

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S HOLOGRAPH COPY OF THE BIXBY LETTER

This bulletin has always aimed at variety in selecting its Lincoln subject matter and it is seldom that two issues bearing on the same general topic appear in a regular monthly installment. The lack of sufficient space available in but one monograph to place before our readers much that seemed to be essential, in commenting on certain October magazine articles attempting to discredit the Bixby letter, has made necessary a departure from the general rule.—Ed.

Last week a documentary background was submitted for the letter Abraham Lincoln wrote to the Widow Bixby on Nov. 21, 1864 and which was delivered to her at her home in Boston on the afternoon of November 25. This week we hope to present evidence which should forever remove any doubt as to who was the author of the letter and the actual writer of the text.

Charles Hamilton who writes for the Department of Autographs in *Hobbies Magazine* contributed to the October issue of the publication an article entitled "Forgery and the Bixby Letter." He submitted his credential in the opening paragraph by recalling his twenty-five years experience with autographs. One's confidence in his deductions, however, is somewhat shaken, when in his preliminary comments he questions whether or not the original Bixby letter ever existed. Twice before, in February 1939 and February 1941, *Hobbies* carried articles which have attempted to prove that Lincoln never wrote a letter to the Widow Bixby but contended that John Hay was the author and writer of the famous letter. Of course it was pertinent for the success of this piece of Hay folklore that any copy of the Bixby letter that looked like Lincoln's handwriting should be immediately pronounced a forgery.

F. Lauriston Bullard in his book entitled *Abraham Lincoln and the Widow Bixby* published in 1946 by the Rutgers Press reproduces in facsimile an extremely important letter written by the same John Hay to W. D. Chandler on January 19, 1904. Hay opens his correspondence with a simple declarative sentence: "The letter of Mr. Lincoln to Mrs. Bixby is genuine." This statement should for all time settle the authorship of the Bixby letter. In the concluding sentence of the same note to Mr. Chandler, Hay further removes himself from any participation in the writing of the Bixby letter by stating with reference to the widely circulated facsimile he had observed: "It is in my opinion a very ingenious forgery." If he had written the letter to Mrs. Bixby on his own or by direct dictation from Mr. Lincoln he would have been quite positive in denouncing the penmanship a forgery. Hay's terminology, however, implies that the handwriting of the Bixby facsimile bears a striking resemblance to Lincoln's holograph writings.

A further comment by Mr. Chamberlain in his general observances about the alleged forgery states that it is "a superb example of a transparent forgery," and later refers to it as an "amateurish forgery." That was not the opinion of John Hay who should have been quite familiar with the handwriting of the President. Hay as has been heretofore mentioned in referring to the facsimile concluded "in my opinion it is an ingenious forgery." It was so much like Lincoln's handwriting he did not want to be so positive as Mr. Chamberlain has been about it being spurious. Hay thought it was a masterful reproduction rather than an amateurish attempt at duplication and not easily identified as a forgery rather than a quickly detected fake. When the handwriting expert, V. H. Paltsits, then in charge of the manuscript division of the New York Public Library was questioned about the authenticity of the Bixby letter

facsimile, the *New York Times* for Aug. 4, 1865 stated: "Mr. Paltsits declined to say that he felt the letter was spurious, merely stating that there were many things about it which made it look curious." Apparently from the viewpoint of this expert it was not a "transparent forgery."

The statement of Mr. Hamilton in *Hobbies* that the original letter to the widow "has never been discovered" might be more accurately worded if it proposed that it is not now known to be extant. The press declared that the letter for Mrs. Bixby arrived in Boston on the morning of November 25. General Schouler states in his book that on the same day he "had the pleasure of placing in her hands" the letter written by the President. The fact that the original is not now available does not invalidate the supposition that it changed hands sometimes between its reception on Nov. 25, 1864 and the date of the widow's death, October 27, 1878. According to comments by the Bixby family it does not seem to have been in the widow's possession at the time of her death, although it was but three years later that copies were first submitted as facsimiles.

Boston was especially autograph conscious during that very week the letter came to the widow. The press gave much space to the Sailors' Fair which was in progress. A letter from General Grant had been received and the committee had ordered that it "be raffled off." On Nov. 21, the same day Grant's letter was received, an autograph and photograph album was presented to the fair and appraised at \$1,000. A missing autograph of George Washington was also mentioned in the *Boston Journal* on that day, and in that same issue Gen. Schouler made his appeal for funds mentioning the poor widow.

Many people who read the letter from the President which appeared in both the *Transcript* and *Journal* and which was also sent to the leading papers in the east must have recognized the monetary value of a letter with such a fine sentiment and signed by a President of the United States. The fact that the widow was poor and apparently not interested in items of this kind, according to her relatives, would almost convince one that it did not long remain in her possession.

There are several traditions extant as to what became of the original writing, one to the effect that it was purchased from the widow and placed in a private collection. There are at least half a dozen places where the original is said to have been seen. Practically all of the early students of Lincoln accepted the facsimiles as having been produced from the original letter. The line "Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass." was moved from the bottom of the page to the place of salutation and the caption "Executive Mansion, Nov. 21, 1864" was elevated to make room for the above line. Photolithography was the process probably used in making the plate which required a clean cut copy to be photographed. The character of some of the letters makes it appear as if the actual copy used was made from a tracing of the original letter. We do know that Michael J. Tobin secured a copyright for the Bixby letter facsimile on April 25, 1891. The Lincoln National Life Foundation has always looked upon the Lincoln-Bixby facsimiles as having been reproduced from a copy of the original holograph.

See *Lincoln Lore* 185 for list of early facsimiles of Bixby letter.