

THE BISHOP WHO ALMOST STOOD WITH LINCOLN

By James E. Kirby

On April 2, 1902, ceremonies were held to dedicate a statue of Bishop Matthew Simpson (1811-1884) of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the denomination's Home for the Aged in Philadelphia. Simpson, who had faithfully served his church as pastor, college professor and president, editor of the *Western Christian Advocate* and, finally, bishop for thirty-two years, deserved the honor, but the statue which commemorates him was originally designed for a grander location than the one on which it now stands. It was to have been part of the Lincoln Memorial.

Although sufficient evidence to enable us to know the full story of Simpson's statue is lacking, its broad outlines are available. When the outcome of the Civil War was clear and its cessation only a matter of time, a group of individuals organized to enlist public support to erect a commemorative monument to President Lincoln in Washington. Senator James Harlan, a Methodist, was one of the leaders in this effort. They proposed to build a three-tiered edifice on the top of which a statue of Lincoln would be placed. Representative figures from the church, state, military, etc. who had been associated with the president were to grace the two lower tiers. Bishop Simpson and Henry Ward Beecher, pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, were selected to represent the church. Each figure on the monument was to be of heroic size and cast in bronze taken from Civil War cannon.

Sculptor Clark Mills, who is today probably best known for the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson which graces Lafayette Park across from the White House in Washington, was commissioned to do the statue of Simpson. Mills made several trips from his home in Washington to Philadelphia where Bishop Simpson sat for him. It is interesting to note, however, that the bishop's voluminous personal papers do not mention either Clark's visits or the proposed memorial. In time a full-size model was completed and Clark was paid the handsome fee of \$1,500.

From the outset there was opposition to the project. After the tragic death of Lincoln there was strong objection to the proposed form of the monument. One writer, nameless but preserved in the bishop's scrapbook, spoke for many when he wrote:

If it is necessary to the paying of due honor to Abraham Lincoln that he should be surrounded by the statues of distinguished living personages, then the selections that have been made are as good as any others. But there is no such need. Abraham Lincoln stood alone in life, and he should stand alone

in death. He was great, not by virtue of what he borrowed from Stanton, or Simpson, or Stuart, or Grant, or any one else, but simply by virtue of his own strong individualities and his own great work.¹

Only three models were completed—those of Simpson, Stanton and Seward; and, of course, the project was never consummated. In 1883 Clark Mills died and the models, which had remained in his studio for almost twenty years, were put up for sale. The Secretary of War, Robert Lincoln, son of the president and close friend of the Simpson family, learned that the statues were to be offered for public sale and notified Simpson's widow. She and the family purchased the model which was then shipped to Philadelphia and reassembled in a local marble yard by one of Mills' sons who was also a sculptor. There is no indication of the price paid by the family.

By 1902, friends of Simpson had raised enough money to cast the statue in bronze and to erect it on the grounds of the home, near Fairmount Park in Philadelphia.

While the story of the statue is an interesting one, behind it lies the far more compelling tale of Simpson's relation to the martyred Lincoln—a relationship which would make him a candidate for a place in the memorial. The nature of this association has for years been the subject of more fancy than fact. For example, it has been alleged that Simpson inspired the Emancipation Proclamation.² George Childs, a Philadelphia publisher, characterized him as "President Lincoln's most intimate personal friend,"³ which would also seem to be something of an exaggeration of what was demonstrably a warm friendship.

Although the exact date cannot be determined, it is certain that Simpson first met Lincoln during the years (1839-1848) he was president of Indiana Asbury College, Greencastle, Indiana. The

¹ Scrapbook, Matthew Simpson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

² This is argued in an article by Clarence True Wilson, "Bishop Matthew Simpson, the Man Who Inspired the Emancipation Proclamation," *Current History*, XXXI (October, 1929), pp. 99-106. Later research has refuted Wilson's claims. See Robert D. Clark, "Bishop Matthew Simpson and the Emancipation Proclamation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXV (September, 1948), pp. 263-271. Clark shows that Simpson

was in California at the time the crucial decisions were being made. It should be noted, however, that the Simpson papers which were in the possession of the Wilson family have just come to light and there could possibly be evidence in them which would shed light on Wilson's assertions.

³ George W. Childs to Benson J. Lossing, n.d., ALS, Matthew Simpson Papers, Old Saint George's Museum, Philadelphia, Pa.

bishop's papers contain nothing to indicate the nature of their early associations, but by the time Lincoln was elected president the two were well enough acquainted for Simpson to be at Lincoln's home in Springfield to see him depart for his inauguration in Washington.⁴ This association was continued in Washington where Simpson was a regular visitor at the White House during the entire Lincoln administration. On a visit the bishop remembered that "after a long conversation in the White House, Mr. Lincoln rose and turned the key in the door and said: 'Bishop Simpson, I feel the need of prayer; won't you pray for me?'"⁵ Some believed that Lincoln turned to Simpson for other than spiritual advice. Clinton B. Fisk relates that Simpson was visiting one day in Lincoln's office just before a cabinet meeting. The various members already present were discussing the question of the number of men necessary to win the war.

The bishop expressed the opinion that seventy-five thousand men were but a beginning of the number needed; that the struggle would be long and severe. Mr. Seward asked what opportunity a clergyman could have to judge of such affairs as these. Judge Bates replied that few men knew so much of the temper of the people as Bishop Simpson; Montgomery Blair sustained the view of Judge Bates. A Cabinet meeting followed. After it was over Lincoln and Simpson remained together quite a long time. The bishop gave him, in detail, his opinion of men throughout the country whom he knew.⁶

On another occasion Simpson is reported to have urged Lincoln to appoint Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton Chief Justice of the United States.⁷ Clarence True Wilson argues, unconvincingly, that Simpson had forced Lincoln to accept Stanton as secretary of war in the first place.⁸

But to show that Simpson and Lincoln were acquainted and that many persons were aware of this association is not to say that they were always in agreement. This was especially true in the area of patronage. Methodist votes had contributed to the first election of Lincoln, and many assumed that their contributions would be recognized in the concrete form of patronage. But their hopes were not realized and suspicion began to arise that Methodists were even being discriminated against because they were Methodists. When Joseph A. Wright, a Methodist and former governor of Indiana, was removed from his post as minister to Prussia, Simpson took the complaint of the denomination directly to the president. Lincoln

⁴ *The Methodist*, "New York Conference," VI (May 6, 1865), p. 138.

⁵ Frank Milton Bristol, *The Life of Chaplain McCabe, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), p. 215.

⁶ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, the War Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), I, p. 216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 588-589.

⁸ Wilson, *op. cit.*

protested that no discrimination was intended and offered to show his good feelings for the Methodists by allowing Simpson to name a minister to Honduras! Simpson declined to name a minister but took the offer in the spirit in which it was made. In a letter to Secretary of War Simon Cameron he asked the latter to "tender to the President my thanks for the proffer so unexpectedly made and which I receive as a token both of his good will to me personally, and his intention to consider more fully the statements which I took the liberty to present to him."⁹ The bishop also took the opportunity to restate his own position.

I am not asking anything for my friends. I object *alone* to the patronage of the government being so dispensed as to establish a religious monopoly and to create unjust distinctions between churches. This I believe has been done, though I do not charge it was so intended by either the President or his cabinet. Yet the injury to us is no less on that account.¹⁰

He then noted that it might provide a clear demonstration of the good will of the Lincoln administration toward the Methodists if John M'Clintock were appointed to fill the vacant chaplaincy at West Point. The offer was in fact made to M'Clintock but he removed the president from his uncomfortable position by declining to serve.¹¹ That the Methodists were making their dissatisfaction known to Lincoln even earlier is shown by an endorsement in his own hand forwarded to the department of state, "As this recommendation is made by Bishops Janes & Simpson, I am anxious an appoint [sic] to a Consulship shall be made accordingly, if one can be found."¹²

Probably great pressure was exerted in placing James Harlan in Lincoln's cabinet. Harlan was both a Methodist and a former student of Simpson at Indiana Asbury. He was elected to the United States Senate from Iowa in 1855 and re-elected in 1860. His daughter married Robert Todd Lincoln. Although Harlan's biographer makes no mention of Simpson's influence in his appointment as secretary of the interior, attributing it rather to Harlan's generally recognized influence with Lincoln, the evidence points to the contrary.¹³ At the end of October James Mitchell confided to Simpson:

⁹ Matthew Simpson to Simon Cameron, November 27, 1861, Matthew Simpson Papers, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ George Crooks, *Life and Letters of the Rev. John M'Clintock* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1876), p. 303.

¹² Abraham Lincoln to William H.

Seward, November 2, 1861. Roy Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), V, pp. 12-13.

¹³ Johnson Brigham, James Harlan, *Iowa Biographical Series*, ed. Benjamin F. Shambaugh (Iowa City, Iowa: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1913), p. 185.

I went to see Mr. L today to talk of my own matters, but finding the P——— disposed to hear, I for the first time referred to the question of our expectation in the event the Govt. falls into his hands a second term—I did not want him to answer, but think I could make a pledge that he would regard us with equity.¹⁴

A little later Governor John Evans reported that the situation looked promising for Harlan.¹⁵ Simpson's role is indicated by the statement of Shelby M. Cullom to the effect that it was Simpson's influence "that secured the appointment of Senator Harlan of Iowa as Secretary of the Interior."¹⁶ As Cullom remembered the events he and several others went to Lincoln in the hope of obtaining the position for Jesse K. Dubois. Lincoln reportedly told the group, "I cannot appoint him. I must appoint Senator Harlan, I promised Bishop Simpson to do so. The Methodist Church has been standing by me very generally: I agreed with Bishop Simpson to give Senator Harlan this place. . . ." ¹⁷ Whether this is the case or not, Harlan was appointed and Methodists along with James Mitchell rejoiced "that the effort to place Senator Harlan in the Cabinet has been a success."¹⁸

Although this writer would have to agree with those who are unwilling to attribute the inspiration of the Emancipation Proclamation to Matthew Simpson, it does seem that he urged Lincoln to issue it as soon as possible. The following conversation was recorded by a family friend who was a guest in the Simpson home when it took place. "Delay is disastrous," Bishop Simpson said, "I can't condone it in Mr. Lincoln. . . I have urged on him that Proclamation, as have so many others of our best thinkers, and I am puzzled and disappointed over his dilatory attitude."¹⁹ Apparently the bishop continued his reflections during the night and the following morning he took the train to Washington to see Lincoln. He was granted an audience and stated his case. The president did not respond and Simpson, thinking the interview was terminated thereby, turned to leave the room. He was stopped by Lincoln who said, "Bishop, the Master whom you serve was very patient and long suffering with the sinner—even until seventy times seven he forgave. Could you

¹⁴ James Mitchell to Matthew Simpson, October 30, 1863, ALS, Simpson Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵ John Evans to Matthew Simpson, December 13, 1864, quoted in Robert D. Clark, *The Life of Matthew Simpson* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 229.

¹⁶ Shelby M. Cullom, *Fifty Years of*

Public Service (Chicago: A. C. McClury & Co., 1911), pp. 134-135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ James Mitchell to Matthew Simpson, March 12, 1865, ALS, Simpson Papers, The Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Cornelia Gray Lunt, *Sketches of Childhood and Girlhood* (Evanston: Private printing, 1925), pp. 215, 217-218.

not be patient with me a little longer?" The appeal was convincing and the clergyman went home. "Lincoln is true and noble," he concluded, "he is our leader, and we must trust him. I believe in the loftiness of his character as never before."²⁰

Despite their differences Simpson's final loyalty to President Lincoln was unquestionable. His disagreements over patronage were not attempts to be a "power behind the throne" but rather to exercise his responsibilities as a general superintendent of the people called Methodists. Barring a few important exceptions, Simpson did not utilize his numerous contacts in Washington to further the careers or dreams of his friends. What he did was, in his judgment, for the good of the denomination as a whole. Nor did Simpson hesitate to associate himself publicly with the attempt to re-elect Lincoln in 1864. He did the nineteenth century equivalent of going on nationwide television, speaking before a packed house at the Academy of Music in New York City on behalf of the president. When events of the war made it impossible at the last minute for Lincoln to attend the opening of the great Sanitary Fair in Philadelphia, Simpson represented him. And finally he represented the nation itself at the graveside in Springfield.

Chieftain, farewell! The nation mourns thee. Mothers shall teach thy name to their lisping children. The youth of our land shall emulate thy virtues. Statesmen shall study thy record, and from it learn lessons of wisdom. Mute though thy lips be, yet they still speak. Hushed is thy voice, but its echoes of liberty are ringing through the world, and the sons of bondage listen with joy. Thou didst fall not for thyself. The assassin had no hate for thee. Our hearts were aimed at; our national life was sought. We crown thee as our martyr, and Humanity enthrones thee as her triumphant son. Hero, martyr, friend, farewell.²¹

Methodists have reason to take pride in the labors of Bishop Matthew Simpson. It is interesting to know that he was deemed worthy by some to be honored with the great Lincoln. But perhaps all are glad today that Simpson's statue stands in Philadelphia and not in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. We share the sentiments of Henry Bacon, the designer of the marble edifice which stands in honor of Abraham Lincoln on the banks of the Potomac:

The most important object is the statue of Lincoln, which is placed in the center of the memorial, and by virtue of its imposing position in the place of

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ George R. Crooks, *Life of Bishop*

Matthew Simpson (New York: Harper & Bros., 1890), p. 401.

honor, the gentleness, power and intelligence of the man, expressed as far as possible by the sculptor's art, predominates. This portion of the memorial where the statue is placed is unoccupied by any other object that might detract from its effectiveness, and the visitor is alone with it.²²

²² Henry Bacon's description of the Lincoln Memorial is contained in the records of the Fine Arts Commission, the National Archives, Washington, D. C.