

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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THE STORY OF GRACE BEDELL AND HER LETTER TO LINCOLN

To the best of anyone's knowledge Abraham Lincoln was never in Orleans County. Our first hand attachment to him by any local history is therefore at best very remote except through Grace Bedell Billings (1848-1936). Grace's parents, Norman and Amanda Bedell came to Albion, N.Y. the year they were married in 1827. In 1831 they purchased a new home at 350 West State Street in Albion. The family lived there for over forty years except from 1859-1861. Norman Bedell in 1827, built a foundry on East Bank Street in Albion where he cast stoves and ranges. His business later expanded and was known as Bedell and Berry Co. and by the mid 1850's they employed from 75 to 100 men. They were able to cast as many as 20 ranges a day which were shipped as far west as Detroit, leaving Orleans County on the old Erie Canal.

In 1859 Norman Bedell decided to move to Westfield, N.Y. to extend his stove-making knowledge. The Bedells evidently did not expect to spend many years in Westfield as they rented out their Albion home. We can assume that they were fairly well-to-do as Norman helped found and endow the Genesee Wesleyan College which was located at Lima, N.Y. We know that George Pullman made use of a college scholarship given by Norman Bedell. The Bedells belonged to the Albion Methodist Episcopal Church which like many churches had become a hot bed over the issue of slavery versus abolition. The harsh treatment of slaves as described in Harriet Beacher Stowe's book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" touched the Bedell's, especially their daughter Grace.

Naturally Norman Bedell was a supporter of Lincoln and in the Fall of 1860 he brought home from a fair in Chautauqua County where they were living at the time, a political poster. Upon seeing

Westfield Chautauque Co. NY

Oct. 15, 1860

"Hon. A B Lincoln,
Dear Sir

My father has just come from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only eleven years old, but want very much you should be President of the United States so I hope you wont think me very bold to write to, such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell here to write to me if you cannot answer this letter. I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you anyway, and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try to get the rest of them to vote for you you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try to get everyone to vote for you that I can I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you (send) your letter direct to Grace Bedell Westfield Chautauque County New York I must not write any more answer this letter right off Goodby Grace Bedell."

Lincoln was so touched by the innocence of this child's letter that he responded to her in a letter dated Oct. 19, 1860. Of course, we all know what the outcome was - he decided to take her advice. In Feb. 1861 Pres. elect Lincoln passed through Westfield, N.Y. on a train enroute to Washington, D.C. It was in Westfield that he gave a brief speech following which he asked if Grace Bedell was present. Upon this invitation to meet her personally, Grace was led through the crowd to the train where Lincoln greeted her with a kiss and simply said, "You see, I let these grow for you, Grace"

In 1861 the Bedells returned to Albion to live and in Dec. 1867 Grace married George Billings of East Gaines. There George helped run their family store but was greatly influenced by Horace Greeley and his advice to young men to go west. It was in 1870 that George and Grace took that advice and moved to Kansas where they spent the rest of their lives. The letter which Grace had received from the Great Emancipator always hung framed in their home library.

This year Lincoln's birthday will be celebrated in a special Sunday service on Feb. 12 at 11:00 A.M. in the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church of Albion. Local historian, J. Howard Pratt, a long time admirer of Lincoln, will relate to the congregation anecdotes about the great man. Rev. Richard E. Hood, minister of the church will speak on Lincoln in a sermon entitled "Lincoln: Hero or Myth". The public is most cordially invited to attend.