

# LINCOLN LORE

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## A NEGRO ARTIST'S OIL PAINTING OF LINCOLN

Considerable comment has appeared in the press of late about President Eisenhower's ability as an artist and interest has been accentuated since he has produced a painting of Abraham Lincoln from an original photograph. These news stories invite an account of another painting of Lincoln done at Washington from an original photograph which has but recently been positively identified. Jay Cooke in 1865 or 1866 commissioned a certain David Bustill Bowser to do a Lincoln which now hangs on the walls of the Lincoln National Life Foundation's Library. From information before us it appears that Bowser was the only negro artist contemporary with Lincoln's day to make the President's picture in oil.

There appeared in the magazine section of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* for Sunday, October 21, 1923, an article by Harlan E. Babcock featuring "Jay Cooke's Castle" which the financier erected on Gibraltar Island in Lake Erie not far from Sandusky. Mr. Babcock had visited the castle the month before and became especially interested in its oil paintings. He wrote: "First and most impressive of all I found a massive and very fine oil painting of Abraham Lincoln that has hung in its present place since 1866 when it was painted for Mr. Cooke by D. B. Bowser, a famous artist of that period, from an original portrait of Lincoln."

Another news item relating to the Lincoln painting appeared in *The Detroit Free Press* for Saturday, Feb. 12, 1927. The painting was then on exhibition in one of Hudson's Woodward Ave. windows. An excerpt from the news story about the painting on display follows:

"When Lincoln was assassinated in 1865 Cooke was crushed with grief. About that time he commissioned D. B. Bowser, a portrait painter of prominence in Washington, D. C., to make a copy of President Lincoln's favorite wartime portrait of himself. . . . From 1866 to 1923 the canvas hung in Cooke's famous 'castle' on Gibraltar Island, where it was discovered and purchased by its present owner, H. E. Babcock."

This painting was acquired by the Lincoln National Life Foundation from the widow of Harlan E. Babcock in 1932 and has occupied a prominent place in the rooms of the Foundation library during the years. The most important factor which encouraged the acquisition of the painting was its association with Jay Cooke, who was recognized as "the foremost financier of his day" and the individual most responsible for supplying the financial needs of the government during the Civil War. The fact that Cooke commissioned the painting makes it an historical treasure.

Jay Cooke had opened his banking house in Philadelphia on January 1861 and on April 1 the same year was invited by President Lincoln to become the treasurer of the Philadelphia mint and Assistant Treasurer of the United States under Salmon P. Chase, but the offices were declined. Chase was well acquainted with the Cooke family and some time after his appointment as Secretary of the Treasury, Jay's brother, Henry, opened a branch of the Jay Cooke firm at Washington. Another factor which prompted the purchase of the Lincoln painting by the Foundation was the fact that Jay Cooke became closely associated with Hugh McCulloch, a resident of Fort Wayne who became Secretary of the Treasury after the resignation of Chase.

Aside from the association values of the painting, the fact that it is a copy of the famous bank note picture

of Lincoln by Brady, which Robert Lincoln had authorized the Lincoln National Life Insurance Co. to use as its insignia, presented a strong incentive for securing the painting. While an attempt was made at the time the picture was acquired to learn something of the painter whose name appeared on the canvas, we were unsuccessful in getting even a clue to assist us in the identification of the artist. It was not until the past month or so that we accidentally came across a notation in a Washington newspaper that offered the first lead to a biographical sketch of the artist.

On July 4, 1865 the "National Monument (colored) Association" held a celebration in Washington in which the Washington City Sunday School Union participated. Each school carried a banner with some decorative device or motto. One which struck the fancy of a reporter was described in these words:

"Among these, we noted particularly that of the 15 Ave. Presbyterian School. It bears a picture of Abraham Lincoln with the motto

'With malice towards none,  
With charity for all.'"

The reporter gives this further information about the banner:

"It was painted at a cost of \$75, by a Mr. Bowser, a colored artist of Philadelphia."

Learning through this source for the first time that there was a negro painter by the name of Bowser, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* immediately got in touch with a friend, Dr. John E. Washington, author of *They Knew Lincoln*. The doctor turned for information to James A. Porter, Director of the Art Department of Howard University and the author of *Modern Negro Art*. In this volume there is a biographical sketch of Bowser and just a few facts about him gleaned from Mr. Porter's book are presented:

David Bustill Bowser was born in Philadelphia on January 16, 1820. He was named for his father, and his grandfather had been a baker in the Continental Army. Apparently he secured his early training in art from his cousin, Robert M. Douglas. Bowser first applied his talent in the painting of emblems and banners for fraternal orders and organizations. He then turned his attention to landscapes and marine scenes. The *New York Herald* for April 16, 1850 in referring to an art exhibition in Philadelphia states, "The marine paintings of Bowser are excellent."

Mr. Porter suggests that there is a possibility Bowser made one painting of Lincoln from life, as members of the family recall having seen a check made out to D. B. Bowser and signed by Lincoln. However, of this fact we are certain, there was more than one Lincoln painting done by the artist as a study of him hangs in the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored Persons in Philadelphia. It is one of the few pieces of his work preserved. The date of his death is given as June 30, 1920 which would make him a hundred years old at the time of his demise.

It appears that the Bowser painting at the Lincoln National Life Foundation has lost none of its value as an item associated with Jay Cooke and Fort Wayne through the McCulloch connection and has also retained its value as a copy of the famous Brady Lincoln. Its desirability, however, has become greatly enhanced by the fact that it was created by David Bustill Bowser, a negro artist contemporary with Lincoln's day.