



Lincoln Lore

June, 1982

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor
Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

Number 1732

PAINTING HISTORY — AND SELLING IT

Among the artists who helped immortalize Abraham Lincoln, Francis Bicknell Carpenter was perhaps the most important. He was responsible for 11% of the known photographs of Lincoln, including the most famous poses used for coins and currency. He painted the original from which J.C. Buttre made a fine mezzotint engraving of the Lincoln family in 1867. And he painted *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln*, which still hangs in the nation's Capitol and which was the model for one of the most successful Lincoln engravings ever made, Alexander H. Ritchie's *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet*.

With only a brief period of instruction behind him, he began to paint professionally at age sixteen. He was only twenty-two when he painted President Millard Fillmore's portrait. Carpenter was able to promote his own work and to exploit opportunities which other artists failed to make the most of. Few people know, for example, that Carpenter was not the only artist to reside in the White House for a lengthy period during the Civil War. Edward Dalton Marchant did so also — and for the same reason, to paint a portrait to immortalize the Great Emancipator. Yet Marchant and his painting are little known.

Despite early success and his practical abilities as a self-promoter, even Francis B.

Carpenter had to struggle to gain for his emancipation painting the secure niche which it now occupies. After completion in 1864, it was briefly displayed in the White House, it toured the country, and the print derived from it spread the fame of the painting far and wide. But in 1873 Carpenter still owned it and wanted to sell it.

With his customary shrewdness, the artist exploited his connections with William O. Stoddard, one of Lincoln's private

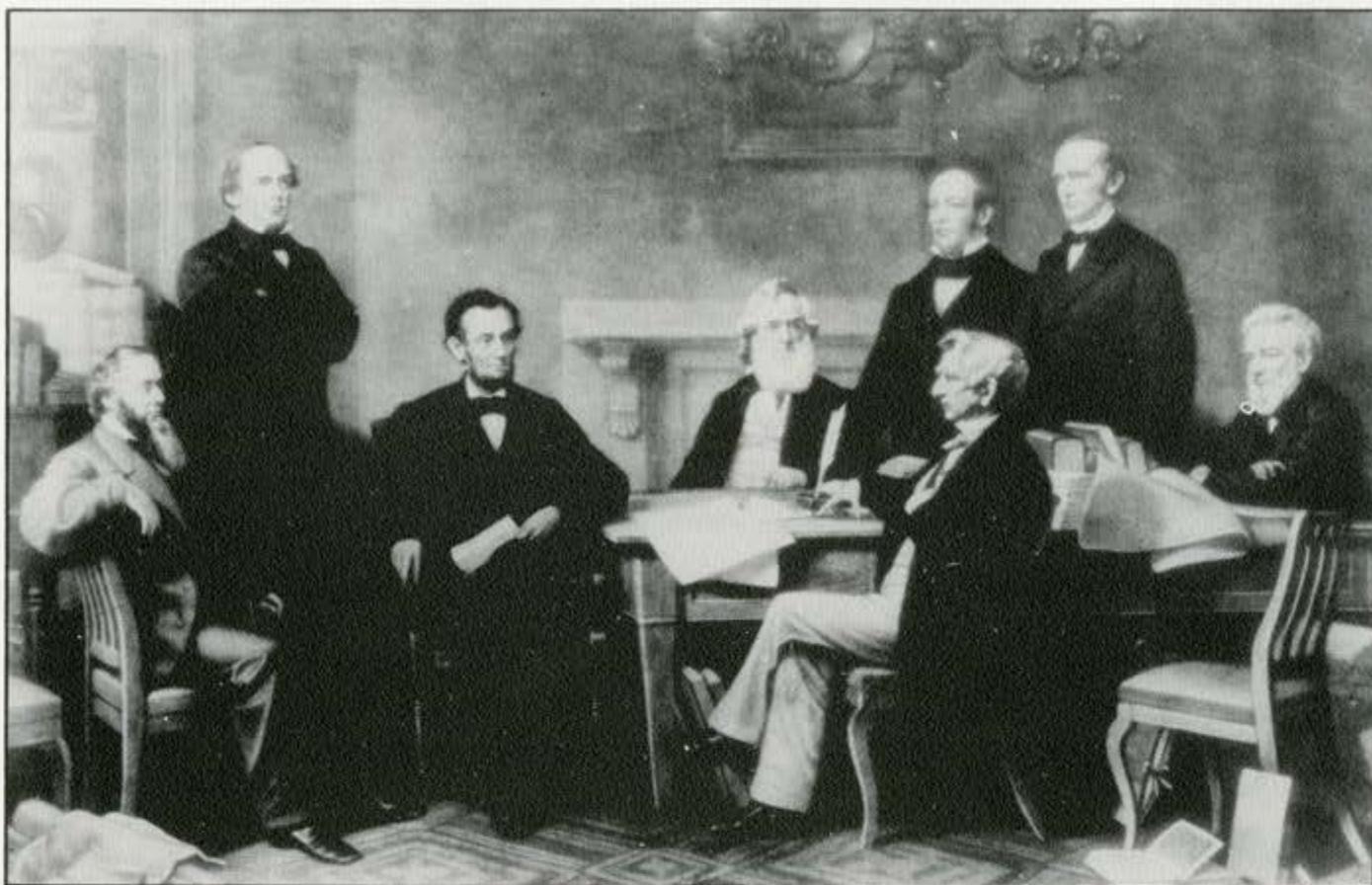
secretaries in the White House. In addition to their Lincoln connection, the two men were natives of the same small town in rural New York, Homer (Carpenter was born there in 1830; Stoddard, in 1835). In 1873 Carpenter employed Stoddard as his agent to persuade Congress to purchase *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln* for the United States government.

On February 24, 1873, Stoddard testified before the Joint Committee of the Library. He told the committee that he had introduced Carpenter to Lincoln "for the express purpose" of making arrangements for the painting and that the two men were "warm personal" friends of "long standing." Stoddard reminded his listeners of the "established idea and practice" of ornamenting the Capitol with works of art and of the recently "settled doctrine, that such productions of the sculp-



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Alexander H. Stephens.



From the Louis A. Warren
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FIGURE 2. A. H. Ritchie's engraving of Carpenter's *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*.

tor's or the painter's genius as found a shrine in this, our national gallery, should be confined to more or less literal representations of men or of events, whose prominence in our national history would fairly warrant such special commemoration." Carpenter's painting seemed surely to qualify, commemorating as it did one of the "three great State papers" given the world by the Anglo-Saxon race (the other two being the Magna Charta and the Declaration of Independence). He made bold to say that "Even political partisanship can hardly now be found so bitter as to deny" the "equal rank" of the Emancipation Proclamation with those other two great documents.

Admitting that "comparisons are odious," Stoddard went on to say that Carpenter's canvas constituted "a historical painting in every worthy sense of that often abused term." Stoddard had passed through the Capitol rotunda and stopped to look at the *Baptism of Pocahontas*, the *Rescue of Smith* "by that romantic female," and the *Discovery of the Mississippi by DeSoto*. They "afflicted" him with "grave doubts of their historical accuracy." Once embarked on this admittedly "odious" course, Stoddard grew quite humorous: "The Columbus, on the eastern portico of the abutment, suggests a painful question, whether, as a matter of fact, the great discoverer ever got himself up in that style, and threatened to bowl the world at the head of a half-naked George Washington out in the middle of the opposite square" (he referred to Horatio Greenough's much-derided statue of Washington in neoclassical style).

The rest of Stoddard's testimony was aimed at playing on the legislators' emotions. Referring to the "plainly-furnished room" depicted in Carpenter's painting, he recalled: "Up and down that room I have heard the pacing of his [Lincoln's] tireless feet deep into the night of sorrow that followed some grave disaster to the arms of the Republic, and out of that room I have seen him come, with the light of hope and faith upon his furrowed face, after some tidings of success." He testified to the truthfulness of Carpenter's portrait of Lincoln, which showed "the prevailing melancholy of that rugged and powerful face, with the added

intensity of meaning in the sad, far-seeing eyes, which the deep thought and feeling of such an hour would surely bring." The great document itself, Stoddard reminded the committee, had burned in the Chicago Fire, and five of the eight men depicted in the painting were dead.

Stooping briefly to the practical level, Stoddard noted that the City of New York had a full-length portrait of each governor of the state in the city hall, and that these now cost \$5,000 to be made. With eight full-length figures in the Carpenter canvas, Congress would be getting \$40,000 of portraiture. It would be a bargain at the asking price of \$25,000. Stoddard then concluded with another emotional appeal:

Imagine some grayhaired veteran, leaning on his cane and telling his stalwart sons, "They tell me all the others are good, and no doubt they are, but that's Stanton. I saw him, one day, when I took a dispatch to the War Department, I've seen Seward and Chase, and perhaps some of the rest, but that man there, with the paper in his hand, that's Lincoln. You ought to have seen the boys in our camp cry the day we heard he was assassinated. Congress did the right thing, they did, when they bought that there picture. There isn't another one like it in all the world."

Stoddard's testimony failed to bring about the \$25,000 appropriation. Partisanship probably did not matter, for the Republicans still controlled both houses of Congress. In September of the same year, however, financial failures in New York triggered one of the nation's deepest depressions, and Congress was unlikely to appropriate thousands for art while unemployed workers went hungry.

Selling Carpenter's history painting required more than eloquent testimony. It needed what might be called in the modern era of high interest rates "creative financing." Carpenter proved to be creative in this realm as well as the aesthetic one. By 1877 he had put together a deal by which a wealthy philanthropist would purchase the painting for \$25,000 paid in installments of \$500 to \$10,000. Once purchased, the



From the Lloyd Ostendorf Collection

FIGURE 3. William O. Stoddard.

painting would be donated to Congress to hang in the Capitol.

The somewhat unlikely philanthropist was Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, a poor Vermont farmer's daughter who had once worked as a maid for twenty-five cents a week. Born in 1821, Elizabeth Rowell met Boston millionaire Thomas Thompson in 1843. A year later they married, and after his death in 1869 Mrs. Thompson became the sole dispenser of the income from his enormous estate. She supported temperance, medical and scientific research, and various movements to aid the poor. Mrs. Thompson purchased Carpenter's painting, donated it to Congress, and received as her reward the freedom of the floor of the House of Representatives (she was then the only woman to have that privilege).

The Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives in 1874, but partisanship apparently did not make Congress look a \$25,000 gift horse in the mouth. On Lincoln's birthday in 1878, a joint session of Congress convened for a ceremony of reception for Carpenter's painting. Stoddard had acted as his agent in the negotiations with Congress the previous month, but on this occasion the artist himself was present, as were Mrs. Thompson and her unnamed escort. The painting, draped in an American flag, stood behind the Speaker's desk. It was unveiled at about two o'clock in the afternoon, and James A. Garfield, then serving as House minority leader, made a brief speech.

The future president described Lincoln as "a character so unique that he stood alone, without a model in history or a parallel among men." Garfield dwelled in customary fashion on the contrast between Lincoln's lowly origins and his high destiny, but his speech also showed the marks of recent Lincoln scholarship. In 1874 Gideon Welles, outraged by Charles Francis Adams's eulogy on William H. Seward, had published *Lincoln and Seward*, a little book which set out to prove that Seward was not, as Adams had contended, the great man of the Lincoln administration. Garfield's speech showed the marks of that book. "At first," Garfield noted, "it was the prevailing belief that he [Lincoln] would be only the nominal head of his administration." Yet, an examination of Secretary of State Seward's

instructions to Adams as minister to Great Britain showed Lincoln's marks all over them. The President was the true head of the administration even in the realm of foreign policy.

Garfield also stressed what Charles Sumner had been among the first to notice in Lincoln's thought: his great debt to the Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, Garfield said, Lincoln's devotion to the Union was even deeper and stronger than his devotion to liberty.

As one observer remarked, "Garfield's presentation speech was proper and fine," but the real attraction which packed the galleries of Congress that day was Alexander H. Stephens, the former Vice-President of the Confederate States of America. Now crippled, he was wheeled into the House to give a speech on the man who crushed the Confederacy militarily and the act which destined the South to become exactly like the North by abolishing its peculiar labor system.

Stephens began by saying that he had served in Congress with Lincoln back in the 1840s and that he "was as intimate with him [Lincoln] as with any other man of that Congress" except Robert Toombs. Stephens described Lincoln as "warm-hearted... generous... magnanimous... most truly... 'with malice toward none, with charity for all.'" Lincoln was "Not highly cultivated," but "he had a native genius far above the average of his fellows." And the "manner of his 'taking off,'" Stephens added, in what was already a staple of Southern mythology, "was the climax of our troubles and the spring from which came afterward 'unnumbered woes.'"

Emancipation and the political meaning of the Lincoln administration were quite something else. Stephens spoke only in veiled language on these subjects, and his speech was as notable in this realm for words unspoken as for what he actually



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FIGURE 4. James A. Garfield.



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FIGURE 5. Elizabeth Thompson.

said. The old Confederate was quick to point out the importance of what Garfield had said about Lincoln's relative devotion to liberty and Union: "Emancipation was not the chief object of Mr. Lincoln in issuing the proclamation. His chief object, the ideal to which his whole soul was devoted, was the preservation of the Union." Lincoln struck slavery "more from what was deemed the necessities of war than from any bare humanitarian view of the matter." As the representative of the Southern states on this occasion, Stephens felt it necessary to point out "that the freedom of that race was never finally consummated, and could not be until the Southern States sanctioned the thirteenth amendment." Thus emancipation was, in his strange view of the subject, somehow "voluntary."

Stephens never said exactly that emancipation was a good thing. He referred to "the great ethnological problem now in the process of solution," and he said of slavery that "it was not an unmitigated evil" and "was not . . . without its compensations." True, it "had its faults," but both North and South were responsible for its existence and it also "gave rise to some of the noblest virtues that adorn civilization." The proslavery argument was by no means dead in 1878, but Stephens did say, ". . . there is not one within the circle of my acquaintance, or in the whole southern country, who would now wish to see the old relation restored."

"I have seen something of the world," Stephens said, "and traveled somewhat, and I have never yet found on earth a paradise." He did not give his views on how "the great ethnological problem" would be solved. He had an unfathomable quibble with the use of the term "wards of the nation" to describe the black race. He thought them more aptly termed "'the wards of the Almighty,' committed now under a new state of things to the rulers, the law-makers, the law-expounders, and the law-executors throughout this broad land."

Stephens also spoke of the near despair which he had frequently felt during the Civil War for "the liberties of our country both North and South." He still worried about continuing "sectional passions," a possible "conflict of classes or of labor and capital or of races," and the "embers of the late war" which might flame up again. But he hoped for the best in a truly federal Union.

Loud applause broke out when Stephens finished, but the modern reader is somewhat hard pressed to figure out why. The speech rambled a bit, was vague, and held no true surprises for any person familiar with Stephens's thought. It was clearly one of those phenomena which could be properly understood only by being present on the occasion. Happily, an eyewitness letter helps the modern reader capture some of the thrill of the occasion. Clarkson N. Potter told Stoddard that "the old ex-Confederate Vice President — special champion of Slavery upon its merits, with his white head and parchment face, wheeling and swinging himself in his invalid chair and gesticulating with his meagre gloved hands, as in his high shrill voice he declaimed about Lincoln & Emancipation; the results of the past, and his hopes and fears of the future; was a picture not to be missed."

As Francis Carpenter saw it, the opportunity to sell his picture and have Congress take it, if missed in 1878, would never have arisen again. Writing to Stoddard in 1884, Carpenter told him of seeing a mutual friend and telling the friend "how we were born in the same town, and how you went to Washington for me, and secured the acceptance of my picture by Congress (which could not be done again)." By 1884 the Democrats had over 100 majority in the House, and partisanship might have been too much for the painting then. Or perhaps Carpenter referred to some other obstacle which is not known today. Whatever the case, Francis B. Carpenter was certainly fortunate in managing to sell his painting for what was then a princely sum and in arranging to have Congress acquire the painting for the nation and for posterity.



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FIGURE 6. Francis B. Carpenter.