

Cranford Resident Had Key to Lincoln's Life

By Steven Glazer



In traveling by railroad to his inauguration in Washington on January 20, 2009, President-elect Barack Obama evoked his Civil War predecessor, Abraham Lincoln, by replicating the last leg of President-elect Lincoln's trip to Washington. Lincoln's inaugural journey from Philadelphia to Washington was infamously marked by an assassination conspiracy history dubbed "The Baltimore Plot," named after the city where the plan was hatched and to be executed. Lesser known to history, however, was the role a Cranford resident was to play in foiling the plot.

On February 11, 1861, Lincoln departed Springfield, Illinois, by special train for a 12-day journey to his inauguration in Washington. While en route, Allan Pinkerton, charged with Lincoln's security, warned Lincoln of a conspiracy brewing in the border slave state of Maryland, then a hotbed of dissent to the anti-slavery policies of Lincoln and his Republican Party.

Operatives of Pinkerton's detective agency, especially two female agents said to have means to "worm out secrets" unavailable to their male counterparts, had learned of the assassination plot in Baltimore. Lincoln was offered the use of a bowie knife and pistol while traveling through Maryland, but he refused.

The day before Lincoln's scheduled stop in Baltimore on the afternoon of February 23, Pinkerton quickly executed his own plan to protect the incoming President. While Lincoln's railroad cars would still travel from Philadelphia through Baltimore for arrival in Washington on the appointed day, Pinkerton secretly expedited the schedule and arranged for the train's nighttime travel, with a dawn arrival in the nation's capital. But the plan's success vitally depended on the denial of the means to convey the revised schedule to those who would do Lincoln harm. And those means were the telegraph lines between Harrisburg, where Lincoln was to embark on the final leg of his journey, and Baltimore, where Lincoln's cars were to make a horse-drawn station change in the middle of the night. To preserve his plan's secrecy, Pinkerton turned to the president of the American Telegraph Company, which controlled much of the communications between Pennsylvania and Baltimore, but not those originating in Harrisburg.

Responding to urgent instructions received from the president of American Telegraph, on February 22, 1861, company superintendent and Philadelphia station chief William P. Westervelt, accompanied by one other telegraph employee, hurriedly took the next train west from Philadelphia to Harrisburg. Upon arrival, and under cover of the winter's twilight, Westervelt and his aide walked about two miles south of Harrisburg, following the telegraph wires running from town to Baltimore. In the early evening darkness Westervelt had his lineman climb a telegraph pole and covertly cut the Baltimore lines, preventing all communications between there and Harrisburg. At about the same time the lines were severed, Lincoln's special train left Harrisburg for Philadelphia and Baltimore, with no word of Lincoln's departure being telegraphed to any would-be assassin. At dawn the following morning, Lincoln slipped safely into Washington.

After Lincoln's inauguration and the onset of the Civil War, Westervelt continued to serve the cause of the Union. In the perilous months immediately following the debacle of the First Battle of Bull Run, he was personally instrumental in establishing telegraph service for the Northern army. Indeed, throughout the war, Westervelt provided communications among Lincoln's commanders in the field. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century most had forgotten Westervelt's faithful service to his country, as well as his place in history as a telegraph pioneer. And on August 14, 1900, two days after Westervelt's death at his home at 602 Springfield Avenue in Cranford, the *Cranford Chronicle* carried only the following simple obituary:

“William P. Westervelt. A former resident of Westfield, died on Sunday morning at the Fett house on Springfield Avenue, after a lingering illness, aged 87 years. The funeral service was held at his late home this afternoon and interment will be made at Philadelphia.”

Although other Cranford residents had wartime ties to Lincoln, only William Westervelt could rightfully claim to have helped save the President's life, as well as that of the Union.