

# LINCOLN LORE

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## FRANCIS BICKNELL CARPENTER, 1830-1900

Members of the Lincoln Advisory Group who selected F. B. Carpenter as one whose name should be inscribed on the Lincoln Recognition Roster were probably motivated by two considerations, the value of his reminiscences and the preservation on canvas of one of the great American episodes. Carpenter's book, "Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln" and Carpenter's painting, "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet by President Lincoln" have contributed much to history and art.

Francis Bicknell Carpenter was born in Homer, New York, in 1830. At fourteen years of age he became a pupil of Sandford Thayer at Syracuse and remained with him for six months. That was the sum total of his instruction in art. He returned to Homer and engaged in portrait painting until 1851 when at twenty-one years of age he opened a studio in New York. For nearly fifty years he followed his profession and maintained a studio at 52 East Twenty-Third Street, New York, at the time of his death. He passed away at the Presbyterian Hospital on May 23, 1900.

### The Book

While the book containing the reminiscences by Carpenter is usually considered an item apart from his art work, it is really an elaborate prospectus for his anticipated painting of "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation." The book was so timed that the publishing date would occur simultaneous with the distribution of the engravings.

The book was first published under the title, "Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln." On the title page also was the descriptive line, "The Story of a Picture." Two years later attention was directed to the book itself instead of the picture and it no longer served as a prospectus but sought recognition on its own merit. It was given a new title, "The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln" with a subtitle "Six Months at the White House." The notation about the picture was removed from the title page. The same plates were used and no change in pagination or other features were made with the exception of publisher's advertisements in the back of the book.

Hurd and Houghton published the first edition in 1866, another edition followed in 1867, both the 1868 and 1869 imprints bear the citation 24,000 copies sold. Another issue appeared in 1877 when the total sold is changed to 26,000. The book was issued again in 1879. In the edition of 1883 the publisher's imprint is changed to Houghton, Mifflin and the number of copies sold was raised to 27,000.

### The Masterpiece

We are told that many of the world's masterpieces in art are rather spontaneous in their creative stages, but Carpenter deliberately set out with plans clearly outlined to do his famous work on "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet."

Preliminary plans for his visit to Washington were made known in a letter written at his studio 653 Broadway, New York, on January 5, 1864 to Hon. Owen Lovejoy, who had visited Carpenter in his studio. It is apparent that the artist was asked to put in writing the proposals he had made with respect to the anticipated work. A few excerpts from the letter give us in Carpenter's own words his hopes and aspirations with respect to the picture.

"I have been studying upon the design for the picture for some weeks and I never felt a stronger conviction or assurance of success in any undertaking in my life!

"I propose to paint the group life size. The canvas will be about ten feet high by sixteen in length. The figures will be grouped around the table in the President's apartment,—the accessories to be as literal as possible.

"I have chosen a moment when a suggestion or criticism is being offered (I had fixed upon Mr. Seward as

the one most likely to take the lead.) which gives occasion for the President to lift his eyes from the manuscript which he holds in one hand directing his attention to Mr. Seward. Opposite the President will be Mr. Chase and the others in various attitudes, some sitting and some standing will be grouped about the table.

"The arrangement of the figures is I think natural, the parts are well balanced, the interests centering as it would in the person of Mr. Lincoln and I think it will make one of the most interesting pictures of this or any other age.

"Certainly there has been no such subject for a historical picture since the Declaration of Independence!"

After Carpenter began his studies in Washington he wrote a letter to a friend on February 21, 1864, advising him of his arrival and stated, "President Lincoln upon hearing of my design very kindly offered me the facilities of the White House." The State Dining Room was made available for Carpenter's studio and here on July 22 the finished work was viewed by the President and his cabinet.

When the painting was completed an engraving of the canvas was made on steel by A. H. Ritchie and The Derby and Miller Publishing Company of New York became the distributors of the engraving, the original plate being 21 x 32 inches.

After the engraving was made and before 1878, the figure of Lincoln was changed somewhat, to allow it to stand out more prominently in the group. The retouched painting was purchased by Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson who presented it to the United States Government. The original canvas now hangs in the east staircase of the house wing in the Capitol building.

### The Family Group

Carpenter also made a painting of the Lincoln family for the publisher, J. C. Buttre, but it was not done from life. Robert Todd is our authority for the fact that neither his mother nor Robert himself ever posed for Mr. Carpenter. While the artist attempted to portray the Lincoln family of five people as they appeared in 1861, he used a photograph of Abraham Lincoln and "Tad" taken in 1864 as the nucleus for the group.

Buttre paid Carpenter \$500 for the canvas and after this initial cost, \$1164.50 was expended in having an engraved plate of the painting made. The original painting was rescued from certain destruction by Warren C. Crane of New York City, who had the painting restored and then presented it to the New York Historical Society.

### Individual Portraits

It is impossible to discover where there originated so many of the individual portraits of Mr. Lincoln, alleged to have been made by Carpenter. One student of the artist's work has discovered at least six of these different paintings. The Foundation archives not only possesses what is claimed to be an original Carpenter, but in its correspondence files it has preserved information about at least half a dozen more studies, one a full length portrait, all said to have been made by Carpenter. Possibly the best known individual portrait of Lincoln by the famous artist hangs at the Union League Club in New York. There is also a portrait of Lincoln and his son Tad said to have been done by Carpenter, companion portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln made in 1864 for Jasper Cropsey and a Lincoln death bed scene.

It is doubtful if any other portrait painter has had his studies of Abraham Lincoln reproduced in so many different processes and in such large numbers as Francis Bicknell Carpenter, whose profession is worthily represented by him on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.

Note: This is the second of a series of biographical sketches on the ten persons selected by the Foundation Advisory Group for enrollment on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.