



Lincoln Lore

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Barondess/Lincoln Award to Floyd E. Risvold for Weichmann Assassination Account

Editor's Note: The Civil War Round Table of New York established the Barondess/Lincoln Award in 1962 to honor persons or institutions for significant contributions to the study of the life and works of Abraham Lincoln. Authors like Paul M. Angle, Kenneth A. Bernard, and Louis A. Warren have received the award, as have Frankie Hewitt (for her work with the Ford's Theatre Society) and Lincoln Memorial University (for its publication of *Lincoln Herald* and for maintaining a Lincoln collection). This year's award went to Mr. Floyd E. Risvold, a manuscripts collector, who bought and then carefully edited Louis J. Weichmann's manuscript, *A True History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and of the Conspiracy of 1865*, published last year by Alfred A. Knopf. The Civil War Round Table of New York is to be commended for this service to the Lincoln field in general and for the choice of this book in particular, which was certainly the most significant Lincoln book of the year and may be the most significant book in the field published in several years. The following is a brief review of this interesting eyewitness account of the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln, of the trials of the assassins, and of the witness's own struggle to vindicate his testimony.

I want to thank Mr. Risvold for his assistance in supplying the photographs used in this *Lincoln Lore*; they are unique, and we feel privileged to use them.

M.E.N., Jr.

Poor Louis Weichmann, he is one of the most despised men in Lincoln literature. Even temperate writers on the assassination suggest that his character was weak, that he was cowardly (or at least easily intimidated), that he was a hypocrite who traded his testimony for exemption from prosecution, and that he was a lick-spittle who received a government job as his

pay for doing the government's hatchet work at the trial of the assassins. At last he has been heard, and though his character remains enigmatic and still somewhat unappealing, it is only fair to have the story told as Louis Weichmann saw it.

Sensation mongers have not taken to this book. In his *apologia pro vita sua*, the government's star witness at the

trial of Lincoln's assassins works so hard to prove the validity of his own testimony that he leaves little room for speculation about unpursued leads or involvement by elusive "higher-ups." The overall effect of the book (besides pleasure — it is what book editors, I think, refer to as a "good read") is to narrow the reader's field of vision, to focus his attention on the tough questions of degree of guilt or innocence among those people whom Weichmann saw at Mary Surratt's boarding house in Washington, D.C. Weichmann concludes flatly that "it can be truthfully said that Booth himself was the author of the whole scheme, both as relates to the plot to abduct, and the plot to assassinate Mr. Lincoln, in the laying of plans, in the securing of accomplices, and in the furnishing of the necessary funds. It was Booth's conspiracy, and that of the foolish young men whom he drew into his schemes along with him. In fact, it may very properly be designated as a conspiracy of foolish and misguided young men." His appraisal of



From the Risvold Collection

FIGURE 1. Louis J. Weichmann as he looked in 1892, about the time he wrote his *True History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Weichmann was living in Anderson, Indiana, where he ran a business school. He left his patronage job in the Philadelphia customhouse when Democrat Grover Cleveland took over the White House. He moved to Anderson to be near his brother, who was a Catholic priest.

their motives is disarmingly simple and straightforward:

What the potent influence was that induced these men and this woman to enlist under Booth's black banner, I cannot comprehend, but in my own mind, I have been satisfied long ago that they were mainly actuated by cupidity — the desire to make money — to gain a large fortune. Indeed, all their talk proves this. When Booth approached Chester [to induce him to join the conspiracy], he told him their money was in it, that he could let him have three thousand dollars, and when Surratt induced Atzerodt to join the Conspiracy, and furnish the boat on which the President was to be ferried over the Potomac, it was under the promise of a fortune, and thereafter whenever Atzerodt talked about the scheme, it was always with the idea of making money. Booth himself may have been actuated by what he considered nobler motives, the desire, perhaps, to pose as the Charlotte Corday of the nineteenth century; to gain a name for himself as the avenger of the South, or by his deed to attempt to revive its dying cause; but his followers, it is safe to say, were actuated by no such motives. They were too commonplace and were not of the material out of which heroes are made.

Surratt's mother was in debt and was keeping a boardinghouse to sustain herself and family, but the son when in the city could be often seen with fine gloves and leggings on, riding on sleek and well-fed horses, and girdled around his waist with a brace of well-loaded revolvers. He kept two horses at Howard's stables on G Street which he claimed as his own, but Brooke Stabler, an employee there, testified that Booth paid for their keeping

Weichmann stresses Booth's charisma, charm, and verbal talent as keys to his success in recruiting, for example, a "country boy" like John Surratt for his plot to kidnap the President.

Only occasionally does Weichmann seem to be insufferably self-righteous. When he tells us that he regularly escorted Mrs. Surratt to church on Sundays (both were Roman Catholics), but that he could "not remember a single time during my stay in her home when her son went with her to church," he may be reporting the facts. This scene, however, seems a bit hard to take now, and the least that can be said about it is that there is little wonder that Surratt grew to hate Weichmann:

On one occasion I found John Surratt in my room sitting before the fire, looking as if his last friend had deserted him. "What is the matter, John?" said I. "Why are you so dejected?" "Weichmann," was his reply, "I can't tell you; you are a Yankee." Then I informed him that if he did not wish to trust me with his secrets, he had better go to his church, attend to his religious duties, and live as a Christian man should, and all his worryment would cease.

A lawyer who once tried courtroom criminal law but found that he lost weight from anxiety during trials told me that criminal lawyers are a peculiar breed. He said that it does not matter much how well they know the law, how logical their minds are, or how learned and careful their briefs

are. All the careful preparations in the world and all the legal learning would be utterly useless if the jury did not understand the pitch or if a key witness clammed up on the stand or changed his story altogether. Criminal lawyers must be astute judges of character above all else. There seems to be some truth in this, for one finds oneself inexorably drawn into a discussion of personalities when one studies a criminal case. Is one witness or another to be believed? Is a person capable of such a crime? These are finally the questions juries answer, and these are questions which historians like to avoid but cannot when studying events like the trials of Lincoln's assassins. The argument *ad hominem* seems not to be avoidable.

What kind of witness is Louis Weichmann? It is still very hard to say, but surely the case for his plausibility is stronger now than ever before. He combines a careful reporter's eye and moral simplicity with a studied ability to piece together complex facts of time, place, and circumstance. To be sure, he seems occasionally susceptible to surface deception, as when he tells us what "an exceedingly fine-looking body of men" the officers of the military commission that tried the conspirators were. One cringes to find him reporting the superficial fact of what "a good impression [they made] on all who visited the court during the hot and exciting days of the trial." On the whole, though, such moments are rare and serve ultimately to lend credibility to Weichmann's story. After all, if he were not capable of being deceived by appearances, then he was a well-wisher to the conspiracy rather than an uncomprehending eyewitness.

His case is stronger now, but not ironclad, partly because he is so secretive about his own life and character. He tells us about Louis Weichmann only insofar as he had contact with the assassins, the men who tried the assassins, and the writers who attacked him or vindicated Mrs. Surratt. Otherwise, Louis Weichmann exists only as a dull shadow who goes to his job with the government bureaucracy (he was a War Department clerk) and returns home to eat, read a bit, and sleep. What are Weichmann's own political opinions? We do not know. He conversed affably enough with a Confederate block-

very seldom. The only Catholic clergyman in the city whom she knew well was Rev. Bernardin F. Wiget, who had been a friend of many years standing to her and her son. He called occasionally, but not often. With Father Jacob Walters, her confessor in the closing days of her earthly life, she had no acquaintance whatever prior to the assassination.

I generally accompanied this woman to church on Sundays, and did many little offices of kindness for her in the absence of her son. I do not remember a single time during my stay in her home when her son went with her to church. That seems to have been my function, and I was always happy to be of service to her in this way.

On one occasion I found John Surratt in my room sitting before the fire, looking as if his last friend had deserted him. "What is the

Handwritten marginalia in shorthand:
 H. L. Weichmann
 22 Feb 1865

From the Risvold Collection

FIGURE 2. This is part of a page of the Weichmann manuscript. There are multiple typewritten copies of most of the chapters of the book; Weichmann sent copies of the manuscript to be read by various people, including Ida Tarbell. At the bottom of this page can be seen some marginalia written in shorthand by Weichmann, who counted mastery of a system of shorthand among his clerical abilities. The last word is in German.

ade runner in the Surratt house. On the other hand, by the time he wrote his memoir of the event (about thirty years later), he could say of southern Maryland that "The only true friends the Union had down there were the colored people." His gratitude to that race, which he seems otherwise to have known only as servants, was doubtless increased when, during the trial of John Surratt in 1867,

One day, I was waited on by two ladies, Mrs. Griffen and Mrs. Thomas L. Tullock, representing a committee of the loyal ladies of Washington, who stated that they had come to me from Secretary Stanton to say that I should in no way feel alarmed during my attendance at court; that the Secretary had taken the precaution to have a number of colored men in the court room every day who would take care that the Government witnesses should not be insulted or subjected to bodily harm.

This wise precaution of Mr. Stanton was an actual fact; there were three rows of benches which were occupied as long as the trial lasted by colored men. They were always orderly and polite in their behavior, but their presence was a great restraint on the element which sympathized with Surratt, and, I believe, was often the means of checking an outbreak in the court room.

Otherwise, we know only that he regularly held a patronage job from all Republican administrations till 1885 and that whenever the Democrats gained control, he was turned out in the cold.

There is enough information in Weichmann's account to suggest a book on the disputes having to do with Catholicism that grew out of the trials of the assassins. Indeed, this is almost a subplot of the book. Payne was a Baptist; Booth, an Episcopalian; Atzerodt, a Lutheran; and Weichmann, a key prosecution witness, was a Catholic himself; nevertheless, it did not take long for the anti-Catholic agitators to dream up allegations that Lincoln's assassination was a papal plot. To a surprising degree, Weichmann suggests that Catholics themselves had much to do with bringing on the hatred and suspicion. At the trial of John Surratt, twenty students from St. Charles College (where John and Louis both had studied for the priesthood) came with a professor (Louis's former father confessor) and shook hands with the accused prisoner, the priest sitting at Surratt's side all day. None so much as acknowledged Weichmann's presence.

Out of such actions as these, and out of the doings of Fathers Boucher and LaPierre, who secreted Surratt in Canada and who arranged and facilitated his escape to Europe, coupled with the fact that some of the priests and other prominent Catholics in Washington, have persistently and unscrupulously maligned the Government, the Military Commission, the witnesses for the prosecution, because of the verdict in Mrs. Surratt's case, more than from any other circumstances, has grown the charge that the assassination was the outcome of a Catholic plot.

He does go on to say that "the charge is too ridiculous for a moment's consideration." But so little attention to the forces of bigotry that raised the charge seems curious in a Catholic. True, he admits asking Stanton for a job when his Bishop refused to answer his letter (in the summer of 1865) requesting permission to resume his religious studies. This incident typifies the great weakness of the account. It is only from Weichmann's obituary, carefully added by Risvold in the useful appendix to the account, that we learn that Weichmann left the Church altogether (until just before his death).

He does not bother to tell us this interesting biographical tidbit, and he is not by any means required to by the rules of evidence. Still, it certainly alters our understanding of his perception of the causes of the Catholic plot theory. We still do not understand the man behind the testimony.

By today's standards, the standards of the nineteenth-century justice system often seem appalling. Weichmann receiv-

ed a government job for his part in the trials of the assassins. Writers have never forgiven him (or the government) for this. Yet something else comes to mind. Weichmann wrote this manuscript justifying his role in the trials late in his life, some thirty years after the event, and even then only in response to frequent newspaper stories that impugned his testimony. He did not rush out of the courtroom door of this, the most famous state trial in American history, get a large advance from a publisher, and try to get rich off his dutiful participation in the trial. Standards of justice have not necessarily changed all for the better.

Recent Acquisitions: A Presentation Copy of the *Debates*

Abraham Lincoln's education was, in his own estimation, "defective." The frontier environment of his youth prevented his owning many books in the years when he had much time for reading. He regretted his "want of education," as he said in his autobiography written for John L. Scripps in 1860, and tried throughout his life "to supply the want." He studied grammar after he was twenty-three years old and "had separated from his father." He studied geometry after he was forty years old and had already served a term in the United States House of Representatives.

The habits of youth nevertheless leave indelible traces, and Lincoln showed no special fondness for books as such. He never accumulated a library like Jefferson's or Washington's. He was not, like Rutherford B. Hayes or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a book collector. Unlike Woodrow Wilson or Theodore Roosevelt, he never wrote books. Therefore, books that are directly associated with Abraham Lincoln are extremely rare. He almost never wrote marginalia in his books; in fact, he rarely wrote his name in a book.

For these reasons, and others, a signed copy of a book for which Abraham Lincoln supplied almost half the text himself is considered a major rarity. The only book that Lincoln in any sense "wrote" was the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858, in Illinois*. . . . (Columbus: Follett, Foster and Company, 1860). Lincoln thought he won the great debates, and he was careful to preserve a newspaper clipping of every speech. He pasted these into an attractive scrapbook. Lincoln turned down one publication offer in 1858, probably thinking it would be too early to have political effect. In 1859, his campaign tour to Ohio seems to have brought the scrapbook to the attention of Republican leaders in that state, and Oran Follett, editor of the *Ohio State Journal*, early Republican, and owner of the Follett, Foster publishing house, printed the book in 1860. Lincoln received, it is said, one hundred copies, and to date eighteen copies which he signed and presented to friends have been found. The Lincoln Library and Museum is happy to announce the acquisition of one of these presentation copies, bearing the pencil inscription, "Capt. J. S. Bradford From A. Lincoln."

Only one copy of the *Debates* is inscribed in ink, the copy Lincoln gave to his former law partner Stephen T. Logan. On it, the ink is badly smeared because the endpapers are porous and soft, and book collectors assume that, from then on, Lincoln knew to inscribe the books in pencil.

Captain John S. Bradford seems at first glance to be an unlikely recipient of Lincoln's book. He was a life-long Democrat who led a restless and varied life. Born in Philadelphia in 1815, he was trained to be a bookbinder. He apparently decided he wanted to see Mexico and started working his way west from Philadelphia. In Richmond, Indiana, he joined the

United States Corps of Engineers in building the National Road. The road terminated in Vandalia, Illinois, in 1840, and so did Bradford's employment on the project. He then moved to Springfield late the same year. In 1841, he bought half of a partnership in a bookbindery which became the firm of Johnson and Bradford.

Lincoln's addressing him as "Captain" betokened Bradford's long-standing military interests. He joined a militia unit known as the Springfield Cadets and went to Nauvoo in 1845, when disturbances with the Mormons in that area led Governor Thomas Ford to call out the militia. In 1846, he enlisted in Company A, Fourth Illinois Infantry, the unit commanded by Lincoln's Whig friend Edward D. Baker, and went to Mexico, where he became a Commissary of the United States Army. He was present at the capture of Vera Cruz, the Battle of Cerro Gordo, and other battles in the Mexican War. He returned with the Illinois regiment in September of 1847, only to leave again early in 1849 to seek gold in California.

Apparently, Bradford went to California with his brother-in-law James Semple, who had been United States Senator from Illinois (1843-1847) and Associate Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court (1843). They engaged not in mining but in supplying the miners with goods and food. They began with a simple pack train, carrying goods from Sacramento. Later they bought wagons and opened a store, forming the firm of Semple, Robinson, and Company, for the transaction of "general business." They even purchased a ship with a cargo of East Indian goods and disassembled it to make a wharf. They must have been successful, for Bradford was elected representative in his Benicia (Sonoma) district when the military commander of the Department of the Pacific ordered a government to be formed for a new state (even before California was a state). In 1850, when California gained admission to the Union, he was reelected to the first state legislature. A year later, he returned home to his family, which he had left behind in Springfield. He remained in partnership with Johnson in the bindery and in 1857 became Superintendent of Public Instruction for Sangamon County.

When the Civil War broke out (and probably after he already had received his copy of the *Debates* from Abraham Lincoln), Republican Governor Richard Yates recognized Bradford's qualifications despite his party identification and appointed him Commissary with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, Governor Yates's first military commission for the war.

After the war, Bradford served as mayor of Springfield, invoking tough sanitation measures when a smallpox epidemic broke out. He was noted for his involvement in charitable and cultural institutions. He served on the board of the Illinois State University, a Lutheran college which flourished briefly in Springfield, and he raised money for the Springfield Home for the Friendless, a charitable institution for homeless women and children.

In 1869, Bradford ended his connection with Johnson and Bradford and opened a book store. Then his restless spirit showed itself again. He sold the store in 1873 and moved to Aberdeen, Mississippi, where he remained for two years. He returned again to Springfield, where, in 1876, he became Crier of the Court and United States Commissioner. He was an Episcopalian, a Mason, and a Knight Templar. He was always described as a staunch Democrat as well. Why did Lincoln give him a copy of his *Debates*? Probably because Bradford was Lincoln's neighbor, living across the street from the Lincoln home at Eighth and Jackson in Springfield. It was an election year and these were political speeches, but Abraham Lincoln remembered his neighbor.

The Bradford copy contains a tipped-in affidavit on the flyleaf just under the Lincoln signature. It reads:

State of Washington
County of King)ss

Donald Bradford being first sworn on oath says that he

is the son of Capt. John S. Bradford, at one time Mayor of Springfield, Ill., and a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln, living across the street from Lincoln's home. (See reference page 428, Sandberg's [sic] *Life of Lincoln*, Vol. 1) Capt. John S. Bradford died in 1892 and among his effects was a library containing the within book which came to affiant at that time, and which has been in his continuous possession ever since. That affiant knows from his father's personal statements to him that this book had been in the continuous possession of his father from the time that he received said book from Lincoln with his name inscribed on this page, viz: "A Lincoln" That affiant knows that said signature is genuine and the signature of A. Lincoln as it purports to be.

Affiant is the youngest son of Capt. J. S. Bradford and resides in Seattle, Wash. That formerly, in 1890, he was mayor of Helena, Mont., and publisher of the Rocky Mountain Magazine.

[signed] Donald Bradford

Subscribed & Sworn to before me this 11th. day of May, 1934.

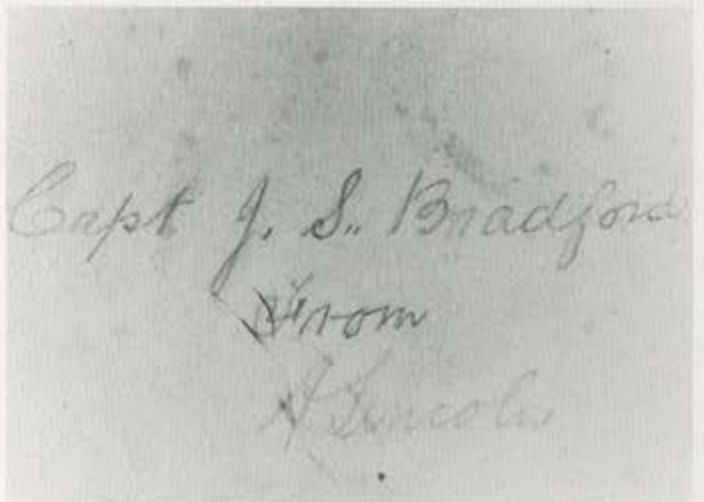
[signed] A. M. Booth

Notary Public at Seattle, Wn

William H. Herndon recalled that Lincoln "had failed to induce any publisher in Springfield to undertake the enterprise [of publishing the debates], thus proving anew that 'a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country.'" In fact, Herndon wrote in 1889:

A gentleman is still living, who at the time of the debate between Lincoln and Douglas, was a book publisher in Springfield. Lincoln had collected newspaper slips of all the speeches made during the debate, and proposed to him their publication in book form; but the man declined, fearing there would be no demand for such a book. Subsequently, when the speeches were gotten out in book form in Ohio, Mr. Lincoln procured a copy and gave it to his Springfield friend, writing on the flyleaf, "Compliments of A. Lincoln."

The inscription is not the same as the one made to J. S. Bradford, but one wonders whether this might not be the very copy to which Herndon referred. If it is, then Bradford doubtless kicked himself for his decision. The *Debates* were a nineteenth-century best seller; over 30,000 copies were sold in 1860.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 3. An old list locating the signed copies of the *Debates* indicates that Lincoln most often inscribed the copies with the recipient's name followed by "from" on the next line and his signature ("A. Lincoln") below that. Other inscriptions are in the form "A. L." or "A. Lincoln" followed by "to" and the recipient's name. In others, Lincoln wrote "Presented to," the recipient's name, and "by A. Lincoln" on the next line.