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March 9, 2016

THIS WEEK: Iowa Politician Becomes Part of the Abraham Lincoln Family

BACKGROUND:

James Harlan was the first Iowan to serve in a presidential cabinet. He was an attorney and politician, a member of the United States Senate (1855-1865) and (1867-1873), and appointed by President Lincoln to the post of U.S. Cabinet Secretary at the United States Department of Interior (1865-1866), serving after Lincoln's assassination under President Andrew Johnson.



James Harlan
1820 - 1899

In 1855, Harlan was elected by the Iowa Legislature to the United States Senate as a Free Soil Party candidate. In 1857, the U.S. Senate declared the seat vacant because of irregularities in that legislative election. He was reelected by the Legislature, serving until 1865. In 1861, Harlan was a Delegate to the Peace Conference that tried to arrange a compromise to prevent the American Civil War.

In 1865, Harlan resigned from the Senate when he was appointed as Secretary of the Interior under President Andrew Johnson, an appointment he held until 1866. As secretary, he announced that he intended to

“clean house” and fired “a considerable number of incumbents who were seldom at their respective desks.” Among this group was the poet Walt Whitman, then working as a clerk in the department, who received his dismissal note on June 30, 1865.

Harlan had found a copy of *Leaves of Grass* on Whitman’s desk, as the poet was making revisions, and found it to be morally offensive. “I will not have the author of that book in this Department,” he said. “If the President of the United States should order his reinstatement, I would resign sooner than I would put him back.”

Harlan was a member of the Southern Treaty Commission that renegotiated treaties with Indian Tribes that had sided with the Confederacy, such as the Cherokee and Choctaw. As part of the new treaties, they had to emancipate their slaves, as was being done by amendment within the United States, and offer them full citizenship in the tribes if they chose to stay in Indian Territory.

Harlan was elected again by the Iowa Legislature to the United States Senate in 1867, and served until the end of his term in January 1873. During his Senate service, Harlan was Chairman of the committees of Public Lands; District of Columbia; Education; and Indian Affairs.

Harlan was an unsuccessful candidate for reelection in 1872.

From 1882 to 1886, Harlan was appointed as Presiding Judge for the Court of Commissioners, which heard cases related to the Alabama Claims.*

Harlan was a close friend of President Abraham Lincoln and his family.



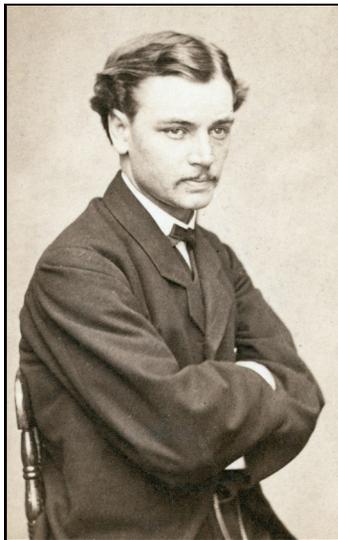
James Harlan

In 1868, his daughter, Mary Eunice Harlan, married Lincoln's son Robert Todd Lincoln. The couple lived during the summers at Harlan's home in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. (The residence has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and is now known as the Harlan-Lincoln House. Operated as a house museum, it exhibits memorabilia from both the Harlan and Lincoln families.)

Mary Todd Lincoln abetted and encouraged a relationship between Senator Harlan's daughter Mary and her son Robert.



**Mary Eunice Harlan
Wedding day, September 26, 1868**



Robert Lincoln

President Lincoln had once told Secretary of War

Edwin Stanton: "Mary is tremendously in love with Senator Harlan's little daughter. I think she has picked her out for a daughter-in-law. As usual, I think Mary has shown fine taste."

Harlan served as president of Iowa Wesleyan University—once from 1853 to 1855—and again from 1869 to 1870.

James Harlan died in Mount Pleasant on October 5, 1899.



**Harlan-Lincoln House
Mount Pleasant, Iowa**



Wesleyan Statue

A statue of James Harlan, former U.S. Senator, Secretary of the Interior, advisor to Abraham Lincoln, and two-time president of Iowa Wesleyan was unveiled on the Iowa Wesleyan campus in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, on Thursday, August 28, 2014.

The Iowa Legislature voted to give the statue to Iowa Wesleyan on “permanent loan” from the U.S. Capitol, where it had been on display in the Hall of Columns since 1910. The Harlan statue, designed by artist Nellie V. Walker, has been replaced by one of Norman Borlaug, a Cresco (Iowa) native, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his role in combating world hunger.

*The Alabama Claims were a series of demands for damages sought by the government of the United States from the United Kingdom in 1869, for the attacks upon Union merchant ships by Confederate Navy commerce raiders built in British shipyards during the American Civil War. The claims focused chiefly on the most famous of these raiders, the CSS *Alabama*, which took more than 60 prizes before she was sunk off the French coast in 1864.