

LINCOLN LORE

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DEATH PICTURE OF LINCOLN

A death picture of the martyred President has just been discovered by a fifteen year old schoolboy, Donald Rietveld of Des Moines, Iowa. Inasmuch as this is the most important find in the field of Lincoln photography for the past twenty-five years at least, it seems that full recognition should be given the youth who was responsible for bringing this valuable picture to light. While the press and radio have been generous in giving the young historian proper credit, a great weekly magazine featuring the picture on September 15 with a two page spread and four columns of print fails to mention his name and refers to him only as "a young Lincoln student." It is so unusual for a boy of fifteen years of age to take an active interest in historical research that the incentive which led to the discovery should receive some commendation. The scooping of all the oldsters by this novice is a real achievement.

Donald went to Springfield, Ill., primarily in the interest of his historical studies on Lincoln and was given the usual encouragement by Dr. Harry Pratt, State Historian. Hence there is not so much of the accidental feature associated with the find as has been supposed. Permission has been received from Donald to excerpt from one of his letters to the editor of *Lincoln Lore* his own account of how he came upon the long hidden treasure. Referring to the discovery he states: "I can tell you for sure what day it was because I made notes on it after I found it. It was after the Library had been closed, on the afternoon of July the twentieth. Dr. Pratt was writing a review on a book in his office. I was going thru the Nicolay and Hay Papers. . . . The folder looked like any other one in the cabinet. It had a number on it, which I think I recorded on the notes I made. The letters were relatively like the others. The folder carried some notes on some books that the two secretaries had written. I opened up a letter which had the date—1887, the handwriting as I remember it was rather scribbly. It was signed L. H. S. Inside of the letter was another piece of stationery, which was in three folds. I opened it up just curious to see what it was. To my astonishment it was a faded brown picture, with a coffin in the center, the closer and the longer I looked at it the more it looked like Lincoln's face in the coffin. All that was visible in the picture was the neatly trimmed beard, thin lips, high cheek bones and a faded nose and the hair on his head. I took a second look to make sure that it was Mr. Lincoln. I immediately took it to Dr. Pratt."

The story, including the name of the finder, was at once made available to the press by Dr. Pratt along with his own professional opinion that the print was a genuine picture of Lincoln lying in a coffin. Information about the taking of such a picture while Lincoln was lying in state in New York has been well known for many years. *Lincoln Lore* on March 24, 1941 used this reference:

"Photographs of the martyred President in New York by Gurney and Son are well authenticated and Lincoln students have been acquainted with these facts."

The Lincoln fraternity had not known however, that either negative or print made by Gurney had been preserved, in fact it was supposed that all impressions had been destroyed at the order of Secretary Stanton. How-

ever, one print was secretly retained by Stanton himself and Lewis E. Stanton, son of the secretary, came upon the picture in his father's files in 1887 and sent it to John G. Nicolay. Although in the midst of writing the 10 volume history of Lincoln, in collaboration with John Hay, Nicolay did not use or make mention of the picture. Apparently it had been undisturbed in the Nicolay files, at least since his death in 1901, as his daughter Helen Nicolay makes no mention of it.

There has been a faint supposition that possibly the use of the Gurney print or negative may have been granted the artist who made the drawing for the Currier & Ives lithograph entitled "The body of Abraham Lincoln lying in state at the City Hall April 24 & 25 1865." The actual photograph now available reveals no similarity with the features displayed on the lithograph.

The picture discovered by Donald Rietveld removes from further consideration some of the spurious prints which claim to have been death-bed portraits of the President. On February 15, 1941 the *Saturday Evening Post* carried a feature article about an ambrotype supposed to be a picture made of Lincoln in his coffin. It bears no resemblance whatever to the recently discovered original. The same may be said with reference to another alleged picture of Lincoln in a casket which had been in possession of a San Bernardino family for over fifty years when called to the attention of the Foundation in 1933. There is no uniformity whatever in the original and the California portrait. Still another picture of a person in a coffin said to be Lincoln was discovered two years ago by a woman in St. Charles, Missouri but the original Gurney photograph now discovered completely nullifies the supposition.

There are two other claims with reference to the taking of death pictures of the President which should now be reviewed in the light of the authentic portrait at hand. One picture which the writer has not seen but which he is informed by a descendant of the photographer is still in possession of the family is alleged to have been taken at Chicago while the body was enroute to Springfield. The other claim, holding that a picture of the dead President was made at Indianapolis a day or two before the Chicago negative seems to be supported somewhat by the similarity of features with the Gurney portrait.

The Foundation has received from two independent sources, photographs of an identical Lincoln lithograph, one forwarded as early as 1935, the other six years later. The inscription on the lithograph showing Lincoln in an open casket bears this title: "Remains of Abraham Lincoln the greatest man of our century. Assassinated April 14, 1865." This lithograph bears the imprint: "Published by George Koch, Indianapolis, Ind. copyright secured." The face of Lincoln resembles closely the features of the Gurney print and it may some day be revealed that at both Indianapolis and Chicago photographers were able to make pictures of the lamented President. However until such original photographs are brought to light Ronald Rietveld will have the credit of discovering the only known picture of Abraham Lincoln taken after his assassination.