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FUN AND FELLOWSHIP: THE AMENITIES OF EARLY LINCOLN COLLECTING

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M.E.N., Jr.

Among the many persons who have not understood the impulse to collect Americana, not the least was Abraham Lincoln himself. The first Lincoln collector was an obscure Philadelphian named Schlater; we know of him only because Lincoln wrote him a letter in 1849, a time when Lincoln was an unimportant, first-term Congressman grown unhappy with Washington life and fast losing interest in politics altogether.

Dear Sir:

Your note, requesting my "signature with a sentiment" was received, and should have been answered long since, but that it was mislaid. I am not a very sentimental man; and the best sentiment I can think of is, that if you collect the signatures of all persons who are no less distinguished than I, you will have a very undistinguishing mass of names.

Very respectfully,
A. Lincoln

More than likely, Schlater wrote a similar letter to every member of Congress and encountered Lincoln's name only as one of many on a list. But in a sense, he goes down in history as the first Lincoln collector.

Lincoln never did understand the impulse to collect. His law partner, William H. Herndon, said of him that "he had, aside from his law books and the few gilded volumes that ornamented the centre-table in his parlor at home, comparatively no library. He never seemed to care to own or collect books."

Though collectors can never lay genuine claim to inspiration by Lincoln's example, they can take some satisfaction from the realization that Lincoln himself never again expressed astonishment at their passion. Note, for example, that Lincoln's expression of incomprehension in the letter to Schlater was completely self-effacing and, most important, note that Lincoln did respond to the request. As his stature in American political life grew, so too did his willingness to satisfy the strange urge of collectors. By the time of his nomination for the presidency in 1860,

Lincoln answered collector's requests with some suavity. To Lieutenant H. Buck, Jr., for example, Lincoln wrote on June 2, 1860:

Dear Sir

You request an autograph, and here it is.

Yours truly,
A. Lincoln

Lincoln the politician turned in a polished performance in this brief letter of May 17, 1862, to a female autograph seeker:

Miss Mary Motley—

A friend of yours (a young gentleman of course) tells me you do me the honor of requesting my autograph. I could scarcely refuse any young lady — certainly not the daughter of your distinguished father.

Yours truly,
A. Lincoln

Any notion that Lincoln was "not a very sentimental man" has vanished in this gallant letter to the daughter of the historian John Lothrop Motley.

In fact, Lincoln tried very hard to satisfy the curious impulse to collect. When a Lady Villiers (identified by Lincoln scholar Roy Basler as the widow of George Villiers, Fifth Earl of Jersey and Eighth Viscount Grandison) asked the British minister to the United States to get Lincoln's autograph for her collection, the President mustered an awkwardly formal battery of words which were a far cry from his more conventional response to Lieutenant Buck:

Mr. Lyon has informed me that Lady Villiers has expressed a wish for my autograph. I beg that her Ladyship will accept the assurance of my sincere gratification at this opportunity of subscribing myself

Very truly,
Her Ladyship's
obedient servant,
A. Lincoln

Without doubt, the effect was somewhat spoiled by the fact that Lincoln misspelled "opportunity" and referred to Lord Lyons as Mr. Lyon, but he was trying. As the Civil War ground on and Lincoln had increasingly less time and energy to devote to sat-



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FIGURE 1. J. B. Oakleaf.

isfying the curious passion to collect, he still did his duty to collectors but in a way that drained his little notes of their earlier delightful attempts to meet the spirit of the occasion. Thus, on February 20, 1865, the weary President wrote Miss Ella Steele:

With pleasure I send the autograph.

Yours truly,
A. Lincoln

Lincoln was never squeamish about the economic side of collecting. The fact of the matter is that Lincoln letters, which set record prices today, appear to have performed very well in the market in his own day. Lincoln wrote some letters specifically to raise money — not for his own sake but for worthy causes. Here is one letter written for one of the sanitary fairs which raised money for supplies for soldiers in the field:

Executive Mansion, March 2, 1864

To the New-England Kitchen, connected with the Brooklyn Sanitary Fair.

It is represented to me that my autograph, appended to this note, may somewhat augment, through the means you are so patriotically employing, the contributions for the benefit of our gallant and suffering soldiers, and for such an object I am glad to give it.

Yours truly,
A. Lincoln

This letter was sold at the Fair to C.H. Mallory of Mystic Bridge, Connecticut, for \$100.

The original draft of the Emancipation Proclamation was an historic document. Lincoln knew it and, as he admitted with characteristic understatement, he "had some desire to retain the paper." But, he went on, "if it shall contribute to the relief or comfort of the soldiers that will be better." He contributed it to the "Ladies having in charge of the North-Western Fair For the Sanitary Commission, Chicago, Illinois" in 1863. Thomas B. Bryan, president of the Soldier's Home in Chicago, bought the document for \$3000. (It might be noted that, in 1847, James Lenox was outraged by having to pay not much less at auction for a Gutenberg Bible — a copy of which has recently sold at auction for over two million dollars.) Lithographed facsimiles of the draft, sold for two dollars apiece, made "thousands" for the Soldier's Home. It is indeed fortunate that the Home ran off the facsimiles: Bryan deposited the document in the Chicago Historical Society, where it was burned in the Chicago Fire. The original draft of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was later sold at the Albany Army Relief Bazaar to the abolitionist Gerrit Smith for \$1000.

With only one exception, the great institutional Lincoln collections in this country began at least in large part as the collection of a private individual satisfying the strange impulse to collect. Among the more important of these were: Governor Henry Horner (Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield), Alfred Whital Stern (Library of Congress, Washington), Judd Stewart (Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California), Joseph Benjamin Oakleaf (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington), Charles W. McLellan (McLellan Lincoln Collection, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island), William Wyles (University of California at Santa Barbara), Ida M. Tarbell (Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania), William E. Barton (University of Chicago), F. Lauriston Bullard (Boston University), James Bollinger (University of Iowa), Daniel Fish (Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana), Stuart Jackson (Yale University), and Harlan Hoyt Horner (University of Illinois). The only exception I can think of is Lincoln Memorial University's collection at Harrogate, Tennessee, which did not begin as the property of any single Lincoln collector.

As we have seen, collecting Lincoln autographs and manuscripts began while Lincoln was still alive. Collecting printed materials, on the other hand, apparently began only after Lin-



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FIGURE 2. Judd Stewart.

coln's death. But it began immediately after his death and has continued unabated ever since. The first collector of these materials may have been a Bostonian named William V. Spencer, who managed to publish a large volume entitled *Lincolniana* less than five months after Lincoln's assassination. The book contained, among other things, a list of 228 publications on the sixteenth President, most of them eulogies and funeral sermons. This book reveals a characteristic of Lincoln collecting which dominated the field into the 1920s and 1930s. Mr. Spencer owned the works he listed in his bibliography. In the first sixty or seventy years of Lincoln collecting, bibliographers and biographers were, almost of necessity, also collectors. Only one Lincoln bibliographer before 1939 was not also a collector, and that simple exception, significantly, was an employee of the Library of Congress, George Thomas Ritchie, who listed the Library's *Lincolniana* in 1903. America in this period lacked the great libraries on which research could be based. If one were a writer on Lincoln, one had to be a collector also. Mr. Spencer, significantly, lived in bookish Boston, America's nineteenth-century cultural mecca; yet even he seems to have been compelled to purchase the works he listed in his bibliography.

That is not to say that all Lincoln collectors were writers. From the start, there were those who collected and left scholarship to others. In fact, Lincoln collecting was dominated until well into the twentieth century by men who were mainly collectors rather than writers. This was certainly true of the "Big Five" collectors — William H. Lambert, a wealthy insurance agent from Philadelphia; Charles W. McLellan, a banker in New York; Daniel Fish, a lawyer and judge in Minneapolis; J.B. Oakleaf, a lawyer in Moline, Illinois; and Judd Stewart, a mining executive who lived in Plainfield, New Jersey. The two lawyers, Fish and Oakleaf, eventually published Lincoln bibliographies. None of the five wrote histories or biographies of Lincoln, though, and the business executives (Stewart, McLel-



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FIGURE 3. Daniel Fish.

lan, and Lambert) left even the bibliographical work entirely to others.

Among the collectors listed earlier, one finds several persons more famed as historians than as collectors — Ida Tarbell, William E. Barton, and F. Lauriston Bullard. John G. Nicolay was not exactly a collector, but as Lincoln's biographer even he left a large enough library at his death to make a substantial auction at New York's Anderson Galleries in 1905. Harlan Hoyt Horner was firmly in this distinguished historian-collector tradition, for he was the author of two books on Lincoln, *The Growth of Lincoln's Faith* (1939) and *Lincoln and Greeley* (1953). In this respect, however, Mr. Horner was nearly the last of a dying breed.

The variety among the great early collectors is proof of a point made about Lincoln by the distinguished scholar David M. Potter:

The printed material on Abraham Lincoln, unlike that on most public figures, is less the literature of a man than of a people. In America, where conditions inhibited the growth in the traditional way of a folk mythology, an equivalent was found in the Lincoln story, beginning with the Log Cabin symbol of humility and ending with a martyrdom on Good Friday. . . . The Lincoln theme has evoked the imagination of poets, the spleen of partisans, the veneration of cultists. Lincoln's figure has dominated the American memory, not because people admired a distinguished public leader, but because they conceived him to be the embodiment of a nation's ideals. The Lincoln literature, consequently, assumes a central place in our national letters.

Lincoln's universal appeal, even while the wounds of the Civil War were still open and bleeding, is demonstrated by two of the "Big Five," Lambert and McLellan, both Civil War vet-

erans, for while Lambert fought on the Union side, McLellan was a Confederate.

Like all sensible collectors, the "Big Five" were never oblivious to the investment side of their hobby, but they were clearly in it for the fun. And their letters show that they had a great deal of that. The fun, of course, is not without its occasional headaches. Storage problems lead the list. In answer to a letter asking him to describe his collection in 1928, J.B. Oakleaf responded by saying that he had 3600 volumes, 300 postcards, 300 pictures (framed and unframed), 200 medals and souvenirs, and about 5000 miscellaneous clippings and papers. Then came the underside of this story of pride:

I don't know whether I told you or not, but there is no Lincoln Collection that is as nicely fixed as mine now. I had my books in three different places — some in a room in a building which was nothing but a storeroom, some at my office, and some at home, and of course for that reason I couldn't work to advantage. Now I have rented a small four room apartment in the new apartment building, a block and a half south of my home, and I have my Lincoln library and my private library installed therein.

Collectors generally have a keen sense of "mine and thine" and part of the joy of collecting stems from the spirit of competition touted by capitalist economic writers. This is unconsciously revealed in the correspondence of past collectors, studded as it is with fear of theft and jokes about stealing each others' treasures. This is a remarkably consistent theme in collectors' banter.

The letters of the "Big Five" are full of references to larcenous impulse. When Judd Stewart learned that Daniel Fish had been elected judge, he wrote:

I am delighted to know that you are on the Bench because it will make you more careful in your dealings with "Collectors"; and if I should happen to steal anything I will of course have my trial conducted before you with a change of venue.

Apologizing the next year for failing to get by Minneapolis on a long trip across the country, Stewart told Fish:

Dont know whether you have anything that would cut down my want list or not. If I knew you had I'd come thro Minneapolis and rob your house at night and never let on I'd been there —

This was not a theme confined to Stewart and Fish. Stuart Jackson wrote Fish after a visit to Judd Stewart's house in New Jersey:

I spent an evening with him at Plainfield but he watched me too closely and I had no chance at the rarities — he knew that at one time I was in Wall Street.

Or again, after another visit in 1917:

See friend Stewart quite often and he always has some new, rare and interesting Lincoln item to show me from the safe in his office. He will not leave me alone and so my collection grows very slowly. . . .

In 1919 a thief broke into Judd Stewart's office in New York (he was Assistant to the President of the American Smelter & Refining Company) and stole over \$6000 worth of property from his safe. The theft made the New York papers, and Stewart sent the clipping to Isaac Campbell, a Canadian Lincoln collector, with this hasty note: "Referring to attached. Can you tell me if Fish is anywhere in the East?" Stewart then explained, in a more serious vein: "They didn't get the bonds but a lot of other valuables — jewelry, gold coins, etc. No Lincoln letters taken." Fish rose to the bait when Campbell sent him a copy of Stewart's letter:

Honestly, Campbell and I are not guilty. At least I am not, and if Campbell is you can't "get" him without bringing on an international crisis. All Canada will swear to any kind of an alibi he chooses to fix up. I warned him to have one ready and, crossing my letter, came a copy of his to you; wherein

he balances the probabilities touching my participation in the crime, giving me a shade the worst of it. Despite his acute speculations I still believe that I am innocent.

On the same day Fish wrote Campbell:

You see how promptly I came to your rescue in our common danger. I vouched for your innocence and went further. I pointed out the difficulty of convicting you, even if guilty, and thus sought to discourage further prosecution Maybe we are not yet out of the woods but if we can stand firmly together I think we are safe.

While Fish was defending Campbell (a bit backhandedly), Campbell was writing Stewart to throw suspicion on Judge Fish:

My first feeling on getting your memorandum the other day was to shout "Ha Ha, now the Judge is found out." But second thoughts perhaps require suspension of judgment If Fish were the culprit he had a curious selection of spoil. He doesn't know any more about jewelry than I do. He would have been after your letters and manuscripts. It follows that there is a slight presumption in his favor.

You never can tell. The Judge for years has been presiding on the judicial bench at Minneapolis with great acceptance to the best citizens there He knows how to admonish a brother man who in a weak moment proceeds from coveting another man's goods to thinking of stealing them, as witness the lecture he gave me when I suggested that I might rob your library at Plainfield, while he robbed your safe in New York City. Can it be possible that this man is only a whited sepulchre? And worse still, can it be possible that after dissuading me he is now proceeding to play a lone hand? Why couldn't he take me in on the Plainfield part of the enterprise? Better run over your shelves at your home and see if their contents are quite intact. The Judge only a few days ago sent me 12 duplicates

I am very sorry that you sent me that note with a query about the Judge. Before that I was suffused with gratitude to him for his kindness Strange indeed that the very same facts now under the leaven or yeast of suspicion are suddenly changed from sweetness to gall.

Despite the constant banter about larceny — the "rhetoric of larceny" — the competition of collectors is really more like the friendly competition of amateur sport than the cut-throat variety associated with *laissez faire* economic struggle. One reason collectors get together is to exchange duplicate items in their collections. When Stewart sent Major Lambert a duplicate in 1910, he wrote:

I am sending you to-day, a copy of the Greek life. I hope that you receive it tomorrow, and as to reimbursing me for it, be assured that the pleasure I will have from knowing that whenever you show this volume you will have to pay a tribute to your hated rival's ability will more than offset its price, and besides I feel that I am so indebted to you that it is only proper that you accept it with my best wishes.

When one of the collectors gave a speech on Lincoln that was printed, he was sure to receive praise from the others — laced with a little friendly chiding — as in this letter from Fish to Stewart:

Yours of the 27th received. Also the two booklets of your addresses at Plainfield. I have heretofore warned you against the sin of publishing Lincoln literature, yet here are two more titles, one of them suggesting still another — yes many others. I am glad of course to have these children of your brain, but — Have you looked into this new science of "birth control?" I haven't, not being personally concerned of late years, but perhaps it might do something for you.

They all enjoyed the spirit of the chase, too, though it could be fairly harrowing. Fish went to Beach, North Dakota, in 1917 to investigate for Stewart a purported Lincoln letter owned by a farmer. He learned that the man wanted a cool thousand for

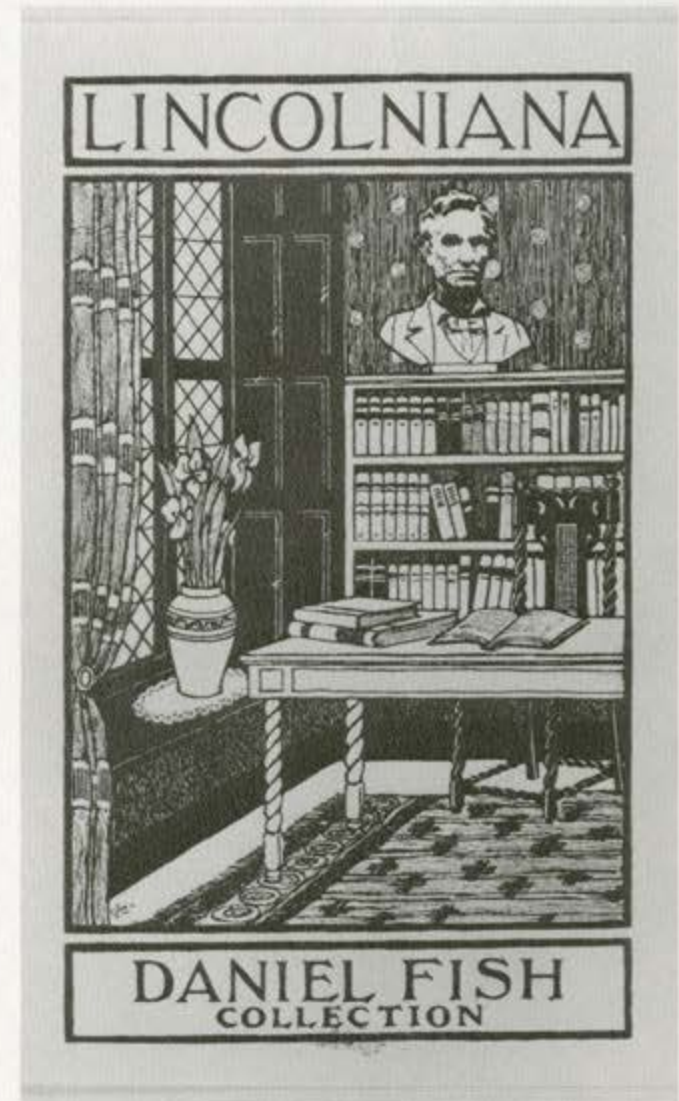
it and let him keep it. He reported to Stewart:

Incidentally I got caught by high water in the Missouri and had to keep a jury waiting two days, notwithstanding I walked from Mandan to Bismarck, on the ties of the railroad mostly and creeping over ice blocks strewn upon the right of way. The day before five men attempted to reach the bridge in a boat and were drowned. I've a durned good notion to draw on you for expenses but I had all the fun so I'll stand the cost.

These were great and good friends, all right, as this moving letter from Campbell to Fish about the death of Stewart shows:

I have not been very well since your previous letter telling me of Stewart's death. I have not for a long time felt so bad about the death of a friend, especially one whom I had met in person for only fifteen minutes, but whose acquaintanceship had been increased with mutual correspondence and through our having you for a mutual friend. Perhaps some of this is due to self pity. Again and again I have imagined a meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship some 12th of February . . . at which both you and I could be present along with Stewart. Now, that is impossible.

It is little wonder that Lincoln clubs were often called Lincoln Fellowships — Lincoln collecting has the power to make fast friends of people who meet face to face for only fifteen minutes in their lives.



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FIGURE 4. Fish's bookplate.