



# Lincoln Lore

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## WILLIAM MARSHALL SWAYNE

### The Man Who Made A "Mud Head" of Lincoln

On Monday evening, January 9, 1865, William Marshall Swayne, a Pennsylvania artist in the employment of the government attended the president's reception. This was the first evening reception of the season at the executive mansion. Swayne was a welcome guest to this affair as he had executed a plaster bust of Abraham Lincoln from life during the early months of the year 1864.

Swayne sent his family the following account of the reception on January 12, 1865:

"I went to the president's reception last Monday evening and was very much entertained looking at the people. There were a good many notables present. After the crowd had somewhat passed away I thought I would go and speak to the president whom by the way, I had not spoken to since I finished the bust. He did not recognize me at first but seemed to be in a deep study, so I merely shook his hand and turned away quite crestfallen. When I heard his repeating something like my name several times, then instead of passing out the regular way I turned back to go out as I had come in. As I did so I glanced toward Mr. Lincoln. He was looking intently at me and motioned me back to him. He had recalled my name and when I went to him he reached his head up and whispered, 'You're the man that made a mud head of me.' He apologized for not recognizing me, and said, 'You saw I was trying to think.'

Then I understood why he had looked so strange at first. He inquired about the bust—told me he had sat several times since, but he liked mine better than any of them. His remarks were very gratefully received as there were quite a number of persons collected around who seemed very much interested in our conversation.

"I thought after, I would not have the incident dif-

ferent in any way, as it was I shook hands three times with him. When he called me back he gave me his hand again, and again when I said goodnight."

Swayne, born December 1, 1828, was a native of Chester County, Pennsylvania. As a young man he demonstrated a talent for sculpture and in 1850 he modeled a bust of Dr. Worth

of West Chester which was awarded a certificate of honorable mention in the exhibit of the Chester County Agricultural Society. His first important study was a plaster bust of Dr. William Darlington of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, executed in 1858.

The young artist took as his model the works of Antonio Canova the outstanding Italian sculptor, and was so taken with his art that he named his son A. Canova Swayne. Perhaps the greatest criticism of Swayne as an artist is that he was not brought up in the strict atmosphere of art and it became very hard for him to grasp the importance of dedicated training.

His plaster figure "Inez" attracted considerable attention and on June 30, 1858 George W. Pearce wrote Swayne indicating that he would like to purchase the figure for a friend who wished to present it to Thomas Buchanan Read, the artist-poet.

Having failed to successfully manage his father's farm and with a wife (he married Mary Barnard on November 14, 1850) and several children, he hoped to meet his increasing responsibilities by following his chosen profession in Washington, D.C. He remained in

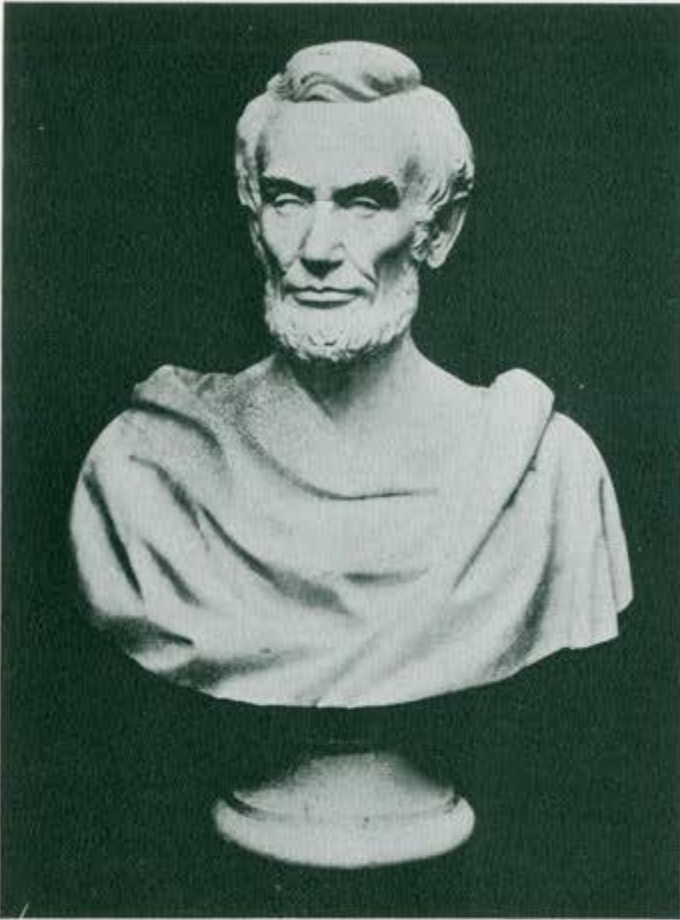
Washington, for several months in 1858 before returning to his home in West Chester. However in 1863 he was appointed to a clerkship in the Internal Revenue Office in the capital city. In addition to securing two promotions Swayne apparently was successful in making a favorable impression in art circles and he had a letter of introduction to the great architect, T. U. Walter, who was at that time designing several important Federal buildings in



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

William Marshall Swayne

This portrait was made by Alonzo Chappel and the original is now exhibited in the West Chester Historical Society Museum.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Plaster bust of Abraham Lincoln by William Marshall Swayne. The original is today coated with bronze and is in the Smithsonian Institution.

Washington. The letter of introduction written by Dr. Darlington mentioned that Swayne had made busts of himself, and John Hickman of the House of Representatives.

One of Swayne's first subjects was General Sam Houston of Texas. In March of 1859 he modeled a bust of Hon. Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio and Hon. James A. Bayard of Delaware. For awhile he was a pupil of H. K. Brown and was no doubt greatly influenced by this recognized artist who was appointed Art Commissioner. Swayne did not restrict his sculpture to portrait art, and in 1859 he did a beautiful study entitled "Autumn."

In May, 1860 Swayne made a bust of Simon Cameron, Lincoln's first Secretary of War. In June, 1860 the sculptor did a bust of General Anthony Wayne. Other commissions for prominent men of the day were received and executed, the most notable being that of Dr. William Darlington in marble which was sculptured for the Bank of Chester County, Pennsylvania.

One of Swayne's most important commissions was a bust of the Secretary of The Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, made shortly after his appointment to the Lincoln cabinet. As would be expected Swayne had an ambition to make a bust or statue of the sixteenth president and arrangements were made for a marble bust of Lincoln, to be commissioned by Henry C. Townsend for exhibition at a fair sponsored by the Christian Commission in Philadelphia in June, 1864. Accordingly Chase wrote Lincoln on January 17, 1864:

"Mr. W. Marshall Swayne a clerk in the Internal Revenue Bureau, wishes to contribute to the Fair to be held in this city for the benefit of the Christian Commission a series of bas relief heads of the President and the heads of Departments.

"Mr. Swayne has modeled a head of myself and I think of Governor Seward, which are said to be good.

"His object is certainly a good one, and if you will give him a sitting or two to enable him to accomplish

it, you will help it and at the same time gratify a very worthy gentleman.

"He devotes only his spare hours to the work, not allowing it to interfere at all with his official duties." Lincoln responded to Chase's letter on February 16, 1864. He wrote:

"I endorse what is said above of Mr. Swayne."

It is believed that Chase gave the Lincoln endorsement to Swayne as the original document is today owned by Mrs. Isaac G. Robert of West Chester, Pennsylvania, a daughter of the sculptor.

The first evidence available that Lincoln was to grant Swayne a sitting was incorporated into a letter addressed to the sculptor's wife, dated January 29, 1864:

". . . went this afternoon to the White House to have a sitting by the President, but he had gone to the funeral of the Swiss Consul, who was buried today."

Swayne set up a temporary studio in the Treasury Building which adjoined the White House grounds and "Mr. Lincoln would walk across and sit and chat . . . while he was modeling." There was no comfortable chair in the studio and one day Swayne discovered in the basement a Victorian red plush upholstered arm chair, and he asked that it be brought to the room for the president's comfort. The request was granted, and after the bust was completed Swayne inquired if he might purchase the chair. He was told that the public buildings were refurnished when necessary and the old furniture was either stored or given away, but never sold. Consequently the chair was given to Swayne and it became a highly treasured possession of the family. Today the chair along with many pieces of Swayne's sculpture are the property of the West Chester Historical Society.

From correspondence files and newspaper articles Swayne's account of his work on the Lincoln bust follow:

February 3, 1864

". . . I have had two sittings from the President, and think I have a recognizable likeness of him. The first thing I said to him, almost, had the usual affect to 'remind him of something.' He was sitting at his table writing when I went in; and, after the usual salutation, asked me if I could take him as he was at work. I remarked that I wished to model the left side of his face, and that the right was turned toward the light. He thought if the left side of his head was right, the other must be also. The analogy of words reminded him, he said, of the man who came to where the road forked, and was told that if he took the left, it was right; and if he took the right it was wrong."

A most intimate picture of Lincoln is revealed in Swayne's letter of March 27, 1864:

"Since I wrote last, I have commenced the bust of the President, and have had two sittings, two nights in succession, the first on Sixth Day evening (March 24). He came over to the Treasury through the rain to keep his appointment; and on last evening he came again, very unexpectedly, to me bringing Mr. Carpenter (the artist who is printing the large historical picture of the Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation) and Tad, saying he came to sit, if I wanted him. He stayed an hour and a quarter, and was withal, very entertaining, reminding me very much of Father in his most jovial domestic moods, telling stories and reciting poetry. Mr. C. (Carpenter) wished to copy or write the words of the poem 'Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?' Thee will recollect it came out in the paper, and was ascribed to his (Lincoln's) pen. He had come across it many years since, liked it much, and committed it to memory, and had frequently recited it, but was not the author of it or any other poem. I told him I had been thinking of it the evening before, and intended asking about the authorship. He seemed to think it quite a coincidence that he had been reciting it to Mr. C. the evening before, about 9 o'clock, at the time it occurred to me."

This visit was later mentioned by Carpenter in an article which appeared in the *Albany Evening Journal* of April 26, 1865:

"A few days afterwards he (Lincoln) asked me to accompany him to the studio of Mr. Swayne, the

sculptor, who was working on a bust of him at the Treasury office."

A calendar of dates can be compiled with reference to the bust or when Swayne had Lincoln as a visitor in his studio, or when visiting delegations came in to see the work in progress.

May 25, 1864

"I went this evening to ask the President to give me a sitting. No trouble in getting to see him. He said he would come in 15 minutes, so I went back to get ready for him. He came promptly but had not sat many minutes when Mrs. Lincoln's messenger came over saying the 'Madam' wishes him to ride out with her. He proposed to stay ½ hour, but I insisted on his going, knowing she would be disappointed. He promised to come again tomorrow evening at 4—an hour earlier."

May 29, 1864

"I did not have a sitting on 7th day (Saturday) as I expected, but hope to be able to get two early in the week. When the President was last in on 5th day evening, he had evidently been thinking that slave property was a very uncertain commodity and very liable to depreciate. He said he had been thinking of the anecdote of the fellow who had bought his time and afterwards wanted to sell out because he thought that kind of property was likely to depreciate and he would not be able to get his money back. He told of a slave who had offended his mistress, and to punish him she put a burning coal of fire on his head. The fellow submitted quietly and then told her to 'Neva mine I'll jus lef it lay dar till massa comes home and see what he'll say.' There is more in his manner of telling jokes than in the joke itself, still they generally have a point."

June 2, 1864

"I have had two sittings this week, one 2nd day evening and one 3rd day morning at quarter of seven. Pretty early for the President, is it not? And then he had been at the War Department an hour before and brought me the latest news from the Army. He had just heard the good news from Sherman which pleased him very much."

June 10, 1864

"I doubt if Washington, while living, was ever venerated as father Abraham is now. I have met with several who were delegates to the convention and they all speak enthusiastically of him. By the way I had almost the whole of the New Jersey delegation in to see the bust yesterday."

June 12, 1864

"Last evening I finished the cast and felt very much relieved by it. I will probably pack and send it off tomorrow. The opinion as far as I have heard is that it is a success."

June 17, 1864

"I got the bust of President Lincoln packed and sent off on Thursday evening. I have sent thee a copy of the 'Tribune' which has a short reference to it. It is literally true about the President doing as stated. He had been over unbidden on Seventh day evening to see it, but I had gone out."

While Swayne's project was a success the bust was not completed due to his illness until near the close of the Great Central Fair at Philadelphia which was sponsored for the benefit of the Christian Commission. A note in Swayne's handwriting provides this information.

"I will here explain that I have received a conditional commission to execute a marble Bust of President Lincoln from Henry C. Townsend of Philadelphia. The conditions were that it should be completed in that city—but from causes unforeseen then the model was not completed until near the close of the Fair. The following card was placed on the exhibit:

"Model  
of a bust of  
Abraham Lincoln

"Now being executed in marble by W. Marshall Swayne of Washington, D. C. To be purchased by Subscription for the Union League of Philadelphia as an ornament for their new house.

Presented To The Great Central Fair

By  
Henry C. Townsend"

There is no evidence that Swayne ever completed a marble bust of Lincoln or that he ever began such a project. The original plaster bust (now coated with bronze) is exhibited by the Smithsonian Institution.

Swayne did make a number of small plaster busts of Lincoln to be sold at the Philadelphia fair. He also made a number of small models in bas relief of Mr. Lincoln and his cabinet for the Fair held in Washington for the benefit of the Christian Commission.

The sculptor continued to reside in Washington after the completion of the Lincoln bust and in his letters to his family he related incidents connected with the Sixteenth President.

November 10, 1864

"Mr. Lincoln will probably be serenaded tonight and I want him to be on hand, there is no doubt of his re-election. I am only afraid he did not get every state as I had hoped he would."

November 14, 1864

"In evening I went with all Washington to serenade the President and heard a very good speech from him."

Swayne's "Reminiscences concerning the Modeling of a Bust of Lincoln" appeared in *The Federal Architect*,



*From the Lincoln National Life Foundation*

The Victorian red plush arm chair in which the president sat while Swayne modeled the Lincoln bust. The chair is on exhibit in the West Chester, Pennsylvania, Historical Society.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Statuette of Abraham Lincoln by William Marshall Swayne. This is the model submitted to the committee who proposed to erect a heroic bronze statue of Lincoln in front of the Washington City Hall. It is now exhibited in the West Chester Historical Society Museum.

July, 1940. This article apparently gives the entire record of the sculptor's contact with Lincoln.

The assassination of Lincoln came as a great personal loss to Swayne. On April 15, 1865 he wrote his family:

"How can I tell you of the great calamity that has come upon us? I cannot realize it myself and could scarcely believe it had I not seen the city draped in mourning from one end to the other, and the hearse as it conveyed the precious remains of our beloved President to his now sad home. You will learn by the papers all particulars of the terrible murder. I can give you no idea of the deep gloom that seems to overshadow everything and everybody, but saddened hearts and weeping eyes will not be confined to this City. The whole world will mourn him, will miss him."

According to Henry Pleasants, Jr., the author of *Four Great Artists of Chester County* "the assassination of Lincoln dealt a blow to Swayne from which he never recovered." It was the sculptor's request that he be allowed to be the last person to view the president's remains before the body left Washington and "for an hour or more William Marshall Swayne stood looking down on the figure resting at last from the labors of the salvation of a nation." An unidentified newspaper article provides additional information concerning Swayne's request:

"The sculptor (Swayne) was the last man to gaze upon the face of Abraham Lincoln as he lay in his casket just prior to his burial. He made the request

that he be allowed to take the last look at the President as he lay in state in order that he might catch a new expression on the face of the martyred statesman. This final request was granted the man who had come to know him in his hours outside of his executive office."

With the death of Lincoln a great deal of interest was manifested in a project for the erection of a Lincoln statue in front of the Washington City Hall. An unidentified Washington, D. C. newspaper indicated that a Swayne statue model was considered:

"Among the designs offered in competition for the statue of Mr. Lincoln to be placed in front of City Hall, that of Mr. W. M. Swayne of this city commends itself most favorably as a truthful representation of our late lamented President.

"Mr. Swayne has seized upon that striking event in the life of Mr. Lincoln which is sure to go down to posterity, ever embalming him in the hearts of succeeding generations. He has represented him as about to utter those memorable words which more than any others show the character and spirit of the man; 'with malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on,' & etc. The position is that which beautifully harmonizes with those forthgivings of that great heart.

"Instead of going into particular description I would recommend a view of the model, now to be seen at the jewelry store of M. W. Galt and Bros., 354 Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Among the busts of Mr. Lincoln, he himself had a marked preference for that of Mr. Swayne, as a true representative of him.

"This artist had rare opportunities of studying the man, and it is only a matter of justice to him to state that in both the bust and the statuette now referred to he has been most successful in bringing before the eye and the mind the peculiar external and internal characteristics of Mr. Lincoln.

"An excellent judge of works of art, who attended the inauguration ball, forty days before the death of Mr. Lincoln, thus writes afterward: 'But this I know the scene all comes back to me today, as I passed into the Old Hall of Representatives and stood before the bust of Lincoln executed by Swayne. The very face that looked down upon us that night is here; the sad eyes, the patient furrows set in marble, the story on the lips told in everlasting silence.' And in the model or statuette, no one can fail to recognize the true expression which would be most valued in a full statue."

Needless to state, Swayne did not receive a commission to create a heroic bronze statue of the martyred president. The death of Lincoln marked the end of Swayne's professional career as a sculptor. He had resided in Washington during a nine year period, a part of which he had served as a clerk in the Treasury Department and "as the perpetrator of the physical characteristics of the greatest leaders of the country." These nine years had been eventful, and into them Swayne had crowded the experiences of a life time and the sorrows of an era. Then, too, the political atmosphere of the reconstruction period in Washington was not conducive to the production of heroic sculptural studies. There were no longer any heroes and the capital city was barren of new artistic concepts. At least that was the way Swayne appraised the situation.

The sculptor returned to his home and family in Pennsylvania and took up new duties as a Collector of Internal Revenue for the 7th Congressional District of Pennsylvania composed of Chester and Delaware Counties. Occasionally he could be persuaded to create a likeness of some banker or lawyer or celebrated person in plaster or marble, but his life work as an artist was finished. In 1918 in quiet contentment the man who made a "mud head" of Lincoln died in obscurity, but he was loved by all who knew him, and was honored by all of his associates.