

# LINCOLN LORE

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S "MOST SATISFACTORY LIKENESS"

One of the most valuable documents in the archives of the Foundation is an original letter written by Robert Lincoln to Arthur F. Hall, founder of the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company. The correspondence is dated August 3, 1905, the same year the company was organized, and was received in answer to a request by Mr. Hall for the permission to use a portrait of Robert's father as the insignia of the institution he had established. An excerpt from the letter will reveal that this request was granted.

"I find no objection whatever to the use of a portrait of my father upon the letterhead of such a life insurance company named after him as you describe; and I take pleasure in enclosing you, for that purpose, what I regard as a very good photograph of him."

The comment made by Robert with reference to his father's picture is of importance as he stated it was "a very good photograph of him." It will be observed that this comment was made four years before the one hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, observed in 1909, when a deluge of Lincoln information flooded the nation.

During the centennial year Robert Lincoln had some reprints made of John Nicolay's article entitled *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* which appeared in the *Century Magazine* for February 1894. When these reprints were received from the publishers Robert wrote on April 22, 1909 to Daniel Fish of Minneapolis stating that he had been "awaiting the coming in to me of some reprints of Mr. Nicolay's *Century* article on the Gettysburg Address in which I was having placed a satisfactory photograph of my father . . . I take pleasure in sending you today by mail a copy of the reprint." The identical autographed pamphlet with picture bound in, is in the library of the Foundation. This picture of the President is similar to the one which Robert presented to Mr. Hall in 1905. It will be observed that in the letter to Mr. Hall, Robert referred to the photograph as being "very good" and in the Judge Fish letter "satisfactory."

Frederick Hill Meserve, the dean of Lincoln picture collectors, published in 1911 his monumental compilation, *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln*. For a frontispiece to this book containing 100 original pictures of the President, he used the same photograph given to both Mr. Hall and Judge Fish. Preliminary to the frontispiece is an explanatory note containing a facsimile of a letter received by Mr. Meserve from Robert Lincoln in which Robert makes further comments about this photograph. The letter is presented:

Chicago, March 30, 1910

60 Lake Shore Drive

Dear Mr. Meserve:

I have always thought the Brady photograph of my father, of which I attach a copy, to be the most satisfactory likeness of him.

Very sincerely yours,  
Robert T. Lincoln

The picture which Robert appraised as "very good" in 1905, "satisfactory" in 1909, by 1910 had become "the most satisfactory likeness" of the President.

The letter to Mr. Meserve also indicates that this identical Lincoln picture by this time was referred to as "the Brady photograph." Although Matthew Brady took at least thirty-five exposures of the President, about one-third of all the known originals, this is the only photograph where Brady's name is used as an identification aid.

The occasion and the purpose for the making of the photograph is of much human interest and of historical importance as well. F. B. Carpenter was commissioned to execute a painting which he later entitled "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before The Cabinet." He was very much in need of a photograph showing the President seated as he would appear at a cabinet meeting. With Mr. Lincoln's consent he made an appointment for sittings at Brady's for 3:00 P.M. on February 9, 1864.

Lincoln's son "Tad" accompanied him to the gallery and while they were waiting on Mr. Brady he came into the room and saw the President showing "Tad" a book of photographs. Mr. Lincoln and Tad were requested to retain their position which resulted in the taking of the well known father and son picture. Carpenter later on used this print as the nucleus of his picture "The Lincoln Family."

For the main objective of the visit Mr. Lincoln was posed in the now famous Brady chair and a full length seated portrait was made of him. We seldom see the complete exposure but usually just the bust of the President. This picture can be identified by observing the engraving of Abraham Lincoln on the five dollar bank note or his likeness on the three cent postage stamp in circulation up to a few years ago.

Among the photographs of the President the one that Robert Todd Lincoln thought to be "the most satisfactory likeness" of him, now known as the Brady Lincoln, has had a wider circulation than the combined output of all other pictures of the President.