

LINCOLN LORE

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BRADY'S LOST OPPORTUNITY

Matthew Brady, if he were living in the modern era, would probably be called Mr. Photographer as he was the outstanding camera man of his day. One of his portraits of Abraham Lincoln has become so well known it is called the Brady Lincoln, although he made at least three dozen different negatives of the President.

We shall always regret however, that he did not have the opportunity to climax his professional relationship with Lincoln in a series of grand imperial photographic studies of the President such as he was capable of creating. How the opportunity for making such a series was somehow lost is revealed in the Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

A photographer by the name of Henry F. Warren of Waltham, Mass. was in Washington for the inaugural exercises on March 4, 1864 and is said to have made a picture of the ceremonies. He was anxious to make a portrait of the President and during his visit to Washington was visiting with an old friend, B. B. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson states that Warren secured his sitting of the President by first seeking an opportunity of making three negatives of the President's son Tad and his pony. Making prints from these negatives and presenting them to Tad, Warren said, "Now bring out your father and I will make a picture of him for you." Mr. Lincoln came out on the south balcony of the White House where the photographer had arranged his camera and according to Mr. Johnson made three portraits "one seated, one standing and the other a bust picture." Only one of these, the bust portrait, has been preserved.

There is some evidence that the President did not like this maneuver on the part of the photographer and his appearance was due to his desire to keep a promise evidently made by his son. The expression on Lincoln's face may indicate his state of mind at the time of the sitting reluctantly given. General Banks pronounced the picture a "horrible accuracy." It was made on March 6th, just two days after the inauguration.

The following day, with this resistance towards photographers in general apparently still fresh in his mind, Mrs. Lincoln is made the stooge of another photographic venture in which Brady becomes involved. James P. Root, Secretary of the Union State Central Committee of Illinois, then in Washington as a representative of the proposed Chicago Sanitary Fair, wrote the following note to Mary Todd Lincoln:

"On behalf of the Sanitary Fair to be held in Chicago in May next, I am sending for your negatives of yourself and the President in order that they may be colored for exhibition and sold on that occasion. It is the intention to have a very extensive art gallery. It would be an additional attraction if we could have elegant portraits of the President and his lady. My people will scarcely permit me to return without them. By permitting Mr. Brady to make some good negatives you will confer a great favor upon Chicago and the soldiers."

Enclosed with this correspondence was this note written by Matthew Brady:

"We have no pictures or negatives of imperial size such as he wishes for exhibition at the Fair in our collection and will be very much pleased to make such

as he wishes and present them to the Chicago Fair. We will sit you any time you propose without delay."

These two letters were supplemented the following day on March 8 by one written to Mrs. Lincoln by Richard Yates, the newly installed senator from Illinois, with this appeal:

"I desire to request that yourself and the President will sit for photographs, imperial size, at such time as will suit your convenience."

Possibly Mr. Root may have been informed that a direct approach to Mr. Lincoln would have been preferable rather than an attempt to reach him through a member of the family as Warren using Tad had done a day or two earlier. On March 9th Root still in Washington directed this letter to Mr. Lincoln.

"We intend to have an extensive Sanitary Fair in Chicago in May and our people desire yourself and Mrs. Lincoln to sit for imperial photographs within a few days so that they can be elegantly colored in time for the Fair. Gov. Yates joined with me in a note to Mrs. Lincoln making the request.

"Brady understands the kind we want. Any day next week will do."

Root enclosed in the letter to Lincoln a circular prepared by the committee on photographs for the Northwestern Sanitary Fair to open in Chicago on May 30. This circular was prepared especially for photographers who were invited to make exhibits. Lincoln's old Chicago photographer friend, S. M. Fassett, was chairman of the committee.

It is interesting to note that while Brady had taken a great many pictures of Lincoln he was obliged to admit that as late as Lincoln's second inauguration, even then he did not possess an imperial size photograph of the President of the United States.

There can be no doubt that with the beginning of a new administration and the war drawing to a climax, Lincoln had little time for picture making as it took an hour to make five exposures. Furthermore, Lincoln left Washington for City Point on March 23 and Brady again went back at the scene of military action making his famous war pictures. Lincoln did not return to Washington until April 6 with Brady still busy in the field.

It has often been lamented that Brady, who was at Petersburg at the close of the war, was not informed of the probable surrender of Lee and was not present at the meeting of Grant and Lee for the peace proposals. It is known that the photographer greatly regretted his failure to record, with a camera, this most important episode of the war and the grand climax in the preservation of the Union.

Equally tragic is Brady's failure to make a carefully executed series of imperial photographs of Abraham Lincoln. While we should be thankful that between Lincoln's return to Washington on April 6 and the President's assassination on April 14, Gardner was able to secure photographs of Abraham Lincoln, it is distressing indeed that Brady lost the grand opportunity to climax his portrait studies with a grand nonpareil full length portrait of the President.