

# Lincoln Lore

The Bulletin of THE LINCOLN MUSEUM



General Tom Thumb and Wife.

Chf Justice Tan.

John W. Booth

Stephen A. Douglas  
June 20th 1864

HOW HAPPY COULD I BE WITH EITHER  
Entered according to act of Congress, in the year 1863,  
in the Clerk's Office of the District Court  
of the Southern District of New York.

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Over 75 Years  
**Lincoln Lore**  
Since 1929

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## Lincoln Lore

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**THE LINCOLN MUSEUM**

The mission of The Lincoln Museum  
is to interpret and preserve the history and  
legacy of Abraham Lincoln through research,  
conservation, exhibitry, and education.

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# The Lincoln Family Album: New Insights, New Surprises from the New Edition

by Harold Holzer

One of the greatest treasures in the collections of The Lincoln Museum—in fact, one of the greatest troves of Lincolniana anywhere—is the rich pictorial archive that has come to be known as The Lincoln Family Album. Although the actual album (the original leather book, now devoid of its contents) resides in another institution, the precious contents it once housed live in the collections of The Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where it inspired a recent exhibit. These pictures, once lovingly held and preserved by Abraham and Mary Lincoln themselves, provide illuminating and profound insights into the Lincoln's domestic sphere: how this tragic family viewed itself, and wanted others to remember them.

In 1989, I was privileged to have the opportunity to coauthor, with then-Museum director Mark E. Neely Jr., a *Life Magazine* story announcing the collection's breathtaking discovery. This was followed by book-length treatment featuring many of the most important pictures, along with a discussion of why and how they came to be collected by Abraham and Mary Lincoln and their children (*The Lincoln Family Album: Photographs from the Personal Collection of a Historic American Family*, Doubleday, 1990). Sixteen years later, in 2006, Southern Illinois University Press issued a new and revised edition, boasting the addition of several previously unpublished pictures, as well as a new preface that gave us the opportunity to reflect on what we had learned in the nearly two decades since the long-unknown album was released to the public by the last living Lincoln.

Although the "Album" in fact encompasses a collection that includes priceless, one-of-a-kind, individually framed ambrotypes taken before the invention of *carte de visite* photographs and the open-slotted albums made to display them—plus larger pictures taken, on into the Kodak era, long after the fashion for *cartes* faded—historians have always focused the most intense scrutiny on the pictures taken from 1861 to 1865. These, we can be secure in concluding, the President and his wife collected and preserved themselves. The pictures the album contains are numerous and revealing, and touchingly, many still bear the dog-eared evidence of their frequent handling by the Lincoln boys. (TLM #4051, pg. 3)

But what has always intrigued this writer about the collection—with apologies for being an eternal pessimist—is precisely why it lacks what it does *not* contain.

For instance, it was natural enough for the Lincolns to collect pictures of themselves and their children, which they did. But in their choice of additional pictures, they revealed a distinct bias toward the Todd side of the family tree.

In one sense, this was not unnatural. The task of collecting family pictures and slipping them into albums was a ladies' task in the 1860s—including First Ladies, apparently. Thus one finds pictures of Mary Lincoln's sisters and cousins in the collection, even those with whom she squabbled when, for example, brothers-in-law Charles Kellogg and Ninian Edwards sought presidential appointments for which Mrs. Lincoln thought them unqualified.



On the cover: Clockwise, from left to right: A. TLM #4051, B. TLM #4012, C. TLM #4042, D. TLM #4620, E. TLM #4034, F. TLM #4036, G. TLM #4039, H. TLM #97, and I. TLM #3977.

What surprises the historian, however, is the *total* absence of Lincoln relatives in the collection. There is no photograph of Abraham Lincoln's beloved stepmother, nor of his mother's Hanks relatives—not even of John Hanks, the cousin who helped win Lincoln the sobriquet of “The Railsplitter” by marching into a state Republican convention in 1860 bearing logs that Lincoln had supposedly split as a young man. Nor does cousin Dennis Hanks appear, the irrepressible yarn-spinner who posed for many pictures during the period of his famous relative's fame—and became something of a celebrity himself.

Does the omission of Lincolns from the family album reflect merely a dearth of available pictures—theirs was a poor family, after all, who worried mostly about surviving, not visiting galleries to have their photos taken. Or does it reflect Mary Lincoln's snobbish determination to keep her husband's hardscrabble past out of their considerably more splendid present? Mary, it should be remembered, never even met her father-in-law or mother-in-law, and as far as we know, kept her children away from them as well. Dennis Hanks did visit the White House once, uninvited, and got a handsome watch from the President for his trouble. But there is no record that Mary entertained, or even deigned to glance, at her husband's pioneer cousin. Whatever the reason or reasons, it remains surprising that the Lincoln Family Album is more accurately a Todd Family Album.

Other omissions strike the modern viewer. Although Mary posed at Washington's Mathew Brady gallery on several occasions, wearing lavish evening gowns and day dresses (See Lloyd Ostendorf, *The Photographs of Mary Todd Lincoln*, Springfield, Illinois State Historical Society, 1969), not one of these pictures was preserved in the album. The only image of Mary that remained is an 1863 *carte de visite* (TLM #97) showing Mary in a black mourning dress, accessorized by black hair-band and jewelry, still grieving for her son Willie, who had died a year-and-a-half before. One is tempted to surmise that just as Mary refused after Willie's death to dress in the sparkling high-fashions she had worn so often, she refused even to countenance reminders of her onetime ostentation in the family album. All such pictures, if they were ever preserved, must have been removed. Where they went, no one can ever know.

Then there are the surprises that the family *did* collect and preserve—and there are many—counter to all the long-intuited conclusions about what families of the day believed was suitable for their private collections.

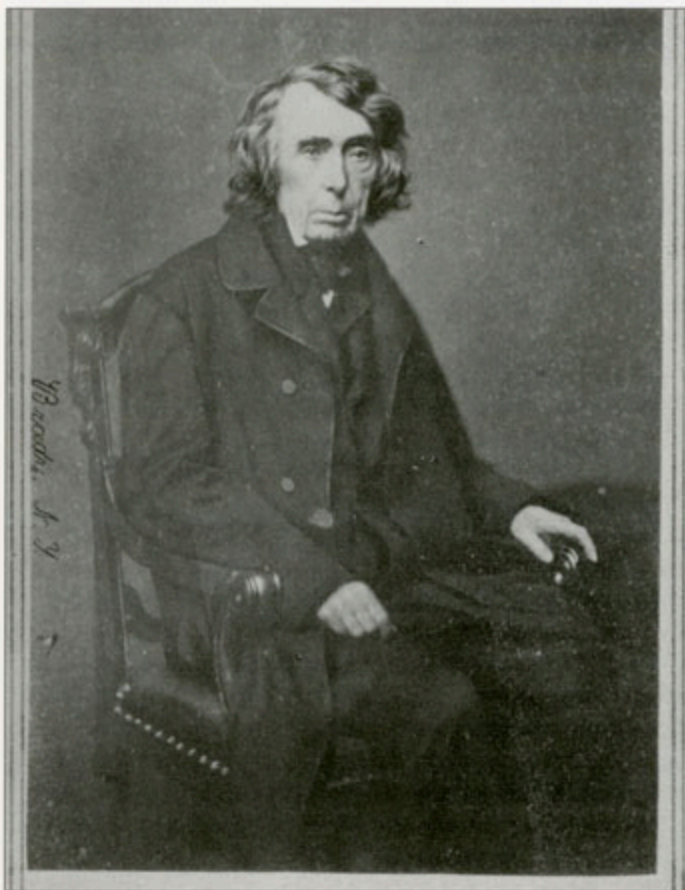
True, widely popular Lincoln-era *carte-de-visite* albums were often stocked with pictures of political and military celebrities—sometimes displayed more prominently even than family members! The Lincolns were no different from ordinary Americans in this aspect of the photo-collecting mania: their album included portraits of Cabinet officers like Simon Cameron and Edwin M. Stanton, and generals like Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, along with more exotic celebrities like the Prince of Wales (TLM #4042) and “General” and Mrs. Tom Thumb, (TLM #4012) the diminutive P. T. Barnum attractions the Lincolns once entertained at the White House (it is likely that the famous little couple left the picture with their hosts as a souvenir). The only difference was that the Lincolns knew these famous people personally.



Tad Lincoln added facial hair to this photograph. (TLM #4051)

Yet it is astonishing to see how many unlikely characters and scenes grace this collection—some utterly astonishing. Here, for example, however painfully reminiscent of their consummate loss, is a picture of the gates to the cemetery where Lincoln was interred in 1865. And here is a photo of the widely publicized Lincoln bust from life by the young artist Vinnie Ream, even though Mary Lincoln did not like her, and later urged Congress to deny her a lucrative commission to adapt the sculpture into a full-length marble statue for the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Vinnie won the assignment anyway, over Mrs. Lincoln's objections, but if she was distressed, Mary did not retaliate by removing the photo of Vinnie's sculpture from her album.

Even more surprisingly, the album included a *carte* of Lincoln's lifelong political rival and opponent in the 1860 presidential election, Democrat Senator Stephen A. Douglas (TLM #3977). Perhaps its inclusion reflected Mary Lincoln's incurable soft spot for the man she liked to believe had once romantically considered her a marriage prospect. But here, too, is none other than Confederate General Robert E. Lee, (TLM #4039) whose strategic brilliance extended the Civil War and cost untold additional Union casualties. But this, too, may be explainable. The Lincolns' son, Robert, was in uniform at Appomattox Court House when Lee surrendered to Grant, and by at least one recollection brought the Lee *carte de visite* home with him from his brief wartime experience. Family friend and seamstress Elizabeth Keckly later remembered the Lincolns examining the picture at a family breakfast shortly before the assassination, and the President expressing his view that Lee had a “kind face.”



Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. (TLM #4620)

But what can possibly explain the newly unearthed *carte* of longtime Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney, (TLM #4620, pg. 4) whose death in 1864 ended seven years of hostility between Lincoln and the pro-slavery jurist. Lincoln's criticisms of Taney's infamous Dred Scott decision were no less stinging than Taney's rebuke of Lincoln's later attempt as President to circumvent Constitutional civil liberty guarantees to prevent Maryland secession. No one who witnessed the sight of Taney administering the Presidential oath to his longtime critic on March 4, 1861, failed to appreciate the irony of this fateful encounter. Surely, the Lincolns did not mourn the old judge's death, and also welcomed the opportunity to appoint a replacement who would reliably sustain the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet here is a fine portrait of the grim-looking Taney in his enemy's private collection. For gloating purposes? Merely because the Chief Justice was a historic figure? One cannot know for certain.

Nothing, however, surprises the modern observer more than the family's *carte de visite* of Lincoln's murderer. True, many American families, even the late President's admirers, avidly collected John Wilkes Booth's photographs (TLM #4036) after the pro-Confederate actor killed Lincoln. Yet the idea that Lincoln's survivors felt compelled to do so as well staggers the imagination. It is almost impossible to think of the oversensitive Mary turning the leaves of her album to contemplate loved ones lost, and somehow enduring the constant reminder of the man who had removed her beloved husband from her life.

It is much easier to comprehend the inclusion of a man who was often accused at the time of inspiring—perhaps even ordering—

Booth's plot to kill his Union counterpart: Confederate President Jefferson Davis. The Lincoln family's Davis *carte*, however, is not a formal, flattering portrait like that of Booth, but a tiny caricature, depicting a comically ragged Davis grimly contemplating his twin losses at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and thinking: "How Happy Could I Be With Either!" (TLM #4034)

It is as difficult to imagine the unrelentingly stern Davis owning any cartoon—of Lincoln, much less of himself—as it is easy to believe that Lincoln enjoyed this Davis picture: not only for its humor, but because it celebrated the Union's great military successes of July 1863. In that sense, then, one of the album's great surprises, a pose of the enemy President, serves as a reminder of Abraham Lincoln's enduring sense of humor, which not only graced his photo album, but sustained the President, as well as the nation.

Of course the saddest omission in the Lincoln Family Album is—and will always be—the absence of a photograph of the President with Mary, much less a group portrait of the entire family together. Such ensembles were standard fare in Civil War-era America; families flocked to photographers to have such groups immortalized. When the existence of a Lincoln Family Album was first revealed in the late 1980s, and its contents studied, experts hoped against hope that such a Lincoln family picture might exist, perhaps banished to obscurity by the mercurial Mary. In fact, a number of previously unknown pictures of the Lincoln children did come to light, poses that lack the charm of the photographs that were widely reproduced for *other* families to collect. These were Mary's wisely chosen rejects—similar to the christening or wedding proofs that are excluded from today's albums because they are not as good as other pictures. Mary must have acted as chief censor, choosing which of her sons' photos to release to the public, and which to withhold.

But no family or husband-and-wife group could be found. By the 1860s, the public hungered for such poses—and the reassurances they provided, however exaggerated, that the beleaguered president had enjoyed a happy home life during the heartbreaking years of his presidency. That appetite was satisfied by the publication of composites that united separately taken pictures of family members and rearranged them in an imagined parlor setting, under an artist's supervision, to create the illusion of a single picture.

It is tempting to say that the full tragedy of the Lincoln family—so torn by war, death, illness, and instability—is nowhere more touchingly reflected than in the widespread proliferation of these fake family pictures after Lincoln's death. But they are equally vivified by the absence of all but a couple from their own family album. Evidently, they created a false reality that even the Lincolns themselves did not embrace. Although many American photo albums featured *cartes de visite* purporting to show the Lincolns and their sons, and though Mary herself engineered the production of one display engraving of her entire family circle, the Lincoln Family Album contained no such composite. Its miniaturized occupants remained silently, eternally, alone.

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# “Not as this chile knows of”: Myth and Reality in the Black Confederates Thesis

By John David Smith

“But the war!” Kentucky novelist James Lane Allen asked in 1899, “what is to be said of the part the negro took in that? Is there in the drama of humanity a figure more picturesque or more pathetic than the figure of the African slave, as he followed his master to the battlefield, marched and hungered and thirsted with him, served and cheered and nursed him—that master who was fighting to keep him in slavery?”<sup>1</sup>

Like Allen, modern writers and Civil War historians question the paradoxical role African American slaves played in the war. A flood of recent publications and websites devoted to this contentious topic has elicited a spirited war of words over precisely in what roles slaves served the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup>

Academic historians generally occupy the left flank of this battlefield. They argue that aside from a tiny minority of Louisiana free blacks who volunteered for Confederate fighting units (who later in fact switched allegiance to join the Union Army), and the rare occurrence when a slave picked up a weapon for self-defense, blacks overwhelmingly opposed the Confederacy.<sup>3</sup> When Confederate slaves had a chance to shoulder rifles, most authorities argue, they aimed their guns at their oppressors—white southerners—not at the Yankees.

On the right flank of this contemporary battleground stands a cadre of southern conservative partisans, ultraright evangelicals, and conservative African Americans. They assert that blacks fought—not just with picks and shovels, but with guns—for the Confederacy. This is the black Confederates thesis.

Writing in 1990 in the *Confederate Veteran*, Jeff Carroll insisted that black and white Confederates shared a “dignity, courage and fidelity” to the cause. “Many slaves accompanied their [white] ‘brothers’ into battle,” he insisted. “You have to search the locally written county histories that haven’t been edited by ‘professional’ historians, for their stories. Look closely at pictures of old Confederate reunions and you’ll sometimes see them in old age, still standing beside their comrades.”<sup>4</sup> According to the conservative black economist and talk-show host Walter Williams, “black civil rights activists and their white liberal supporters have committed a deep, despicable dishonor to our patriotic black ancestors who marched, fought, and died to protect their homeland from what they saw as Northern aggression.”<sup>5</sup>

Spokesmen of the black Confederates argument contend that blacks sided with the Confederates because of their loyalty to their masters and the South; because they believed that supporting the

Confederacy would lead to emancipation; because, in the case of free blacks, they sought to protect their private property; because they feared reprisals against their families that remained enslaved; and because the war posed an exciting adventure.<sup>6</sup> In 1979 a writer remarked “that the Rebel black seems to have had at least a primitive, instinctive feeling that his fortunes were tied inextricably to those of the South. That he was a Southerner. In this regard, the black Confederate—far more than the Reconstruction politicians who were appendages of the Republican North—was the prototype of the modern, middle-class black of the ‘New South.’” Black Confederates, then, like later black civil rights activists, reportedly fought for a truly biracial, integrated South.<sup>7</sup>

Another writer interprets black Confederates’ service as beneficial to the race—akin to Booker T. Washington’s view of slavery as a proto-college education for the bondsmen. “Slave or free,” Wayne R. Austerman wrote in 1987, black artisans employed by the Confederacy “benefited from the skills they perfected and the prestige they earned as well as the money gained in supporting the struggle for Southern independence.” Austerman, historian at the U.S. Army Medical Department Center and School, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, insists that “the story of Virginia’s black Confederates deserves to be told, for the courage and skills they displayed in defending their state would help to carry them through the long decades of struggle that followed until they finally won a sadly belated place of equality among all the Old Dominion’s citizens.”<sup>8</sup>

Austerman blames the Confederacy’s leadership for failing to take advantage of the slaves’ enthusiasm to fight for the cause. “Had the national government capitalized on the willingness of Southern blacks to fight for their freedom as allies rather than opponents of their native land it might well have been able to win independence from Northern domination while forging bonds of trust and need between the two most important elements of its population.” Without the support of its black population, Austerman explains, during Reconstruction Virginia succumbed to “the ill-advised attempts by some radical reformers to overthrow long-standing social mores.”<sup>9</sup>

Today’s proponents of the black Confederates argument disseminate these revisionist views largely electronically—on websites such as The Black Confederate sponsored by General Nathan Bedford Forrest Camp No. 469, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Rome, Georgia. Scott K. Williams, a member of the staff of the Missouri Civil War Museum, maintains another site: Black Confederates in the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> I recently discovered a website—Dixie Outfitters—devoted to defending the black Confederates thesis. It stockpiles historical “facts” about black Confederates and provides a forum for those who support the thesis; it also keeps track of those who oppose it.<sup>11</sup> Authors also have published books on the subject, including such titles as *Black Southerners in Gray*, *Black Confederates*, and *Black Southerners in Confederate Armies*.<sup>12</sup>

Advocates of the black Confederates thesis challenge academic historians. Williams goes so far as to allege that in the name of political correctness, “anti-Confederate liberals” have covered up blacks’ real military contributions to the Confederacy.<sup>13</sup> According to The Black Confederate website, “anywhere from 30,000 to 100,000” black “soldiers” served the Confederacy. “However,

because the victors—the north—needed to give the world the impression the War was fought over slavery, a concerted scheme was put into motion to suppress the figures by destroying records, thus giving credence to their ‘the war was fought over slavery’ mantra.”<sup>14</sup>

Such sites eulogize the South’s patriotic slaves for following their masters into battle and for serving in innumerable capacities, including as armed soldiers. They present old photographs of former slaves who attended reunions of Confederate veterans. One illustration, for example, features 100-year-old Charles Hicks at the 1938 Gettysburg Reunion. This “Black Confederate” served in Co. F, 14th Georgia Infantry. The caption states that “Charles was sent home to help protect family and home from Sherman’s War criminals who were ravaging Johnson County.”<sup>15</sup>

A website devoted to Confederate veterans in Lauderdale County, Alabama, reports that “black Confederate veterans were common; there were anywhere from 90,000 to 300,000 Blacks who served in the Confederate armies all or part of the time. Lauderdale itself had eight Black Confederate veterans.” The site quotes a 1919 newspaper story about a Confederate veteran, “‘Uncle Reuben Patterson... one of the landmarks of the community, and a faithful adherent to the Confederacy, [who] attended the reunion in Atlanta.’ Patterson had been a body servant to a Confederate officer and, according to the *Florence Herald*, ‘no truer or more loyal servant ever followed the fortunes of his master during those troublous times.’ The newspaper described Patterson ‘as quaint as he is original, and his fund of anecdotes and war reminiscences is irresistible.’”<sup>16</sup>

Defenders of the black Confederates argument thus imply that slavery was not so bad after all; that slavery was not the cause of the Civil War; that black southerners did not support the North; that slaves proudly identified with the Confederacy; that degrees of solidarity bound masters and slaves; that blacks preferred slavery to freedom and citizenship—in short, that black men were willing to fight and die for their own enslavement and for the enslavement of their children. While the black Confederates argument might seem illogical, if not ludicrous, the subject has become politicized by both Confederate heritage and conservative Christian groups and their critics. Nonetheless, Confederate apologists and reactionary whites and blacks seem to be winning the war of words—at least in terms of the volume in print and in cyberspace.

In 1979, for example, the *Gray Ghost Newsletter* celebrated what it referred to as African Americans’ “Confederate heritage.” “Do black people have a Confederate heritage?” the editor asked. He replied: “One of the best kept secrets of The War Between the States is the roll [sic] of black people in the war. It has been estimated that as many as 300,000 black people served the war effort in one way or another.” “Why did Southern Blacks fight for the South?” the editor asked rhetorically. In response, he wrote: “Southern Blacks were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the South.” “Some were concerned for friends and family at home. Some were unsure as to what the outcome of the war would be. Many were disillusioned by the prejudice of northerners. And most of all had never been out of the South. The South was their home! Today, very few Blacks know of their Confederate heritage. History books are written by the victors and they dare not print the truth about the roles of Blacks in the Confederacy.”<sup>17</sup>

Confederate heritage groups have taken steps to remedy what they consider to be this conspiracy of silence about their black Confederate forebears. In doing so they seek to legitimize themselves. In 2002, for example, the Jubal Early chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), Rocky Mount, Virginia, honored three black Confederate soldiers at a graveside ceremony with memorial markers and poems, speeches, prayers, cannonball volleys, and rifle shots. The slaves—Claiborne, Cornelius, and Creed Holland—belonged to Thomas J. Holland and worked on his 732-acre farm in Franklin County before entering Confederate service. While the UDC lauded the three blacks as “soldiers,” in fact Claiborne built breastworks, Cornelius cooked, and Creed labored as a teamster. Sam Loughheed, president of Virginia’s UDC chapters, described the three slaves as “Confederate heroes”—“patriots who loved our Southland and suffered in its defense.”<sup>18</sup> The state of Virginia rewarded Creed Holland for his war work in 1925 with a disability pension. His great-grandsons and great-granddaughter recently joined, respectively, the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy.<sup>19</sup>

Such celebration of black Confederates has become a national movement, gaining popularity far from the South. Members of Idaho’s Community Evangelical Fellowship, closely aligned with the League of the South, the Christian nationalist, and the white supremacy movements, combine attacks on abortion, feminism, and sodomy with defenses of slavery and the Confederacy.<sup>20</sup> “You have been told many times that the war was over slavery,” Steve Wilkins and Rev. D. Wilson wrote in 1996, “but in reality it was over the biblical meaning of constitutional government.”

Engaged in what they term “a cultural war for which we were woefully unprepared,” Wilkins and Wilson declared that the slaves had “a life of plenty, of simple pleasures, of food, clothes, and good medical care.” Not surprisingly, then, “most southern blacks...supported the Southern war effort. Some of course supported that effort from purely selfish motives...But many Southern blacks supported the South because of long established bonds of affection and trust that had been forged over generations with their white masters and friends. They gladly supported the war efforts with food, labor, and sometimes fighting. Their loyalty to the principles of the South rivaled and was sometimes even greater than that of some whites.”<sup>21</sup>

Recently the Community Evangelical Fellowship devoted an issue of their on-line magazine *Credenda/agenda* to the black Confederates debate. Attacking multiculturalism and Afrocentrism, Wilson blamed “relativists” and “egalitarians” for “withholding from blacks an important part of their genuine heritage”—“the immense contribution made by loyal Confederate blacks to...[the South’s] war effort.”<sup>22</sup> According to writer Cris Schlect, the incredulity, gullibility, and racism of Union troops (and later Yankee carpetbaggers) manufactured the false assumption that the South’s slaves hated their masters and resisted the Confederates. “Sadly, these Yankee false assumptions still persist today,” he explained. Yankees are still duped by false caricatures of Blacks in the South, and worse, Confederate Blacks are not remembered as they should be. This will continue so long as we persist in our unwillingness to believe that ‘black Southerners could be pro-Confederate.’”<sup>23</sup>

Wilson accounted for as many as 40,000 black Confederates taking arms against the Yankee invaders. “Black Southerners were

Southerners. Many of them were patriots. They were natives of a land at war, and their response to the invasion of their country should not be at all surprising. The wave of patriotic fervor which swept the South clearly included the black population." Wilson identified three specific ways that blacks served the Confederacy. They provided 1. "faithful and loyal labor"; 2. they accompanied their masters to battle as body servants; 3. and they fought. He recounted the story of a black Confederate sniper. This "remarkable sharpshooter would settle in tall trees, and begin to systematically pick off Union soldiers. Because of this a detachment of soldiers was sent to get him, and after much maneuvering, finally surrounded him. One of the Yanks yelled up at him, 'I say big nigger, you better come down from there, you are captured.' The black Confederate's last words were, 'Not as this chile knows of!' He resumed fire, and was immediately killed."<sup>24</sup>

Black conservatives form a major phalanx in the black Confederates campaign. Edward C. Smith, a black professor at American University, was one of the movement's earliest spokesmen. In 1990 he emphasized the loyalty slaves felt toward the South and their masters, who in Virginia at least "tended to be benign in their treatment of blacks," who in turn considered themselves "American Africans" rather than "African-Americans."<sup>25</sup> Smith insists that blacks' response to slavery and the Civil War was just as diverse as whites'. "There's this caricature of all blacks in the South being victimized and supporting the North," Smith explained in 1997. "But we are just as complicated as any people. We're three dimensional." Smith asserts that 30,000 black Confederates carried arms.<sup>26</sup> According to one critic, Smith's African American roots "somehow lends credence to bizarre, unsubstantiated claims about the mythical Sable Arm of the Confederacy."<sup>27</sup>

African American spokemen like Stanley Lott add credibility to the black Confederates thesis. In 2000 the *Newsletter of the Georgia League of the South* featured Lott in an article entitled "He is Big, Black, and Confederate." "There is no way even the most myopic Yankee liberal could look at Stanley Lott," the article began, "and deny that the six-foot-four African American was anything but a Confederate. Built like a linebacker and wearing a dress shirt that was one huge Confederate Battle Flag, Mr. Lott gave a rousing speech to those gathered at the June 30th Georgia League of the South Annual Meeting in McDonough." The editor continued: "Speaking with a rich Black accent, Mr. Lott made his sentiments quite clear early in his speech when he said, 'I am a diehard Black Southern Confederate American, and proud of it.' This brought cheers that rattled the windows of the meeting hall."

"Speaking with great passion, he told the crowd that he had read books on Southern History and the war of 1861, and knew very well that 'the war was not over slavery.' He described that particular falsehood as the 'biggest and ugliest lie' in American history. Mr. Lott pointed out that Yankees want Americans to be ignorant, and said that Yankees are twisting Black folks' minds. He said there was no need for Blacks to 'live in the Stone Age' of information, and was quick to blame globalists for race wars around the world."

"Mr. Lott's position on the changing of the Georgia State flag was unequivocal. He said that 'when they tore down the flag, they tore down a piece of me.' He encouraged Southerners to 'never

let anyone make you ashamed of your heritage.' He added that he was there at the meeting to honor the real men and women of the Confederacy, and he reminded the crowd that more and more Blacks are talking to him positively about the Confederacy."<sup>28</sup>

Proponents of the black Confederates thesis also point to black Confederate re-enactors to bolster their argument. Willie Casey, for example, an African American U.S. Army officer, is a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and re-enacts with the 6th North Carolina State Troop. "People say to me," Casey explains, "Do you support slavery?" He responds, "No. I support preserving Southern history and telling it the way it is." A collateral relative of a Confederate soldier (his white great-grandfather's brother was a South Carolinian killed in 1862), Casey believes that tens of thousands of blacks fought for the Confederacy not to defend slavery, but rather to defend their country—the South. "You would fight to gain status. Because you know that even if you lose, you're still one of the brothers in arms," Casey says.<sup>29</sup>

Gerry Turner, an African American emissions inspector from Atlanta, is another Confederate re-enactor. Responding to a critic who charged that his reenacting was tantamount to his "spitting on his people," Turner remarked: "They don't know exactly what went on. When I was in school, our history books only had one page about the [Civil] [W]ar. A lot of blacks fought on the Confederate side."<sup>30</sup>

H.K. Edgerton, a black North Carolinian formerly active with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but who now speaks at Confederate flag rallies in favor of the flag, lauds slavery as an "institution of learning" and insists that "it was better to be an African in the Southland as a slave than to be free in Africa." Edgerton believes that emancipation severed the bonds of affection between blacks and whites in the Old South. He blames the Yankees for emancipating the slaves and wiping away "the place of honor and dignity they earned in the South."<sup>31</sup> In 2004 Edgerton conducted a "March Across Dixie," honoring the memory and efforts of black Confederates.<sup>32</sup>

It is this heritage that led Anthony Hervey, a Mississippian descended from slaves whom he believes fought for the Confederacy, to create the Black Confederate Soldier Foundation. In 2004 Hervey was reportedly a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Chicago.<sup>33</sup> When asked about his motives for wearing Confederate gray and waving the Confederate battle flag, Hervey pointed out that he sought to honor his two great-grandfathers: one who fought for the Confederacy in exchange for his freedom but was killed at Shiloh; another, a free black, who sided with the South to protect his property from the Yankees. "I'm integrating history," Hervey explained. "As long as they can write history the way they've written it, we owe them."<sup>34</sup> Hervey's organization is committed to building a memorial that will list the names of the black Confederates who fought against the Union to protect state's rights and their land. "We currently live under a psychological form of reconstruction," he said in 2000. "Whites are made to feel guilty for sins of their ancestors, and blacks are made to feel downtrodden. This keeps all of us from communicating. The political correctness of today is killing the pride of the people."<sup>35</sup>

While I recognize the insidiousness of political correctness, I'm even more concerned with historical accuracy, balanced analysis, candor, and truth. In their quest to construct a useable past, proponents of the black Confederates thesis have constructed a mythological past for partisan and ideological purposes. And their version of the past is unsupported by documentation.

If, as its supporters insist, blacks commonly fought with guns, not shovels, for the Confederacy, why, then, did soldiers in both armies fail to comment on what would have been considered a revolutionary event in southern race relations? Whites in the Old South generally were uncomfortable—if not paranoid—over the prospect of armed Negroes. Why did President Jefferson Davis suppress Major General Patrick R. Cleburne's December 1863 plan to arm the slaves? Why did Confederate leaders agonize over their government's last-gasp decision to arm the slaves in 1865? In his postwar recollections, South Carolina planter J. Motte Alston remarked pointedly: "Always remember that our laboring class were negroes who were *not* put into the Southern armies, whilst at the North, East, and West this class were whites." Alston compared the Confederacy favorably with the Union, whose melting pot army, he wrote, "was composed of all nationalities, the bulk of whom fought for money and not principle."<sup>36</sup>

Historian Brooks D. Simpson notes tongue in cheek, "if there were all these black Confederate soldiers, given that we don't see them show up [in documents] as prisoners or killed or wounded, they must have been the best troops the Confederacy ever had, because they were never killed, wounded or captured. So an entire army of black Confederates would have been invincible." Simpson refers to "a very selective use of the historical record by certain academics who are pushing an agenda. So where there has been some evidence of an African-American taking a weapon up in a Civil War battle and firing away in self-defense, that is transformed into regiment after regiment of African-Americans ready to fight. There's a conscious effort among these people to distort and exaggerate whatever they find in the historical record to serve their ends."<sup>37</sup>

"If," historian Truman R. Clark observes, "there were thousands of African-American men fighting in the Confederate armies, they apparently cleverly did so without Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, the members of the Confederate congress or any of the white soldiers of the Confederacy knowing about it. (I can just imagine some former Confederate soldier, told in 1892 that hundreds of the men in his army unit during the Civil War were black, snapping his fingers and saying, 'I knew there was something different about those guys!')."<sup>38</sup>

In his thoroughly researched recent book *Confederate Emancipation*, historian Bruce Levine becomes the latest combatant to enter the fray over the black Confederates thesis. According to Levine, white southerners only broached the volatile issue of arming their slaves "because the Confederate war effort was plagued by an increasingly critical complex of military, political, and morale problems." Confederate generals and politicians endorsed General Cleburne's December 1863 memorandum reluctantly—"only because (and only when) they recognized the depth of the crisis into which these difficulties had plunged the southern war effort."<sup>39</sup> At best, then, the idea of arming the South's slaves

was a last ditch, negative response to military crisis—not a positive step toward incorporating black southerners into the fabric of the Confederate nation.

Moreover, Levine argues, southerners never intended to grant full freedom to those slaves who donned Confederate gray. Instead, Confederates "planned to grant no more than the most limited, circumscribed form of freedom to the black soldiers they expected to recruit." By so doing, Levine explains, Confederates "hoped to maintain their hold over the black population and keep it available as a cheap and malleable plantation labor force." Proposals to arm the slaves "aimed to salvage not only southern national independence but also (and *thereby*) as much of the Old South's economy and basic social structure as could now be saved." The nominal freedpeople would be the equivalent of serfs or apprentices—"propertyless and forced to work for white landowners."<sup>40</sup>

Levine's research also suggests that, notwithstanding the arguments posed by today's Confederate apologists, neither rank and file whites nor blacks enthusiastically supported arming the South's slaves. Whites interpreted the move as a distinct threat to the plantation system and to white supremacy. Blacks, free people of color as well as slaves, "recognized that the Confederacy's defeat would bring them a fuller form of freedom, and much more swiftly, than would a Confederate victory achieved on any basis."<sup>41</sup>

Levine's close reading of the debates over arming and emancipating the South's slaves leads him to conclude that Confederate legislation authorizing the use of black troops in fact "did not free a single slave, nor did it attempt to do so." It depended not on conscription, but rather on voluntary offerings of slaves by their owners to the Confederate government. He insists that President Davis "remained unwilling to impose manumission upon a single master."<sup>42</sup> In an even more recent publication, Levine reiterates the essential points that "the Confederate government never granted freedom to a single prospective black recruit," and that the final bill enacted by the Confederate Congress "explicitly left the relationship between slave owner and slave unchanged." Levine calculates that at most, the number of "black Confederates" enlisted into southern armies included "[a] small company or two of black hospital workers" and "another forty to sixty men who were drilled, fed, and housed at military prison facilities in Richmond."<sup>43</sup> Where were the "anywhere from 30,000 to 100,000" black Confederates that proponents of the black Confederates thesis insist fought for the South?

My research, confirmed by that of Simpson, Levine, and other respected historians, convinces me that the black Confederates argument is fraught with sloppy scholarship, especially the misuse of anecdotal evidence by citing stray information out of context and by the twisting of the historical record for partisan purposes. Those who write about phantom black Confederates carelessly at best, maliciously at worst, equate such terms as *working* and *servant* with *fighting*, *servant* with *soldier*, *laborers* with *troops*, and *enlisting* with *being impressed*. This is not just semantic pedantry on my part.

For many years historian Michael P. Musick, formerly of the National Archives, was responsible for responding to inquiries about African Americans who served in the Confederate Army. When answering such queries, Musick explained that "The answer



depends upon the meaning given to the term 'served in.' If the meaning is interpreted as referring to body servants, laborers, cooks, musicians, teamsters, etc., the number of persons involved is substantial, and the sources in our custody [are] fairly extensive, though scattered. If the meaning is seen as indicating persons who were regularly enlisted to serve as soldiers, the subject and the sources become problematic. We have found no records among those in our custody that document the second interpretation." To illustrate his point, Musick adds that while free black musicians who "served" in the 1st (McCreary's) South Carolina Infantry do appear on that regiment's muster rolls, significantly "their status appears as distinct from that of regularly enlisted soldiers."<sup>44</sup>

The stakes are high in this debate because proponents of the black Confederates argument present a not-so-thinly-veiled apology for slavery, segregation, and white racism, and a not-so-thinly-veiled political agenda—connecting the black Confederates thesis to the issue of the flying of the Confederate battle flag over public buildings. "How," asked the late Sheldon Vanauken in the *Southern Partisan*, "would those Confederate blacks have regarded today's blacks who want to tear down the Southern flag?" According to Vanauken, a Christian writer whose book *A Severe Mercy* won the National Religious Book Award, historical memory of "massive black loyalty" to the cause has been "blanked out" by anti-Confederate "propaganda." That the Confederacy ultimately decided to arm and free its slaves proves, says Vanauken, that southern leaders "cared more for independence than for slavery....Therefore it cannot be said that the South fought primarily for slavery."<sup>45</sup>

With all due respect to Vanauken, I don't know any serious historian today who believes in single causation. Liberal and conservative scholars agree that slavery—in its broadest cultural, economic, intellectual, political, and social manifestations—caused the bloody Civil War. But while slavery as the cause of the war remains a non-issue for scholars, recent historians have focused closely on the meaning of freedom to the slaves and their role during the war as active agents of their own emancipation.

This is not to suggest that African Americans were unimportant to the Confederacy. In fact, blacks played essential roles in keeping the Confederacy alive for four years—in agriculture, in industry, in mining, in transportation. They constructed fortifications, trenches, roads, railroads, and ships. Thousands of slaves baked, butchered, cleaned, cooked, served, worked as stable hands, attended to the wounded, and buried the dead. But these black men and women served not by choice but by coercion. They were slaves—confiscated, hired, and impressed persons. I think we use the term slavery too casually, forgetting both the implications for those transformed into an extension of someone else's will and the role of "race" in the Old South's organic social structure. Has anyone ever classified slave laborers in the Third Reich as "soldiers" in Hitler's *Wehrmacht*?

Such rhetoric aside, African American slaves were not armed soldiers in the Confederate army. A handful of light-skinned blacks perhaps "passed" as whites. Some—caught in what President Abraham Lincoln called "mere friction and abrasion—by the mere incidents of the war"—may have fired weapons.<sup>46</sup> But such

instances, as historian James M. McPherson explains, were "sporadic and exceptional" at best.<sup>47</sup> Responding to undocumented secondary accounts that "the Confederacy used a lot of black sharpshooters" against black Union troops at the December 1864 Battle of Nashville, Tennessee, historian James Lee McDonough remarks that never, "over a period of nearly forty years has this author ever found any evidence of such occurrences; not in Confederate or Federal records; not in letters, memoirs, diaries; not anywhere."<sup>48</sup> Walter B. Hill Jr., the National Archives' senior archivist and subject area specialist in African American History, reports that in almost thirty years of research in Federal records, he has found "absolutely, positively no documentation of black combatant troops in the Confederate Army."<sup>49</sup> Hard facts and cool logic thus demolish the black Confederates thesis and dismiss it to the realm of mythology.

The contest over "owning" history, then, in this case the history of African Americans in the Confederacy, underscores the importance and power of historical remembrance. As historian David W. Blight wrote recently, it is a classic case of the "struggle between scholarship and public memory." "The issue of competing popular memories," he explains, "is driven largely by the desire of current white supremacists to re-legitimize the Confederacy while tacitly rejecting the victories of the modern civil rights movement."<sup>50</sup>

After sifting the available evidence and reflecting on the black Confederates debate, then, one might ask: Did African Americans willingly side with the Confederates to any substantive degree? No. Were Confederate blacks forced to serve as laborers? Absolutely. Did Confederate slaves understand the meaning of freedom? Unquestionably yes. Did blacks fight with guns for the Confederacy? "Not as this chile knows of."

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## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of fifteen free blacks from Louisiana who joined regular Confederate units, see Arthur W. Bergeron Jr., "Free Men of Color in Grey," *Civil War History* 32 (September 1986): 247-55. On Louisiana's First Native Guards, a Confederate unit composed of free blacks, see Mary F. Berry, "Negro Troops in Blue and Gray: The Louisiana Native Guards, 1861-1863," *Louisiana History* 8 (Spring 1967): 165-90, and James G. Hollandsworth Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Carroll, "Dignity, Courage and Fidelity," *Midlothian Mirror*, May 31, 1990, reprinted in *Confederate Veteran* (November-December 1990): 26.

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- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 54.
- <sup>10</sup> See The Black Confederate, accessed at (<http://www.scvcamp469-nbf.com/theblackconfederatesoldier.htm>), January 7, 2007, and Scott K. Williams, Black Confederates in the Civil War, accessed at (<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/mo/county/stlouis/blackcs.htm>), January 7, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> See Dixie Outfitters, accessed at (<http://www.dixieoutfitters.com/heritage/blc33.shtml>), May 2, 2005.
- <sup>12</sup> See Rollins, ed., *Black Southerners in Gray*; Charles Kelly Barrow, J.H. Segars, and R.B. Rosenburg, comps. and eds., *Black Confederates* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2001) (originally published as *Forgotten Confederates*); and J.H. Segars and Charles Kelly Barrow, comps. and eds., *Black Southerners in Confederate Armies: A Collection of Historical Accounts* (Atlanta: Southern Lion Books, 2001).
- <sup>13</sup> Scott Williams, "On Black Confederates," accessed at <http://www.37thtexas.org/html/BlkHist.html>, March 8, 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> "The Black Confederate Soldier," accessed at <http://www.scvcamp469-nbf.com/theblackconfederatesoldier.htm>, March 19, 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> "Black Confederates," accessed at <http://blackconfederates.tripod.com/index.html>, January 21, 2004.
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- <sup>17</sup> *Gray Ghost Newsletter*, May-June 1997, July-August 1997, accessed at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~msmarsha/military/conheraa.html>, March 5, 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Keisha Stewart, "Confederate Groups Honor Black Soldiers," *Roanoke Times*, September 8, 2002, B1, B8.
- <sup>19</sup> Linda Wheeler, "Putting a New Face on a Confederate Past; Some Blacks Find Ancestors in Uniform," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2003, Metro, B 3.
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- <sup>21</sup> Steve Wilkins and Rev. D. Wilson, *Southern Slavery, As It Was* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), 11, 9, 25, 27. I am indebted to William Ramsey for bring this pamphlet to my attention.
- <sup>22</sup> Rev. D. Wilson, "True Defiance," *Credenda/agenda*, vol. 9, no. 1, accessed at <http://www.credenda.org/issues/9-1thema.php>, February 23, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> Cris Schlect, "Vignettes of Black Confederates," in *ibid.*, accessed at <http://www.credenda.org/issues/9-1historia.php?type=print>, February 23, 2004. In 1907 a former Confederate officer made strikingly the same argument: "I do not envy the men, or fiends, who could take advantage of the ignorant negroes and turn them against the white people and expose them to the possible dangers and evils of a bloody race conflict. The infamies practiced by the carpetbagger engendered the feeling of hatred in the negro's breast, and I firmly believe that but for this we would not have felt the horrors of the so-called "Reconstruction," and that we would have no negro question now. I do not believe that the effect those teachings had on the negroes then will ever be eradicated from the present or future generations, but whatever the future may develop, we must remember the loyalty of our good slaves." See Captain James Dinkins, "The Negroes As Slaves," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 35 (1907): 62.
- <sup>24</sup> Wilson, "True Defiance."
- <sup>25</sup> Edward C. Smith, "Calico, Black and Gray," *Civil War: The Magazine of the Civil War Society* 8 (May-June 1990): 11-14.
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- <sup>37</sup> "White Lies" [interview with Brooks D. Simpson], *Intelligence Report* [Southern Poverty Law Center], no. 99 (Summer 2000): 35.
- <sup>38</sup> Truman R. Clark, "History Gives Lie to Myth of Black Confederate Soldiers," *Houston Chronicle*, August 29, 1999, accessed at <http://members.aol.com/neo-confeds/trclark.htm>, March 24, 2004.
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- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 129, 15, 159.
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- <sup>43</sup> Bruce Levine, "In Search of a Usable Past: Neo-Confederates and Black Confederates," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 190, 210-11.
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- <sup>45</sup> Sheldon Vanauken, "Black Fighters for the South," *Southern Partisan* 12 (4th Quarter 1992): 30-31.
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- <sup>49</sup> Walter B. Hill Jr. to John David Smith, email communication, March 12, 2007 (copy in possession of the author).
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# Lincoln's Letter to Colonel Elmer Ellsworth's Parents: A Study in Literary Excellence

By E. Phelps Gay

Of Lincoln's three great letters of condolence,<sup>1</sup> the following letter to Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth's parents dated May 25, 1861,<sup>2</sup> may be his most powerful and eloquent.

Washington, D. C. May 25, 1861

To the Father and Mother of Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth:

My dear Sir and Madam,

In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own. So much of promised usefulness to one's country, and of bright hopes for one's self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall. In size, in years, and in youthful appearance, a boy only, his power to command men, was surpassingly great. This power, combined with a fine intellect, an indomitable energy, and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew. And yet he was singularly modest and deferential in social intercourse. My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engrossing engagements, would permit. To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or an intemperate word. What was conclusive of his good heart, he never forgot his parents. The honors he labored for so laudably, and, in the sad end, so gallantly gave his life, he meant for them, no less than for himself.

In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow, I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brave and early fallen child.

May God give you that consolation which is beyond all earthly power.

Sincerely your friend in a common affliction—

A. Lincoln

## The Story of Colonel Ellsworth

Behind this letter lies the story of Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth, sometimes called the "first casualty" of the Civil War.

Born in 1837 in Malta, New York, Ellsworth was animated from an early age with an abiding sense of patriotism. To him the greatest glory lay in fighting for one's country. As a child he listened to his great grandfather, George Ellsworth, tell stories of exploits at the Battle of Saratoga, site of the colonists' first major victory in the War of Independence. As a boy he built forts and toy soldiers, and at school he organized classmates into brigades. In his spare time he read books on military drills and tactics.

At fifteen, Ellsworth assembled a group of boys from the neighboring town of Stillwater. Anointing them the "Black Plumed Riflemen," he trained and drilled them as a military unit. To the amazement of local citizens, he led the young men in public displays of dexterity and physical prowess. On one occasion they formed a human ladder and scaled the outside of a large building.

Filled with visions of military glory, Ellsworth wanted to attend West Point. However, on coming of age in Mechanicville, New



Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth. (TLM #4038)

York, where his parents moved when he was about ten, he had no opportunity to study for the entrance exam, nor any realistic chance of finding meaningful work. He left home, lived briefly in New York City, and moved to Chicago. There he joined a volunteer company of National Guard cadets. The company had been ready to disband, but Ellsworth's energy brought them back together.

Much taken with heroic tales of French Zouave soldiers during the Crimean War (1854-56), Ellsworth introduced his men to the flashy Zouave uniform, consisting of baggy pants, short jackets, fezzes, and gaiters. He renamed them the United States Zouave Cadets. Through hard work and infectious enthusiasm, he turned them into a national champion drill team. During the summer of 1860, they performed their complicated drills and flashy movements with muskets and bayonets in twenty cities throughout the northern part of the country. Audiences were awed.<sup>3</sup>

In August of 1860, Ellsworth left his command temporarily and traveled to Springfield, where he studied law in the offices of Lincoln & Herndon. Lincoln immediately took to the young man, although it is uncertain how much law Ellsworth studied. William Herndon referred to Ellsworth as "nominally a student in Lincoln's office."<sup>4</sup> Ellsworth's head was apparently so full of military matters that he had little time for the dry world of torts, contracts, and legal procedure. Still, Lincoln was impressed with his irrepressible new friend, calling him "the greatest little man I ever met."<sup>5</sup>

During the presidential campaign of 1860 Lincoln stayed above the fray. On his behalf, Republicans staged rallies in many northern cities. David Herbert Donald has noted that Lincoln, unable to participate, "could only watch the exhibitions put on by Republican para-military groups like the Zouave Company recruited and drilled by his young friend Elmer Ellsworth, who was supposed to be reading law in the Lincoln & Herndon office."<sup>6</sup> Ellsworth also gave several campaign speeches for Lincoln. According to John Hay, he was "one of the most popular speakers known to the schoolhouses and barns of Central Illinois."<sup>7</sup>

On election day, November 6, 1860, Lincoln did not intend to vote, considering it unseemly to do so for his own presidential electors. Herndon persuaded him that he would be able to cut off the presidential electors from the ballot and vote for his party's state officers. Lincoln proceeded to the polls, escorted on one side by his self-appointed bodyguard, Ward Lamon, and on the other by his young friend, Elmer Ellsworth.<sup>8</sup> Ellsworth would eventually accompany the president-elect on the train ride from Springfield to Washington, "arrayed in his Zouave uniform."<sup>9</sup>

Now widely regarded as our country's greatest president, Lincoln came into office with virtually no administrative or executive experience. A former state legislator and one-term Congressman (1847-49), he had spent much of his adult life practicing law in a western state. Professor Donald illustrates how little Lincoln knew about the administrative side of the presidency by noting that initially he tried to do everything himself. One example was his attempt, without congressional authorization, to create a Bureau of Militia in the War Department, to be headed by his young friend, Elmer Ellsworth.<sup>10</sup>

In his letter to Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, dated March 5, 1861, one day after taking the oath of office, Lincoln wrote:

If the public service admits of a change, without injury, in the office of chief clerk of the War Department, I shall be pleased of [sic] my friend, E. Elmer [sic] Ellsworth, who presents you this, shall be appointed. Of course, if you see good reason to the contrary, this is not intended to be arbitrary. Yours truly, A. Lincoln.<sup>11</sup>

A few weeks later, on April 15, 1861, still hoping to help his friend, Lincoln wrote the only letter, so far as we know, he ever addressed to Ellsworth:

Ever since the beginning of our acquaintance, I have valued you highly as a person[al] friend, and at the same time (without much capacity of judging) have had a very high estimate of your military talent. Accordingly I have been, and still am anxious for you to have the best position in the military which can be given you, consistently with justice and proper courtesy towards the older officers of the army. I can not incur the risk of doing them injustice, or a discourtesy; but I do say they would personally oblige me, if they could, and would place you in some position, or in some service, satisfactory to yourself. Your Obt. Sevt. A. Lincoln.<sup>12</sup>

With civil war about to break out, Ellsworth went to New York City where he raised a volunteer regiment. He recruited men from the city's fire departments, trained them in the arts of drill, and outfitted them in Zouave uniforms. Soon the regiment was designated the 11th New York Fire Zouaves.<sup>13</sup>

The events leading to Colonel Ellsworth's death began on May 23, 1861, when Virginia joined the Confederacy. The next day, hoping to secure the Potomac River and achieve a quick, morale-boosting victory, Lincoln directed federal troops to occupy neighboring Alexandria. Reportedly, the president had been disturbed for several weeks by a huge Confederate flag flying over that city. Using his spyglass, Lincoln could see this flag from the White House.<sup>14</sup>

Ellsworth convinced his superiors that he should be given the mission of seizing and controlling the Port of Alexandria. He donned a new uniform and fastened upon his breast a gold badge with a Latin inscription meaning, "Not for ourselves alone but for country."<sup>15</sup>

Crossing the Potomac by night, Ellsworth and his Zouave regiment marched into Alexandria. Outnumbered, the small Virginia militia retreated; there was virtually no battle. Flushed with the spoils of victory, Ellsworth strode into town. He ordered a company of his soldiers to take and hold the railroad station. Ellsworth and a small detachment set out to dismantle the rebels' telegraph office. On the way, Ellsworth noticed a Confederate flag flying atop a local hotel on King Street known as the Marshall House—the same flag which President Lincoln could see from the White House. Ellsworth exclaimed, "Boys, we must have that down before we return."<sup>16</sup>

Ellsworth and four of his men bounded up the stairs of the hotel. They went out onto the roof and tore down the offending flag. Triumphant, they ran back down the stairs. In front of Ellsworth was Corporal Francis E. Brownell; behind him was Edward H. House, a reporter for the New York Tribune. At the landing on the

third floor, the innkeeper, James W. Jackson, waited with a double-barreled shotgun.

The ensuing events were reported by Mr. House as follows:

“While on the second floor, a secessionist came out of a door with a cocked double-barreled shotgun . . . [He] took aim at Ellsworth . . . and discharged, lodging a whole load of buckshot in Ellsworth’s body, killing him instantly.”

The man turned to shoot Brownell, but Brownell knocked the gun aside, fired his rifle, and killed the assassin.<sup>17</sup>

Ellsworth’s men carried his body into a nearby bedroom. They covered it with the rebel flag, “wet with his blood.”<sup>18</sup>

On the morning of May 24, 1861, President Lincoln was sitting in the library on the second floor of The White House, expecting news of the invasion and occupation of Alexandria. A navy captain, Gustavus V. Fox, who knew of the close relationship between Lincoln and Colonel Ellsworth, entered the room with a sad expression. He told the president what had occurred. Lincoln’s head slumped to his chest.

Moments later, two visitors came in on a matter of public business. Lincoln turned, extended his hand, and said, “Excuse me, but I cannot talk.” Covering his face with a handkerchief, he burst into tears. Regaining control, Lincoln said: “I will take no apology, gentlemen, for my weakness; but I knew poor Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard. Just as you entered the room, Captain Fox left me, after giving me the painful details of Ellsworth’s unfortunate death. The event was so unexpected, and the recital so touching, that it quite unmanned me.”<sup>19</sup>

When President and Mrs. Lincoln gazed at Ellsworth’s body in the Navy Yard that afternoon, the president was heard to say: “My boy! My boy! Was it necessary this sacrifice should be made!”<sup>20</sup>

On May 25th, Ellsworth’s body was brought to the East Room of The White House. He lay in state as mourners paid their last respects. President and Mrs. Lincoln attended the funeral. The funeral procession bore Ellsworth’s body to a train station, where it was transported to New York City to lie in state at City Hall. A private service for family and friends was held at the Astor House, after which Ellsworth’s body was carried by steamer to Albany where it again lay in state. The body was then taken to his childhood hometown of Mechanicville, where crowds lined the tracks.

In her biography of Ellsworth, Ruth Painter Randall describes the scene:

A storm was raging in the town as if to represent the grief and rage in the hearts of the friends who received Elmer Ellsworth home. Through wind and rain the hearse, adorned with heavy black plumes, toiled up a high hill overlooking the town. In the loftiest spot on that lovely hilltop, with highest military honors, Colonel Ellsworth was laid to rest.<sup>21</sup>

Ellsworth’s death aroused public sentiment and a “desire for revenge,” spurring military enlistments. William Burleigh wrote:

The pulse that beat  
But yesterday within his frame,  
Today is like a living flame  
In every manly breast we meet.<sup>22</sup>

The Forty-Fourth New York Volunteer Regiment came to be known as “Ellsworth’s avengers.” Fort Alexandria was renamed Fort Ellsworth. Across the country, infants were named in honor of the young hero. In town after town one could hear the rallying cry, “Remember Ellsworth!”<sup>23</sup>

Ellsworth is buried in the Hudson View Cemetery in Mechanicville. Tributes to his memory continue to this day.<sup>24</sup>

Colonel Ellsworth’s story is dramatic, combining youth, bravery, and tragedy at the beginning of one of the greatest conflicts in history. Undoubtedly, it would be told in history books whether or not Lincoln had written his letter of condolence to Ellsworth’s parents.

But, as often happened during his presidency (Gettysburg is the preeminent example), Lincoln’s literary talent proved equal to the occasion, capturing it in poetic expression of permanent value. Although not as well-known as the letter to Mrs. Bixby, the letter to Colonel Ellsworth’s parents is, in its way, as balanced and elegant, and it is unquestionably more personal.

Before examining the letter in detail, a few observations about Lincoln as a writer are appropriate.

## Lincoln as Writer

The American literary critic, Edmund Wilson, noted that Lincoln’s writing style was “developed to a high degree.” It was “cunning in its cadences, exact in its choice of words, and yet also instinctive and natural; and it was inseparable from his personality in all of its manifestations.”<sup>25</sup>

Wilson believed Lincoln’s letters in particular showed “a training of the literary ear that is not often taught in modern schools.”<sup>26</sup> Lincoln sought “the balance of eighteenth-century rhythms,” while discarding old-fashioned ornaments of forensic and congressional oratory.<sup>27</sup> “Alone among American presidents,” Wilson concluded, “it is possible to imagine Lincoln grown up in a different milieu, becoming a distinguished writer of not merely a political kind.”<sup>28</sup>

In his Preface to a collection of Lincoln’s speeches and writings, Roy Basler pointed out that Lincoln’s literary education was more thorough than is commonly believed. The textbooks he studied — *Dilworth’s A New Guide to the English Tongue*, *The Kentucky Preceptor*, and *Scott’s Lessons in Elocution*, among others — “probably provided as good an opportunity for learning the essentials and the graces of expression then, as the best modern textbooks do now.”<sup>29</sup> At the age of twenty-three, Lincoln studied Kirkham’s *Grammar*, “so as to speak and write as well as he now does.”<sup>30</sup> Wilson notes that the school books of the early nineteenth century “taught not only the mechanics of writing—

that is, of grammar and syntax—but also the art of rhetoric—that is, of what used to be called ‘harmonious numbers’ and of dramatic and oratorical effectiveness.”<sup>31</sup>

In his masterful book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Garry Wills devotes a chapter to Lincoln’s “Revolution in Style.” He praises Lincoln’s subtle use of balance and antithesis<sup>32</sup> and his fondness for grammatical inversion.<sup>33</sup> Lincoln read aloud, in order to “think his way” into the sound of words, and he wrote as a means of ordering his thoughts. He loved the study of grammar and meant to be precise in his choice of words. Wills quotes Herndon’s recollection that in the search for words Lincoln was “often at a loss” because there were “so few that contained the exact coloring, power, and shape of his ideas.”<sup>34</sup>

Lincoln’s search for exactitude in his writing is illustrated by Wills in his commentary on Lincoln’s famous letter to Horace Greeley. He observes that “even the sentence structure seems to present its own case.” In other words, “the grammar argues.”<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, Wills finds it significant that Lincoln welcomed the invention of telegraphy.<sup>36</sup> We know he spent long hours in the telegraph center of the War Department. Communication in this new medium required clarity and concision, two hallmarks of Lincoln’s prose.

One of the best essays on Lincoln’s prose style was written by literary scholar Jacques Barzun. His book, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing*, contains a chapter entitled “Lincoln the Writer.” Barzun characterizes Lincoln as “the maker of a style that is unique in English prose and doubly astonishing in the history of American literature, for nothing led up to it.”<sup>37</sup> He asserts that the rhythm of Lincoln’s sentences was not taught by a grammar book, but arose out of a “singular determination to express his thoughts in the best way.”<sup>38</sup> As a writer, Lincoln “toiled above all to find the true order for his thoughts—order first, then a lightning-like brevity.” He cites these two sentences, written in 1846, as an example: “If I falsify in this you can convict me. The witnesses live, and can tell.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Lincoln’s range of reading was relatively small, the books he knew best—the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Aesop’s Fables*, and the works of Shakespeare, Burns, Byron, and DeFoe—provided invaluable lessons in the arts of “terseness and strength.”<sup>40</sup> Barzun correctly notes that his letters are “the crucible in which Lincoln casts his style.”<sup>41</sup>

Barzun examines the four main qualities of Lincoln’s literary art—precision, vernacular ease, rhythmical virtuosity, and elegance. Tracing the development of American literary tradition, he notes that after Lincoln came Mark Twain, and from the works of Mark Twain sprang such distinguished twentieth century writers as Sherwood Anderson, H.L. Mencken, and Ernest Hemingway.<sup>42</sup> Barzun maintains that one gift Lincoln possessed from the start was the gift of rhythm.

Most recently, Douglas L. Wilson has provided a superb analysis of Lincoln’s prose style, and its impact upon his presidency, in *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and The Power of Words*.<sup>43</sup> He describes in detail Lincoln’s careful drafting and editing of presidential messages, public letters, and works such as the Springfield

Farewell, Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural. Wilson concludes that to approach Lincoln’s presidency from the standpoint of his writing “is to come to grips with the degree to which his pen, to alter the proverb, became his sword, arguably his most powerful presidential weapon.”<sup>44</sup>

## A Close Reading of the Letter

*“In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own.”*

Lincoln’s gift of rhythm can be seen in his fondness for the periodic sentence. It begins with a phrase or clause which must be completed. It “rises,” raising expectations, and “falls” to a safe and logical destination. According to a standard reference work, it is designed to “arouse interest and curiosity,” holding an idea in suspense before its final revelation is made.<sup>45</sup> Had Lincoln written: “Our affliction is scarcely less than your own in the untimely loss of your noble son,” the sentence would have been stripped of elegance and suspense. Instead, Lincoln begins with: “In the untimely loss of your noble son,” a balanced phrase approximating poetic meter (*untimely loss of your noble son*) with repeated “l” and “s” sounds.

Once, asked why he would lie down in his office and would read aloud from a newspaper or book, Lincoln replied: “I catch the idea by two senses....”<sup>46</sup> Lincoln wanted to know not only what the words meant, but how their sound and order complemented their meaning. Deft exploitation of the relationship between sound and sense was perhaps the salient characteristic of his writing style.

“Our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own” illustrates Lincoln’s penchant for, and rhetorical training in, comparison and contrast. He constantly compares one thing to another, using phrases such as “scarcely less than,” “as well as,” and “no less than.” Contrast, of course, is a rhetorical device by which one element is thrown in opposition to another, the effect of which is to make both ideas clearer than either would have been if described by itself.<sup>47</sup>

Incidentally, this sentence betrays Lincoln’s shaky grasp of punctuation. There should be no comma after “here.” An instinctively rhythmic writer who studied grammar on his own, Lincoln occasionally elevated rhythm and sound above punctuation rules. (At times his spelling could be as shaky as his punctuation.) It seems clear that to Lincoln the comma served as a musical notation. It denoted where he wished to pause and catch his breath, and where he wished the reader to do so. It signified how he “heard” the sentence.<sup>48</sup>

Worth noting as well is Lincoln’s choice of the word “here.” Wills comments on its repeated use in the Gettysburg Address—six times.<sup>49</sup> The word also plays a prominent role in the Springfield Farewell. (“Here I have lived....”) In the letter to Colonel Ellsworth’s parents, it conveys immediacy and “lightning-like brevity.” Our suffering, he says, is right here, not “at the Executive Mansion.”

Finally, note the sensitively respectful tone set in this opening sentence. “Scarcely less than your own” not only shows his literary gift for comparison; it demonstrates genuine concern for the young man’s bereaved parents. Lincoln’s affliction may be

“scarcely less than” that of Colonel Ellsworth’s parents, but it is less. He does not presume to suggest their emotions are equal.

Alliteration and assonance mark the next sentence, surely one of Lincoln’s most startling.

*“So much of promised usefulness to one’s country, and of bright hopes for one’s self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall.”*

Here again, Lincoln “tilts” the reader into the sentence. An ordinary writer might have written: “Colonel Ellsworth would have been very useful to his country had he not been killed,” robbing the moment of memorable expression.

Instead, Lincoln’s ear led him to an opening noun clause mixing iamb and dactyl (“so much” “of promised” “usefulness”) which forms the subject of the sentence. “So much” is echoed later in the sentence in “so suddenly.” “Promised usefulness,” two words accented on the first syllable with three “s” sounds, economically captures the bright future which has been “so suddenly dashed.” The phrase “so suddenly dashed” is both alliterative and onomatopoeic: it “sounds” abrupt, violent, and final. “As in his fall” continues the pattern of vivid comparison. In four monosyllabic beats, it brings the periodic sentence home to rest. The tone remains reverential, sensitive to the feelings of parents who have lost a son.

In the third sentence, also periodic, Lincoln demonstrates brevity and balance.

*“In size, in years, and in youthful appearance, a boy only, his power to command men, was surpassingly great.”*

This remarkable sentence rises with three “ins,” levels off with “a boy only,” and falls to a powerful, paradoxical conclusion. Unnecessary “connecting words” are omitted. The technique of asyndeton—a condensed form of expression in which elements customarily joined by conjunctions are presented in a series without the conjunctions—is used.<sup>50</sup> Evident also is the poetic pause (caesura) after “a boy only.” A more flat-footed correspondent might have written: “Although he was small and young, Elmer had the power to command men.” In Lincoln’s hands, the sentence becomes a piece of music. Compact and direct, it achieves power in spareness. It is unburdened by effusive adjectives. It requires only one verb.

Once again, the punctuation is questionable: there should be no comma after “men.” But Lincoln worked from the ear, and his ear heard a pause at that point.

Aware of the need for variety in vigorous prose, Lincoln begins the fourth sentence declaratively.

*“This power, combined with a fine intellect, an indomitable energy, and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent in that department, I ever knew.”*

“This power” may not seem to require comment, yet it is a vintage Lincoln locution. Frequently in his speeches and writings, Lincoln

refers to “this continent,” “these people,” “this place,” or “this interest.” It is not merely a reference to the idea established in the previous sentence; it is also, as Barzun notes in another context, a reflection of Lincoln’s perspective as a wise and detached observer. It “betrays [his] isolation from the action itself.”<sup>51</sup>

The sentence further displays Lincoln’s literary gifts in the repetition of vowel sounds (“combined with a fine intellect,”) and in the inventive use of the inverted phrase “a taste altogether military.” Most writers would have completed the series of three with “a military taste.” But a taste “altogether military” does more. It varies the rhythm and captures the attention of the reader (as well as the essence of the departed hero) in successive four-syllable adjectives, (“altogether military”), each accented on the first and third syllables.

“As seemed to me,” is also vintage Lincoln. Aside from its assonance, it conveys a personal touch. It communicates that Lincoln knew Ellsworth, and this is how he came across to him. It is a phrase Lincoln frequently used to signify that he could only rely on his best observation and judgment. He dared to do his duty “as he understood it,” and he would adopt new views “so fast as they shall appear to be true views.”

Lincoln’s use of commas as the fourth sentence winds down suggests he “heard” it as a poem ending with five staccato phrases:

*Constituted in him  
As seemed to me  
The best natural talent  
In that department  
I ever knew.*

Having described the admirable qualities of the young man, Lincoln turns to his core character.

*“And yet he was singularly modest and deferential in social intercourse.”*

The first two words are those of an experienced public speaker, attuned to the role of drama in effective communication, aware that a change of direction enlivens the reader’s interest. In addition, Lincoln deeply valued the virtues of modesty and deference. He was himself from a modest background and had little use for boastful, conceited men. In his letter to J.W. Fell of December 20, 1859, enclosing a brief autobiography, he explained, “There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me.”<sup>52</sup>

Lincoln then points out that he met Ellsworth less than two years ago, “yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engrossing engagements, would permit.” The tone remains respectful. Lincoln does not “overplay” his friendship with the young man. He was more than twice Ellsworth’s age, and his “engrossing engagements” included the greatest conflict in the nation’s history. (In the Second Inaugural he refers to the contest which still “engrosses the energies” of the nation.) In this letter of condolence, it would be insensitive to suggest he “loved” young Ellsworth; that is not what the aggrieved parents want to hear. But we can be confident they appreciated hearing that their son commanded

the president's affection and admiration, despite his "engrossing engagements."

Lincoln's instinct for comparison and contrast crops up again when he notes that his acquaintance with Ellsworth was "as intimate as" the disparity of their ages and his engrossing engagements "would permit." Assonance appears in these words and phrases: "latter half," "intervening...intimate," and "disparity of our ages." Also of interest is the semi-colon after "ago." Lincoln had begun the previous sentence with "and yet;" it would have been awkward to repeat the phrase. By using a semi-colon, he avoids the problem and quickens the reader's interest in the contrast between the short time he knew Ellsworth and the depth of their relationship.

Lean and muscular, Lincoln's prose is almost never "literary." The words are exact and arranged in logical order. The tone is natural—in Barzun's phrase, he displays "vernacular ease." Moreover, he accomplishes the core mission of a letter of condolence: conveying genuine sympathy for the parents' loss.

The seventh sentence begins periodically:

*To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or intemperate word.*

Lincoln maintains a modest and personal tone. It is not simply that Ellsworth had no indulgences or pastimes, or that he did not swear, but no such indulgences or pastimes appeared "to me," and "I" never heard him utter a profane word. Lincoln consoles the parents by extolling a moral character which he is careful to note he observed first-hand.

In the second half of the sentence, there is no need for a comma after profane, except in the mind of a writer who "heard" that pause. Basler has observed that Lincoln "breaks sentences into clauses and phrases sometimes to the point of fragmentation."<sup>53</sup> But, as noted, errors in punctuation are often offset by the comforting voice resonating with the reader.

The eighth sentence may be the letter's most important.

*"What was conclusive of his good heart, he never forgot his parents."*

The first three words rise up with assonance and gathering momentum, preparing the reader for a payoff. The first three syllables ("what was con") are equally accented; then we hear "clusive." In sound and meaning, this "seals the deal." Ellsworth's modesty and industry may have been suggestive of good character, but "what was conclusive" was that he never forgot his parents. Lincoln does not write that what was conclusive was that he never forgot his parents. Having reached the word "heart," he omits connecting words and gets to the point: he never forgot his parents. The sentiment is central to the letter, which after all is addressed to Ellsworth's parents. This is what they want and deserve to hear, and it is undoubtedly true.

Alliteration, assonance, concision, and balance cohere in the last sentence of the first paragraph.

*"The honors he labored for so laudably, and, in the sad end, so gallantly gave his life, he meant for them, no less than for himself."*

The repeated sounds of l's ("labored" and "laudably"), s's ("so," "sad," "so," "less," "himself"), and g's ("gallantly" "gave") give pleasure to the mind and ear. At the same time, they do not seem forced or "worked up." For the second time in the letter, Lincoln employs the word "so" twice in one sentence—to eloquent effect.

The sentence concludes with another concise comparison: "*he meant for them, no less than himself.*" On the heels of its elaborate opening clauses, the sentence suddenly becomes simple and monosyllabic: "he meant for them." Four equally accented words, they carry full freight. One remembers in another context: "And the war came."

The "detached" perspective of the wise man, noted earlier, is evident in Lincoln's reference to Ellsworth's parents as "them." He could have written "he meant for you," but the effect would not have been the same. By design, it seems, Lincoln waited until his second paragraph to address Ellsworth's parents directly.

Before moving on to that paragraph, a grammatical "stickler" might carp that this sentence is missing a word or two. Perhaps Lincoln should have written "for which" Ellsworth gallantly gave his life or referred to the honors Ellsworth gallantly gave his life "for." But Lincoln didn't hear it that way; and to quibble over it seems as impertinent as complaining that in his famous sonnet Keats confused Balboa and Cortez.

The second paragraph consists of one sentence, among the most beautiful Lincoln wrote.

*"In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow, I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brave and early fallen child."*

The opening clause combines perfect rhythmical virtuosity with exquisite sensitivity to the occasion. Lincoln chooses not to break the clause up with commas, but the reader "hears" it as follows:

*In the hope  
That it may be no intrusion  
Upon the sacredness  
Of your sorrow*

Assonance and balance are in evidence: "in" and "intrusion;" "hope," and "no," and "sorrow." "The sacredness of your sorrow," apart from its felicity as a phrase, strikes the perfect note. It is their loss which is sacred, not his; he hopes he hasn't intruded upon it. In that spirit, he does not inform or "advise" them of his high regard for their son, but "venture[s]" to address a tribute to the memory of their "brave and early fallen child."

Lincoln's ear for the sound and rhythm of words and his quest for arranging them in proper order often extended to paragraphs. In the first paragraph he expressed admiration for Ellsworth and specified the reasons for that admiration. Now, he "turns," as it



were, to speak directly to Mr. and Mrs. Ellsworth in order to tell them why he has ventured to address them. It seems no accident that he limits this personal expression to one sentence.

With its reference to God, the third paragraph reveals Lincoln as a deeply spiritual man. Although never aligned with a particular religion, he believed in God and was all too familiar with tragedy. He had suffered the loss of his mother (October 5, 1818) when he was nine years old, the loss of his sister (January 28, 1828) when he was eighteen, and in later years the loss of a child (Eddie, 1850). When he wrote to Colonel Ellsworth's parents, he believed that only God could provide consolation beyond "all earthly power."<sup>54</sup>

The complimentary close—"Sincerely your friend in a common affliction"—nicely echoes the "affliction" alluded to in the first sentence. Lincoln's affliction is by no means equal to theirs, but it is "common." The tone remains balanced and respectful, sensitive and sorrowful, never overwrought.

Lincoln's letter to Colonel Ellsworth's parents exemplifies his gifts as a writer. Each sentence contains a rhythm and balance supportive of its meaning. Each builds upon the other and advances the sentiment. There are twists and turns, eloquent phrases, inverted clauses, and simple, direct statements. Although each sentence can be admired on its own, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In the Gettysburg Address, with two hundred and seventy-two words, Lincoln approached literary perfection and in the process changed the meaning and purpose of America. In this private, personal letter, his prose is, as Lincoln might say, "no less perfect."

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The other two are the letter to Mrs. Bixby of November 21, 1864, and the letter to Miss Fanny McCullough of December 23, 1862. Some historians believe the evidence suggests that Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, wrote the Bixby letter. Michael Burlingame, *New Light on the Bixby Letter*, Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Roy P. Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. IV, pp. 385-386. The original letter is maintained in The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>3</sup> This summary of Ellsworth's life is drawn primarily from Ruth Painter Randall's biography, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth* (Boston: Little-Brown & Co., 1960). See also *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth: A Hometown Hero* at [www.angelfire.com/ny5/ellsworth/](http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/ellsworth/).

<sup>4</sup> William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Da Capo Press, 1942), p. 257.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 255.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>11</sup> Roy P. Basler, *Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 306.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p.258; Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 151;

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262. This story is well told in Joshua Wolf Schenk's recent book, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*, p. 176 (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston-New York, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.274.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.272.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, A Hometown Hero*, [www.angelfire.com/ny5/ellsworth/](http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/ellsworth/).

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121 .

<sup>29</sup> Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (The World Publishing Company, 1946), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4; *Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 62. For a discussion of Lincoln's study of English grammar, see Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1998), pp. 62-67.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, at p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164; Herndon-Weik, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing*, (University of Chicago Press, 2d Ed., 1986), p.66.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and The Power of Words*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, (Pearson Prentice Hall, 10th Ed., 2006), p. 386. See also, Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 164-165.

<sup>46</sup> Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, p. 121.

<sup>48</sup> This point is well illustrated by Douglas L. Wilson in *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, pp. 86-90. Lincoln's "basic sense of language, like the poet's, is aural; he hears it." *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, p. 173. Wills is referring to the *Bliss* text.

<sup>50</sup> William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, p. 47. See also, J. A. Cutton, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Basil Blackwell Ltd., 3rd Ed., 1991), p. 64. See also, Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 18

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing*, (University of Chicago Press, 2d Ed., 1986), p. 81.

<sup>52</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, Vol III, p. 511. In his 1832 campaign letter "To the People of Sangamo County," Lincoln wrote: "I have been and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life." *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, p. xxvii.

<sup>54</sup> Also worth noting is the echoing assonance of "earthly" with the just-used "early" fallen child.

# Lincoln's Response to His Invitation to Gettysburg

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On a gentle rise off to one side of the Gettysburg National Cemetery stands a modest but dignified monument, an arc of granite some fifteen feet long and five feet high, set upon a wide stone platform reached by a few steps. A pedestal divides the arc and is surmounted by a fine bust of Lincoln, notable for its somewhat irascible expression and sharp eyebrows. But the statue by Henry K. Bush-Brown is in a way only an adornment, for the monument was erected in 1912 with the express purpose of honoring not so much who the man was but what he said there: affixed to the curved granite wall on the statue's left is a tablet with the Gettysburg Address, cast in bronze for the ages. But on the arc of granite to the right of Lincoln's bust is another text, also cast in bronze: the invitation from David Wills of Gettysburg asking Lincoln to speak at the cemetery dedication ceremony. "It is the desire," reads the key sentence of the letter, "that, after the Oration, You, as Chief Executive of the Nation, formally set apart these grounds to their Sacred use by a few appropriate remarks."<sup>1</sup> In bringing together these texts—the Gettysburg Address and the invitation that gave it birth—the enveloping arms of the "Lincoln Address Memorial" give physical form to the two threads of events that created an American classic: the aftermath at Gettysburg of the Civil War's greatest battle, and the maelstrom of events around Lincoln in Washington, at the eye of the Civil War.

Lincoln's response to Wills's letter of invitation has generally been taken as unproblematic. Despite the fact that there is no record of a reply, for the past century most students of Lincoln and the Address assume that Lincoln in some way immediately communicated to Wills that he would go to Gettysburg as requested. The legend of Gettysburg has grown to such proportions that it has often been taken for granted that Lincoln attended the dedication primarily in order to give "the Gettysburg Address," that is, that Lincoln was seeking a venue to present an important statement of war aims and national values. Many of these same accounts also argue that Lincoln had received prior notice of his invitation before November 2, giving him a great deal of time to ponder his remarks.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, most accounts often only touch upon Lincoln's response to his invitation before moving on to the speech itself. Yet, the record of events suggests instead that Lincoln had no knowledge of an invitation to speak before the letter of November 2; furthermore, another look at the evidence shows that when Lincoln received his invitation he did not consider his "remarks" to be a particularly important element of the planned ceremony at the Gettysburg cemetery. The upcoming message to Congress in December, 1863, which Lincoln was writing at exactly the time he composed his Gettysburg remarks, afforded Lincoln all the opportunity necessary to speak to the country. Lincoln's response to his invitation was not, it seems, to immediately decide

to go to Gettysburg in order to deliver "the Gettysburg Address." Nor was it the lateness of the invitation that kept Lincoln from devoting hours and days to his "remarks," composing in the process an elaborate and lengthy speech. Rather, it was the obviously minor role these remarks were assigned in the ceremony and Lincoln's uncertainty that he would even attend the event. It is for these reasons that Lincoln did not give his remarks a great deal of attention until almost the very eve of the ceremony, and it is for these reasons that Lincoln's initial response to his invitation is so crucial for understanding the eventual remarks themselves.

The first indication of Lincoln's thoughts about the Gettysburg ceremony comes from a conversation he had with Ward Hill Lamon that took place sometime between the third and fifth of November. Lamon had just received an invitation from David Wills to be the marshal of the parade preceding the Gettysburg dedication, a request that put him in such a difficult position that he wanted to speak with the president about it. Wills's invitation to Lamon has never been published, but it can clear up some misunderstandings about Lamon's role in Lincoln's decision to go to Gettysburg<sup>3</sup>:

Gettysburg Oct. 30 1863

Marshall of the District of Columbia,

Sir,

The Several loyal States having Soldier dead on the Battle Field of Gettysburg have united in arrangements for the removal and proper Burial of the remains of these fallen heroes in a Cemetery on the Battle Field. The Grounds will be consecrated and set apart to the sacred purpose by appropriate & imposing ceremonies on Thursday the 19th day of November next. There will be loyal delegations from all the States and probably altogether one of the largest concourses of people that has assembled for a long time in this Country. There will be a civil procession and must be someone to take charge of it. We have agreed upon you as the proper person and therefore extend to you an invitation to act as Marshall of the procession on that day. If you accept, which I hope you will feel it your duty to do, you will have to make all the necessary arrangements for the procession, its order etc.

Hoping to have an Early reply from you I am with respect

Your obedient Servant

David Wills

Agent for A. G. Curtin Gov of Penna and also acting for all the States interested.

It has been suggested that this invitation to Lamon, coming as it did just days before the invitation to Lincoln, was intended to prepare the way for the president's invitation, or even that Lamon was the conduit for an invitation to Lincoln prior to that of November 2.<sup>4</sup> But Wills's invitation to Lamon is clearly their first communication, for the letter outlines in some detail the duties that would

be required and includes a plea for Lamon to accept. Furthermore, it was only on November 5 that Lamon began seeking the help of others—especially U. S. Marshals across the Union—to help with ordering and policing the procession, which strongly suggests that Wills had not contacted Lamon before that time.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Lamon could not have been the agent for an early invitation to Lincoln. Nor, of course, does the invitation to Lamon mention Lincoln, much less ask Lamon to encourage him to attend. Rather, as Frank L. Klement pointed out, Lamon had several friends and acquaintances among Pennsylvania politicians and political operatives, which likely explains why he was chosen to lead the procession of officials, organizations, and civilians out to the new cemetery from the town of Gettysburg.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as a lawyer, David Wills would likely have known that Lamon could call upon the entire U. S. Marshal service for assistance, which Lamon did not hesitate to do.

If Lamon's invitation was issued under the assumption that it would somehow induce Lincoln to more readily agree to come to Gettysburg, there is no evidence that the letter fulfilled its purpose. So far as we know it was not Lamon who advised Lincoln to attend, but rather, Lincoln who encouraged Lamon to accept. But, as usual, it is best to let Lincoln himself tell the story, which he did in a letter of November 9 to his former law partner, and Lamon's father-in-law, Stephen T. Logan:<sup>7</sup>

Dear Judge

Col Lamon had made his calculation, as he tells me, to go to Illinois and bring Mrs. L. [Lamon] home this month, when he was called on to act as Marshal on the occasion of dedicating the Cemetery at Gettysburg Pa on the 19th. He came to me, and I told him I thought that in view of his relation to the government and to me, he could not well decline. Now, why would it not be pleasant for you to come on with Mrs. L. at that time? It will be an interesting ceremony, and I shall be very glad to see you. I know not whether you would care to remain to the meeting of congress, but that event, as you know, will be very near at hand. Your friend as ever

A. Lincoln.

It is not certain whether Lincoln's own invitation from Wills had arrived at the time of Lincoln's conversation with Lamon, but it almost certainly had by the time Lincoln wrote this letter to Logan on the ninth. Possibly, however, the letter was delayed due to the dislocations caused by the Lincoln household moving from its summer lodgings at the Soldiers' Home back to the White House at precisely this time. Because Lincoln did go to Gettysburg, it has been assumed that the letter proves that Lincoln knew of his invitation, that he had decided to attend, and that he was inviting Logan to join him there.<sup>8</sup> But the letter says no such thing. We must avoid reading Lincoln's letter of November 9 in light of what we know, and instead read it in light of what Lincoln knew.

What Lincoln knew was that Wills's invitation to Lamon to serve as parade marshal had placed Lamon in a quandry. With typical Lincolnian brevity, the first sentence of the note states the problem, while the second provides the resolution—and with typical

Lincolnian "honesty," taking upon himself responsibility for any inconvenience to the family from the fact that Logan's son-in-law was not coming to take his daughter back east, as had been expected. With these preliminaries out of the way, Lincoln turned the heart of his message: "Now, why would it not be pleasant for you to come on with Mrs. L. at that time?" Buttressing his somewhat weak initial argument for undertaking an arduous journey, Lincoln gives three specific reasons to make the trip: "It will be an interesting ceremony," "I shall be very glad to see you," and, "the meeting of congress [...] will be very near at hand." That the first two reasons are joined in the same sentence should not be construed as necessarily meaning Lincoln intended to say, "I shall be very glad to see you at the ceremony." Lincoln had just told Logan that Lamon was going to Gettysburg, not Lincoln himself. So far as Lincoln knew, Logan had no idea that Lincoln was going or had been invited to attend. Nor did Lincoln tell Logan he had been invited or planned to attend. He did not need to. The purposes of the letter—to explain the change in Lamon's travel plans, and to invite Logan east—are perfectly clear without referring to the matter at all.

Yet, for our purposes, for determining whether Lincoln himself at that moment knew he was going to Gettysburg, Lincoln's letter to Logan is perfectly ambiguous. Indeed, given Lincoln's usual precision, it very likely is intentionally ambiguous. Logan may have thought Lincoln would be at Gettysburg, but Lincoln himself did not say, nor did he mean to. This is only the first indication that, far from immediately communicating his acceptance to David Wills, Lincoln's first response to his Gettysburg invitation was to temporize. In classic Lincoln fashion he put off making a final determination until compelled to do so. At the time he wrote to Logan, Lincoln did not know whether he would be at Gettysburg, so he phrased his note in such a way that left open the possibility.

Even beyond the letter of November 9 to Logan, there is overwhelming evidence that in the two weeks between receiving his invitation and the actual ceremony, Lincoln was not at all certain that he would, or could, attend the dedication. Thirteen years after Gettysburg, Lincoln's former Attorney General, James Speed, gave a brief account of the speech that he said came from a discussion with Lincoln himself. "When requested to deliver an address on the occasion of the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg," Speed told a newspaper reporter, "he [Lincoln] was very uncertain whether his duties would not detain him at Washington." Similarly, Lincoln's secretary, John Nicolay, wrote in 1894 that Lincoln was very busy that November, and that "there was even great uncertainty whether he could take enough time from his pressing official duties to go to Gettysburg at all."<sup>9</sup> And the Illinois agent at Gettysburg, Clark E. Carr, wrote in 1915 that the President gave no definite response to his invitation, "and it was not until about the time of his leaving Washington for Gettysburg that the [cemetery] Board was at all certain that he would speak."<sup>10</sup>

Lincoln's responses to other invitations to speak during his presidency are illuminating in this regard. The previous August, James C. Conkling had invited Lincoln to give a speech at a "Grand Mass Meeting" in Springfield, Illinois, and at first Lincoln "cherished the hope of going" according to Nicolay and Hay. Even so, Lincoln

prudently responded by telegram, "I think I will go, or send a letter—probably the latter."<sup>11</sup> This circumspection about possible travel is even more marked in response to an invitation in March, 1864, to attend the Maryland State Fair in Baltimore. According to one of the fair organizers, Lincoln gave only a conditional, verbal, answer. A month later Lincoln still had not given a firm response, so the worried host wrote to remind Lincoln that he had said he would "come as desired, unless something that you (I) cannot now foresee prevents"; the writer was quoting Lincoln's words back to him, hence the awkward "you (I)."<sup>12</sup> Probably Lincoln responded, if at all, in a similarly non-committal manner to the Gettysburg invitation.

The first contemporary evidence connecting Lincoln to the ceremony was a front page article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of October 13, 1863, that is, about a month after David Wills and the other state agents decided upon Everett as the principal orator of the day.<sup>13</sup> The article, datelined Baltimore, October 12, presents information gleaned from "a long conversation" with Wills. After announcing that the dedication ceremony will take place on November 19th, the article states that "Hon. Edward Everett has consented to deliver the oration. President Lincoln is expected to perform the consecrational service." This has been read by many as supporting the hypothesis of an early invitation, prior to the formal letter of November 2, but as with virtually everything associated with the Gettysburg Address the matter is not quite so simple. First of all, the wording gives pause: Everett "has consented," but Lincoln is merely "expected," a phrase that speaks to the hopes of the organizers rather than to the point of whether Lincoln had in fact been invited. Furthermore, the article contains many inaccuracies and other statements describing the ceremony that in the event turned out not to be true, suggesting that the reporter had not accurately presented Wills's conversation or that aspects of the planned ceremony were in flux.<sup>14</sup> The article confidently stated, for example, that "The Marshall of the District of Columbia takes charge of the civic procession," but as we have seen, Wills first contacted Lamon about this nearly three weeks later, just before the invitation to Lincoln.<sup>15</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* article of October 13, then, presents Wills's aspirations rather than an accurate report of preparations that have already been completed. Indeed, some ten days after the publication of the article, Wills wrote to Curtin asking for a personal interview to discuss the "final arrangements" for the ceremony.<sup>16</sup> It may be that this interview concerned in part the question of Lincoln's invitation. Just over a week after Wills requested this meeting with Curtin, Wills wrote Lincoln's formal invitation. A few days after that, on November 7, Wills first announced through a public letter addressed to Curtin that Lincoln had been invited "to participate" in the dedication ceremony. Wills added that the invitation to Lincoln and to other high officials had been suggested by Curtin himself, perhaps during his meeting with Wills in late October.

The lack of a decisive response from Lincoln probably accounts for the wording of a press release by David Wills dated November 7, which stated that Lincoln had been "extended an invitation" and was silent about whether the invitation had been accepted.<sup>17</sup> On Monday, November 9, Wills invited the Oddfellows of Baltimore to participate in the civic procession, adding that "the Consecration will be performed by the President of the United States, with some

appropriate remarks."<sup>18</sup> This confident assertion is belied, however, by the fact that as late as November 14, the Saturday before the ceremony, Wills was making alternate plans in case Lincoln did not attend, an incident that provides us with our best direct evidence for Lincoln's thoughts about his invitation to Gettysburg.

On November 12 and 13 Ward Lamon and Benjamin French Brown had been in Gettysburg consulting with Wills about the procession and the ceremony, and they likely brought Wills the latest information about Lincoln's plans. It is significant, then, to find Wills on the 14th writing Secretary of State Seward asking him to perform the dedication if Lincoln could not.<sup>19</sup> Whatever Lamon may have said to Wills about Lincoln's plans must not have been overly encouraging, as shown in this unpublished letter from Wills to Seward:<sup>20</sup>

Gettysburg Nov. 14th 1863

Hon. W. H. Seward,

Secretary of State

Sir,

His Excellency the President of the United States will be present at the Consecration of the Soldiers' Cemetery here next Thursday (19th inst) unless prevented by unforeseen circumstances, and will, with some remarks, formally dedicate or set apart to the sacred use for which it has been proposed, the grounds where the burials are being made. In the event of his not being able to be present that duty would, I think, naturally devolve on you as Secretary of State. I write you to apprise you in time of what will be expected.

I have arranged for the accommodation of the President, Vice President and all the Members of the Cabinet at private Houses. I would like to be informed of the trains they will severally arrive in so that they can be met at the depot here.

I am with Great Respect,

Your Obedient Servant,

David Wills,

Agent for Governor Curtin<sup>21</sup>

It would appear, then, that Lincoln had told Lamon, who had then informed Wills during this visit, that Lincoln would attend "unless prevented by unforeseen circumstances." As usual, Lincoln was hedging his bets. Wills seemingly was making alternative arrangements on the fly, as suggested by his stating to Seward that the duty would, "I think," fall to Seward if Lincoln could not attend. Wills was usually careful about establishing his credentials and authority to act, so this wording suggests that Wills had not consulted with other state agents or Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania. The timing of this letter to Seward suggests that Lamon's trip to Gettysburg and his consultations with Wills triggered the let-

ter. Indeed, this may have been Wills's first solid indication of Lincoln's plans, contingent as they were. It is difficult, otherwise, to explain why Wills had not made such contingency plans earlier, for example when Wills first invited Seward on November 2.

Up to this time, articles in several newspapers described the planned ceremony without mentioning whether Lincoln would be in attendance. Indeed, at least one Washington reporter was convinced that Lincoln had decided not to attend the ceremony.<sup>22</sup> Then on Monday, November 16, three days before the cemetery dedication and nearly two weeks after Lincoln received his invitation, newspapers across the country published a barrage of articles datelined from Washington that announced the news: "The President has finally determined to attend the inauguration of the Gettysburg cemetery," declared the *Baltimore Daily Gazette*, the phrasing suggesting that David Wills was not the only one who had been awaiting a presidential decision.<sup>23</sup> All these reports stress Lincoln's attendance as the notable feature of the story, not mentioning any words that Lincoln might say or even that he would participate in the dedication, further evidence that at this point Lincoln or those around him who announced the news saw the ceremony mainly as an event to be attended rather than the occasion for a speech. From these accounts, it would seem that Lincoln made his final decision to attend sometime over the weekend of the 14th and 15th, or at the latest on the morning of Monday the 16th. Had Lincoln decided much before Saturday the 14th, his decision would doubtless have been published in the Saturday papers.<sup>24</sup>

It appears that two factors converged to force Lincoln to make a final decision about whether he would attend the Gettysburg ceremony. The first was simply the necessity of allowing enough time to arrange for transportation in an age of balky locomotives and unreliable railroad timetables. The newspaper reports written on the 16th announcing Lincoln's plans made much of the President's train schedule and route, which likely reflects the way the information was presented to the journalists. In addition, both Nicolay in 1894 and Carr in 1915 mentioned the travel schedule in their accounts of Lincoln's indecision. Similarities in tone and content of the press reports suggest that they originated from the same source, perhaps the telegraph office at the War Department, where Stanton was in charge of the travel plans.

One of these reports hints, however, at another element that likely induced Lincoln to finally make a decision about whether to go to Gettysburg, and perhaps reveals a crucial factor in determining that the decision would be to attend, rather than forego, the inconvenient journey. This report, published in the *Boston Herald* on November 18, was datelined Washington, November 17, has good reason to be considered a reliable source on this topic. All the major Boston newspapers devoted a great deal of attention to the Gettysburg cemetery and the dedication ceremony because of the avid support given the cemetery project by the governments of both the city of Boston and the state of Massachusetts. Bostonians flattered themselves that they had been the first to arrange for the proper burial of Union soldiers at Gettysburg, in this case those from their city and state. Boston and Massachusetts sent large delegations to the dedication ceremony, and the governor of the state afterward gave the event a prominent place in his

annual address to the state legislature in January, 1864.<sup>25</sup> At the time of the dedication ceremony reporters for Boston newspapers were particularly well informed about the internal history of the cemetery project and the future plans for further decoration of the grounds, as shown in the *Boston Herald* article in question, which contains a number of accurate details proving the author knew of the latest developments regarding Lincoln's plans for his brief trip to Gettysburg. "The President did not believe that he could leave for so brief a time even," the article then added, "but at the urgent solicitation of several Executives of the States so concerned."

This direct language ascribing thoughts to Lincoln is unusual and suggests that the reporter had reason to believe that this was an authentic account of the President's thinking. Although the *Boston Herald* article did not mention any governors by name, on November 14, that is, the Saturday of the weekend that Lincoln apparently made his final decision to attend the ceremony, Lincoln did in fact meet with one governor: none other than Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania. Curtin, fresh from his difficult re-election campaign, wanted to meet with Lincoln to discuss patronage appointments. "I will ask very little," he explained, "but you can readily imagine that in such a contest [referring to the recent elections] compromises had to be made."<sup>26</sup> With the New York governor's mansion in the hands of Democrats, Pennsylvania was the largest Republican state and was vital to the Party, to the Union cause, and to Lincoln's looming re-election campaign, as the state in 1864 would account for nearly a quarter of the electoral college votes needed for victory. Lincoln had been deeply concerned with the recent election there and during the campaign had been in almost continual contact with political operatives and elected officials from the state including Curtin, former Secretary of War Cameron, and the man vilified by Democrats as "Lincoln's dog," John W. Forney, the Clerk of the Senate and owner of several important newspapers, most notably the *Philadelphia Press* and the *Washington Daily Morning Chronicle*, often referred to as the unofficial press organ of the Lincoln administration.

We know nothing of Lincoln's discussions with Curtin about patronage during their November 14 meeting, but we do know that they discussed the Gettysburg ceremony. Curtin was, of course, deeply committed to the cemetery project and according to David Wills's press release of November 7 had even initiated the idea of inviting Lincoln. The governor appears to have spoken with Lincoln about his plans for the upcoming dedication ceremony, writing two days later that Lincoln's plans were "not definitely settled when I left Washington," but adding that "I have no doubt the President will go [to Gettysburg] direct by Baltimore."<sup>27</sup> It would be very much like Lincoln to not make an instant decision about going, even with the chief executive of Pennsylvania pressing him, but if the *Boston Herald* article is accurate, it would seem reasonable to conclude that it was Curtin's "urgent solicitation" that may have given Lincoln an additional reason to finally decide that he could make the trip. Political life of the day required building and maintaining networks of reciprocal obligation, and we know that around the time of the dedication ceremony Lincoln acceded to several of Curtin's requests regarding patronage appointments. Lincoln may have viewed the journey to Gettysburg in part as a similar favor.<sup>28</sup>

Lincoln, however, had waited so long to decide whether he would go to Gettysburg that there was considerable confusion in the press about the travel arrangements, reflecting confusion in the White House and administration more generally.<sup>29</sup> Stanton queried the railroads about a travel schedule, probably on the 16th, but evidently without much sense of Lincoln's wishes. Acting under the assumption that "economy of time" was essential, the railroads on the 17th responded with an itinerary that had the presidential party leaving Washington the day of the ceremony at 6 a.m. and returning by midnight. Some of the newspaper articles datelined November 16 reported this schedule, but sometime during the morning of Tuesday the 17th Lincoln wrote Stanton, "I do not like this arrangement. I do not so wish to so go that by the slightest accident we fail entirely, and, at the best, the whole to be a mere breathless running of the gauntlet."<sup>30</sup> Economy of time, it seems, was not the highest priority: Lincoln wanted to be sure that he arrived in time for the ceremony.

Without a travel schedule, Lincoln could not announce a departure time, or even a date, at the mid-day cabinet meeting on Tuesday, the 17th, as he had hoped. Late into the afternoon the office of the Secretary of State still did not know whether Seward, Lincoln, and the others in the official party would be conducting business as usual in Washington or traveling to Gettysburg on Wednesday.<sup>31</sup> At some point, Stanton and Lincoln finally consulted about the plans and arrived at a schedule more to the president's liking that had Lincoln leaving Washington at noon on the 18th, the day before the ceremony, and returning just after the ceremony on the 19th.<sup>32</sup> The *New York Express* and other papers reported that this schedule was designed to get Lincoln to the ceremony "without fail," which is undoubtedly an echo of Lincoln's determination, expressed in his note to Stanton, not to "fail entirely" by attempting to make the trip in one day. The railroads telegraphed their acceptance of this new schedule at 3:50 p.m. on Tuesday, November 17, and the issue was finally settled. Lincoln was going to Gettysburg—the next day.

Lincoln's decision to attend the Gettysburg ceremonies closed the circle that, since the battle itself, was emerging to link Gettysburg and the nation, David Wills and Abraham Lincoln, as so powerfully expressed in the speech monument at the Gettysburg National Cemetery. Wills's letter of invitation was Lincoln's first and most important source of information about what was expected of him at Gettysburg; there was no prior invitation. That being the case, the letter and the plans of the cemetery organizers more generally deserve greater attention from those who seek a clearer idea of the contexts affecting the composition of Lincoln's remarks. Yet, even though Lincoln's invitation may have been tardy, it was not want of time that determined the length or content of Lincoln's speech. Wills's letter of invitation was consciously crafted to convey a specific set of expectations to the President, shaping the way Lincoln himself thought about what he was being asked to do. It was not Lincoln alone who wrote his speech, or rather, who called it into being. The entire obscure group of cemetery agents, state representatives, and Christian Commission members who consulted with David Wills had a hand in its making. Had a long oration been called for, Lincoln could no doubt have produced one during the two weeks between his invitation and the ceremony. But it was primarily Lincoln's attendance "as Chief Executive of the Nation" that was sought, which he understood full well. It is

only by exploring these precise, even seemingly trivial details surrounding Lincoln's response to his invitation to go to Gettysburg, which so deeply affected what he said there, that we can gain a full understanding of the mind of Lincoln as he turned, finally, almost upon the very eve of his journey, to composing "my remarks at Gettysburg."<sup>32</sup>

## Endnotes

- David Wills to Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress (LOC), November 2, 1863.
- Clark E. Carr initiated the notion that Lincoln received an invitation prior to November 2; Carr, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: An Address* (Chicago: McClurg, 1906). Carr's contention received wide publicity in William E. Barton, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: What He Intended to Say; What He Said; What He Was Reported to Have Said; What He Wished He Had Said* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1930) and Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 2: 452 and 454. This assertion was reinforced by Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration: "A New Birth of Freedom"* (Fort Wayne, IN: Lincoln National Life Foundation, 1964) and by Frank L. Klement, *The Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery and Lincoln's Address: Aspects and Angles*. (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane, 1993). Klement's work, published earlier as articles, was followed by Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). More recently, Gabor Boritt accepts that there was an early invitation to Lincoln, though he does not mention Carr; *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech that Nobody Knows* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2006), 38.
- Lamon Papers, Huntington Library. (Printed with permission) Unlike Wills's other correspondence, the orthography of this letter is sloppy, with words half-scrawled, and there are many ink blotches on the paper, at the top of which is the notation "[copy]" in brackets in the original, though whether this word is in Wills's hand is not certain. Yet, the rest of the letter appears to be, and the signature certainly is, in Wills's hand, all of which suggests that this document is a copy of the original letter that Wills made for his files or that he made at Lamon's request.
- David H. Donald, probably following Klement's, *Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, states that before the November 2 invitation the cemetery organizers likely had "informal contacts" with Lincoln through Lamon, who was "probably" chosen to be marshal for "just this reason." *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 460. Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 369, follows Klement, stating that Lincoln was aware from Lamon that the invitation was coming and "he set to work on his 'remarks' weeks in advance, as though it were a major state paper."
- Lamon's several requests for aid dated November 5 stating that he had accepted the offer to be Marshal can be found in his papers at the Huntington Library. B. French, who will be Lamon's chief assistant, noted in his diary on November 6 that Lamon had asked for his help; French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870*, edited by Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), 431. The sometimes sycophantic French, who was dependent upon Lincoln's good graces for his position, wrote nothing in his diary to suggest that Lamon may have told him that Lincoln was attending the dedication. Kunhardt, who is sometimes unreliable, quotes Lamon without attribution as having "most cheerfully" accepted the invitation on November 4; Philip B. Kunhardt, *A New Birth of Freedom: Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 37. The timing of Lincoln's letter to Logan, below, also strongly supports the argument that as of November 9 Lamon had only recently learned of his invitation to be the parade marshal.
- Klement, *Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, 21.
- Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. 9 vols. (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-5), 7: 7. The Gettysburg ceremony was a family affair in more ways than one, as another of Logan's daughters was married to an uncle of John Hay, from whom Lincoln may have recently learned that, "Judge Logan whom we had been led to give up is not at all copperish"; John Hay diary, Springfield, Illinois, October 13, 1863, in Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds. *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 92.
- Klement argues that this letter proves that Lincoln had decided to attend the ceremony; *Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, 247 n. 49 and 248 n. 6. Klement, "Ward H. Lamon and the Dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg" *Civil War History* 31 (December 1985), 293-308 on page 295 incorrectly gave the date of the letter as October 30. This error was repeated by Garry Wills,

Lincoln at Gettysburg, 25, and appears to have given him increased confidence in his assertion that Lincoln had laboriously prepared his remarks over an extended period.

- <sup>9</sup> Speed's recollections appeared in the *Louisville Commercial*, November 12, 1879. Nicolay cited Speed's account in his article and the similar phrasing of the two accounts makes it difficult to know whether Nicolay's version is an independent recollection; Nicolay, "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," 596. Nicolay and Hay wrote that "President Lincoln expressed his willingness to perform the duty requested of him," a wording that suggests an intent to attend but not a firm commitment. With monopoly access to Lincoln's papers at that time, Nicolay and Hay were generally quite careful about citing sources, and the lack of a citation for this statement, expressing as it does some knowledge of Lincoln's actions and intent, is somewhat unusual. Moreover, the lack of details in this account by Lincoln's former secretaries suggest that they may have been describing more what they expected Lincoln had done than any positive knowledge of an actual response; Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*. 10 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1890), 8: 190.
- <sup>10</sup> *Galesburg Daily Republican-Register*, October 7, 1915, an account of a speech by Carr at the unveiling on the lawn of the town library of a tablet inscribed with the Gettysburg Address.
- <sup>11</sup> Telegram to James C. Conkling, August 20, 1863; *Collected Works*, 6: 399. Lincoln said "it will be rather a good letter" according to Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 7: 381.
- <sup>12</sup> William J. Albert to Abraham Lincoln, April 13, 1864; Lincoln Papers, LOC.
- <sup>13</sup> George, Joseph. "The World Will Little Note? The Philadelphia Press and the Gettysburg Address", *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 114/3 (July 1990): 385-398. George is first to discover this source, but he over-interprets Wills's statement to mean that Lincoln had already been invited. The *Gettysburg Compiler* of October 19, 1863, carried what appears to be a brief summary of the article, but there is no indication that the article benefited from independent information from Wills. Klement, (*Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, 139) notes that *Gettysburg Compiler* 19 Oct 1863 stated that "President Lincoln will also be present and participate in the ceremonies."
- <sup>14</sup> The article asserted as a fact that Longfellow would "prepare" an ode for the occasion and that "all" the governors of the loyal states had consented to attend, for example, which was not true. But Wills certainly hoped that all the governors would attend. It states that the cabinet members and foreign ministers "have been extended invitations," but all the extant invitations to Cabinet members were sent in early November. In addition, the article states that a monument at the center of the cemetery will bear a tablet listing the names of the fallen, but at the time this was only one among several possibilities for the placement and arrangement of the monument. In the end, the monument when dedicated in 1869 was indeed at the center, but it did not have an external tablet listing the names of the dead.
- <sup>15</sup> Wills to Lamon, October 30, 1863, Lamon papers, Huntington Library. This letter is discussed in more detail below.
- <sup>16</sup> Wills to Curtin, October 23, 1863, Klement *Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, 9.
- <sup>17</sup> *Adams County Sentinel* [Gettysburg], November 10, 1863. Later in the same statement, while listing the order of events of the dedication ceremony, Wills mentioned "Dedicatory remarks by the President of the United States," but I take this to be a generic description of the program, rather than an indication that Lincoln had actually accepted the invitation. The lack of a definitive response from Lincoln appears to have left its mark on the Boston and Massachusetts agents at Gettysburg, as well. In their official report to the Boston City Council, the agents wrote that large crowds attended the dedication ceremony, in part because the President was "expected to be present." This seems an odd phrasing after the event, when Lincoln had in fact attended, and is perhaps a lingering echo of the uncertainty about Lincoln's plans; *Boston City Document 106. Report of the Joint Special Committee* (Boston, MA: J. E. Farwell, 1863), 14.
- <sup>18</sup> Letter reprinted in the *Baltimore Clipper*, November 17, 1863.
- <sup>19</sup> Seward had probably already informed Wills or Lamon that he would definitely attend. In an article datelined Washington, November 16, the *New York Herald* of November 17 reported that Seward had introduced several Italian naval officers to Lincoln and that the Italians would be going with Seward to Gettysburg, as indeed they did. There was no mention of whether Lincoln would also be going or even that he had been invited.
- <sup>20</sup> Lamon arrived in Gettysburg in the late afternoon of the 12th to plan the final details with David Wills; French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, 431. Upon returning to Washington, Lamon arranged to have printed and distributed to the press a description of the civil procession from the town to the cemetery that he had agreed upon with Wills; *Washington Sunday Chronicle*, November 15. This "Order of Procession" included Lincoln but also Lieutenant General Winfield Scott and Admiral Charles Stewart, neither of whom attended; nor had the officers told Wills they would attend, for both later wrote Wills giving their excuses. Lincoln's inclusion on the program thus cannot be taken as a sign that he had informed Wills that he would attend the dedication.
- <sup>21</sup> David Wills to W. H. Seward, November 14, 1863; William Henry Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books & Special Collections, University of Rochester Library (Printed with permission) Gideon Welles Papers, reel 33, LOC. This letter was mentioned by Klement but not quoted. It undermines his contention that Lincoln had been asked to attend the dedication, and had firmly decided to go, long before receiving the formal invitation of November 2; Klement, *Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery*, 247 n. 49.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Philadelphia Press*, one of the papers owned by the usually well-informed John Forney, on November 12 referred to "the presence of the high officials of the nation and the State" with no mention of Lincoln. Similarly, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* reported on November 14 that "many distinguished men from all parts of the country" will be present, again not naming Lincoln. An article in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, November 17, 1863, datelined Washington, November 16, stated that "the President has changed his mind," and will go to Gettysburg.
- <sup>23</sup> Including the *Baltimore Daily Gazette*, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, the *Philadelphia Press*, and the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*. The articles in all these papers were datelined Washington, November 16, and were printed in the November 17 editions. On the 18th, the *Boston Herald* and the *New York World* printed similar announcements, datelined Washington, November 17. But many other newspapers continued to make no mention of Lincoln's plans.
- <sup>24</sup> There were few Sunday papers at this time. The Sunday, November 15, edition of the *Washington Sunday Chronicle*, a newspaper with close ties to the administration, did not refer to Lincoln's plans. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* of Monday, November 16, printed reports datelined Washington, November 15, but nothing about Gettysburg.
- <sup>25</sup> *Boston City Document 106* details the efforts of Bostonian officials to bury their dead, begun as early as July 23. See also John A. Andrew, *Address of His Excellency John A. Andrew, to the two branches of the Legislature of Massachusetts...* Boston: Wright and Potter, 1864.
- <sup>26</sup> Curtin to Lincoln, October 27, 1863; Lincoln Papers, LOC.
- <sup>27</sup> Curtin to Morton McMichael, November 16, 1863; Curtin Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives, cited in Boritt, *Gettysburg Gospel*, 38.
- <sup>28</sup> See Curtin to Lincoln 28 October, 4 November, 6 November, 1863; Lincoln papers, LOC.
- <sup>29</sup> Arrangements for the train journey left an unusually large mark in the documentary record, a sign of the confusion and difficulty of coordinating such an enterprise at the last moment. The record includes a November 17 note from Stanton to Lincoln conveying the railroad's proposed one day schedule; Lincoln's endorsement written on Stanton's note and rejecting the one day schedule; railroad executive John Garret's 3:50 pm telegram on November 17 accepting Stanton's proposed two-day schedule; and Stanton's note to Lincoln of November 17 stating that the railroads had accepted the two-day schedule; Basler, *Collected Works*, 7: 16 and Lincoln Papers, LOC.
- <sup>30</sup> *Collected Works*, 7: 16. Lamon had just returned from Gettysburg and may have told Lincoln about the arduous journey to Gettysburg by rail. The columnist known as "Occasional" in the *Philadelphia Press*, in an article datelined Washington, November 16, emphasized that Lincoln won't be able to "extend his tour" because he needed to work on his annual message to Congress. The "Occasional" column was generally written or inspired by John W. Forney.
- <sup>31</sup> Diary of Thomas H. Duval, who hoped to meet with Seward and Lincoln, quoted in James Marten, "'Dancing attendance in the ante-chambers of the great': A Texas Unionist goes to Washington, 1863" *Lincoln Herald* 90 (1988): 84-86.
- <sup>32</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 7: 16; *The Washington Evening Star*, November 17, 1863. Many newspapers reported this accurate schedule in their November 17 editions along with the fact that Nicolay would accompany the President, suggesting that it was Nicolay who announced the final schedule to the press sometime in the early afternoon; see the *New York Express*, November 17, 1863, for example.
- <sup>33</sup> Lincoln to Edward Everett, November 21, 1863; Lincoln Papers, LOC.

# Upcoming Events

## 2007 McMurtry Lecture

Doris Kearns Goodwin will give The Lincoln Museum's annual McMurtry Lecture on September 21, 2007. For more information contact The Lincoln Museum, Ft. Wayne, Indiana. See page 2 of *Lincoln Lore* for contact instructions.

## Lincoln Forum

Lincoln Forum: "Lincoln, Law, and Justice" November 16-18, 2007, Gettysburg, PA ([www.TheLincolnForum.org](http://www.TheLincolnForum.org)).

## Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission Celebration Events:

**February 12, 2008**—"Kentucky Kick Off" Lincoln Birthplace, Hodgenville, KY

**Mother's Day 2008**—Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Lincoln City, IN

**February 12, 2009**—"Lincoln Birthday Gala" Washington, D.C.

**May 25, 2009**—"Rededication of the Lincoln Memorial" Washington, D.C.

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