

Words of Lincoln

The following "Words of Lincoln" — written or spoken — have been compiled by Harry J. Lytle as among the outstanding gems of thought expressed by the Great Emancipator. An authority on Lincoln lore, Mr. Lytle has selected these for Iowans — young and old — and they are reprinted herewith for the pleasure and profit of all citizens. — THE EDITOR.

Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is often a real loser — in fees, expenses, and waste of time. As a peacemaker the lawyer has a superior opportunity of being a good man. There will still be business enough.

From notes used in a law lecture.

July 1, 1850

What I do say is, that no man is good enough to govern another man without the other's consent. I say this is the leading principle — the sheet anchor of American republicanism. . . . Our republican robe is soiled and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claim of 'moral right' back upon its existing legal rights and its arguments of 'necessity.' Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let

us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it the practices and policy which harmonize with it. Let North and South — let all Americans — let all lovers of liberty everywhere join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union, but we shall have so saved it as to make and to keep it forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up and call us blessed to the latest generation.

Reply to Douglas — Peoria.

Oct. 16, 1854

Ambition has been ascribed to me. God knows how sincerely I prayed from the first that this field of ambition might not be opened. I claim no insensibility to political honors; but today could the Missouri restrictions be restored, and the whole slavery question replaced on the old ground of "toleration" by necessity where it exists, with unyielding hostility to the spread of it, on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both or either, live.

Springfield campaign speech.

Oct. 30, 1858

As each man has one mouth to be fed, and one pair of hands to furnish food, it was probably intended that that particular pair of hands should feed that

particular mouth — that each head is the natural guardian, director and protector of the hands and mouth inseparably connected with it; and that being so, every head should be cultivated and improved, by whatever will add to its capacity for performing its charge. In one word, free labor insists on universal education.

Wisconsin Agricultural speech.

Sept. 30, 1859

Of course, when I came of age I did not know much. Still, somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the rule of three, but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.

From Autobiography.

Dec. 1, 1859

Dear Mary:

With pleasure I write my name in your album. Ere long some younger man will be more happy to confer his name upon you. Don't allow it, Mary, until fully assured that he is worthy of the happiness.

Autograph Album.

Dec. 7, 1859

Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it.

Address at Cooper Union.

Feb. 27, 1860

My friends: No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Farewell address — Springfield.

Feb. 11, 1861

I take the official oath today with no mental reservations, and with no purpose to construe the Constitution of laws by any hypercritical rules. . . . I hold that, in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. . . .

Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. . . .

The chief magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the states. . . .

If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people. . . .

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

First Inaugural — Washington.

March 4, 1861

My dear Sir:—

The lady bearer of this says that she has two sons who want to work. Set them at it if possible. Wanting to work is so rare a want that it should be encouraged.

Letter to Major Ramsey.

Oct. 17, 1861

Your dispatches complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much.

Letter to Gen. McClellan.

April 9, 1862

Your dispatches of today received. God bless you, and all with you. Destroy the rebel army if possible.

Telegram to Gen. McClellan.

Sept. 15, 1862

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaption to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere great power on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began and, having begun, He could give the final victory to either side any day, yet the contest proceeds.

Written Meditation.

Sept. 30, 1862

I have just read your dispatch about sore tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything.

Telegram to Gen. McClellan.

Oct. 24, 1862

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. . . . The world knows we do know how to save it. We — even we here — hold the power and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom for the free — honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope on earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just — a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.

Second Annual Message to Congress.

Dec. 1, 1862

If you are besieged how do you dispatch me?
Why did you not leave before being besieged?

Telegram to Gen. Daniel Tyler.

June 14, 1863

The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea. . . . Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. . . . Still, let us not be over-sanguine of a speedy final triumph. Let us be quite sober. Let us diligently apply the means, never doubting that a just God, in his own good time, will give us the rightful result.

From a political letter.

Aug. 26, 1863

My dear Sir:—

Hadn't we better spank this drummer boy and send him back to Leavenworth?

Letter to Secretary of War Stanton.

(No Date)

The year that is drawing to a close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. . . . Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense, have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. . . . No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gift of the Most High God, who, dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath

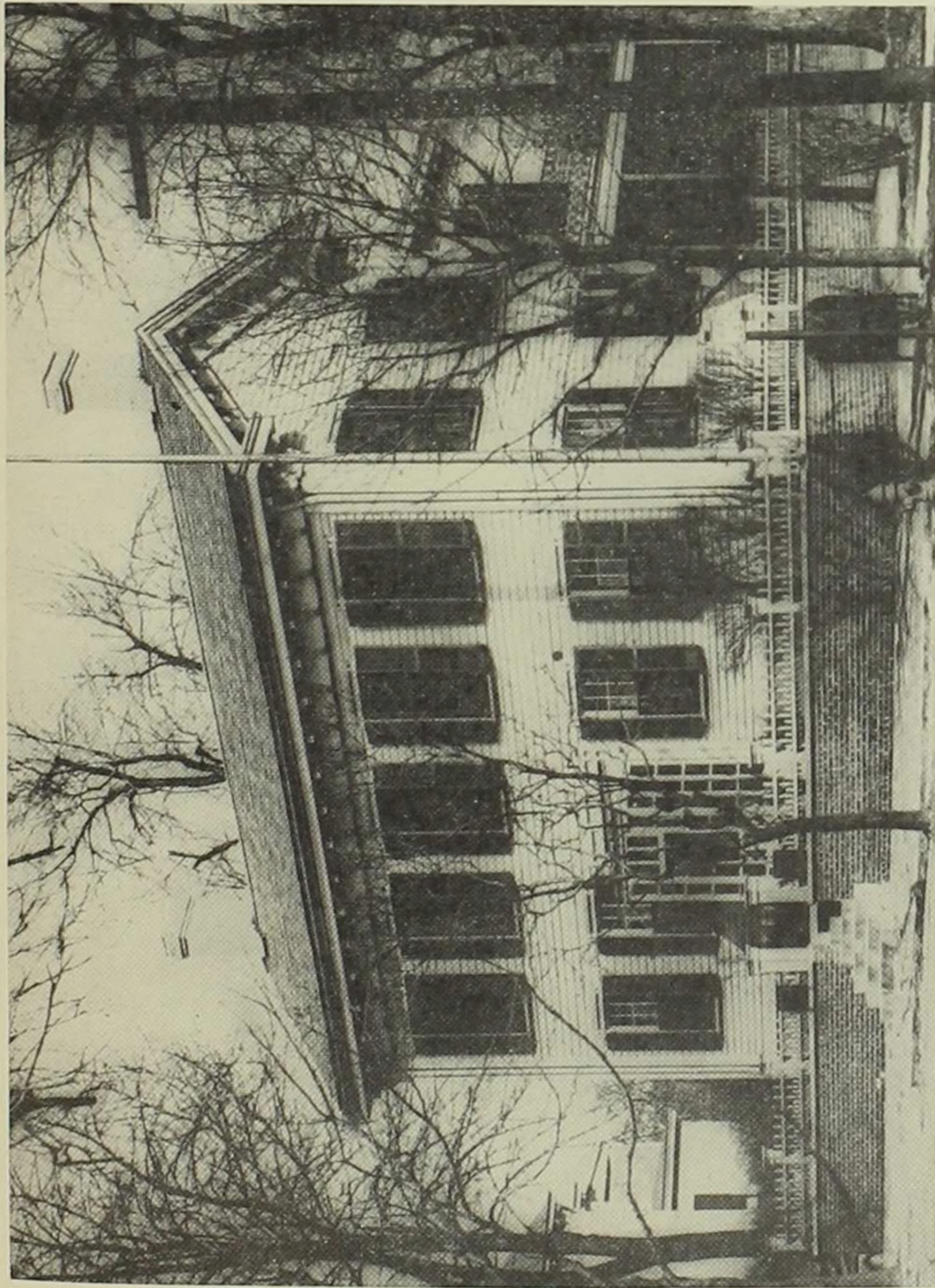


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LINCOLN'S HOME AT SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

"Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man." February 11, 1861

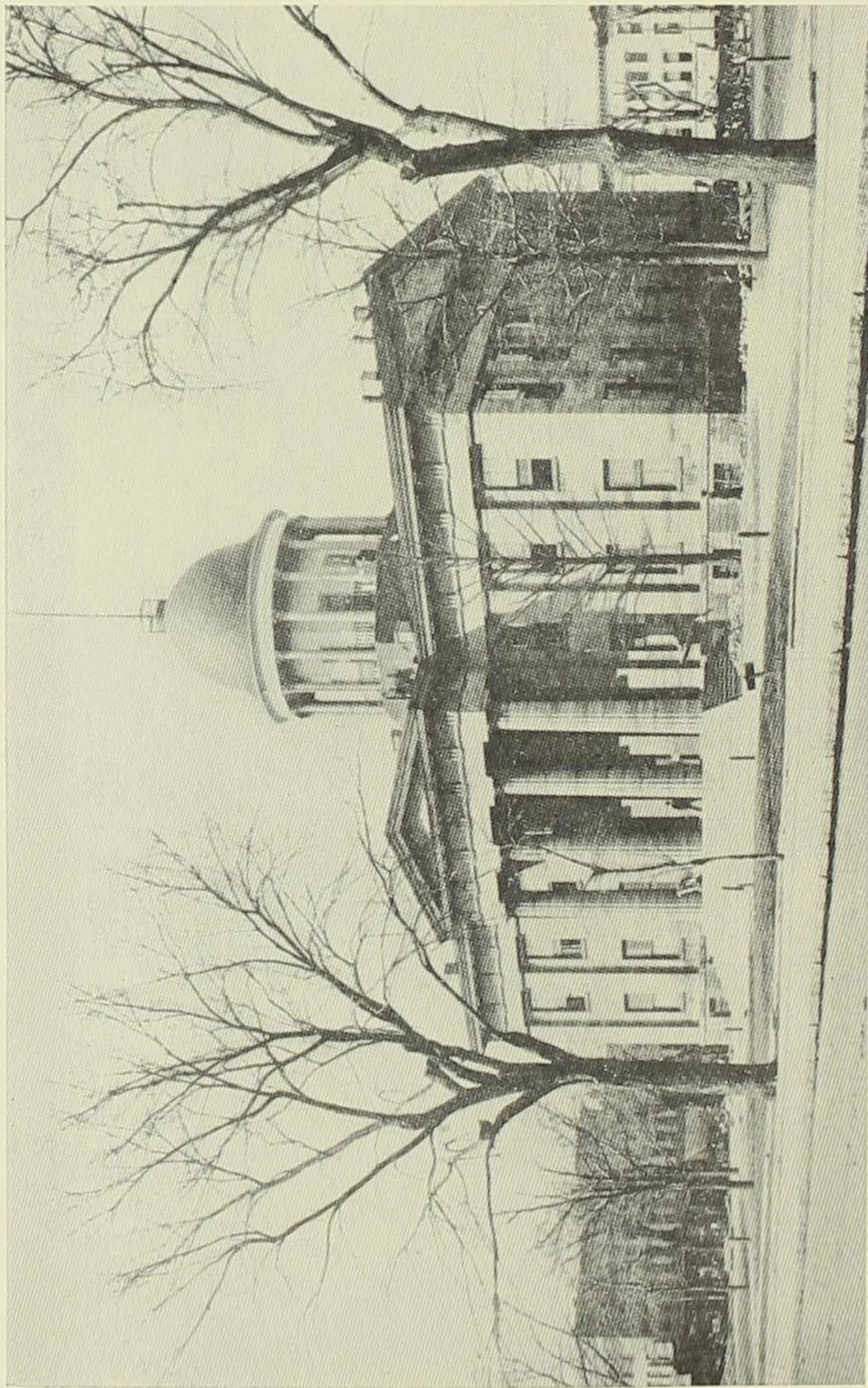


Photo Courtesy Illinois State Historical Library

ILLINOIS STATE CAPITOL AT SPRINGFIELD

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” June 17, 1858

nevertheless remembered mercy. . . . It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do therefore . . . set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Oct. 3, 1863

Dear Sir:—

I personally wish Jacob Freese, of New Jersey, to be appointed colonel for a colored regiment, and this regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar's hair.

Letter to Secretary Stanton.

Nov. 11, 1863

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate — we cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Gettysburg Address.

Nov. 19, 1863

I have seen your dispatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew and choke as much as possible.

Telegram to General Grant.

Aug. 17, 1864

The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to

accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise.

Letter to Mrs. Eliza P. Gurney.

Sept. 24, 1864

Dear Madam: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Letter to Mrs. Bixby.

Nov. 21, 1864

I am profitably engaged in reading the Bible. Take all of this book upon reason that you can and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a better man.

Letter to Joshua F. Speed.

(No date)

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. . . .

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Second Inaugural Address.

March 4, 1865