



Lincoln Lore

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THE LAST LIFE PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN

While Boston authorities were attempting last spring to embargo the removal of Gilbert Stuart's famous paintings of George and Martha Washington, the last portrait of Lincoln painted from life quietly left Boston for Fort Wayne. The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum—thanks to a special appropriation from its governing body, the Lincoln National Life Foundation, Inc.—now houses Matthew Wilson's portrait of Lincoln painted from life and dated April, 1865, the month of the President's assassination. Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, commissioned the portrait, and important contemporary witnesses testified to the remarkable quality of the likeness.

Matthew Henry Wilson was born in England in 1814. When he was seventeen, he emigrated to America to engage in the business of silk manufacture, only to find upon his arrival that no such industry existed in the United States. Hard times followed, as Wilson tried to make ends meet by tuning pianos and teaching school. His first portrait was a painted sketch of himself he made to send to his mother. The residents of his boarding house were so taken with the likeness that he decided to try painting portraits for a living. His first sitter paid him \$2.00 for his portrait.

Wilson studied with Philadelphia painter Henry Inman from 1832 to 1835 and then went to Paris to study with Edouard Dubufe. He returned to America two years later and painted in Brooklyn, New Orleans, Baltimore, and other places before settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1856. He worked in the Boston-Hartford area and met Welles, a Hartford resident, in 1859. He painted portraits of the Welles family and of numerous members of

the Connecticut commercial elite. Patrons now paid \$100 for a Wilson portrait. By the end of the Civil War, Wilson charged \$150 for a portrait.

On February 4, 1865, Mrs. Welles introduced Wilson to the President, apparently in order to make arrangements to paint his portrait. The next day, he met Lincoln at Alexander Gardner's photographic studio to have photographs made on which to base the portrait. The famous group of photographs that resulted from this last photographic sitting included the only Lincoln photographs with a hint of a smile on his face. After a day passed, probably spent waiting for Gardner's gallery to develop the photographs, Wilson started painting Lincoln's portrait. He painted all day on the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th.

Wilson worked on the Lincoln painting on the 14th and 15th, and then he tried to see the President in order to put on the finishing touches. A Cabinet meeting prevented him from doing so on the 17th, but he saw Lincoln the next day. On the 20th, he returned to the White House and painted there.

Wilson finished the portrait by February 22, 1865. As Francis B. Carpenter, another artist fortunate enough to have Lincoln sit for him, records it, on that day Lincoln was in a good mood:

Temporarily upon the wall of the room [Lincoln's office] was a portrait of himself recently painted for Secretary Welles by a Connecticut artist friend. Turning to the picture, Mr. Welles remarked that he thought it a successful likeness. "Yes," returned the President, hesitatingly; and then came a story of a western friend whose wife pronounced her husband's portrait, painted secretly for a birthday present,



*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 1. Matthew Wilson's portrait of Lincoln is an oil painting on oval artist's board, 16 7/8" x 13 7/8". The frame, apparently the original, measures 27 5/8" x 24 1/2". It is in excellent condition.

"horridly like," "and that," said he, "seems to me a just criticism of *this*!"

Lincoln was notoriously modest about his physical appearance. Welles was pleased with the portrait. He must have been pleased with the price, too. Wilson charged him only \$85. Welles wrote the artist a check for that amount on April 12th.

Wilson had no way of knowing it, but he painted the President's likeness at the last possible moment. Three days after the check was written, the President was dead. Immediately, Louis Prang of Boston, a lithographer, wanted a copy of the portrait on which to base a print portrait. On April 20th, Wilson began painting a copy for Prang. Before the year was over, Wilson painted at least three copies, perhaps four or five.

The demand for copies shows that the portrait was successful. And the names of those who asked for copies provide even firmer proof that this was not just another portrait from life but also an excellent likeness. Wilson painted one copy for Welles, who wanted a copy to hang permanently in the Navy Department. He made a copy for Joshua Speed, Lincoln's most intimate friend in the days of his early manhood. Wilson provided still another copy for John Forney, a prominent Republican newspaperman in Philadelphia and Washington and a close political associate of Lincoln's during the Civil War. He may have made another copy for Mrs. Welles, who wanted one for a New Year's Day party in 1866.

Sorting out the subsequent history of the various portraits is no easy business. Maury Bromsen, the prominent dealer and collector from whom the Lincoln Library and Museum procured the painting, worked for years to establish the history of this portrait. Although some questions remain unanswered, it is clear that the copy hanging in the J.B. Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, is the copy made for Joshua Speed. Likewise, the Navy Department still retains the copy Welles had made for that purpose. One other copy of the painting is known; it hangs in Philipse Manor Hall in Yonkers, New York.

Both the Philipse Manor Hall copy and the copy in the Lincoln Library and Museum are signed, the former in red, the latter in black. The other two copies are unsigned and are known to be copies of the original. How

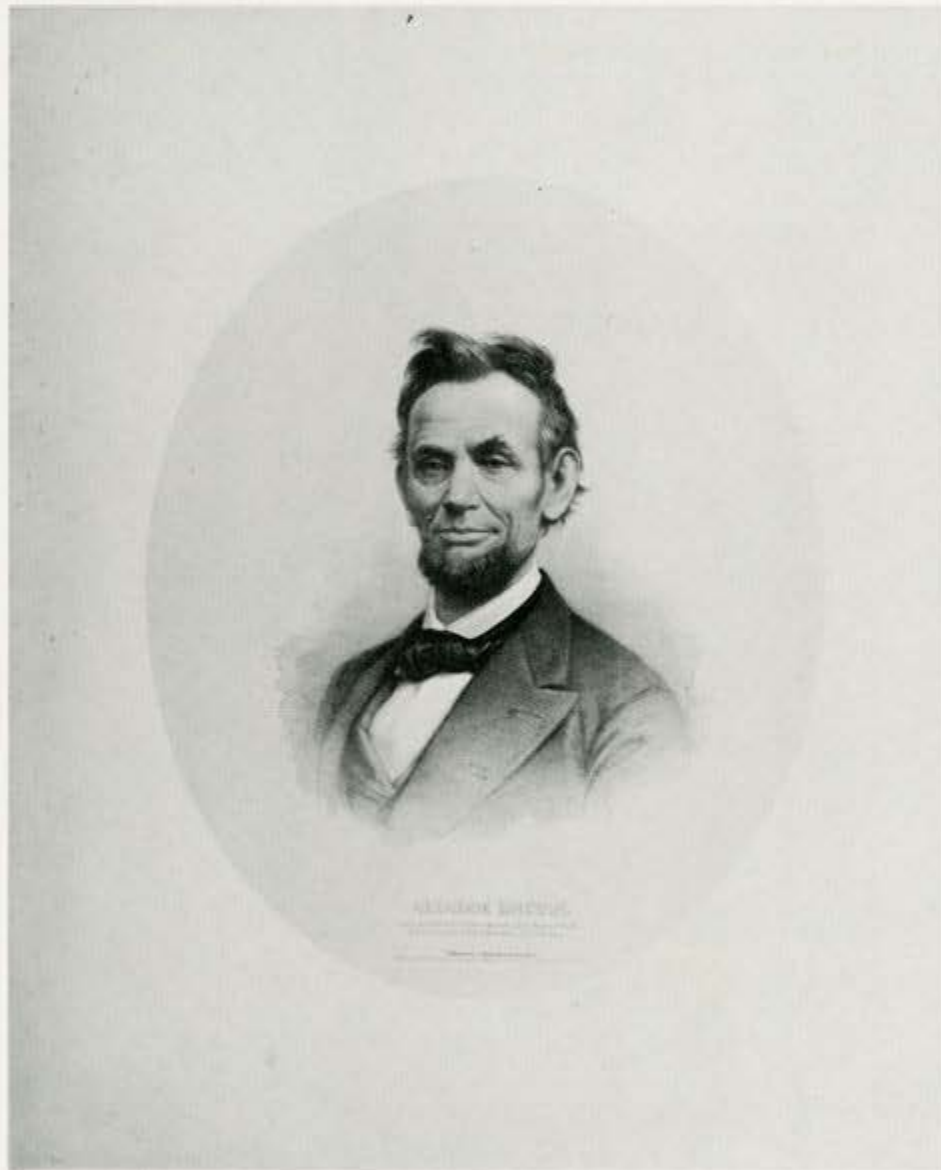
can one be sure the Lincoln Library and Museum portrait is the original painting? First, it is the only version of the portrait which is dated. The date is April, 1865, and Wilson completed the original portrait in that month (note the date of Gideon Welles's check). Wilson began painting the copy for Prang late in April. He was apparently still painting it in May, for his diary states that he worked on the copy steadily from April 20th through May 2nd. On May 16th, Wilson noted that he was painting *two* copies of the Lincoln. This is the first mention of another copy and is proof that the May 2nd entry, "Painted on Mr. Lincoln," still refers to the Prang copy. Wilson finished no *copy* in April.

A complicating factor in tracing the history of the painting is that Charles Henry Hart, an enterprising Lincoln collector and sometime art dealer, owned two versions himself. In a 1911 newspaper article boasting of the quality of the version he owned at that time, Hart said that Wilson signed it in red to distinguish it as the original and best version. This, then, is the Philipse Manor Hall portrait, but it is not the original. Alice Brainerd Welles sold the Welles family's portrait to Hart in 1915. She sent a letter with it saying that the portrait she was selling had belonged to her grandfather, Gideon Welles; to her father, Edgar T. Welles; and then to her by inheritance in 1914. Hart owned the original portrait, but it was the second one he acquired. The first, of which he boasted so much,

was a copy—not the original, not the only signed copy, and not so designated by the artist in any way.

A further distinguishing feature of the recently acquired portrait is the fact that it is an oil on board. The other three extant copies are painted on canvas.

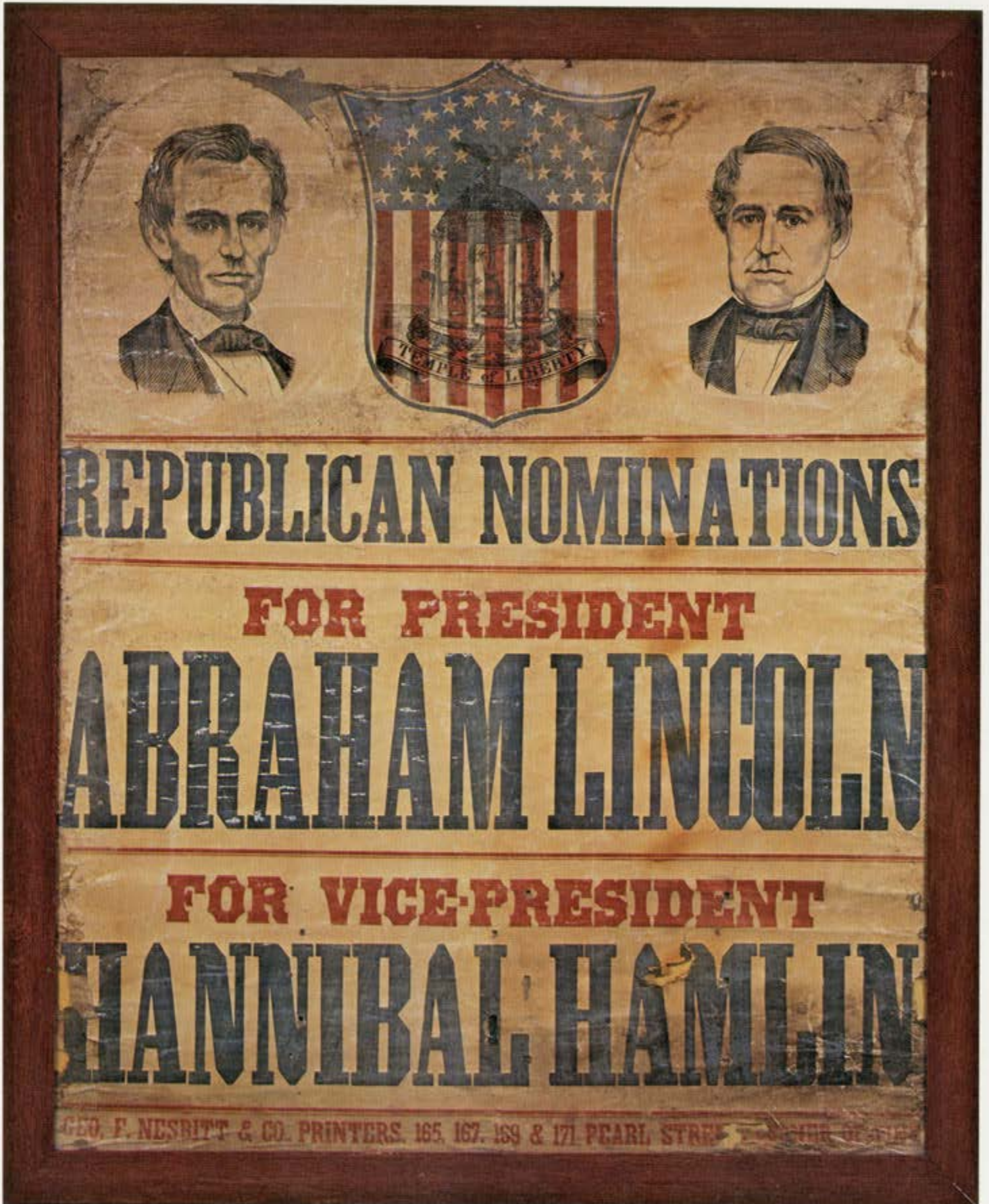
The staff of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum is grateful to the Lincoln National Life Foundation, Inc., which immediately upon hearing that this important portrait was available provided generous funding. The staff is grateful too for Mr. Bromsen's making the painting available and supplying copies of all his correspondence and research notes on the painting. Finally, it is grateful to Matthew Wilson, who captured the spirit of Lincoln's last days as no other artist ever has. One can see the hint of merriment in Lincoln's face, the first sign that the great burden of the war was, with Grant's victories, growing ever lighter.



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. Famed for chromolithography, L. Prang & Co., Boston, Massachusetts, based this lithograph of Lincoln on Wilson's painting. Surely, no one commenced work on a new picture of the assassinated President more quickly than Prang.

OTHER RECENT ACQUISITIONS



*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 3. Political banners of the 1860s are rare, and banners from the 1860 campaign are apparently even scarcer than those from 1864. Doubtless frugal wives turned many a political banner into rags. Last year the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum added the first two examples of cloth political banners to its collection.

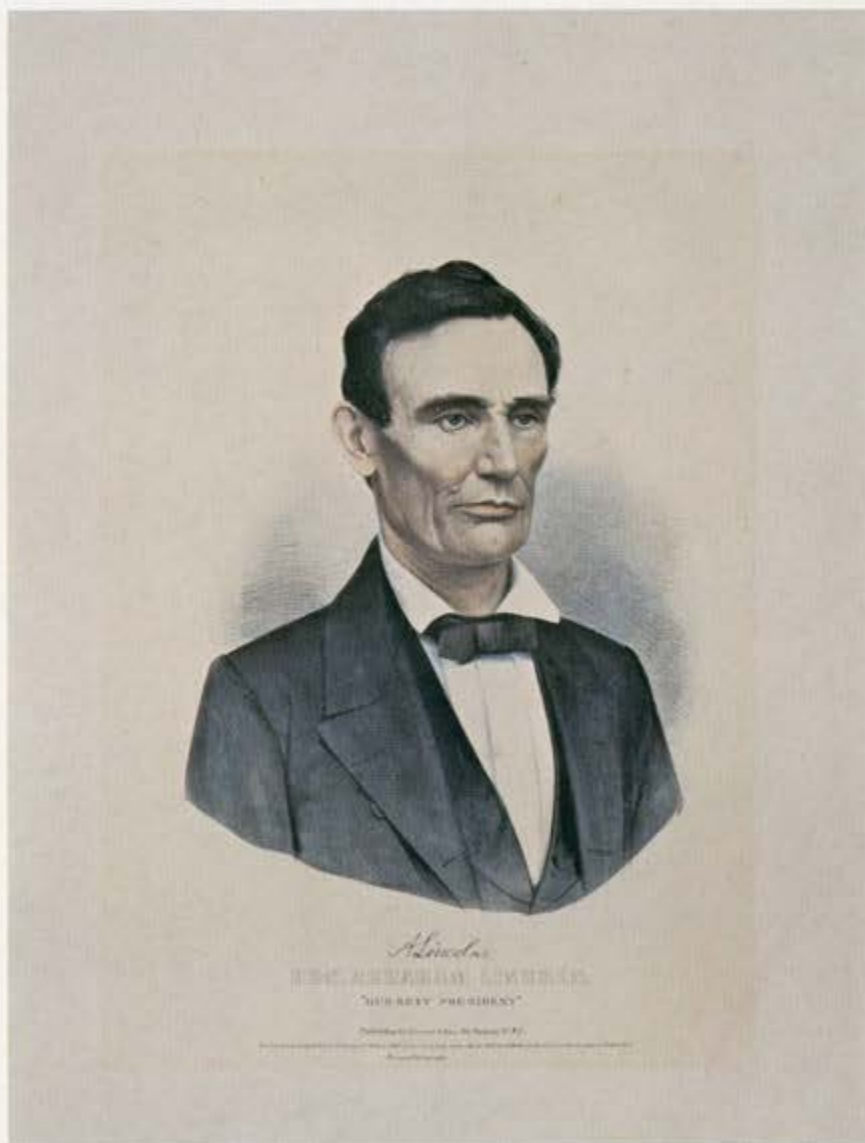


FIGURE 4. In 1964, R. Gerald McMurtry described the Manny reaper in the June issue of *Lincoln Lore*. He had recently helped collector Philip D. Sang obtain a manufacturer's model of this famous reaper, which was a competitor in the market and in the courtroom with the McCormick reaper. Mr. Sang's widow remembered Dr. McMurtry's good offices and recently allowed the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum to acquire the model. For the first time in history, this beautiful model (in perfect working order) is on public display.

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FIGURE 5. Like most other producers of campaign portraits for the 1860 election, Currier & Ives favored the portrait of Lincoln taken by Mathew Brady on February 27, 1860, while Lincoln was in New York City to make his famed Cooper Institute Address. As a statesmanlike photograph, it had not been exceeded by any likeness made by the time of the Republican nomination. Since Brady made the photograph, it was readily available to lithographers and engravers in the East.

Currier & Ives also obtained a copy of an earlier Lincoln photograph, probably taken by Roderick M. Cole in Peoria in 1858. The Republican candidate appeared considerably gaunter and generally less distinguished in this Western portrait. Nevertheless, Currier & Ives based "Our Next President" on it as well as "The Republican Banner for 1860," a campaign lithograph which showed both Lincoln and Hamlin. The portrait was widely used for tintypes, ferrotypes, and other campaign ephemera, but the Currier & Ives print is rather rare. The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum acquired a copy of "Our Next President" only this year.



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