

LINCOLN LORE

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HISTORY OF THE LINCOLN PAPERS IN LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The History of The Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress should follow the brief account of the ceremonies arranged for the opening of the papers as recorded in the last issue of Lincoln Lore. The origin and growth of the collection, weeding out process, custodians of the papers, various archives where the manuscripts have been housed, and the present permanent location are some of the items of general interest.

While a few documents of the early Illinois years were saved by Mr. Lincoln the first considerable number of letters which laid the foundation for the collection was the Congressional correspondence he received between 1847 and 1849 inclusive. It may prove to be one of the most valuable unused sources and inasmuch as it was Lincoln's first batch of letters written by his constituents and political friends it is safe to conclude that this phase of the collection is fairly comprehensive.

With Lincoln's nomination to the Presidency the matter of discrimination as to what should be preserved faced both Mr. Lincoln and his secretary, John Nicolay. In a letter to a friend written during the 1860 campaign Nicolay said: "Mr. Lincoln's mail averages as many as fifty letters a day." At this ratio over the period of the political canvass these writings would total 9000 letters. Here began the first weeding out process which probably continued throughout Lincoln's life. During the presidential years we have evidence of the great basketfuls of correspondence that was not retained and while a few of the great number of threatening letters were destroyed some of them illustrating the general character of the abuses heaped on the President have been preserved.

Upon the death of Abraham Lincoln it is natural that his oldest son Robert, recently graduated from Harvard University, should become the logical beneficiary into whose hands these personally possessed papers should fall. He had the personal assistance of Nicolay and Hay in gathering and packing the papers of his father, the contents of which he knew practically nothing as he had been at the White House only at short intervals. We have proof that there came into the hands of John Nicolay probably at this time a great many items formerly in possession of the President but which had been turned over to Hay by the President himself or by Robert. The Anderson Galleries sold some of Nicolay's belongings on Jan. 6, 1905 and in the catalogue are listed many items once belonging to Abraham Lincoln. Helen Nicolay has recently presented to the Library of Congress her father's papers which will become a valuable supplement to the Lincoln Papers.

Within two weeks of his father's death, in a letter to Professor Child of Harvard, Robert stated that the papers of his father had been "sealed and deposited in a safe place." He further stated that in a few years along with Nicolay and Hay and some of his father's friends he would "open the boxes and glean out what is useless and classify the remainder."

Just when the process of gleaning out these papers began is problematical but it may have been started in 1873 when Nicolay was in Chicago for about six months and in constant touch with Robert Lincoln. Just how extensive this discarding process may have been is sug-

gested by a letter written by Robert Lincoln to a person who had requested some Lincolniana for display purposes. Robert replied: "So much is included in what would be called personal relic, which is only trash unworthy to be dignified by exhibitors, that I have myself carefully avoided preserving some things I once had."

It is doubtful if the correspondence between members of the Lincoln family, with the exception of a few telegrams, ever found a place in the Lincoln Papers. Certainly the letters Lincoln wrote to his wife would not be placed in the presidential archives. A most natural procedure for the widow to follow after the death of Mr. Lincoln would be to gather the personal correspondence with her husband as the most sacred tokens of their twenty-three years of married life. When Mrs. Lincoln died in 1882, if Mary had preserved her correspondence, it became the property of her only son Robert. Is it likely that he would send on to Nicolay at Washington the personal family correspondence of his parents to become a part of a collection containing the Congressional and Presidential papers of his father?

John Hay wrote to Robert Lincoln in 1785, after the papers had been moved to Washington, complimenting the work Nicolay had done "in arranging your papers and in preparing our history. Besides putting the manuscripts in admirable order he has made a first rate beginning at the chapters allotted to him." Edward Marshall as late as 1894 prepared an article for *The Republic* in which he tells of a visit to the study of John Nicolay where he saw the papers belonging to the Lincoln Family and mentions some of the documents which impressed him.

After the papers had been used by Nicolay & Hay for their book, *Abraham Lincoln. A History*, Robert Lincoln urged the authors to publish the *Complete Works* of his father which consisted of the writings and addresses including practically all of the documents in the President's own hand. Upon publication of the latter the original Lincoln papers were returned to Chicago and stored in the offices of the Pullman Company where they remained until some time after Robert Lincoln retired from the presidency in 1911 when they were removed to his home.

Robert Lincoln made his will on October 17, 1919 and bequeathed to his widow his entire estate with the exception of "6 trunks (18 inches square by five feet long) of Lincoln papers now in the Library of Congress." On January 21, 1923, Robert Lincoln made a deed of gift of the above papers to the Library of Congress with the specification that they should not be opened until 21 years after his death. The Library of Congress accepted the Robert Lincoln gift on the same day it was presented. On January 16, 1926 a letter by the donor was received at the Library of Congress modifying the terms of the gift giving jurisdiction to the widow with respect to the availability of the papers previous to their legal opening, and also making provisions for their cataloguing. With the death of Robert Lincoln on July 26, 1926 the opening of the papers to the public was fixed as of July 26, 1947. Authorities at the Library of Congress have affirmed that the papers placed in their custody on October 17, 1919 are the same papers opened on July 26, 1947.