

LINCOLN LORE

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BIXBY LETTER FACSIMILES

Abraham Lincoln wrote to the Widow Bixby that he had been "shown in the files of the War Department" a statement that she was "the mother of five sons who had died gloriously on the field of battle." He did not doubt the records and wrote out of a heart full of compassion for her great loss. While the information he had may not have been correct, that fact has no bearing whatever on the composition of the letter or the sympathy expressed by the President for one whom he was advised had laid "so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom." What Lincoln believed about the Bixby family is of more importance than what historians have discovered about this group.

This monograph does not propose to examine the literary worth of the Bixby letter. We take it for granted that the place it occupies in American literature is merited. Whether or not literary critics of England ever pronounced it to be "the most elegant diction extant" is not so important in the quest before us.

We would like to know, however, about the identical copy of the letter which is reported to have hung on the walls of Brasenose College, Oxford University, and this brings before us the question which this discussion desires to raise—where is the original copy of the Bixby letter?

This approach calls for the classification of the early facsimiles and a critical study of the hand writing in the reproductions now available. While there has been serious doubt about the many facsimiles having been reproduced from the original in Lincoln's own hand there never has been any question as to the accepted text having been composed and written by Mr. Lincoln.

1. The Original Writing

The Bixby letter was written by Mr. Lincoln on the very same day that Adjutant General William Schouler's appeal for the widow appeared in the Boston Transcript of November 21st. Several weeks previous to that date Mr. Lincoln had received information about Mrs. Bixby from Governor Andrew. The President wrote to General Schouler for details about the family and other data had been gathered for him. Undoubtedly it was General Schouler's article in the Transcript which caused Lincoln to write the letter to Mrs. Bixby at that specific time. He penned and forwarded it to Gen-

eral Schouler for delivery as he did not know the widow's address. No one had been able thus far to trace the letter after it reached Mrs. Bixby's hands. If the original letter is in existence today the public does not know where it is in hiding.

2. The Printed Text

On Friday evening, March 25, 1864, the Boston Transcript carried the first printing of the Bixby letter. The next morning the Boston Journal had a story about Mrs. Bixby and printed the letter received by her from the President. A comparison of these printings in the Transcript (see text below) and Journal shows a few inconsistencies in punctuation but that is all.

2. Tobin Facsimile

Michael F. Tobin of New York City registered with the Librarian of Congress on April 25, 1891, an engraving entitled "Lincoln's Letter." Just above the letter in the center of the sheet was a picture of Lincoln. These broad-

Executive Mansion,

Washington, Nov. 21, 1864

Dear Madam,—I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle.

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.

Yours, very sincerely and respectfully,

A. LINCOLN.

Mrs. Bixby.

sides were sold by Tobin at two dollars each. Where he secured the copy from which his facsimile letter was made is not known.

4. Huber Facsimile

The editor has before him at this time a copy of the Bixby letter bearing this inscription: "Facsimile of the Original Manuscript on Exhibition at Huber's Museum in New York City." It is not definitely known where Huber acquired this item although one writer who had done considerable original research previous to 1922 with reference to the letter claims it is a facsimile of the Tobin letter.

6. Stuart Facsimile

Many years ago Mr. Frederick Meserve of New York presented to Judge Fish a photograph of what appeared to be the original copy of the letter. This photograph is now in the possession of the Lincoln Historical Research

Foundation. Mr. Meserve was under the impression that the photograph was made from a letter in the possession of Judd Stuart, one of the famous "Fig Four" Lincoln collectors. Whether or not it was the original has not been learned.

7. Boston Globe Facsimile

What seems to be the first facsimile to be released in a publication of general circulation appeared in the Boston Globe for April 12, 1908. It has not been learned just what copy was used for this reproduction.

After a very careful study of the many facsimile reproductions of the Bixby letter now before the writer and a comparison with the general characteristics of Lincoln's handwriting there does not seem to be anything in the context or the form of the letter that should cause doubt as to its genuineness. Somewhere we believe the original copy of the letter will be found and hope that those in charge of the following collections will do all in their power to try and find some clue to the original.

(a) Oxford University, England

The following inscription printed in 1905 was used on the margin of a facsimile of the letter "An engrossed copy of this facsimile letter of President Lincoln to Mrs. Bixby hangs on the walls of Brasenose College, Oxford University, England as 'a specimen of the purest English and most elegant diction, etc.'" In 1908, however, Hon. Whitelaw Reid was advised by the librarian that those who had been at the university for thirty years or more knew nothing of the letter.

(b) J. Pierpont Morgan Library

In 1922 Kendall Banning prepared for *The Bookman* an exhaustive article on "The Case of Lydia Bixby" and he concluded that "The original Lincoln letter is now in the collection of J. Pierpont Morgan in New York City." The Morgan family, however, is said to know nothing about the letter.

(c) Old State House, Boston

In 1925 Charles F. Reed, secretary and treasurer of the Bostonian Society, made this statement: "I am positive that we have never had any copy whatever except a so-called facsimile." It was alleged many times that the society was in possession of the original.

(d) Library of Congress

We are not surprised that many have felt that the original writing is preserved in the Library of Congress. Authorities there, however, claim that they have never exhibited any writing which could be confused with the original.

(e) Huntington Library

It would be very interesting to know where Judd Stewart acquired the letter from which the Meserve photograph was made. Possibly the Huntington Library at San Marino, California, which acquired the collection of Stuart, might be able to learn the origin of the letter.