

Abraham Lincoln in Stafford

During the Civil War, in 1862 and 1863, Lincoln visited Stafford six different times for a total of fourteen days. Each time he came to the area, he followed the same routine. He would leave the White House and travel by carriage to the Washington Navy Yard. Then he would catch a steamer and head south on the Potomac River until he got to Aquia Landing. Sometimes during this three and a half to four hour trip he would be accompanied by members of his administration, Union officers, friends or family. Several times Commander John A. Dahlgren, Commandant of the Navy Yard, traveled with Lincoln. We know about Lincoln's happenings on the journeys by reading Dahlgren's journal. Lincoln did discuss the war, but more than likely, he would tell jokes or read poetry.

Because there were so many Lincoln trips to the area, only two will be discussed during this summary. In the spring of 1862, Union forces occupied Fredericksburg. Lincoln wished to come down to meet with commanding officers and visit troops in both Stafford and Fredericksburg. Accompanying him on this visit were Dahlgren and Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Leaving late at night they spent the evening on the boat on May 22nd. The next morning they waited for a railroad car and finally boarded a baggage car equipped with camp stools. They traveled over the track, now the approximate Brooke Road. When they got to the bridge over Potomac Creek, General McDowell was waiting for them and pointed out a recently completed bridge created by Herman Haupt and common soldiers in nine days for foot travel and less than two weeks for engine travel. Boyishly, Lincoln suggested that the party walk over it. Although the pathway was a mere plank wide, the president led the way. Halfway across Stanton became dizzy, so Dahlgren, although dizzy himself, helped the secretary across. (Later when in Washington Lincoln recalled, "...the most remarkable structure than human eyes ever rested upon. That man Haupt has built a bridge across Potomac Creek, about 400 feet long and nearly 100 feet high, over which loaded trains are running every hour, and upon my word, gentlemen, there is nothing in it but beanpoles and cornstalks.")

Getting back on the train, the presidential party arrived at Falmouth Station, the approximate site of today's Fraternal Order of Eagles Lodge on Cool Springs Road. From there a carriage took them to The Lacy House, today known as Chatham. There Lincoln had breakfast and was visited by civilian leaders and conferred with brigade commanders. Later in the day he traveled by a carriage pulled by four steel-gray horses to George Washington's Boyhood home at Ferry Farm. No doubt, Lincoln was thrilled at the prospect of being on the grounds where Washington, whom he so greatly admired, grew up. He said that as a young boy he obtained the small book, *The Life of*

Washington, by Parson Weems and held it to memory. He felt that “Washington is the mightiest name on earth.”

Traveling over a canal-boat bridge, Lincoln visited troops in Fredericksburg. After his return to The Lacy House he reviewed nearby divisions on horseback. At 6:00 p.m. he said down to dinner, what we would call lunch today, with fourteen officers and foreign dignitaries. At 9:00 p.m. Lincoln caught the railroad for Aquia Landing. At 10:00 p.m. the steamer departed for Washington D.C.

In August 1862, the Union forces pulled out of Fredericksburg and Stafford, and traveled north to protect the nation’s capital city. Eventually, after fighting at Manassas and Antietam, 135,000 Union troops returned to Stafford in November 1862. In December, in the horrific Battle of Fredericksburg, Union forces suffered 12,653 casualties (killed wounded, captured, or missing). Then in January of 1863, the Union forces traveled west on Warrenton Road (today’s route 17) attempting to attack General Lee’s left flank. They were prevented from reaching Lee as they encountered extensive mud and foul weather, causing them to abandon horses, mules, wagons, and pontoon boats. This aborted mission, known at the “Mud March,” combined with the defeat at Fredericksburg, caused the troops to feel dejected. Snowy weather caused a soldier to write that Stafford was the Valley Forge of the Civil War. Weather plus loss of morale created approximately 200 desertions a day. These problems caused Lincoln to appoint a new commanding general, Joseph Hooker. Hooker reorganized and overhauled the Army of the Potomac to boost the troops’ spirits. He established bakeries in Stafford so men could obtain fresh bread. Fresh meat and vegetables and fruits, came in daily at Aquia Landing. There would be no more hardtack and tainted salt pork. Better food, new uniforms, and daily drilling transformed the army. Hooker informed Lincoln and said the he know had the “Finest Army on the planet.” Wanting to see for himself, Lincoln, along with his wife and son, Tad, traveled to Stafford in April of 1863. The presidential family was only going to stay for two days, but ended up staying for about a week. During this time they stayed in a tent alongside that of General Hooker. Everyday, the president visited with troops or sat alongside of wounded men in hospital tents.

During this time Lincoln held several reviews, one of which was the largest cavalry review in the world with 13,000 to 17,000 men on horseback. Another review, located around today’s Grafton Village, lasted five and a half hours with over 60,000 infantrymen participating. If an officer passed in front of Lincoln he would raise his hand to his tall silk hat and salute. When enlisted men were in front of him, he would take off his hat, communicating his full respect.

While in Stafford, Lincoln passed over corduroy roads, was kissed by a princess, and accompanied by a world famous little person. The visit by the Army of the Potomac’s Commander-in-Chief lifted the troop’s spirits and boosted their morale and inspired them to greater achievements. Lincoln said of his long visit to Stafford, “...It is a great relief to get away from Washington and the politicians...”

Bibliography

Conner, Jane. *Lincoln in Stafford*. Fredericksburg: Cardinal Printing, 2007.

Field Trip Opportunities

Chatham
120 Chatham Lane
Falmouth, VA 22405
540-654-5121

Ferry Farm
268 King's Highway
Falmouth, VA 22405
370-0732

White Oak Civil War Museum
985 White Oak Road
Falmouth, Virginia 22405
371-4234



This drawing was done by a Civil War artist of Lincoln during a grand review when he was in Stafford. Outside of Washington D.C., Lincoln visited Stafford more than any other place during the Civil War – six times for a total of 14 days.