

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS M. JOHNSON'S PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN

Three early portrait painters, Barry, Hicks and Johnson are more often mentioned than others among those who made studies of Lincoln from life during the political campaign of 1860. The work done by Barry and the sketch by Hicks have been preserved by lithographic reproductions, but the whereabouts of Johnson's effort is problematical.

Thomas M. Johnson was commissioned by C. H. Brainard, a Boston lithographer, to go to Springfield, Illinois, and make a study of the Republican nominee for the presidency. Letters which he wrote to Mr. Brainard have been preserved and likewise notes he wrote to his father about the progress of his work are available. The combined correspondence to Brainard and the elder Johnson allows us to present a fairly comprehensive story about the Springfield visit.

It will be more satisfactory to present the excerpts from the letters in chronological order and inasmuch as they were all written by Mr. Johnson from Springfield, Illinois, the place is omitted and only the date and name of addressee are preserved in the preliminaries. The closing salutations are omitted entirely.

July 18, 1860

Dear Brainard:

I arrived here at five o'clock today, and proceeded to once to Mr. Lincoln's not finding him at his home, I went to his office where I had the pleasure of a short interview (with) him. He seemed very much engaged but I am happy to say expressed himself much pleased to see me and consented to sit to me for his portrait without the least hesitation. I will commence tomorrow at half past seven.

July 19, 1860

Dear Father:

I saw Mr. Lincoln soon after my arrival. He had hardly read one letter before he consented to sit, and appointed tomorrow morning for the first sitting.

July 20, 1860

Dear Brainard:

I have not yet seen Mr. Lincoln's home except from the outside and cannot give you a glowing description of it nor its inmates. I commenced the portrait today under the most favorable circumstances. I feel sure of getting a good thing. Perhaps I shall be able to send you "an interesting letter" tomorrow I will try.

I have just 27 dollars in pocket and as my board bill will amount to about 15 dollars and my fare 3 more than I now possess, I am obliged to call on you to fill the gap.

Dear Father:

Mr. Lincoln is a very tall, awkward-looking man, but with a face and head that I really consider beautiful in the extreme, when compared with all the pictures that have been published over his name.

This fact is very encouraging to me. I had reason to expect to see a face that reminded one of an over-sized pear than anything else. Mr. Lincoln's title of ugly must be owing to his figure entirely.

July 22, 1860

Dear Brainard:

Mr. Lincoln has not yet invited me to his home, therefore I have not yet seen any of his family except himself.

I have had two satisfactory sittings from him and feel certain of being able to make a likeness that every Republican will have reason to be proud of: for I believe no man's personal appearance has been so variously

misrepresented as the Hon—Abraham Lincoln's. I was not aware that it was possible for photographs taken from life to so misrepresent the human face. The only one that gives any idea of him is the profile which I told you before I left Boston I preferred to all others: this is somewhat like him but does not do him justice. Volk's bust gives a good general idea of him but lacks detail. Barry's original drawing is like him in very many respects but the lithograph from it is a failure.

Mr. Lincoln has a fine head and face the expression of which indicates an amiable disposition combined with great force of character. The upper part of his head is quite Websterian. Mr. Lincoln's title of "ugly" must be owing entirely to his figure and gait; the length of the former destroying to some extent the grace of the latter. I am quite well and enjoy my visit much. Please write me a long letter.

Dear Father:

Mr. Lincoln sat for the second time yesterday, and I have made good progress. I hope to finish it in three more sittings, for he is a first-rate sitter, and a much better looking man than I had reason to suppose him to be. His ugliness is entirely owing to his figure.

July 23, 1860

Dear Brainard:

I was delighted to hear from you today and hope you will write often. Mr. Lincoln sits every day early in the morning thus far I have had three sittings and the picture is nearly done. I thank you for having my way for me in Chicago. I presume I shall feel quite at home there in consequence. I am sorry that I have been unable as yet to see a copy of Mr. Hick's picture. He should have sent one to Mr. Lincoln before now; however if it is no better than Volk's bust I am not afraid of it. Mr. Lincoln and myself are good friends and get along well together. He is very much pleased with my work: he says B's lith. is a total failure; he also says that B's original drawing pleased Mrs. Lincoln better than Hick's portrait so I think I have no reason to fear Hicks. Everybody laughs at B's lith. in this city. it is very unpopular.

July 26, 1860

Dear Father:

The picture is finished. I leave for Chicago tonight. The picture is a decided success.

(end of correspondence)

From this correspondence we must conclude that Johnson made an original study of Lincoln from life which he states in one of his letters was "a decided success." We are wondering if Mr. Brainard who commissioned him to execute the portrait was of the same opinion?

Brainard brought out a lithograph of Lincoln in 1860 with the initials T. H. J. under the portrait but it is not a reproduction of a painting from life. It is a slightly retouched copy of a photograph made by a Springfield photographer by the name of C. S. German who had a studio on the State House square. It is known in the Meserve classification of Lincoln prints as number nine, and is from the same negative as the one presented to Mrs. Chapman. Apparently it was taken about the time of Johnson's visit. Johnson complains in one of his letters how "photographs taken from life misrepresent the human face," nevertheless the only contribution we have bearing his initials are retouched photographs. What became of his portrait of Abraham Lincoln made at Springfield in July, 1860?