



Lincoln Lore

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Some Correspondence Between John Hay and Helen Nicolay about her father, the Sixteenth President, royalty payments, investments and the problems of authorship

Part I

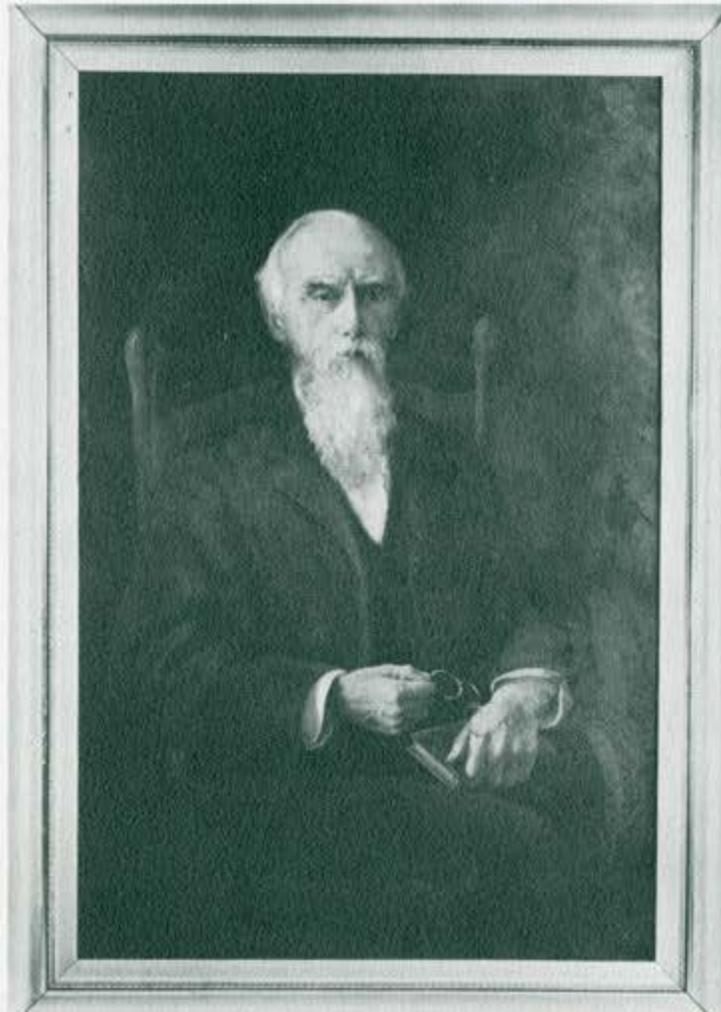
Editor's Note: All the original letters and documents used in this compilation are to be found in the Foundation collection. It is, perhaps, unusual to have so complete a file. This can be explained by the fact that Miss Helen Nicolay made a longhand copy of nearly every letter she wrote to John Hay, even to the affixing of her signature. Then, too, years later (Sept. 11th) she received the following letter from Alice Wadsworth, the daughter of John Hay: "Dear Helen Nicolay; years ago I came across these letters of yours and gathered them together intending to send them to you, but somehow or other they were pushed to the back of the desk drawer, and I forgot them. Sorry! Perhaps you have not yet come down from Holderness but I am sure these will reach you eventually, now they are really on their way." These letters were undoubtedly the originals that Miss Nicolay had sent to John Hay.

Most of John Hay's letters (up to the year 1904) were written on mourning stationery which served a double purpose as a memorial to President McKinley and to Hay's son, Adelbert. About half of the Hay letters are typewritten. None of Miss Nicolay's letters are typewritten. About half of them are written on mourning stationery as her father died in 1901.

While the information contained in these letters is not particularly earth-shaking, they do reveal little insights into the characters of the principals involved, and the literary abilities of the authors, particularly John Hay. Anyway, there is some unexplainable fascination in the reading of private correspondence, whether the writers are literate or not.

R. G. M.

John George Nicolay, private secretary to President Abraham Lincoln, and co-author with John Hay of several works on the life of the great War President, died on September 27, 1901 at the age of seventy years. He had for a long period suffered ill health, and since his resignation as Marshal of the United States Supreme Court in 1887 had been living quietly at 212 B Street, S.E., in Washington, D.C. with Helen, his only daughter. His wife, Therena Bates, whom he had married on June 15, 1865, died in November, 1885, when Helen was nineteen years of age.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

John George Nicolay
1832-1901

Biographer, born in Essingen, Bavaria; came to the United States in 1838; private secretary to Abraham Lincoln (1860-65); U. S. Consul at Paris (1865-69); Marshal of U. S. Supreme Court (1872-87); collaborator with John Hay in a biography of Abraham Lincoln (1890), and in an edition of the complete works of Abraham Lincoln. This original portrait of Nicolay was painted by his daughter, Helen Nicolay.

During these last years of Nicolay's retirement, he and his daughter had been engaged in writing a one volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, which would be a condensation of Nicolay and Hay's monumental ten volume work, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*. In compiling the information for this volume Colonel John Hay, then Secretary of State (1898-1905), was most helpful, whenever he could find the time, in the promotion of the project.

From time to time Hay visited with the Nicolays, and he would occasionally send little notes by mail to amuse his old friend. One such item was a newspaper clipping taken from the *New York Herald*, dated June 20, 1901, concerning H. W. Gourley entitled "'Abe' Lincoln's Protege Ends Forty Years In Custom House." According to the newspaper article President Lincoln appointed Gourley, who had once resided in Springfield, Illinois, to a minor clerkship at the New York Customs House. "I knew Abraham Lincoln," said Gourley, "as well as I knew my own father." This prompted Hay to write Helen Nicolay as follows:

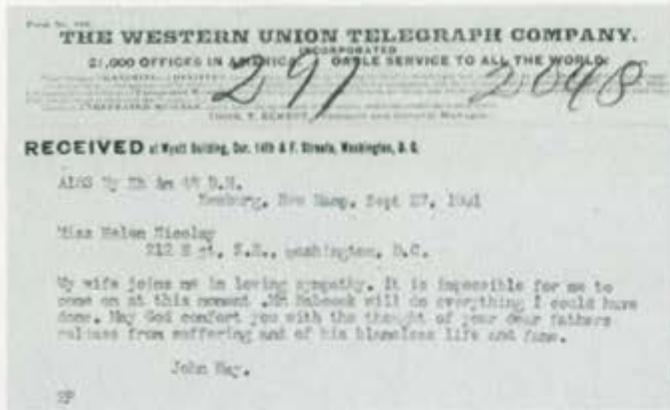
Dear Helen:

If your father is amiable perhaps he may smile to see how Harry Gourley has fallen in with the tide which masters them all and has begun to fib about his intimacy with Old Abe.

J. H.

On September 22, 1901 from the Department of State, John Hay wrote to Helen Nicolay. At this time he must have realized that his old friend and collaborator could not live very much longer.

My Dear Helen



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Telegram from John Hay to Helen Nicolay expressing sympathy in regard to the death of her father.

I was so occupied every instant of the time yesterday that I could not come to see you. We are going to Newbury to-day to be gone a week or two. I have asked Mr. Babcock, my Private Secretary, to call at your home from time to time and put himself at your disposition for anything I could do if I were here. You must have no hesitation in calling upon me, or upon Mr. Babcock in my place, precisely as if I were your father's brother. You must not regard it as a matter of favor or obligation, except that you are doing me a favor in allowing me to do whatever is in my power.

My wife sends her love, and I am always,

Sincerely Yours
John Hay

On September 24, 1901 just three days before her father died, Miss Nicolay answered Colonel Hay's cordial letter.

Dear Colonel Hay:

I am afraid I did not more than half thank you for your kind thoughtful note last Sunday. When Mr. Babcock brought it I was still dazed from a horrible experience of the night before, and I am sure I do not know what I wrote you.

Today the Doctor spoke very encouragingly to Papa, and told me afterwards, that though he did not know how much or how little it might mean there was no doubt of the fact that our patient was better. I want you and Mrs. Hay to share the ray of hope with me.

The very experience that at the time seemed so terrible encourages me. He had been, as you saw, very weak. Suddenly, without warning Saturday night, came a period of violent delirium, when it took the combined strength of three of us to keep him in bed and to administer the necessary medicines to quiet him. His grip was like steel and once when his fingers closed on my wrist it seemed as though they might break it before I could unclasp them. The collapse that followed was also very distressing but soon passed, and by morning he had rallied in a manner to astonish us all. The improvement has continued and I feel that if he has strength for a performance of that kind, he must have greater reserve than we gave him credit for.

Mr. Babcock was here again this morning, renewing the kind offers you made, and proffering his services in any form. Thank you so much. I think and trust I shall have no occasion to come to you for the material assistance you suggest. In case I do it will be easier to accept it from you than from anyone else in the wide world and I will accept it, in the spirit in which it is offered. At present however there is no need for even the thought of such a thing.

Please give my love to Mrs. Hay. It wrung my heart to see her looking so sad.

I fear too that I had been inconsiderate in asking you to come upstairs. I really thought Papa would be able to say a little more to you. I know he would want you to come. He realizes perfectly who you were, for he spoke of your visit, next day.

I hope when you come back that you will see him again, and find him much more like himself and in the meantime that air and glorious foliage of New England will rest and cheer both you and Mrs. Hay. One can-

not be altogether sad in that glory of crimson and gold
With Much Love
Helen Nicolay

On September 27, 1901 Miss Nicolay sent Colonel John Hay at Newbury, New Hampshire, the following telegram:

My father died today do not think of coming to the funeral.

Upon receiving the distressing telegram, Colonel Hay wired Miss Nicolay, the same day, as follows:

My wife joins me in loving sympathy. It is impossible for me to come on at this moment. Mr. Babcock will do everything I could have done. May God comfort you with the thought of your dear father's release from suffering and of his blameless life and fame.

Two days after the death of her father, Miss Nicolay wrote Colonel Hay acknowledging receipt of his telegram: Dear Colonel Hay

Thank you and Mrs. Hay for your telegram of sympathy. The thought that it contains is the one great comfort I have at this time.

I am afraid my telegram to you must have been changed in the sending — for I tried to so word it that you would see I did not expect and did not want you to think of coming to the funeral.

Mr. Gilder* happened to be in town, and was so tactful and comforting. I have always liked him, but never dreamed of the depth and sweetness of his nature. My relatives were all too far away to come, and you were out of town — there seemed no one nearer or better loved by Papa — so he rode to the cemetery with me. It was a hard thing I asked of him, and he really made my sorrow easier to bear. Before we came back he handed me a little poem he had written about my father, which I am sure you will like as much as I do.

My own pastor was out of town, and Dr. Hamlin** conducted the short and simple service. His little address was full of appreciation, and he has been extremely kind to me.***

I want to thank you for the beautiful flowers that came to us by your thoughtfulness. Some of them I placed beside my father — His friends of the Century Co., sent others that were very lovely — as did the President.****

I know that you will be as thankful as I that the end was peaceful — Papa simply ceased breathing. It was a surprise to us as all — neither the doctor nor the nurse expected it to come that day. At four o'clock I sent a note to the doctor and called the nurse who was resting — not because I was alarmed but because I felt that I wanted them both near. He died at half-past five. Half an hour before that he talked with us, and his eyes seemed brighter and his enunciation clearer than it had been for many days. I had feared there might be a long night of agony, and feel so thankful it happened as it did.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This card and black ribbon were taken from the floral wreath which was sent by President Theodore Roosevelt to John G. Nicolay's funeral.

*Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909) editor of *The Century* (1881-1909).

Dr. Teunis S. Hamlin was the pastor of the Church of the Covenant. *It is an odd coincidence that on Thursday last, the day Lincoln's remains were bestowed in their final resting place (reconstructed tomb,) occurred the death of John G. Nicolay, the great war President's private secretary." *Baltimore American*, September 30, 1901.

****Theodore Roosevelt succeeded to the Presidency on the death of McKinley on September 14, 1901.

People have been wonderfully kind. Miss Gallaudet has come on to be with me for a little time, and I hope soon to be somewhat rested.

With love to you and yours
Sunday, September 29th
Helen Nicolay

After sending the telegram, Colonel Hay then wrote the daughter of his old friend and associate:

Dear Helen:
I received your telegram at eleven o'clock today — too late to get to Boston before night, and therefore too late to arrive in Washington before Monday. We are so out of the way that it takes 48 hours notice to get to Washington, and on Sundays there are no trains running.

I at once wired Mr. Babcock to put himself and all I could do absolutely at your service.

I shall not try to comfort you by any conventional words. Your heart is too sore and sad to listen to any thing of that kind. But after a while you will take consolation in reflecting what an inheritance of pleasant memories is yours. You have never seen a man purer in heart and in life, of higher principles and nobler thoughts, than was your father.

What a year this has been for me. I think what I was last June and what I am now. My dear boy,* my President,** your father, and Clarence King*** who is dying in California — the four men nearest me on Earth — all gone.

I do not know where your father is to be buried or where you are going.**** Mrs. Hay would be glad if you would come here. We shall be here, we hope, for two weeks. And you would be as quiet as anywhere in the world.

In love and sorrow
Yours faithfully
John Hay

Again on October 2, 1901, Col. Hay wrote to Helen from Newburg, N.H.:

Here is a letter from General Doster, one of your father's old friends. I have answered it.

Your telegram arrived correctly, but I wanted to explain that in spite of your prohibition I should have come on to the funeral, if it had been possible to get there in time. If I had started the moment I received your telegram I could not, if I had made all connections, have reached you before Sunday.

I am glad to learn that the end was so peaceful. The pain he was suffering had been a heavy weight on my heart for these months past.

I need not repeat that I hope you will make some use of us. If you can think of anything now write to me. When we meet we can talk everything over. I feel honestly in your debt, and will be glad of a chance to acknowledge it.

My wife sends her love and I am as ever
Sincerely Yours
John Hay

The letter by W. E. Doster from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, dated September 29, 1901 and enclosed by John Hay follows:

My Dear Sir:
I regret to read this morning the death notice of your old friend, fellow Secretary and co-historian in the life of Mr. Lincoln, Mr. John Nicolay. No doubt, you feel his loss as much as any one. I knew him also very well, during the war, and regret that I never saw much of him afterwards.

*In June, 1901, Hay's elder son Adelbert, whom President McKinley had just appointed his Private Secretary, died instantly by a fall from a window.

**President William McKinley died on September 14, 1901. Hay wrote ". . . What a strange and tragic fate it has been of mine — to stand by the bier of three of my dearest friends, Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, three of the gentlest of men, all risen to the head of the State, and all done to death by assassins."

***Before the year 1901 ran out, death took Clarence King. Hay wrote "I have acquired the funeral habit." In 1882 a novel entitled *Democracy*, a strikingly clever satire on Washington society was published. Clarence King is still commonly regarded as its author.

****Funeral services were held at the Nicolay home 212 B Street N. E., on Thursday, September 28, 1901. Burial was at the Oak Hill Cemetery. The pall-bearers selected from among the old friends of Mr. Nicolay were Judge Martin F. Morris, Col. I. Edward Clark, Dr. William T. Harris, Francis P. Leupp, Dr. Edward M. Gallaudet, and Judge William M. Springer.

If he left a family, I would be obliged if you conveyed to them my sincere sympathy
Very Sincerely Yours
W. E. Doster

To Hon. John Hay
Washington, D.C.
On October 4, 1901 Miss Nicolay acknowledged the receipt of Colonel Hay's sympathetic letters:

Dear Colonel Hay:
Thank you for your two letters, the latter enclosing one from General Doster. Thank you too for answering that. I am struggling to acknowledge the many notes I have received, but the pile seems to grow larger instead of smaller. Most of them express such a sincere admiration for my father that I cannot bear to leave unanswered, even for a week.

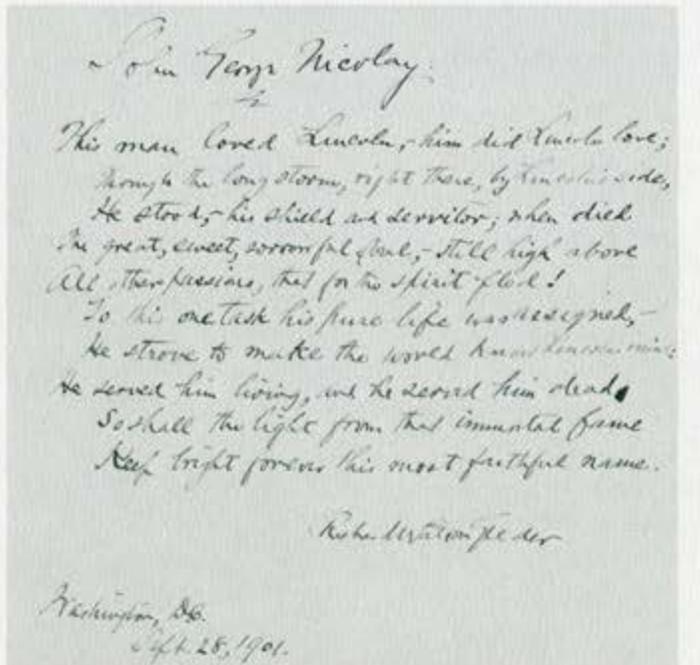
I wrote to Mrs. Hay a day or two ago to thank her for the kind invitation you both sent me, and to explain that it seems best for me to stay here for the present. I am really very well, and a home-coming would be hard to bear. Besides, there are many things to do.

When you come back to town I shall have to ask you many questions. In the meantime your love and sympathy are a great help and comfort.

Mr. Babcock lies awake nights imagining things to do for me, and Dr. Gallaudet has been kindness itself. With love to Mrs. Hay and the girls
Very sincerely yours
Helen Nicolay

Quite a number of financial transactions were negotiated between Col. Hay and Miss Nicolay due to the receipt of royalty checks from the Century Company. Of Course, Helen Nicolay was entitled to her father's share of these payments. On November 1, 1901 John Hay wrote as follows:

My Dear Helen:
I have your letter. You must not bother about that check. You are too conscientious. "I shall have to be firm with you," as the old fashioned schoolmistresses used to say.
Yours sincerely
John Hay



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

On September 29, 1901 Miss Nicolay wrote Colonel Hay, "Before we came back [from the cemetery] he [Richard Watson Gilder] handed me a little poem about my father, which I am sure you will like as much as I do." This original poem is now in the files of the Lincoln National Life Foundation. It was published on the editorial page of the *Evening Post* and several other newspapers, one of which was the *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, October 1, 1901.

The very next day, (November 2, 1901), Colonel Hay again wrote to Miss Nicolay about royalty payments:

Dear Helen:

Here you have your little \$500. a year. May you live long to enjoy it.

Yours faithfully
John Hay

On November 2, 1901 Miss Nicolay wrote Colonel Hay about some Abraham Lincoln papers that had been in her father's custody. She also sent him two checks:

Dear Colonel Hay:

Here are two checks. Many thanks. Yesterday I received a letter from Mr. Lincoln saying he meant to come to Washington and see you before taking away the papers, but offering to have them cared for elsewhere immediately if they were in my way. Of course I wrote him that they were merely harmlessly decorative in my present position.

Very truly yours
Helen Nicolay

John Hay replied to Miss Nicolay with a letter dated November 4, 1901:

My Dear Helen:

I have the check you so kindly sent me.

I also have a letter from Mr. Lincoln accepting my proposition to place the papers now in the Safe Deposit Company in the State Department temporarily. Will you kindly send me an order on the Bank, so that I can have them transferred, and relieve you of that much responsibility.

Yours sincerely
John Hay

On the same date (November 4, 1901) that John Hay replied to Miss Nicolay, she wrote him a letter of acknowledgement and mentioned Robert Lincoln:

Dear Col. Hay

The green and valuable paper representing "\$500 a year" reached me last night. Thank you again for your kindness in the matter.

This morning I received the enclosed [perhaps an order on the bank] from Robert Lincoln.

Sincerely yours
Helen Nicolay

Helen Nicolay wrote Robert Lincoln again on May 22, 1902 relative to the Lincoln papers:

Dear Mr. Lincoln:

You remember that when I wrote to you last fall about President Lincoln's papers that had been in my father's custody, I mentioned besides the box sent at that time



From the Lloyd Ostendorf Collection

An 1884 photograph of John G. Nicolay in Mr. Champuey's studio in Deerfield, Massachusetts. The identity of the four people (left to right) are: girl at extreme left, unknown, John G. Nicolay, Mrs. (Therena Bates) Nicolay and their daughter, Helen Nicolay. This photograph was made by James U. Stead, 383 6th Avenue, New York, N.Y.

THY WILL BE DONE

by John Hay.

Not in dumb resignation,
We lift our hands on high.
Not like the nerveless fatalist
Content to do or die.
Our faith springs like the eagle
Who soars to meet the sun,-
And cries exulting unto Thee
O Lord, Thy Will Be Done.

Thy will it bidst the weak be strong,
It bidst the strong be just.
No lips to fawn, no hands to beg,
No brow to seek the dust.
Whenever man oppresses man
Beneath the liberal sun, -
O Lord be there, - Thine arm make bare
Thy righteous Will Be Done.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This poem appears in the Helen Nicolay papers along with her correspondence with Secretary of State John Hay. If her good friend sent this poem at the time of her father's death, no mention is made of it in any of their letters.

to the State Dept. several other boxes of his important papers (were) stored at my house.

As I am just leaving town for my summer at Holderness, New Hampshire, to be gone several months, I have asked Col. Hay to help me dispose of them more safely, and he has had them sent to the State Dept. to be kept with the others, subject to your order. So at present they are all there.

Very sincerely yours
(Helen Nicolay)

Hon. Robt. T. Lincoln*

After her father's death Helen Nicolay became quite busy in an effort to complete his unfinished manuscript. Her first step, after having added a considerable amount of copy, was to submit it to her father's best friend and former collaborator. The manuscript was sent to Colonel Hay with this letter:

Dear Colonel Hay

After seeing how rapidly you read Chinese MSS I have less compunction in bothering you with this.

Will you be good enough to look at it and tell me what I must do before sending it on to New York? I have stared at it so long that I see nothing but spots.

I have stolen from you shamelessly, Have made long things short and good things bad and done those things that I ought not to have done from the first page to the last. The trouble is that I have done so many of them I don't know where I am at.

Pencil marks and criticisms will be much appreciated, and I am quite prepared to have you tell me that it is "no go" — that I must give it up — or try again

Sincerely, though dejected
Helen N.

*For additional correspondence between Robert T. Lincoln and Miss Nicolay in regard to the President's papers, see *Lincoln Lore* 1437, 1438, November, 1957, December, 1957 entitled "Some Correspondence Regarding A Missing Copy Of The Gettysburg Address."

(Continued to the February issue)