

LINCOLN PASSES THROUGH SCHENECTADY

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
for the Sunday Gazette

I finally got to view the latest Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln* but Jean and I had to leave the county to do so. For some unfathomable reason, Bow Tie Movieland has yet to show the movie that has been deservedly nominated for so many awards. I e-mailed Bow Tie Cinema's HQ in Connecticut to ask why, but have yet to receive an explanation.

When *Lincoln's* credits are rolled to say that the movie is based "in part" on Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize winning book *Team of Rivals*, "part" is the understatement of last year. The central plot of the movie is Lincoln's early 1865 effort to persuade Congress to endorse a 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (to abolish slavery) and forward it to the states for ratification. The story of that successful effort is 90% of the movie but only a little more than 1.3% of the book, 10 pages of a total of 750 of narrative.

Lincoln's motivation in proposing the Amendment was his concern that the Supreme Court might claim that he had had no Constitutional power to issue his Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. Furthermore, it applied only to the states that had seceded, not to the slaveholding states that had not. New York farms, in particular, were home to more slaves than those of any other state north of Maryland, including our Mabee Farm. See www.schist.org/newsletters/Jan-Feb-2013.pdf for the cover story by Niskayuna High School senior Hannah Hamilton.

Team of Rivals, but not *Lincoln*, starts in 1860, and hence covers the election of our first Republican President and his circuitous 1700 mile railroad trip from Springfield, Illinois to Washington, D.C. in time for his first inauguration on March 4, 1861. As the train traveled east across New York State, passing through Amsterdam, Schenectady, and Niskayuna before turning south, it then passed Troy and stopped in Albany on February 18, 1861. While there, Lincoln went to the Albany Gaiety Theater with his wife Mary Todd Lincoln, U.S. Senator Ira Harris and his wife, and Major Henry Rathbone. Both Harris and Rathbone were Union College graduates from Albany. Harris's wife was the former widow Pauline Rathbone, mother of Henry, whose father Jared Rathbone had been elected Mayor of Albany in 1839.

It was that night at the Gaiety Theater that Lincoln first saw John Wilkes Booth, who was performing as Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*. Senator Harris had just been appointed to succeed Senator William Henry Seward, yet another Union College graduate, whom Lincoln had appointed Secretary of State. Seward was one of the three "rivals" who had contended with Lincoln for the 1860 Republican nomination for President, the others being Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, and Edward Bates, Attorney General.

In *Lincoln*, the movie, David Strathairn plays Seward, a very strong role, just as was true in the actual Lincoln saga. Strathairn has also played in several movies made by Schenectadian John Sayles. Seward, who served as our 12th Governor and two terms as a U.S. Senator, deserves a full profile on some future Sunday, and I'll try to oblige.

Of the many sad parts of the movie, the most poignant is when Mary enters the room where Lincoln is working to tell him that son Willie has died (at age 11 in 1862). Of the Lincolns' four sons, three died at age 18 or younger, Edward Baker "Eddie" Lincoln had died in 1850 at just short of 4 and Thomas "Tad" Lincoln at 18 in 1871. Only first-born Robert Todd Lincoln lived to adulthood, and after serving as Secretary of War for Presidents James Garfield and Union College graduate Chester A. Arthur, died in 1926 at age 83.

Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, a friend and associate of Lincoln, was born in Malta, NY, on April 11, 1837. He grew up in Mechanicville, and lived in New York City until 1854 when he moved to Rockford, Illinois, where he worked for a patent agency. In 1860, Ellsworth went to Springfield, Illinois, to work with Lincoln. He studied law in Lincoln's office, campaigned with him in 1860, and went to Washington with him in 1861.

On May 24, 1861, the day after Virginia's secession, President Lincoln looked out from the White House across the Potomac River, and saw a large Confederate flag displayed over the town of Alexandria, Virginia. Volunteering to retrieve the offending flag, found to be flying above the Marshall House Inn, Ellsworth went upstairs and cut it down. As he came downstairs with the flag, the owner, James W. Jackson, killed him with a shotgun. Corporal Francis E. Brownell of Troy, NY then killed Jackson, and was later awarded a Medal of Honor for his actions. After lying in state in the East Room of the White House, Ellsworth was buried in his home town of Mechanicville.

The Ellsworth story is related in *Team of Rivals*, not in *Lincoln*. Nor does either work tell of the demise of John Wilkes Booth, another story with a local connection. After he assassinated President Lincoln, Booth escaped from Ford's Theater and made his way up into Maryland. After a few days, authorities traced him to a barn in Virginia and, on April 26, 1865, surrounded it, and set it afire. Orders from Secretary of War Edwin

Stanton were that Booth be taken alive. But an English-born and allegedly “mad” (from mercury poisoning) hatter from Troy, NY, Thomas P. “Boston” Corbett, fired his pistol through a crack in the barn and killed Booth, his bullet striking him in the head within an inch of the same point that Booth’s had entered Lincoln’s. Corbett, at the time a member of the 16th New York Cavalry Regiment, was initially arrested for his disobedience but was later released, praised for what he did, and given a share of the reward money.

Five days earlier, April 21, 1865, Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train left Washington. It would essentially follow the same 1700 mile route Lincoln had traveled as president-elect in 1861, but counterclockwise this time. On board also was the coffin of Willie Lincoln, the son who had died at age 11 in the White House three years earlier.

As the train proceeded north from Washington through Albany and Troy and then west through Niskayuna and Schenectady, the train engineer was Alonzo John Wemple, who was born in Schenectady in 1833 and lived for a time in Albany, later in Illinois, and last in Texas where he died in 1929 at age 96.

Alonzo’s earliest American ancestor, Jan Barentse Wemple, was, along with Arendt Van Curler, one of the 15 founders of Schenectady. After immigration from Holland, the Wemples were prolific and many aspired to and were elected to public office. Among the more recent ones were Assemblyman Clark Wemple of Niskayuna and Archibald Wemple, Schenectady Mayor from 1952 to 1955 and later a long-time County Judge.

Police Sergeant Ray Wemple retired from the Schenectady Police Force in 1988 after 33 years of service and then worked as the coordinator of our countywide radio district, the capacity in which I knew him best. Ray, who now lives in Rotterdam, is a history buff who has researched the use of observation balloons in the Civil War after their demonstration to President Lincoln on the White House lawn. See Ray’s interesting interview by Paul Post in the online *Saratogian* of October 9, 2010.

Some Wemples use the surname “Wemp,” which is the middle name of my friend Richard W. Arthur of Charlton. His father was Richard S. Arthur, our long-time chairman of the Niskayuna Zoning Board of Appeals, who died at age 98 in 2001. His mother was the former Ruth Wemple.

There is a saying politics that it is not good practice to run against people who have streets named after them. There is a Wemple Lane in Niskayuna, a Wemple Road in Rotterdam, and a Wemple Street in Schenectady. No wonder that so many Wemples ran unopposed.

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Postscript: I received more complimentary feedback from this article than for any of the 90 or so that appeared before it. Ray Wemple sent a very nice Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Gazette* about it.

Space limitations led me to omit a possible local connection that I would have liked to mention, but even if I had it would have had to be qualified. *Lincoln* director Steven Spielberg’s father, Arnold Spielberg, a spry nonagenarian, worked for the G.E. Computer department in Phoenix and may have visited units of that department in Schenectady some 60 years ago. Arnold designed the GE 210 series of computers and before that assisted in the creation of Bizmac, the first specialized business computer.

Joseph Bernocco, Historian for the Town of Richmondville, NY, a bit west of Cooperstown, sent me a nice note calling my attention to another local connection, one I had not been aware of. James R. Tanner, born in Richmondville, was the Union Army Corporal during the Civil War who served as stenographer at the Peterson house where Lincoln lay on his death bed. Assigned there by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Tanner took statements from witnesses that would later be used in the trials of the conspirators a few weeks later. And he was present as Lincoln died on the morning of April 15, 1865. What follows is an excerpt from the Wikipedia article on Tanner:

James R. Tanner (April 4, 1844 - October 2, 1927) was an American Civil War soldier and in 1889 Commissioner of the Pension Bureau. Tanner was born at Richmondville, NY where he worked as a teacher. When the Civil War began in 1861, he enlisted in the 87th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He served as a corporal with that unit through the Peninsula Campaign of 1862 and at the Second Battle of Bull Run where he received wounds that required the amputation of both legs above the knees. He learned how to walk with artificial legs and in 1863 secured appointment as Under-Doorkeeper of the New York State Legislature. Tanner later studied stenography and worked at the War Department in Washington, D.C., and served as a stenographer at Abraham Lincoln’s deathbed.