

Abe Lincoln Comes to Town for the First Time

By

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On September 22 Abe Lincoln (A celebrated Lincoln re enactor) for the first time will appear in the town of Eastchester. Today Lincoln is arguably our most beloved President. But in his lifetime he was not very popular either in our town or in Westchester County. In 1860 Westchester County bitterly divided over Lincoln with the Democratic "Anti-Lincoln" ticket topping the Republican ticket by a count of 1,455. Resentment was extremely strong in the southern part of Westchester feeling that Lincoln's election threatened the peace and prosperity of the county.

It is very easy to get caught up in the mythology of Lincoln as a gentle, jovial soul who was beloved by the people of the North. This only belies Lincoln's greatness. In his epic poem *John Brown's Body* Stephen Vincent Benet described how the people actually perceived him when he became President:

The small-town lawyer, the crude small-time politician,
State –character but comparative failure at forty
In spite of ambition enough for twenty Caesar,
Honesty rare as a man without self pity...
And self-confidence like an iron bar:
This Lincoln, President now by the grace of luck,
Disunion, politics, Douglas, and a few speeches

In 1860 due to a split in the Democratic Party won the Presidential election with less than 40% of the popular vote.

Why do professional historians consider him to be one of our greatest Presidents? No other President has come to office under more trying circumstances. Seven slave states had already seceded with 6 other slave states and 4 border states ready to join the Confederacy. His Presidential cabinet has been aptly described in Doris Kearns book as *A Team o Rivals*, radicals in his own Republican party viewed him as being too soft on slavery, while the divided northern Democratic party viewed him as a threat to "the continued peace and prosperity of the country."

Abe Lincoln was a brilliant politician who had the ability in times of unmatched stress both public and private to access the mood of the county to do whatever was necessary to keep the union together. He also had the intelligence, flexibility, and strength of character to make the right decision and when circumstances changed to modify that position.

At the start of the war he realized that the abolition of slavery would be meaningless and ineffective act of desperation. As the deaths mounted up and the cries for capitulation grew louder, Lincoln would not budge. But finally after eighteen months of war and finally a victory at Antietam that stopped Lee's first invasion of the North, he made the fateful decision against the advice of his divided cabinet to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. By the fall of 1862 Lincoln had broadened the purpose of the war to make men free with the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation only freed slaves in area still under rebellion but this decree proved very unpopular in urban centers of the North. Newly arrived immigrants did not want to compete with emancipated slaves and when the first draft in American history took place, bloody draft riots were soon to follow.

As the deaths mounted and the opposition to the war became more intense, Lincoln only became more resolute. During the Gettysburg Address he defined how amid the horrific casualties of the battle a "new birth of freedom" had arrived. A year later at his 2nd inaugural address when victory seemed more plausible he warned the country the country should proceed "with malice toward none and with charity for all." Sadly an assassins bullet ended his plans to bring the South back into the union in a way that the wounds of war could have been healed more quickly. But enough history.

On Thursday, September 23 come to the Eastchester Historical Society, met the President, listen to him speak, and feel free to ask questions. Come have a great dinner and have an enjoyable evening.