

Lincoln document took Jewish route to church

by Hillel Kuttler
Special to WJW

A hand-written document by President Abraham Lincoln that is considered a precursor to the Emancipation Proclamation has resided for the past 57 years in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

But the three-page document took what might be called a Jewish route to the display case in the church's Lincoln Parlor.

On July 14, 1862, Lincoln submitted to both houses of Congress a draft of a bill to compensate states that would outlaw slavery. The bill, "passage of which I respectfully and earnestly recommend," the president wrote in a short cover letter, would provide bonds bearing 6 percent interest to states that he and the secretary of the treasury deemed to have "lawfully abolished slavery within and throughout such state."

Congress did not vote on the bill. But Lincoln's document set in motion a process that culminated in his issuing, on Jan. 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, ordering all slaves in the Confederacy freed.

Fast forward nearly nine decades to Barney Balaban, the president of Paramount Pictures. Balaban was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who owned a grocery store on Chicago's South

Side. He and his family built and owned some of Chicago's most ornate and successful movie theaters.

Balaban loved American history, buying and donating artifacts. "He was very patriotic," his grandnephew, David, said. "He was very involved in spreading American ideals."

According to a Dec. 21, 1951, *Washington Post* article, Balaban bought the Lincoln document from a Philadelphia collector, A.S.W. Rosenbach, who had rescued it after House of Representatives employees discarded loads of "what was considered useless paper."

Balaban planned to donate it to Rabbi Norman Gerstenfeld of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, although it is unclear how the two men knew one another. Earlier that year, Gerstenfeld had delivered an address at the synagogue in which he said that "it was because of the principles of life that he affirmed in his leadership" that Lincoln became "the great myth of the soul of America."

Jay Davenport, a congregant of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church since 1954, recalled that Pastor George Docherty and Gerstenfeld were golfing partners. She remembered chatting with Docherty and a few other church members in the Lincoln Parlor.

Docherty told the group that on one

such golf outing, Gerstenfeld mentioned Balaban's intention to donate the Lincoln document to the synagogue. "And George Docherty had the *chutzpah* to say something like, 'Oh, I think it belongs in the Lincoln church,'" Davenport said.

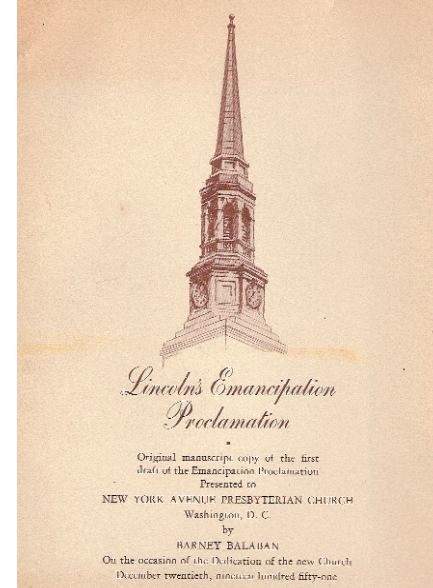
Chutzpah or not, the request was a legitimate one. While not formal members of the church, the Lincolns regularly attended services there. Lincoln and his wife were good friends of Docherty's predecessor, Phineas Gurley. The church still owns several letters from Mary Lincoln, including one that thanked Gurley for his comfort after her husband's assassination. The hitching post said to be the president's remains outside the New York Avenue entrance to the building. The bells in the steeple were presented in 1929 by Lincoln's granddaughter, Mary Lincoln Isham.

Gerstenfeld not only donated the Lincoln manuscript, but had the honor of formally unveiling it at the dedication of the church's new building on Dec. 20, 1951. Balaban attended the ceremony, too.

"Possession of the manuscript would have meant a great deal to you and your congregation," C. Stewart McKenzie, minister the downtown Western Presbyterian Church, wrote in a letter to Gerstenfeld four days later.

A week later, Docherty wrote Gerstenfeld what he termed "an inadequate note ... to express something of my gratitude." He called the rabbi "the instrument of Providence for bringing us the Lincoln manuscript."

On May 6, 1955, President Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower attended the dedication of Washington Hebrew Congregation's new building on Macomb Street. Balaban and his wife sat in the



The invitation cover from the Dec. 20, 1951, church rededication at which Barney Balaban presented the Lincoln document to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Washington Hebrew Congregation's Rabbi Norman Gerstenfeld unveiled it.

Courtesy of David Balaban

same row; presumably, Docherty attended, too.

Had Gerstenfeld not made the gracious gesture to his fellow cleric and golfing partner, the Lincoln document also would have been in the building that Shabbat night — and now, on the bicentennial of the 16th president's birth, it would still be displayed there.

Hillel Kuttler is a freelance writer in Maryland. He can be reached at hk@hillelthescribecommunications.com. The author wishes to thank Washington Hebrew Congregation archivist Lois England for her research assistance.

WASHINGTON JEWISH WEEK

2009 PURIM ART CONTEST

- Three categories: preschool and kindergarten, grades 1-3, grades 4-6
- Winners of each category will have their drawings published in Washington Jewish Week on March 5
- \$50 cash prize for first place in each category; \$25 for second place

RULES

1. Paper size: ONLY 8 1/2" x 11"
2. No chalk or computer-generated art will be considered
3. Deadline: Thursday, February 26
4. Attach entry form to back of art
5. One entry per person, please
6. Washington Jewish Week employees and their families are ineligible
7. Drawings will not be returned, but may be picked up at the address below beginning March 6. Please call ahead to 301.230.2222 to arrange pickup
8. Unclaimed drawings will be discarded April 3

Name _____	Grade _____	Age _____
Home Address _____		
City/State/Zip _____		
Phone Number _____		
School Name _____	School City _____	

Please attach this entry form to the back of your drawing. Forms must be fully completed
Mail to: WJW, C/O Purim Art Contest, 11426 Rockville Pike, Suite 236 Rockville, MD 20852

PROJECT

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home in Silver Spring. Since then, the 260-family congregation has operated out of sites in Olney, Silver Spring, Kensington and Rockville.

Original plans called for the 40,000-square-foot project to include a sanctuary, religious and nursery schools, administrative offices, a 90-seat chapel, a kiddush room, a social hall and a youth

activity center.

The project has been reduced to a little more than 20,000 square feet, but virtually all of the original components remain, said Teller. She declined to reveal the current construction cost; the prior cost has also not been disclosed.

The Olney project has been on hold since shortly after Shaare Tefila learned it had received final approval from Montgomery County to proceed with work, following months of permit-related delays. Roughly 10 percent of preliminary construction work had been completed at the 4.09-acre, \$1.2 million parcel on Georgia Avenue.

Resumption of the project was approved last week by a membership vote of 148 for, 21 against and seven abstained.

"I am delighted that 85 percent of those in attendance voted in favor of moving forward with construction," Shaare Tefila's rabbi, Jonah Layman, said in an e-mail sent last week from Israel. "Our transitional time has been trying, but it has created a very loyal and dedicated leadership and membership. We are ready to provide ourselves with a new home that we hope will serve the needs of our congregation and the Jewish community."

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