

James Singleton

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On January 5, 1865 a rather unusual event occurred when President Abraham Lincoln signed a pass allowing Congressman James W. Singleton of Illinois to pass through Confederate lines to Richmond. Although this was supposedly in order for Singleton to conduct business, it also signaled the beginning of serious efforts on both sides to negotiate peace.

Lincoln and Singleton had known each other since the 1830's. They had both been members of the Whig party and had each served in the Illinois General Assembly. Their relationship was strained a bit during the 1848 presidential election. Although both men had been long time supporters of Whig statesman Henry Clay, Lincoln supported war hero Zachary Taylor for the party's nomination. Although Taylor was not really a Whig, he was extremely popular so this might have shown an early version of Lincoln's famous pragmatism. Taylor won the election over former president Martin Van Buren.

Still, Singleton and Lincoln remained friends. By the time the Civil War started, Lincoln had become President as a member of the fairly new Republican Party while Singleton had shifted over to the Democratic Party when the Whig party dissolved in the late 1850's. As the war began, Singleton was offered a commission as a colonel to lead ten companies of Illinois militia. Singleton had been a brigadier general in the militia in the 1840's and had played an important role in the war against the Mormons in that state. He turned the commission down as he was fervently against the war. As time went on, Singleton became one of the more vocal Peace Democrats calling for immediate negotiations with the Confederacy.

Despite their political differences, Singleton and Lincoln remained close. So close in fact that Lincoln and Singleton came up with an interesting scheme in which Singleton would travel to Richmond and arrange to buy cotton and tobacco with Union money. These could be sold at a huge profit in the North and Lincoln believe that infiltrating the Confederacy with Union currency would help bring them back into the fold. However, Lincoln left such trips up to the discretion of commanding General Ulysses S. Grant. After Singleton had made several such trips, Grant put a halt to them.

On his last trip in January of 1865, Singleton managed to also work peace negotiations into his itinerary. Singleton had already been working in this direction when he traveled to Canada in November 1864 and met with Confederates Nathaniel Tucker and Clement Clay. During that meeting, the desperate Confederates had tried to persuade Singleton and other Peace Democrats to take up arms against the Union. Singleton was not willing to go that far to end the war, but he was certainly willing to take whatever peaceful means available.

During his January visit to Richmond, Singleton met with Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee. He was impressed with their desire to bring the war to an end but not with their refusal to consider ending slavery. Lincoln received a report from Singleton on February 1, but his efforts like those of other peace negotiators ended up coming to nothing. The war would end in about ten weeks through military means.

After the war, Singleton was elected to Congress from 1879-1883 and then took up farming. He moved to Baltimore, Maryland in the early 1890's and died there in 1892.