

Abraham Lincoln Once Declined Governorship of Oregon

Opportunity to Direct Territorial Government Is Refused at Wish of Mrs. Lincoln

By Rowland R. Gittings, *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, February 11, 1912, Portland

It appears that few besides those persons who read history and biography with more than ordinary attention know how nearly Oregon once approached the honor of numbering among her executives "Governor" Abraham Lincoln. No one can more than conjecture the vast unlikenesses between American history as it is and will be, and American history as it might have been if he who was to become preserver, emancipator and martyr, had elected to console himself for his retirement from congress, with the assumption of the duties of executive in the Territory of Oregon. An episode of which biographers make little, but which "changed history by letting it alone," may thus be recounted:

On March 4, 1849, Lincoln's one term in congress expired. He had served the central district of Illinois during the last two years of the administration of President Polk. It was then, in his district, a peculiar tradition in his party, the Whig, that no member should seek re-election. Ambitious party leaders were many, and it is notable that in very many cases ambition was all but equaled by actual ability. Rotation prevailed. Lincoln was not defeated for re-election in 1848. He was merely not a candidate. He might have been defeated; at all events, the Whig who was a candidate was defeated. It was a Democratic year in Illinois, only one Whig, Colonel E. D. Baker, then of the Galena district, being successful in the race for Congress, even as Lincoln had been the only Whig sent from Illinois in the election of 1846.

The outlook promised nothing for Lincoln or his party in the lower house. As for the Senate, the prospect was no better for the party, while as for Lincoln himself senatorial ambitions would have seemed, in 1849, premature even with his party in power. Yet he seemed scarcely content to resume at once his law practice, although he had in it achieved notable success. Besides, the lure of Washington City was upon him. He was not blinded, but he was charmed. Hence, in the last days of his term he submitted himself to the incoming administration, that of Taylor, as an applicant for the commissionership of the general land office. For this position he had special fitness, to be sure, but inasmuch as no distinction whatever could come to any incumbent, it is easy to agree with his biographers, who exult in Lincoln's escape from "the greatest danger that ever threatened him," when one Justin Butterfield of Chicago, being either less scrupulous or more ambitious, ran under the plum and caught it falling.



Lincoln campaign button
from the 1860 election

Following his failure to obtain this commissionership, Lincoln was offered the governorship of Oregon territory, to succeed General Joseph Lane, who was, of course, about to be removed for reasons purely political. In one sense, the place was probably tendered as a sort of consolation prize; on the other hand, Oregon's material potentialities were well recognized by the well informed, while those who saw far politically discerned possibilities not at all despicable, no matter how ill defined at that day. Friends of Lincoln advised him to accept the Oregon tender, reasoning that the territory must, in a few years, achieve statehood, and that a seat in the senate of the United States might most reasonably be expected at the hands of the Oregonians. This consideration appealed to Lincoln himself, and doubtless he would have placed himself at the disposal of the administration. But Mrs. Lincoln was loath to undergo the long journey to Oregon and the discomforts of life on the farthest frontier. And so the name Abraham Lincoln was never sent to the senate; Oregon lost a distinguished honor and intimate experience with a premier influence; and there went on without pause that steady marshalling of hosts that were to settle, under Lincoln, in four years, an issue that but for him might not have been settled in forty, nor settled as it is now settled, in half a thousand.

But suppose Lincoln had accepted the governorship of Oregon territory, and at the same time



Oregon Senator Joseph Lane who Lincoln was to replace as Territorial Governor in 1849 defended secession and was a vice presidential candidate on the Democratic Breckenridge ticket in 1860.

suppose the nation's history had proceeded substantially as it has actually proceeded. What, at this day, would have been Oregon's peculiar share in and heritage of Lincoln? That he would still have ranked large as a factor in national affairs, and would in some great way have come to be considered as of the nation rather than as of any state, there can be little question. It is difficult to imagine any combination of circumstances that would have made him president at the hour of national crisis, or otherwise, but it is easy to imagine him laboring fruitfully as the foundations of Oregon were laid, and later in a national sphere in the undertaking to remove old evils other than slavery and to bring forth new benefits other than emancipation. Lincoln did one, and but one, great work. It was enough. But he saw evil, and saw it single – a polyhedron of innumerable facets. The facet turned toward him was slavery. He never had his chance at other evils of his time, nor at forefending against evils then only impending, save as he might warn of them.

And warn he did, even in the midst of war's stress; but, he had only incidental opportunity to essay the constructive in the general economic field. Yet no other American ever saw so clearly all the ills of his country, present and to come. Not secession alone threatened the republic; the growth of privilege and the consequent recession of liberty were ever before him. In fact, slavery itself was not set apart by Lincoln as a unique iniquity; it was only for the time, the greatest; it was in reality only one form of that evil of evils, privilege, in virtue of which one man presumes to exercise the political powers appertaining unto another and to seize the fruits of another's toll.

By how many years might Oregon's preeminence as a progressive commonwealth have been put forward had Abraham Lincoln come hither in 1849!