

The Express

Today's News Today

Peek at the Past

Lincoln, Garibaldi and the wartime diplomacy of J.W. Quiggle

By MATT CONNOR - For The Express
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As we gear up to celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, The Express is taking a look at the lives of a pair of area residents who knew Lincoln personally, who communicated with him at least semi-regularly, and who in different ways impacted the course of American history.

Clinton County can, of course, lay claim to many individuals who displayed leadership and heroism during the Civil War, the crisis that defined the Lincoln presidency. They include the members of Renovo's Bucktail Regiment, those rural sharpshooters who played a pivotal role in the Battle of Gettysburg, and Phaon Jarrett who led the first Union forces into battle against the legendary Confederate Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson.



Matt Connor

Next week the pages of this newspaper will examine the life of Gov. Andrew Curtin, a Bellefonte native who was a fervent Lincoln supporter and who frequently had the president's ear.

But today we take a look at the legacy of James W. Quiggle, a Lock Haven attorney and consul to Antwerp, Belgium during the early days of the American Civil War.

Quiggle's actions during the Lincoln administration have been debated by military historians ever since the discovery in 2000 of a document found among the papers of the old Kingdom of Italy's Royal House of Savoy. That document, a telegram sent from the great Italian freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi to King Victor Emanuel, confirmed once and for all the long-held belief that the Lincoln administration had offered Garibaldi a Union command during the Civil War.

The offer was made during the early days of the conflict, when things were going extraordinarily bad for the North. Indeed, many feared that after a series of Union defeats, Washington, D.C. might be overtaken by Confederate forces. Lincoln was unhappy with his military leadership at the time and desperately needed generals with hardened battle experience.

Garibaldi was considered a hero by many in the U.S. for his fight to unify his home country. Indeed, many here referred to him as the "George Washington of Italy." He, in turn, had great affection for the U.S. and considered it his second home, having lived in New York for a couple of years. He seemed like the perfect candidate to take a leadership role among the Union troops and boost Northern morale during the war.

Quiggle had been appointed Antwerp consular during the administration of President James Buchanan, a Lancaster County native, and remained in that position during the first year of Lincoln's first term.

When an article touting Garibaldi as a good choice for a Union command was published in a Boston newspaper in January of 1861, the Italian freedom fighter actually took the time to have a thank-you note sent to the paper.

Quiggle must have seen the article, because six months after its publication, he wrote Garibaldi a letter that survives today.

"The papers report that you are going to the United States, to join the army of the North in the conflict of my country," Quiggle wrote. "If you do, the name of LaFayette will not surpass yours. There are thousands of Italians and Hungarians who will rush to your ranks and there are tens of thousands of American citizens who will glory to be under the command of the 'Washington of Italy.'"

At the time, Garibaldi was in his 50s, wheelchair-bound and suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. Describing Quiggle as a "dear friend," he wrote the former Lock Haven lawyer that he was not planning on taking a leadership role in the U.S. Civil War, but that he would consider it "if I did not find myself occupied in the defense of my country. Tell me, also, whether this agitation is the emancipation of the negroes or not?"

And here is where Quiggle's reputation begins to take a beating by a handful of military history buffs, most notably New York-based historian Matt Duff, who wrote about the Quiggle-Garibaldi connection in a meticulously researched article for Military History Online.

The first blow to Quiggle's reputation comes in his reply to Garibaldi's query, in which he appears to come down on the wrong side of the slavery issue.

"You propound the question whether the present war in the United States is to emancipate the negroes from slavery?" Quiggle wrote. "I say this is not the intention of the Federal Government. But it is to maintain its power and dignity - put down rebellion and insurrection, and restore to the Government her ancient prowess at home and throughout the world. You have lived in the United States; and you must readily have observed what a dreadful calamity it would be to throw at once upon that country in looseness, four millions of slaves."

Quiggle somewhat redeems himself by his vague follow-up comment, however: "But if this war be prosecuted with the bitterness with which it has been commenced, I would not be surprised if it result in the extinction of slavery in the United States, no matter what may be the circumstances."

Near the end of his diplomatic career at this time, James and his wife, Cordelia - the sister of Clinton County President Judge Charles A. Mayer - were packing for their trip home to Pennsylvania when he forwarded copies of his Garibaldi correspondence to Washington, D.C., where they were reviewed by Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward.

He didn't stop there, however, and that seems to be what really engenders historian Duff's ire: "In a third letter to Garibaldi he muddled future negotiations by saying that the Italian general would be receiving a formal invitation to go to the United States 'with the highest Army Commission which it is in the power of the President to confer,'" wrote Duff. "This implication that Garibaldi would be offered the top command was bolstered with the false statement that President Lincoln had thanked Quiggle for initiating the offer. In an interesting side note, Quiggle, who was then on the way out anyway, had, in his first letter, offered to resign to join the General in his efforts should he come to the United States."

By mid-July, Duff writes, Lincoln was aware of Quiggle's actions and his "assumption of too much authority." He goes on to lay the blame on Quiggle for Garibaldi's failure to assume a role in the American Civil War, which he speculates might have ended the war much sooner and perhaps saved the life of the president, who was felled by an assassin's bullet in 1865.

He does not, for some reason, give Quiggle a modicum of credit for being the first to actually reach out to the great Italian general about the possibility of joining the Union forces.

It should be noted that a number of sources say that Quiggle was indeed working as Lincoln's emissary in his outreach to Garibaldi. Those include Quiggle's own obituary; an article in a 2007 newsletter of the Italian Cultural Society of Washington, D.C.; a 1942 New York Times piece; an academic article entitled "Garibaldi, Lincoln and the American Civil War" by Edoardo A. Lebano; and the Clinton County Historical Society's "Historic Lock Haven: An Architectural Survey."

"It was during Quiggle's stay in Europe that he attempted to negotiate for President Lincoln the services of Italy's Garibaldi to conduct the American Civil War," wrote the authors of "Historic Lock Haven." "The Quiggle family counted among their friends Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, General Samuel Houston, Governor A.G. Curtin, Garibaldi and King Leopold of Belgium."

Coming in on the side that claimed Quiggle was not in fact acting on Lincoln's authority is a 1975 American Heritage magazine article from which Duff clearly lifted (and sourced) a great deal of his information.

Regardless, the Quiggles moved to Philadelphia after their Antwerp experience, and within a few years James used his presidential connections to help his brother-in-law, Lock Haven attorney William H. Mayer, land a job in the Lincoln administration, as paymaster of the U.S. Navy, seeming to confirm his close relationship with the president.

By 1871 Quiggle had returned to his Lock Haven law practice and built himself a fine, Italianate-style house on the 500 block of Bellefonte Ave.

He died in November 1878, and according to the Clinton Democrat newspaper, "his dying wish was to sleep the last sleep in the home of his childhood... at the foot of the noble Bald Eagle range, on the banks of the beautiful Susquehanna, in the midst of scenery that the eye never tires of dwelling on."

The world traveler, who had briefly dipped his ambitious fingers in the waters of international wartime diplomacy, had finally come home for good.

Matt Connor can be reached at mbconnor4265@gmail.com.

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