



Lincoln Lore

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PHOTOGRAPHING LINCOLN (Part IV)

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

The day Lincoln was to give his speech at the Cooper Union in New York City, several of the organizers of the event called on him in his hotel room. R. C. McCormick remembered that Lincoln was wearing "a suit of black, much wrinkled from its careless packing in a small valise," and that Lincoln "apologized for the awkward and uncomfortable appearance he made in his new suit." The New Yorkers found him "very odd" and were surprised to discover that he did not know he should have prepared a copy of his speech for the newspapers. As he admitted that he had only been in New York once before, they decided to take him sightseeing. McCormick remembered that they took him to "several large establishments, with all of which he seemed much amused."

They included Brady's famous gallery in their tour, and as McCormick remembered it,

We visited a photographic establishment on the corner of Broadway and Bleecker street, where he sat for his picture, the first taken in New York. At the gallery he met and was introduced to George Bancroft, and had a brief conversation with that gentleman, who welcomed him to New York. The contrast in the appearance of the men was most striking—the one courtly and precise in his every word and gesture, with the air of a trans-Atlantic statesman; the other bluff and awkward, his every utterance an apology for his ignorance of metropolitan manners and customs. "I am on my way to Massachusetts,"



FIGURE 1. Mathew Brady's gallery, January 1861. Brady moved to this gallery a few months after Lincoln sat for the Cooper Union photograph, but his previous gallery was similarly opulent. *From the Lincoln Museum*

said he to Mr. Bancroft, "where I have a son at school, who, if report be true, already knows much more than his father."¹⁹

If Lincoln had been made to feel awkward earlier that day for his rumpled suit and his naiveté about the newspapers, Brady's opulent gallery could not have made him any more comfortable. Brady might have thought it was cramped and out-of-date—he would be moving to a larger and even more extravagant gallery in a few months. For Lincoln though, it must have seemed overwhelming, especially compared to Shepherd's makeshift studio.

In 1853 *Humphrey's Journal*, a magazine for photographers, published a "plain and somewhat minute" description of the studio where Lincoln would be photographed seven years later. As Lincoln and McCormick came to the front door, they may have stopped to look at some of Brady's display photographs in "rich rosewood and gilt show cases." (Brady would have a similar display at the entrance to his next gallery, and crowds would gather there during the war to pore over his photographs of battle scenes.) Opening the street door and climbing up a flight of stairs, Lincoln and his party passed through "folding doors, glazed with the choicest figured cut glass, and artistically arranged" into "the largest Reception Room in this city." As the *Humphrey's* reporter described the room where Lincoln stood talking with Bancroft,

The floors are carpeted with superior velvet tapestry, highly colored and of a large and appropriate pattern. The walls are covered with satin and gold paper. The ceiling frescoed, and in the center is suspended a six-light gilt and enamelled chandelier, with prismatic drops that throw their enlivening colors in abundant profusion. The light through the windows is softened by passing the meshes of the most costly needle worked lace curtain, or intercepted, if occasion requires, by shades commensurate with the gayest of palaces, while the golden cornices, and festooned damask indicate that Art dictated their arrangement. The harmony is not in the least disturbed by the the superb rosewood furniture—tete-a-tetes, reception and easy chairs, and marble-top tables, all of which are multiplied by mirrors from ceiling to floor.

In Shepherd's gallery in 1848, Lincoln was probably more interested in the photographs' amazing detail than in their subject matter—perhaps local notables or state officials. In comparison, strolling through Brady's gallery in 1860, Lincoln could see photographs of internationally famous people: "Presidents, Generals, Kings, Queens, Noblemen—and *more nobler* men—men and women of all nations and professions." Since Brady had been photographing celebrities since the 1840s, Lincoln could see, through photographs, people he could never see otherwise. For example, Brady photographed Henry Clay, Lincoln's "beau ideal of a statesman," two years before

Clay's death in 1852.

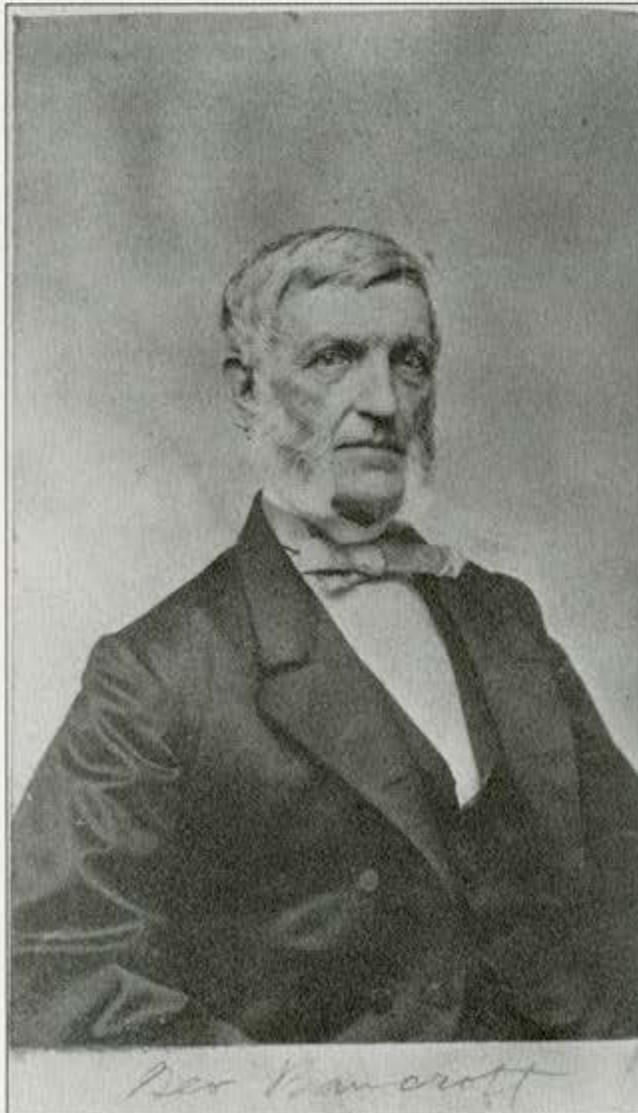
Eventually Lincoln and McCormick would have made their way to the business office which was "fitted up with a variety of showcases, where can be seen samples of all the various styles of Frames, Cases, Locketts, &c., used in the Art." If, as Lincoln sat in the office making the arrangements for his sitting, he was tempted to buy a photograph album or other knick-knack to take home to his family, he did not mention it in his only extant letter to his wife about this visit to New York.

Beyond the business office was the "Ladies Parlor," where women could adjust their dresses and coiffures. Lincoln, of course, would not have seen this room. Had she known, Mary would have been disappointed he could not describe it to her because it was as opulent as the rest of the gallery. The *Humphrey's* reporter did visit it, and he noted that it had all of the conveniences to make the Patrons comfortable and delighted. The walls are covered with the richest green velvet satin and gold paper. The ceiling frescoed with a center, through which is suspended a large enamelled chandelier. The two windows have curtains to correspond with the general appearance; between them is a large oval mirror, with a massive carved gilt frame—cottage chairs, rosewood tete-a-tetes, covered with green and gold brocatelle, while the exquisite velvet tapestry contribute to the perfection of the room.²⁰

When his turn for a sitting came, Lincoln would have been escorted to one of the "operating rooms" where Brady and his assistants actually took the pictures. The

operating rooms were filled with sunlight streaming in from large windows and skylights. If Lincoln troubled to look around the room, he might have noticed that Brady used more elaborate backdrops and props than the Illinois photographers he had posed for. His earlier photographs have simple backgrounds and they are all head-and-shoulders views. In comparison, the Cooper Union photograph is a three-quarters length standing pose, and Brady chose a background and props that would provide clues for interpreting the finished photograph (see *Lincoln Lore* no. 1807, figure 4). That is, the classical column to Lincoln's right and the books under his left hand suggest that he is a learned statesman, not just a prairie demagogue. Brady bragged that his photograph gave Lincoln the election, and Francis Carpenter, a contemporary artist, did not discount Brady's claim, judging that the Cooper Union photograph was the best one available during the campaign. "The effect of such influences, though silent, is powerful," Carpenter noted.²¹

After the operator made the exposure for the photograph, he might have asked Lincoln to wait while the plate was developed so that he could approve the negative, but the actual prints would not be ready until the next day at the earliest. Since Lincoln had to be in Rhode Island the next evening, he probably did not return for the prints, although he could have ar-



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 2. George Bancroft.

ranged for Brady to send some to Springfield. In Brady's gallery, unlike Shepherd's, all the preparations and developing were done out of sight of the clients, and the printing was often done in a different building entirely. This meant Lincoln would not have had the same opportunity to chat with Brady or his operators, as he could have chatted with daguerreotypists and ambrotypists while they finished his photographs. Thus he did not have the same opportunities to learn how the new photographic process worked.

Three years later in July of 1863, if Lincoln was interested in the manufacture of cartes de viste, he would be able to read an *Atlantic Monthly* article explaining the process in detail written by Oliver Wendell Holmes (whose son, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was later a U.S. Supreme Court Justice). The steps for preparing, exposing, and developing a glass negative were the same as the steps Robert's photographer had followed for making an ambrotype. Much of the process of making a carte was done by someone other than the photographer though; by the 1860s photographers were able to purchase many of their supplies ready-made.

To make paper prints from the glass negatives, photographers needed special paper imported from Europe. The paper had to be thin so that it would float on top of the various chemical solutions, but more importantly, it needed to be free of impurities. Most paper contained traces of minerals left from the water used in the papermaking process, and these mineral traces interfered with the photographic chemicals. Only two cities in Europe had access to the mineral-free water needed for making photographic paper, and until the late 1860s photographers all over the world had to import paper from those two factories. By 1863 Americans were importing at least fifteen thousand reams of this paper every year.²²

The first step in transforming the imported paper into a carte was to "albumenize" it by floating it on top of a tray of egg whites which had been salted, beaten, and allowed

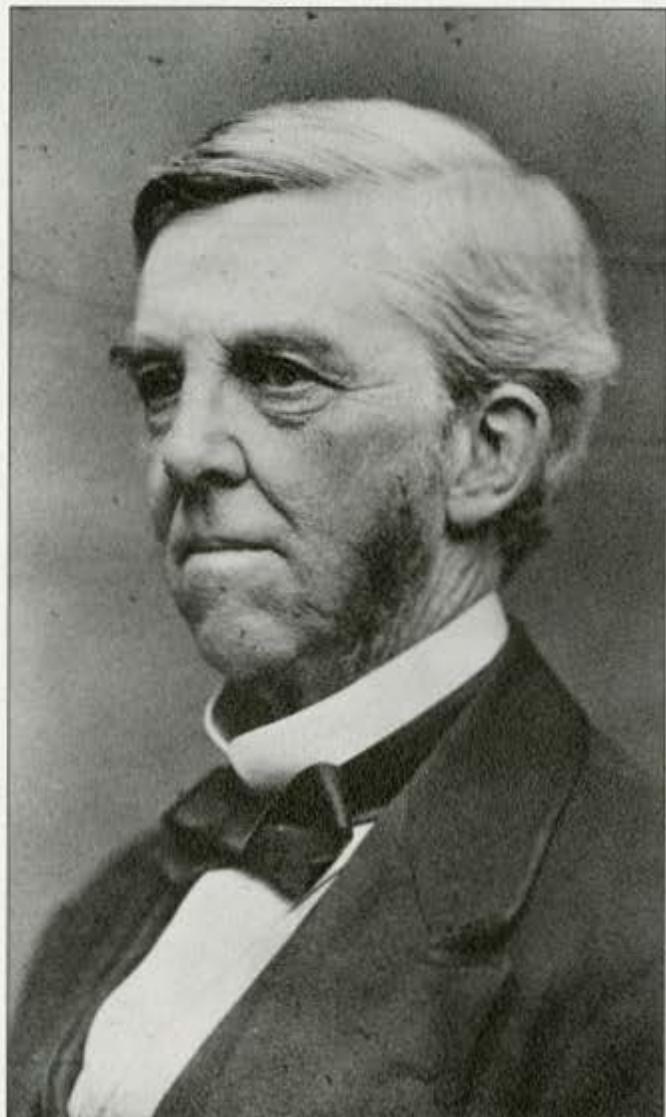
to settle back to a liquid. The egg whites gave the paper a glossy finish which would keep the photographic image from soaking into the paper itself. Photographers who had experimented with paper prints before albumen paper was developed had found that without the glossy albumen finish, the texture of the paper obscured the picture's detail. Most photographers bought paper already albumenized from a photographic supply house like E. & H. T. Anthony (who controlled the photographic supplies industry until the late nineteenth century). Because albumen paper could be stored indefinitely, it made sense to buy it ready-made.

On the other hand, sensitized paper did not store well, so photographers had to do the next step themselves, making up fresh batches of sensitized paper every day (or having their assistants do so). To sensitize the paper, they floated it, albumen side down, in a solution of silver nitrate. Once the paper had dried, it was light sensitive and ready to use. The next step was to fasten the paper and the glass negative together into a wooden frame. (It looked like a picture frame with a hinged wooden back on it.) Once everything was sandwiched into the frame, it was taken upstairs to the roof (or out into the backyard) to lie in the sun. Normally photographers made several prints at once, and the larger businesses used racks that could hold 100 frames at a time. At intervals someone would open the backs of the frames to check the prints, and if a print looked finished, it was turned on its back to shut out the light and stop development. Prints were made differently than negatives in that they did not require a



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 3. Mathew Brady (on the right), 1862. Brady was more often behind the camera than in front of it, and photographs of him are relatively rare.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 4. Oliver Wendell Holmes.

developer like the mercury fumes Shepherd used. With printmaking, speed was not important, and so photographers could just leave the plates and paper in the sun until the silver halides were completely transformed into metallic silver. The prints still needed to be fixed though, because the parts of the print which had been covered by the dark part of the negative (i.e. the light areas) had not been exposed and were still photosensitive.

Carrying the prints back inside, the photographer or assistant floated them in a salt solution and then rinsed them in water. Next they went into a solution of gold chloride. Because the gold was expensive, most photographers trimmed their prints to the very edge of the photographic image. (If they had left the border untrimmed, that border would have absorbed some of the expensive gold chloride unnecessarily.) The next bath was hyposulphite of soda, which fixed the print, making it no longer photosensitive. Finally, it was rinsed thoroughly and dried.

The last step was to glue the finished photograph onto the standardized card (usually with the photographer's imprint on the back), put it under a weight, and allow it to dry for several hours.²³

Although Holmes' article was available to Lincoln in July 1863, he probably did not read it—being preoccupied with other, more pressing concerns. Similarly, in February 1860 he was probably more preoccupied with the speech he was about to make than with the photograph he was sitting for. As he must have realized, the purpose of the sitting was not to create an image he and his family would cherish; it was to create a negative that would allow Eastern Republicans to distribute prints to potential voters. Any prints Brady might send him would be incidental to the project. When less than two months later, one of Lincoln's political supporters asked him for a photograph, Lincoln emphasized the political (rather than personal) nature of the Cooper Union photograph by saying, "I have not a single one now at my control; but I think you can easily get one at New York ... Any of the Republican Club men there can show you the place."²⁴

Lincoln's correspondent could "easily get one at New York" because artistic photographers like Brady had improved on the mass production techniques of the blue-bosom operators. When Brady switched from daguerreotypes to the wet-plate process, he did more than change media. He re-photographed his entire collection of daguerreotypes onto glass negatives, and then turned the plates over to the E. and H. T. Anthony company, which did the printmaking and some of the distributing for him. With this system, theoretically, anyone in the country could buy any one of thousands of Brady's photographs.

Compared to the blue-bosom operators Werge described, Anthony's business was truly a factory; each step of the process was sub-divided and simplified until it could be done by any unskilled laborer. Werge's description shows how the blue-bosom operators saved money on wages by hiring men who were not highly skilled and by using boys for some jobs. Still the men had to have the minimal training required to take and develop photographs. Anthony saved even more money by eliminating all skill from the process. As Holmes described it,

The workmen in [Anthony's factory] where labor is greatly subdivided become wonderfully adroit in doing a fraction of something.... A young person who mounts photographs on cards all day long confessed to having never, or almost never, seen a negative developed, though standing at the time within a few feet of the dark closet where the process was going on all day long. One forlorn individual will perhaps pass his days in the single work of cleaning the glass plates for negatives. Almost at his elbow is a toning bath, but he would think it a good joke if you asked him whether a picture had lain long enough in the solution of gold or hyposulphite.²⁵

Holmes' references to "workmen" are deceptive because another way Anthony saved money was by hiring girls for unskilled jobs. Girls were more cost-effective than men

because employers assumed that girls were being supported by their parents; therefore they felt justified in paying them less.

Anthony's mass production techniques meant that the factory could produce Brady's photographs cheaply and in great quantities. (They printed thousands of photographs a day.) In all likelihood, most of them were sold on the East Coast, but Brady did not need a mass-distribution system to get his photographs to other parts of the country—only to make a profit from doing so. The temptation of piracy was irresistible. A photographer in Springfield, for example, could buy one copy of Lincoln's Cooper Union photograph, re-photograph it, and turn a tidy profit by selling the duplicates himself. (Brady himself indulged in the practice, putting his own imprint on the back of the pirated images.) Through mass production and piracy, the cartes de visite brought accurate pictures of celebrities and politicians to all parts of the country.

Between 1846 when Lincoln visited Shepherd's makeshift gallery in Springfield, and 1860 when he posed in Brady's opulent New York gallery, photography had undergone a major transformation. In the 1840s and 50s inventors and innovators had made improvements on Daguerre's idea, but for the most part they continued to think of photographs as unique works of art, like paintings. By 1860, though, almost everyone had made the mental leap, thinking of photographs now as reproducible images. This change in thinking had a number of consequences. From the photographer's point of view, much of the drudgery of their profession had been eliminated (although by no means all of it). The tedious chore of buffing metal plates was no longer necessary, for example; and mass production transferred other chores to unskilled laborers. Even photographers who could not afford to hire assistants of their own might buy factory-mixed chemicals and pre-treated paper. From the customer's point of view, the change meant that good photographs could now be purchased inexpensively. The middle class could afford to buy photographs of themselves by the dozen, distributing them among their friends and relations. Furthermore, cartes made photographs of people like Lincoln accessible to almost everyone. Owning a photograph of a celebrity like Lincoln gave people a connection to him that had never before been possible; they had indeed (as Lincoln remarked) got his shadow and could multiply copies indefinitely.

FOOTNOTES

19. Francis F. Browne, *The Every-day Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: N. D. Thompson, 1886), p. 315; Henry J. Raymond, *The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Derby & Miller, 1865), p. 100.

20. "Brady's Daguerreotype Establishment," *Humphrey's Journal* (June 25, 1853), pp. 73-74.

21. Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), p. 47.

22. See Jenkins, p. 49 on photographic paper making.

23. Holmes, pp. 1-8; Darrah, *Cartes*, pp. 13-16. Jenkins, pp. 38-39.

24. To H. G. Eastman, April 7, 1860.

25. Holmes, p. 2.

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