



Lincoln Lore

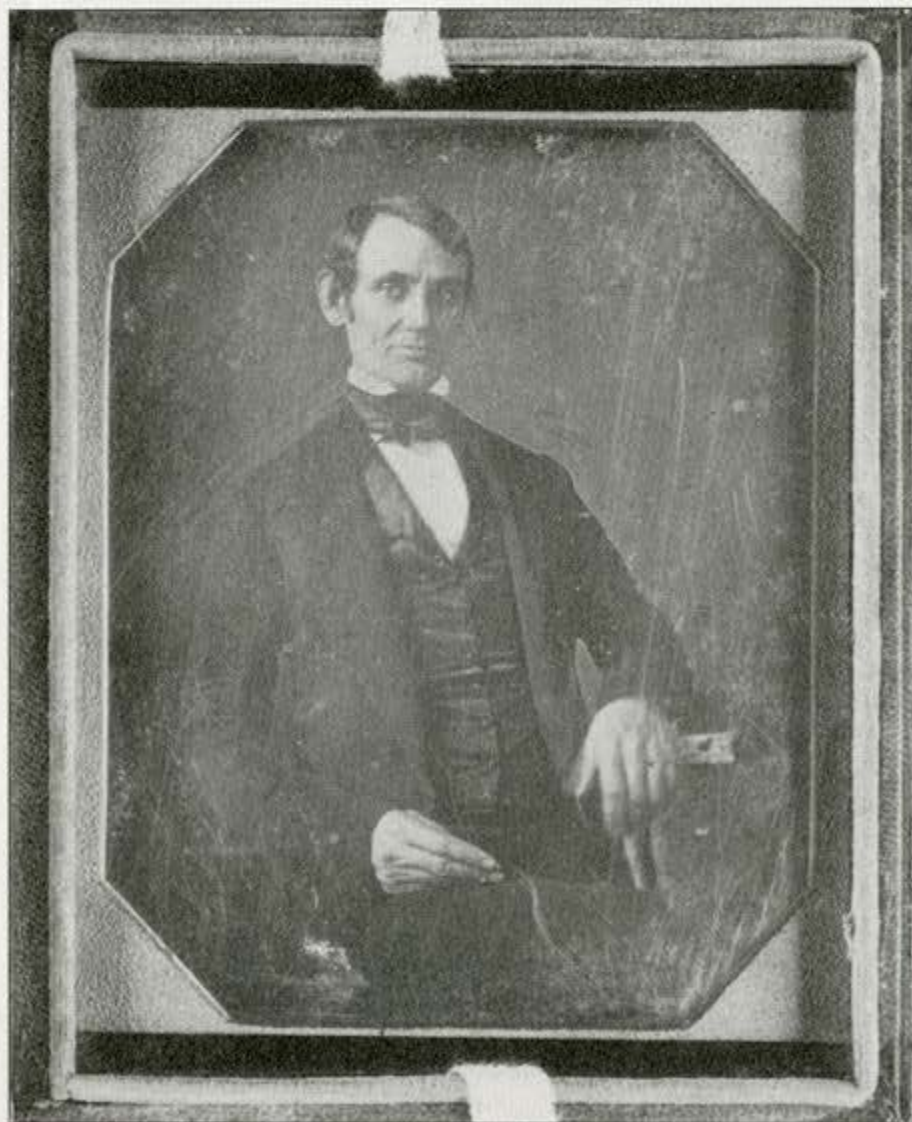
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PHOTOGRAPHING LINCOLN: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY 1846–1860

(PART I)
by Sarah McNair Vosmeier



From the Library of Congress

FIGURE 1. Quarter-plate daguerreotype (about $3\frac{3}{4}$ by $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches) by N. H. Shepherd, taken in Springfield, in 1846. The original is smaller than this reproduction, yet (with a magnifying glass) one can distinguish between the white and the quick of Lincoln's fingernails. James Mellon's *The Face of Lincoln* (p. 19) shows the plate itself (outside of its case); in that reproduction, the silversmith's mark is just visible in the upper-left corner.

When Lincoln was photographed for the first time, in 1846, the invention of photography was only seven years old, and the new experience must have been an ordeal for him. Deciding to be photographed was not done on impulse in the 1840s. Lincoln would have expected to pay at least \$2.00 for the privilege—no small sum considering he paid \$1.50 or less for shoes. Once he had made the decision, he still had to wait until the weather was right because daguerreotype cameras required bright sunlight for portraiture. When the right day finally came, we can imagine Mary Lincoln fussing about what he should wear and how he should present himself. Perhaps Lincoln worried too. In this picture (unlike many of his later ones), his hair is carefully combed and cut short, and his tie is neatly tied. Mary apparently had his coat ironed, but the unblinking eye of the camera recorded wrinkles in his vest.¹

Lincoln's photograph was taken by N. H. Shepherd, an itinerant photographer who was in Springfield in January 1846 and set up a studio in a room above J. Brookie's drug store. As Lincoln reached the top of the stairs leading to Shepherd's studio, he must have been overwhelmed by the odor of chemicals. The elegant studios in big cities had separate rooms for developing the photographs, but itinerant photographers like Shepherd made do with what was available. No matter how makeshift his studio might seem, Shepherd made sure it included a special display of his photographs, and Lincoln may have dawdled there a while looking at them. If he had seen Shepherd's advertisement in the *Sangamo Journal*, he would have understood that the upstairs room was intended to be more than just a working

studio. Shepherd called it a "Daguerreotype Miniature Gallery," and he invited Springfield residents to "call and examine specimens—whether they intend sitting or not." In New York City at this time, people regularly visited Mathew Brady's fashionable gallery on Broadway, even if they had no intention of being photographed. Perhaps people were drawn to Brady's celebrity photographs in the same way they were drawn to the curiosities in Barnum's American Museum across the way.²

When Lincoln had finished looking at the photographs on display, Shepherd would have directed him to a chair in front of the camera and explained that he would have to sit very still for half a minute or more. If Lincoln moved even slightly, he might mar the picture, Shepherd would have cautioned. Then, to help him hold perfectly still, Shepherd fastened his head into an "immobilizer," or metal head rest, attached to a tall stand which would be hidden behind Lincoln's body in the finished picture. Shepherd also arranged his hands so that it would be easy to keep them still, propping up Lincoln's right arm on a book and resting his left hand on his leg. Perhaps Shepherd even arranged Lincoln's fingers on that hand, or perhaps Lincoln, himself, was striving for an elegant look. In any case, no other Lincoln photograph shows his hand composed so stiffly. When everything was ready, Shepherd uncovered the camera's shutter, counted off the appropriate number of seconds, and then covered it again.

Once Shepherd finished the exposure, Lincoln must have let out a sigh—because Shepherd had surely directed him to hold his breath during the exposure and possibly as well in relief that the ordeal was over. Lincoln was always interested



From the Museum of the City of New York

FIGURE 2. Mathew Brady's gallery (lower right) at the corner of Fulton and Broadway in New York City in the late 1840s. Note Barnum's American Museum across the way (far left) with its sign partially obscured.

in technical inventions, and while he relaxed waiting for Shepherd to develop the picture, he might have wandered about, looking at the photographic equipment.

An obliging Shepherd might even have given Lincoln a grand tour, starting with the pile of untreated plates. Daguerreotypes are photographs made directly on a silver-coated metal plate. The plates were made by silversmiths and often imported from France. To make them, a silversmith attached a sheet of silver to a block of copper. Then he flattened this block by running it through rollers over and over again, transforming it into a thin copper sheet with an even thinner layer of silver on top. The sheet was then cut into standard sizes. Shepherd used a "quarter plate" for Lincoln's photograph (about 3 1/4 by 4 1/4 inches). Big-city photographers could make larger photographs, but Shepherd probably dealt exclusively in the less expensive and more popular smaller sizes. In addition to being less expensive, smaller plate could be used in cameras requiring shorter exposure times—another advantage for portraiture. If Lincoln had wanted a whole-plate daguerreotype of himself (about 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches), he would have had to sit still for two or three times as long as he did for his quarter-plate daguerreotype.³

Theoretically, Shepherd could have used the quarter plate as it came from the silversmith, but many photographers added more silver to their plates by "galvanizing" (electroplating) them. To do this, Shepherd attached one wire to his plate and another to a piece of silver. Then he dropped the silver and the plate into a tank filled with a potassium cyanide solution, attaching the wires to a battery. This caused silver molecules to move from the piece of silver to the plate.



From the Lincoln Museum
FIGURE 3. Judson Kilpatrick, carte de visite. Note base of "immobilizer" at his feet. Although his pose looks casual, the immobilizer is holding him rigidly in position.

Buffing, the next step in preparing the plate, was the most tedious part of the process. The idea was to cover the plate with almost microscopic parallel scratches. If it were properly buffed, these scratches reflected the light in such a way that the plate looked almost black. Lincoln could have examined several specialized tools for holding and buffing the plate: the most interesting one was the "buff stick," which looked like a wooden short sword covered in leather.

Next Shepherd had to make the plate light sensitive. Daguerreotypists with permanent galleries set up separate dark rooms with tinted lamps for light, but absolute dark was not necessary. Itinerant photographers could simply curtain one corner of the room with a piece of dark muslin. This made it dark enough to sensitize the plates but light enough to see. In the dim light, Shepherd "coated" (sensitized) the plate in three steps. First, he put the plate in a "coating box" containing iodine crystals. He left the plate in the box for half a minute or so, removing it when it had turned an orange-yellow color. Next he put it in another coating box containing "quickstuff." The quickstuff, a mixture including bromine and chlorine, was what made the plate sensitive enough for portraiture. Without quickstuff, Shepherd could have taken a picture, but it could not have been a portrait because it would have required an exposure of half an hour or more. Most photographers developed their own formulas for quickstuff, and Shepherd might have tried to impress Lincoln with the special qualities of his own blend. Finally, the last step in coating the plate was to give it another brief dose of iodine fumes.⁴

All of these steps would have been completed before Lincoln arrived or while he was looking at the display photographs. By the time Shepherd had gotten this far in his explanation, he would surely have finished developing the picture Lincoln was waiting for. Still, if he warmed up to his role as photographic lecturer, he might have explained what had happened during the exposure and what he had been doing to the exposed plate since.

The chemicals Shepherd used in the coating process reacted with the plate to form layers of silver halide on the plate, and silver halide is photosensitive. While the shutter of Shepherd's camera was open, light in the studio reflected off Lincoln's figure and through the lens of the camera onto the plate, breaking down the silver halide to form photolytic silver. Lincoln's shirt front reflected the most light, and therefore the corresponding area of the plate received the most light and formed the most silver. In comparison, the wrinkles in his vest reflected little light onto the plate, and thus the silver halide was not broken down in those areas. Although the plate was chemically changed as soon as it was exposed, it did not look any different until Shepherd "mercurialized" (developed) it.

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

1. For daguerreotype prices see *Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1983), p. 131, or John Wood, ed, *The Daguerreotype: A Sesquicentennial Celebration* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 36. To compare these prices with Lincoln's household expenses, see Harry E. Pratt, *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1943).

2. Shepherd's ad is reproduced in Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf, *Lincoln in Photographs* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1985), p. 5.

3. *Encyclopedia of Photography*, p. 131.

4. Examining daguerreotypes with an electron microscope, M. Susan Barger has discovered that the chemistry of this step is more complicated than nineteenth-century photographers could have known. The fact that photographers had to sensitize their plates in subdued light is as significant to the final result as the quickstuff. See "Delicate and Complicated Operations: The Scientific Examination of the Daguerreotype," in Wood, pp. 97-109.

CIVIL WAR INSTITUTE AT GETTYSBURG COLLEGE, 1990

For information write to G. S. Boritt, Director, Civil War Institute, Box 435, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA 17325. Telephone: 717-337-6590.

PROGRAM

Sunday, June 24

Evening Reception
Concert by the 11th Pa. Volunteer Infantry Fife and Drum Corp.

Monday, June 25

Morning Phillip Shaw Paludan, "A People's Contest: A Meaning of the Civil War"
Afternoon Col. Harold W. Nelson, "After Appomattox: The American Peace, Comparative Views"
Extra Jon Berkey, "Appomattox: Then and Now" Slide Lecture
Evening Ed Bearss, "The Road to Appomattox"

Tuesday, June 26

Morning Tour of Appomattox Battlefield or Tour of Gettysburg Battlefield
Evening "Lee at Appomattox," Sweet Briar College or "Grant and Lee in Virginia," Gettysburg College

Wednesday, June 27

Morning Tour of Appomattox or Tour of U.S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks
Afternoon Return from Appomattox or Continuing tour of U.S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks
Evening Gettysburg College: Medley of Civil War films and/or Gabor Boritt, "The New \$50,000 Lincoln Prize"; Wil Greene, "Battlefield Preservation and the APCWS"

Thursday, June 28

Morning Joseph Glatthaar, "Forged in Battle: Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers"
Afternoon Free time
Late
Afternoon Encampment and drills (bayonet included): Company B, 54th Massachusetts
Extra Walt Powell, "Gettysburg's Black Soldiers"
Evening Film: "Glory," followed by a discussion of film with Joe Glatthaar

Friday, June 29

Morning Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Lincoln and Liberty"
Afternoon The Great Assassination Debate: William Hanchett, Mark Neely, Jr., William Tidwell, Thomas Turner
Extra Gary Kersey, "The Death of Lincoln" Slide Lecture
Evening Banquet and Closing Ceremonies

Saturday, June 30

Morning Participants depart after breakfast

FACULTY

LECTURERS:

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Assistant Professor of History, University of Houston, author of *Forged in battle: Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (1989).

William Hanchett, Professor of History, Emeritus, San Diego State University, author of *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (1983).

Mark E. Neely, Jr., Director, Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, author of *Civil Liberties in the Civil War: Abraham Lincoln and the Problem of Political Prisoners* (tentative title, forthcoming, 1990).

Col. Harold W. Nelson, Chief of Military History, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., former Director, U.S. Army Military History Institute, co-author of *Guide to the Battle of Gettysburg* (1986).

Phillip Shaw Paludan, Professor of History, University of Kansas, author of *A People's Contest* (1988).

Walter Powell, historian at Gettysburg, author of *Connecticut Yankees at Gettysburg* (forthcoming, 1991).

Brigadier General William A. Tidwell (Ret.), U.S. Army Reserves, principal author of *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln* (1988).

Thomas R. Turner, Chair, History Department, Bridgewater State College, author of *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Lincoln* (1982).

EXTRAS:

11th Pennsylvania Volunteer Fife and Drum Corp.

Company B, 54th Massachusetts (from "Glory").

Jon Berkey, CWI Alum, senior history major, Gettysburg College, from Danville, PA.

Gary Kersey, CWI alum and CWI auctioneer from Sabina, Ohio.

A. Wilson Greene, Executive Director, Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, co-author *Antietan: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaigns* (1989).

BATTLEFIELD GUIDES:

Ed Bearss, Chief Historian of the National Park Service, co-author of *Battle of Five Forks* (1985).

Christopher M. Calkins, historian, Petersburg National Battlefield, author of *From Petersburg to Appomattox* (1982).

William Ridinger, battlefield guide, Gettysburg National Military Park, Professor Emeritus, Southern Connecticut State University

Ron Wilson, historian, Appomattox National Military Park.

Gabor S. Boritt, author of *How Big Was Lincoln's Toe? or Finding a Footnote* (1989), directs the Civil War Institute.