Lincoln, Wright, and Holmes at Fort Stevens
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LINCOLN, WRIGHT, AND HOLMES
AT FORT STEVENS

BY FREDERICK C. HICKS

The fine art of story-writing is skillfully illustrated in Alexander Woollcott's "Get Down, You Fool," the first article in his volume, Long, Long Ago, and which first appeared in the Atlantic Monthly for February, 1938. The gist of it is that Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, when a young lieutenant colonel in the Union Army, seeing President Abraham Lincoln standing in an exposed position on the parapet of Fort Stevens during General Jubal Early's attack on Washington, D. C. (July 11-12, 1864), shouted "Get down, you fool," grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him under cover.

Woollcott got the story from Professor Harold Laski and from Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter, to both of whom, many years after the event, Holmes told the story. Justice Frankfurter in a letter to the writer vouches for the fact that Holmes told the story, and Professor Laski has given his own version in an article in The Listener, March 13, 1941 (p. 359), where he says of Holmes:

He often liked to speak of one of his memories of the war. Lincoln visited the regiment when it was engaged in the defense of Washington against the rebels. He asked Holmes to show him where the rebels stood. Holmes pointed across to the Virginia hills [they were really in Maryland], and the President, raising his tall, gaunt figure to see better, became at once a target for snipers. "I lost my nerve," Holmes used to say, "and yelled at the President, 'Get down, you fool!' The President turned to me quietly, and said with a twinkle in his eye, 'Colonel Holmes, I am glad to see you know how to talk to a civilian.'"

Woollcott satisfied himself (and I have no reason to dis-
agree with him) that Holmes told the anecdote, and that it could have happened. But to make a good story better, Woollcott went on to speculate why the story remained so long locked up in the Justice's memory. Wrote Woollcott:

It is my own surmise that in after years he heard of so many high-ranking warriors having rescued Lincoln from Early's snipers that it took him a long time to recover from his distaste. More than half a century had to pass before he could bring himself to say in effect—and then only in rare confidences—"You know, it was to me that really happened. It was this way."1

This surmise of Woollcott's seems to say that high-ranking warriors had untruthfully professed to have rescued Lincoln, and that no one but young Holmes was entitled to that honor.

I must confess that when I first read this surmise in 1938, there arose in me a distaste for Woollcott rather than for any unnamed, supposedly presumptuous warrior. What warriors did he have in mind? He says that you will search the Library of Congress in vain for any record of the colloquy between Holmes and Lincoln. True; but he could have found there a record of another colloquy which took place on the same day and in the same circumstances. The persons involved were Lincoln and Major General Horatio G. Wright, who was in command at Fort Stevens. The well-authenticated record of this conversation had long been in print when Woollcott wrote. It was worthy of a less sarcastic reference, if Woollcott knew about it. And the implications of his surmise should no longer be allowed to cast doubt on the truth of the other episode.

Horatio Gouverneur Wright, born in Clinton, Connecticut, on March 6, 1820, was a soldier by profession. He graduated in 1841, second in his class, at the United States Military Academy. His specialty was military engineering, but he commanded fighting troops in many of the engagements of the

Civil War, returning to the Corps of Engineers at the end of the war. He was one of the engineers in charge of the preparation and publication of the *United States Geographical Surveys West of the 100th Meridian.* He retired in 1884, but continued to live in Washington until his death in 1899.

As an engineer he had been in 1861 employed on the building of the fortifications about Washington, a fact which was useful when he was ordered to Washington, as Major General of Volunteers, to resist the attack of Early. There is nothing in the record of his career to suggest that he would, any more than Holmes, lay claim to a distinction to which he was not entitled. How did it happen that these three men, Lincoln, Wright, and Holmes, were together at Fort Stevens?

For some time prior to that date the Lincoln family had been living at a summer cottage at the Soldiers' Home, a short distance south of Fort Stevens. Lincoln drove the five miles to the White House each morning and returned at night. He was familiar with the whole region, and particularly he knew what steps had been taken to strengthen the sixty-eight forts and batteries which surrounded the city. The areas in front of these forts were cleared of timber in order to give an unobstructed view from them. In the case of Fort Stevens, this meant that one could see clearly all the way to the northern hills where Early's troops later appeared. Lincoln knew from day to day of the progress of Early's advance along the Shenandoah Valley, which began on June 13, and he was in constant touch with Grant, whom he urged, not only to take steps to protect the capital, but also to pursue Early and destroy his army.

On Saturday, July 9, Early was at Frederick, Maryland, and the next day he was at Rockville, ten miles north of Fort Stevens. That evening (July 10), as usual, Lincoln drove out to the Soldiers' Home to spend the night; but Secretary Stan-

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*Published in Washington, D. C., 1873-1884, 12 vols.*
ton sent a carriage and insisted that the family return to the White House. They arrived there about midnight. In the meantime, to Lincoln's embarrassment, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy had put a vessel in readiness for the family, in case of necessity, to leave Washington.

Next morning, Monday, July 11, Lincoln inspected Fort Stevens, and the forts to the west in Tennallytown. From one of them, Fort Reno, at 11:00 A.M., the first view was had of Early's army wagons advancing on the Seventh Street pike, straight north of Fort Stevens. At Fort Stevens that morning, Lincoln must have seen the encampment of the Twenty-fifth New York Cavalry which had arrived the previous midnight—the first regiment to arrive from the James River, sent for the protection of the city. Other troops were on the way. They had embarked at City Point, sailed down the James River and up the Potomac, and were even then arriving at the Sixth Street wharf. They were units in the Sixth Corps, commanded by General Wright, to whom Holmes had just been assigned as an aide-de-camp.

One of the members of this corps was Dr. George T. Stevens, surgeon of the Seventy-seventh Regiment, New York Volunteers, who wrote the book, Three Years in the Sixth Corps. His regiment sailed from City Point at daybreak, July 10, on the steamer Essex, and reached the Sixth Street wharf at about 2:00 P.M. on July 11. At the wharf were also ships which had brought the Nineteenth Corps from New Orleans.

Lincoln was at the dock to meet these ships. Stevens saw him there, "chatting familiarly with the veterans, and now and then, as if in compliment to them, biting at a piece of hard tack which he held in his hand."³

The troops with whom Stevens came formed in line and marched past the Smithsonian Institution, the Patent Office, and the Post Office, and northward on Fourteenth Street. As

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³ George T. Stevens, Three Years in the Sixth Corps (New York, 1867), 372.
they marched, they could hear cannonading to the north. They eventually camped for the night in the rear of Fort DeRussy, the first one west of Fort Stevens. That same evening, another brigade, under the command of General Frank Wheaton, was massed near Crystal Springs, not far from Fort Stevens. At 4:10 P.M., General Wright, from Fort Stevens, reported to General C. C. Augur, in command of the Department of Washington, "The head of my column has nearly reached the front."* Probably Holmes was with Wright.

Meanwhile, things had been happening on the Confederate side. General Early, in person, one hour after his advance wagons had been observed, arrived on the hills before Fort Stevens, in a position from which, over and beyond the fort, he had a clear view of the dome of the Capitol. He concluded (and rightly) that the fort was feebly manned, and ordered an immediate attack. But before the order could be executed he saw new troops forming a skirmish line. By five o'clock Early's men had driven this line back, but General Wheaton's troops recovered the position in the course of the next two hours. During the day, twenty shots were fired from the guns of Fort Stevens. Skirmishing continued during the night.

On this day, July 11, while Lincoln was visiting the forts, the first attack on Fort Stevens was made. Lincoln was there at the time, and was under fire. This fact is established by an entry in the diary of John Hay, one of his secretaries. After visiting the forts, and after greeting the troops arriving at the Potomac River docks, Lincoln returned to the White House and talked with Hay. The latter wrote the following in his diary:

> At three o'clock P.M. the President came in bringing the news that the enemy's advance was at Ft. Stevens on the 7th Street road. He was in the Fort when it was first attacked, standing upon the parapet. A soldier roughly ordered him to get down or he would have his head knocked off."  

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* Tyler Dennett, Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay (New York, 1939), 208.
The best account that I have seen of the situation in Washington on the evening of July 11 is in Chapter XVI of Margaret Leech's *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*. Southern sympathizers were sure now that the city would be taken, and they did not hesitate to say so. Refugees in wagons and on foot, bringing what possessions they could, were flocking down the roads past the northern ring of forts and into the city. Union troops were marching in the opposite direction to take positions in or near the fortifications. And to add to the confusion, crowds of Washingtonians made their way by streetcars, carriages, horseback, and on foot out along the Seventh Street road to see what was going on. It was the kind of crowd that might have been out to see a circus arrive in town. Strangely enough, this attitude was shown next day even by officials and their guests when they gathered at Fort Stevens as if to see a spectacle rather than an engagement in which men lost their lives.

July 12 dawned "bright and glorious," wrote Dr. George T. Stevens.\(^6\) The Confederate skirmishers could be plainly seen from Fort Stevens, and puffs of smoke from their rifles marked their positions. This was the crucial day. No one knew how strong Early was, or whether he was now making a display of force to cover a retreat. It was decided to give battle rather than to continue on the defensive. The barracks in the rear of the fort were converted into a hospital for the Second Division, the first brigade of which was on picket duty in front of the fort. Dr. Stevens was one of the surgeons in charge. While preparations for the attack were being made, all remained quiet except for the crack of rifle shots. Five o'clock was the hour set for the attack,\(^7\) and an hour before this, official spectators and their friends began to arrive.

At four o'clock "President Lincoln and his wife drove up to the barracks, unattended, except by their coachman, the

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\(^6\) Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*, 374.

superbly mounted squadron of cavalry, whose duty it was to attend upon his excellency, being left far behind."8 They talked with Dr. Stevens until General Wright with his staff (including Holmes, I presume) arrived, "accompanies by several ladies and gentlemen from the city."9 The whole party, Stevens with them, then went into the fort. Stevens remained with them until the wounded began to be brought in, when he returned to the barracks in the rear. An engraving in his book (between pages 376 and 377) pictures the opposing skirmish lines before Fort Stevens, and the assembled spectators, including ladies, and Lincoln, standing on the parapet. Stevens says in his preface that nearly all the engravings in his book are from sketches made by him on the ground.

This is what Lincoln and the others saw. They saw Colonel D. D. Bidwell at the head of the Third Brigade march from the rear and out past the fort into the valley in front of it, where they formed in two lines in the rear of the skirmishers who were already there; "the President, the members of his cabinet and the ladies praising the hardy, soldierly bearing of the men as they passed."10 When Bidwell's men were in position as planned, they saw him signal to General Wright, who stood with Lincoln on the parapet of the fort. Then, on Wright's command, the heavy ordnance in the fort, over the heads of Bidwell, his men, and the skirmish line, shelled the enemy positions on the opposite hills. They saw Wright give the order to cease fire, and saw him signal to Bidwell to send his men to the charge. One of their objectives was a frame house occupied by the Confederates. They saw Bidwell's men reach this house and push on beyond. Says Stevens:

The President, the members of his cabinet and the ladies, as well as the military officers in the fort, and the crowd of soldiers and citizens, who had gathered about it to witness the fight, watched with breathless interest the gallant advance as our boys pushed forward . . . until they

8 Stevens, Three Years in the Sixth Corps, 374.
9 Ibid., 375.
10 Ibid.
saw the rebels take to flight. Then the crowd at the fort rent the air with exultant cheers, and as the boys reached the house, the people were wild with excitement, shouting and clapping their hands, leaping and dancing with joy.\textsuperscript{11}

In the first edition of Dr. Stevens' work, which was published in 1867, three years after the event described, appeared the following paragraph:

While the battle was in progress, President Lincoln stood upon the parapet of the fort watching, with eager interest, the scene before him. Bullets came whistling around, and one severely wounded a surgeon who stood within three feet of the President. Mrs. Lincoln entreated him to leave the fort, but he refused; he, however, accepted the advice of General Wright to descend from the parapet and watch the battle from a less exposed position.\textsuperscript{12}

At the end of this chapter in the second edition is the following additional statement prepared for Stevens by General Wright. I do not take the liberty of condensing it, or putting it into the form of questions and answers. Here it is in full:

The President evinced remarkable coolness and disregard of danger. Meeting him as I came out from my quarters, I thoughtlessly invited him to see the fight in which we were about to engage, without for a moment supposing he would accept. A moment after I would have given much to have recalled my words, as his life was too important to the nation to be put in jeopardy by a chance shot, or the bullet of a sharpshooter. He took his position at my side on the parapet, and all my entreaties failed to move him, though in addition to the stray shots which were constantly passing over, the spot was a favorite mark for the sharpshooters. When the surgeon to whom you allude was shot, and after I had cleared the parapet of every one else, he still maintained his ground, till I told him I should have to remove him forcibly. The absurdity of the idea of sending off the President under guard seemed to amuse him; but, in consideration of my earnestness in the matter, he agreed to compromise by sitting behind the parapet instead of standing upon it. He could not be made to understand why, if I continued exposed, he should not; and my representations that an accident to me was of little importance, while to him it could not be measured, and that it was, moreover, my duty, failed to make any impression on him. I could not help thinking that in leaving the parapet he did so rather in deference to my earnestly expressed wishes than from any considerations of personal safety, though the danger had been so un-

\textsuperscript{11} Stevens, \textit{Three Years in the Sixth Corps}, 376.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, 378.
mistakably proved by the wounding of the officer alluded to. After he left the parapet he would persist in standing up from time to time, thus exposing nearly one-half his tall form to the bullets.\footnote{Stevens, Three Years in the Sixth Corps (2nd ed., New York, 1870).}

In another place, also, we have an account of the Lincoln-Wright conversation. On April 2, 1900, William Van Zandt Cox read to the Columbia Historical Society a paper on "The Defenses of Washington." This is printed in the Society's Records,\footnote{Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. 4 (1901), 135-65.} and it was reprinted in pamphlet form for the use of the Fort Stevens-Lincoln Military Park Association. In this paper, Cox told about a visit that he made in 1896 to the remains of Fort Stevens. His companions on that visit were General Wright, and the latter's daughter, Mrs. Rosa Wright Smith; General D. S. Stanley; Captain Thomas Wilson; Dr. C. G. Stone; and James E. Kelly. At that time Wright was seventy-six years of age. He identified the spot on the old earthworks where he and Lincoln had stood, and, as reported by Cox, recalled that he said to Lincoln, after his entreaties failed to have effect:

Mr. President, I know you are commander of the armies of the United States, but I am in command here, and as you are not safe where you are standing, and I am responsible for your personal safety, I order you to come down.

On the cover of the pamphlet in which this account appears is a drawing representing Wright expostulating with Lincoln, while the surgeon falls wounded at his side.

There is another Lincoln episode connected with Fort Stevens, which Cox relates in his paper, as to the truth of which I can only say that I talked with one of the supposed participants. In 1904, I visited Fort Stevens, photographed the old ramparts, and talked with Elizabeth Thomas, a colored woman who, with her relatives, was the owner of the property on which Fort Stevens was built. In the month of June, 1861, under authority of the United States, General Isaac I. Stevens,
after whom the fort was named, took possession of the prop-
erty, for the purpose of erecting fortifications upon it. In July,
1863, a detachment of the Army tore down Elizabeth's house,
barn, and outbuildings. Put into Cox's English, this is Aunt
Betty's story:

The soldiers camped here at this time were mostly German. [They
were Pennsylvanian Dutch.] I could not understand them, not even the
officers, but when they began taking out my furniture and tearing down
our house, I understood. In the evening I was sitting under that sycamore
tree—my only house—with what furniture I had left around me. I was
crying, as was my six-months'-old child, which I had in my arms, when
a tall, slender man, dressed in black, came up and said to me: "It is hard,
but you shall reap a great reward."\footnote{Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. 4 (1901), 138.}

The man was Lincoln.

When I saw Aunt Betty, she was living on the property,
which had been restored to her at the end of the war; but the
only reward that she had received was the friendly attention of
visitors, including veterans from the near-by Soldiers' Home.
She had not yet been reimbursed for the use of her property,
or for the damage done to it. But in June, 1902, a bill to reim-
burse her had been introduced in the Senate, and on October
17, 1904, the Court of Claims had considered the case. The
report of the Court of Claims was printed as Senate Document
No. 53 (58th Congress, 3d Session). The Senate bill above
referred to provided for payment to her of $6,930. The Court
of Claims assessed the damages at $1,835, but I can find no
record that Congress appropriated the money.

Fort Stevens is now a public park. On an earthwork near
the east entrance is a tablet reading: "Lincoln under fire at
Fort Stevens, July 12, 1864."