

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE HOOKER LETTER

At a recent auction sale in Philadelphia, a letter written on January 26, 1863, by Abraham Lincoln to General Hooker, brought the sum of \$15,000. It was but one of the many Lincoln rarities sold formerly in the possession of Col. Louis J. Kolb. At the evening session of the auction, set apart for the sale of Presidential manuscripts, there were one hundred and fifty-seven lots offered for sale, thirty-nine of which were Lincoln items. These thirty-nine Lincoln items averaged approximately \$625 a lot. The amount realized for the one hundred and eighteen autographs of other Presidents including 16 Washington items, averaging but \$80.00 a lot.

Matthew Brady took three dozen portraits of Lincoln, but one of them is so generally admired it has been set apart from the others and is known as "The Brady Photograph." Lincoln wrote three dozen letters to General Hooker, but one of the lot has become so famous it is known as "The Hooker Letter." It is this remarkable letter which brought top price during a one day auction sale from which there was realized \$70,753.50.

Just previous to the recent sale of this letter, the Lincoln National Life Foundation was pleased to receive a photostat copy of the original letter from Mr. George J. C. Grasberger, the compiler of the catalogue.

This is not the first time the Hooker letter has changed hands. It was offered at auction in the Freeman sale at Philadelphia on November 14, 1924 and brought \$14,000 at that time. Previous to this, it had been in possession of George C. Thomas of Philadelphia, whose remarkable collection of autographs, were put up at auction.

The mere fact that Lincoln in this remarkable letter is advising Hooker of his appointment to the command of the Army of the Potomac, has little to do with the actual value of the manuscript. Neither does the political atmosphere suggested which it is claimed, by some authors, to have been indirectly responsible for the appointment, enhance its value to any considerable degree. The value of this letter to a very large extent, is vested in the fact that it offers a magnificent character sketch of the President himself, which displays so many of those qualities which have set Lincoln apart

from other men of his time, and all times. While the letter is "one of the finest examples of composition in the English language" we cannot feel that

"Executive Mansion,  
Washington,  
January 26, 1863

"Major General Hooker:  
General.

"I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals, who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticizing their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it.

"And now, beware of rashness.—Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

"Yours very truly  
A. Lincoln."

even this outstanding feature has allowed it to gain its great desirability.

The letter reveals the frankness and downright integrity on the part of the President. Lincoln does not review Hooker's shortcomings until the general has been complimented on many of his commendable traits. Lincoln's freedom from a spirit of retaliation is exhibited when he wavers criticisms which Hooker has made of him personally, and caps the incident by promising all possible aid to him. Possibly the finest display of magnanimity is found in Lincoln's promise to attempt to break down the spirit of criticism engendered to a large extent by Hooker himself, and which now seems about to turn on its author. Lincoln was not willing as many would have been to stand by and see Hooker reap what he had sowed.

Possibly the confirmation of the Lincoln spirit, found to such a full degree in this famous letter, may be discovered in other correspondence which passed between Lincoln and General Hooker.

After nearly four months had passed without General Hooker gaining any important objective, Lincoln wrote on May 7, "Have you already in your mind a plan wholly or partially formed? If you have, prosecute it without interference from me. If you have not, please inform me, so that I, incompetent as I may be, can try and assist in the formation of some plan for the army."

By June 16 there had developed such an attitude of suspicion between General Hooker and General Halleck that a personal letter was written to Hooker reviewing the misunderstanding between them, and in this letter Lincoln uses one of his most classic sentences. He said with respect to their attitudes, "If you and he would use the same frankness to one another and to me, that I use to both of you, there would be no difficulty. I need and must have the professional skill of both, and yet these suspicions tend to deprive me of both. . . . Now, all I ask is that you will be in such mood that we can get into our action the best cordial judgment of yourself and General Halleck, with my poor mite added. If indeed he and you shall think it entitled to any consideration at all."