decline this kind offer of yours that would, no doubt, profit me, and harm no one directly, as I view it. **I have no maledictions or even criticisms on those who honestly buy, sell, and speculate in lands; but I do not believe in it, and I feel, for myself, that I should not do it. If I made the investment, it would constantly turn my attention to that kind of business, and so far disqualify me for what seems to be my calling, and success in it, and interfere with the public, or half-public service, which I neither seek nor avoid. So, with a feeling of increased friendship for you, I feel that I must be firm in purpose, and not engage in anything that will turn my mind from my present and increasing duties in the work I have chosen.**

"In my early career I was unfortunate in business, as you know, which I now attribute to lack of experience and insufficient needs. I am satisfied of that in my own mind, and believe that **very** men have failed in business in our new, developing country because our ambition is so apt to

outrun our judgment; but, notwithstanding these mishaps, I am confident enough of my own capacity to believe that, with the present need and opportunities, especially through the help of a man like yourself, whose business sagacity is beyond question, I could very well conduct some kinds of business and save money. But for the present I am wholly devoted to my work, and do not feel that I could divide the time so much needed in it with anything else. My work, too, I must say, presents itself to me now, which I have no right to avoid."

Although Mr. Gridley had known Mr. Lincoln well for at least fifteen years, and intimately for six or seven, he was completely upset and amazed at Lincoln's remarks. . . . He said nothing until Mr. Lincoln finished, when he looked calmly across the table at Lincoln's earnest face, and thus addressed him: "Mr. Lincoln, you astonish me, indeed you do. I have been keeping along with a great many of your advanced ideas and foolish philanthropies, but this surpasses all . . . [Y]ou have more than surprised me about land ownership. Are you turning, just at the age when men should be getting wise, to the French 'Fourierism'—I believe it is—or to Emerson's school of air and thin soups, a cosmogony or theories attenuated through and beyond the gases to a something beyond nothing? For neither Frenchman nor Yankee has seen enough of it to give it a name or tangibility"

Mr. Lincoln replied: "... You are aware, however, that I cannot avoid my duty, and whether I succeed, or meet frequent disappointments as I have done, there is no man in the State who would require of me a more unflinching devotion to that duty than you would. I grant you, that if I should fail to render that dutiful service, . . . you would know, as few men can, deep in your conscience, how Lincoln had failed, while you expected so much better of him, and had good reasons for it; and if I accepted this generous offer you would not be entirely guiltless."

Mr. Gridley replied: "You are correct, no doubt, in what seems to be a necessity, that no matter what may be the recognition you receive, or what remuneration may come to you for all your years of faithful public service, if any; nevertheless, I see it just as you say. You can have no divided duty, but must diligently pursue the work you have undertaken or give it up altogether. It seems strange, after two thousand years of the spread of Christian belief, that so little of it is put into practical operation. Men are, as I understand, constantly blaming me as greedy and over-reaching in my business, most of which is, I think, no more than envy. . . ."

Mr. Lincoln said: "I have enjoyed your kind interest. Your eruptions are not unpleasant. In an ordinary sense I have not sought the relation I hold in public affairs. I often come to a point where I feel I have done all the going and talking I can consistently attend to for awhile, and settle down more determined to follow my law business; then I find a condition like the present, where I can not decline going into a political campaign without disappointing good friends, which no sensible man would do without much better reason than I have"

"I favor the best plan to restrict the extension of slavery peacefully, and fully believe that we must reach some plan that will do it, and provide for some method of final extinction of the evil, before we can have permanent peace on the subject. On other questions there is ample room for reform when the time comes; but now it would be folly to think that we could undertake more than we have on hand. But when slavery is over with and settled, men should never rest content while oppressions, wrongs, and iniquities are in force against them."

"The land, the earth that God gave to man for his home, his sustenance, and support, should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society, or unfriendly Government, any more than the air or the water, if as much. An individual company or enterprise requiring land should hold no more in their own right than is needed for their home and, sustenance, and never more than they have in actual use in the prudent management of their legitimate business, and this much should not be permitted when it creates an exclusive monopoly. All that is not so used should be held for the free use of every family to make homesteads, and to hold them as long as they are so occupied.

"A reform like this will be worked out some time in the future. The idle talk of foolish men, that is so common now, on 'Abolitionists, agitators, and disturbers of the peace,' will find its way against it, with whatever force it may possess, and as strongly promoted and carried on as it can be by land monopolists, grasping landlords, and the titled and untitled senseless enemies of mankind everywhere."

If all that Mr. Lincoln did in his busy twenty years or more, to help people get or keep their homesteads or claims, were told, it would throw a clear light on the work and real character of the man. As it is, enough is known to establish beyond doubt that it took much of his time, and that he never gave up 'the cause of any settler or distressed litigant while there was hope of saving it, and that most of this was done for people who had scanty means of payment, quite often none. Many were not able to pay anything at the time. None of them paid more than very moderate fees. The work was congenial to him, and no earnest man ever came that he did not set to work at once, with all his ability, influence, and untiring perseverance. He seldom failed, and few doubted his success who saw the energy and determination he had about it.

A number of friends talked this over at Bloomington about the time of his inauguration. There were several of us there at court, from the seven or eight counties where he had been so actively employed for years, and a few from more distant counties. All of us knew of some cases, some more, some less, some for two or three years, and some as long as ten years. One man had knowledge of a hundred or more instances. Thus talking and estimating, we reckoned up near one thousand homes and farms which he had saved or helped to save for our people. His work was so complete that no one knew of an entire failure; none that were even partly so could be charged to him. Some of the claimants had emigrated while he was contending for them. He saved several of these after the parties had left, and only a few were lost to them, and those because of abandonment.

It is well to think of such a record, especially those who would and can do something for their fellow-men. During all this time many lawyers were making more out of foreclosures and forced bankruptcies than he was making in saving men's homes. In all this his law and court proceedings were only a small part of the labor. He hesitated at no amount of outside service, as it was called, and carried it on with all the patience required to bring final success.

We have related how he helped one settler, giving him his own horse to get to the land office at Springfield. After getting there himself, he rendered still further service that aided the settler in securing his homestead. In a claim against the Illinois Central Railroad, the writer became interested and helped in one case, which was about as follows: A farmer in Champaign County

contracted, through the railroad agent, for a half-section of land, three hundred and twenty acres. A few days after the farmer's last payment the agent of the company absconded. The company refused to complete title to the purchaser, averring that they were not liable for some neglect of the purchaser, which, however, was only technical.

The farmer had paid the company several thousand dollars. The tract had rapidly increased in value, and it appeared as necessitating a very serious loss or the doubtful contingency of a lawsuit with a moneyed corporation. He took counsel from lawyers in his vicinity and several friends, who gave him little or no encouragement, telling him that if he did succeed it would be after long litigation, which would probably cost him more than the repurchase of the land at double the former price. This double price was the best compromise offered him.

In this condition the claim came to the writer's knowledge. The farmer was an honest, hard-working man who had earned all he had by his own persevering labor. At his age, over fifty years, the loss would have been a crushing one. I wrote a letter to Mr. Lincoln, giving him the principal facts and asking his advice. In the return mail he replied, "Send me the papers, and I will give it attention." The papers were sent at once, and Mr. Lincoln started to Chicago the same day, where he laid the claim before the manager of the company, saying he would be in the city a day or two and await their reply to his plain demand for a complete conveyance of title.

The business took a full half-day, in which he was very earnestly engaged with the railway officials, including their counsel. His argument was clear and distinct. He demonstrated the company's liability beyond legal doubt. They wanted time, they said; but he insisted. So next day, without considering the liability, the manager informed him that they would not make the title as applied for; that the precedent would be injurious in several ways, and would likely encourage other agents to default and abscond.

The conclusion of the negotiations was related by Mr. Lincoln as follows: "When they rejected the honest and lawful settlement I was as near being angry as I ever permit myself to be. I stood a minute to think, so as not to make any faulty statement or propose anything which I could not carry out. My wits came to me in good time, however, and satisfied me at once. So, after fully recovering my equanimity, I replied: 'Gentlemen, Mr. Manager, and Counsel, I will be at the Hotel until four o'clock to-morrow afternoon, within which time I shall expect a deed as prayed for. This is something out of my present law work. It is a case I have taken up mainly on behalf of good friends. My client is justly, and by every fair consideration of the facts and equities, entitled to his deed. It is in my judgment a claim which any court of honorable men will concede on presentation; one such as your company can not afford. to deny. Unless the conveyance is forthcoming, or your agreement for it in my hands before leaving the city, I will engage with our people to bake every claim or suit against your company, where there is apparent liability, with or without compensation;' on which I left the office."

The next day the deed, with a very courteous letter, was sent him. Thus, through this determined sort of work, our friend and client saved his land, worth fifteen thousand dollars at the time. Mr. Lincoln was satisfied with a fee of fifty dollars and expenses, less than one hundred dollars all told.

Such acts as these were of common occurrence, and establish the truth, wherever they are learned and told, that his highest ambition was to be faithful and true in the service of his fellow-men, taking fees so moderate, or none at all, as to place his unequalled services within the reach of all who were under the hand of the oppressor, in whatever form or kind of distress.