
Lincoln LORE

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PRESIDENT LINCOLN AND FAMILY.



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Jessie Cortesi, Senior Lincoln Librarian
Abbie Meek, Senior Lincoln Librarian
Chris Viel, Lincoln Lore Layout and Graphic Designer
Lincoln@acpl.info

Friends of the Lincoln Collection

Jonathan W. White, Editor
jonathan.white@cnu.edu
P.O. Box 11083
Fort Wayne, IN 46855

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Editor's Note



In April 2025, The Lincoln Forum hosted a symposium at Robert Lincoln's palatial estate, Hildene, in Manchester, Vermont. Throughout the weekend, speakers discussed various aspects of Abraham Lincoln's family life, from his childhood in Kentucky and Indiana through Robert Lincoln's handling of his father's papers into the twentieth century. As I listened to the presenters, I knew I had to turn several of their papers into a special issue of *Lincoln Lore*.

During a captivating lecture on Robert Lincoln, biographer Jason Emerson quoted several letters by a friend of Robert's that were entirely unknown to Lincoln scholars. I asked Jason to edit them for *Lore* so that we could make them available to future generations for the first time.

Michelle A. Krowl's fascinating presentation on the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress traced the movement of Lincoln's papers across the years. Her remarks give readers the surprising story behind a collection that nearly every Civil War historian consults.

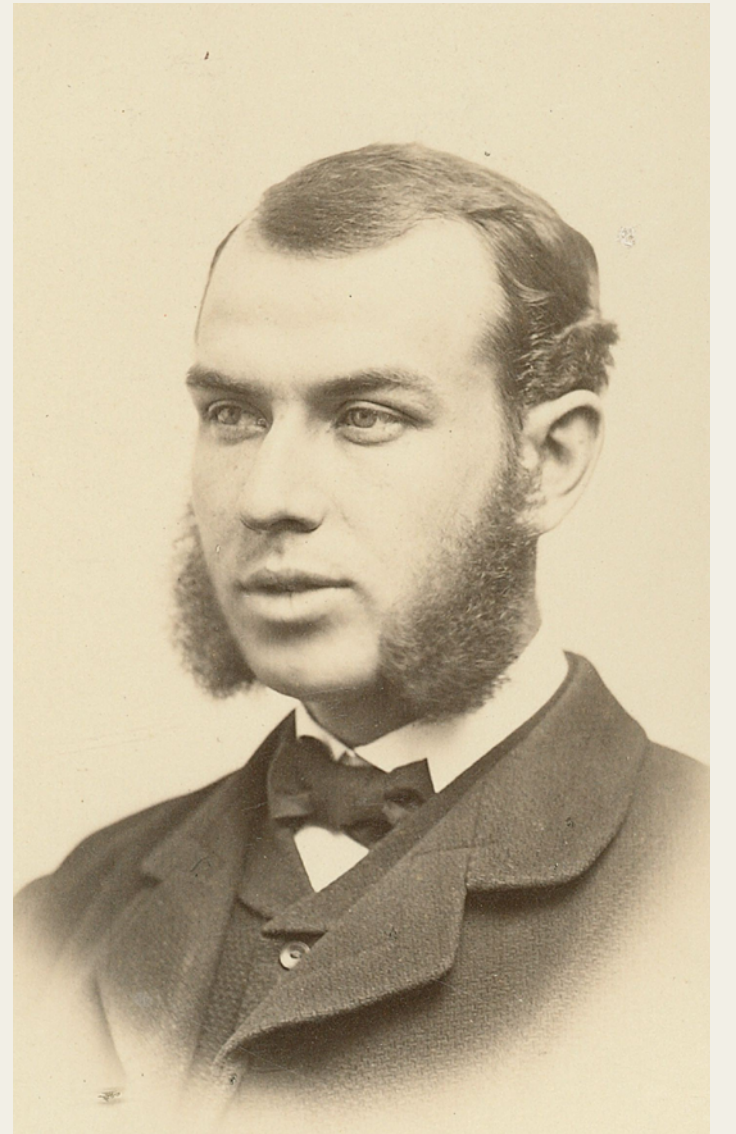
As part of the symposium, Samuel Wheeler, Christian McWhirter, Jason Emerson, and Callie Hawkins participated in a wonderful panel discussion on the Lincoln children's formative years in Springfield. Following the panel, I asked Sam to edit what he is calling "The Collected Works of Willie Lincoln" so that readers can see into the mind of a child who died too soon.

Taken together, these articles give readers a glimpse into The Lincoln Forum symposium at Hildene. I hope that you enjoy learning more about the personal side of the Lincoln family.

— Jonathan W. White

On the Cover: In this carte-de-visite Abraham Lincoln sits holding a book in his lap as Tad, Robert (in uniform) and Mary look on. The picture on the wall is of Willie Lincoln, who died in 1862. (OC-0359)

Robert Todd Lincoln first met Richard J. Meconkey (pictured here) at Phillips Exeter Academy in 1859. The two remained friends when they joined the class of 1864 at Harvard. (Harvard University Archives)



On Holiday with the Lincolns: *The Letters of Robert Lincoln's College Friend, Richard J. Meconkey*

by Jason Emerson

Abraham Lincoln once wrote, "the better part of one's life consists of his friends." His son Robert had many friends, some of whom were lifelong—such as John Hay and John Nicolay—and some who came and went with the circumstances. During his year at Phillips Exeter Academy from 1859 to 1860, Robert made a friend in his classmate Richard J. Meconkey, a young man from West Chester, Pennsylvania, whose father was an eminent banker and solid Republican. The two boys were so close that Meconkey became an intimate of the Lincoln family, joining the "presidential suite" through part of Pennsylvania during the inaugural journey (including his eyewitness account of the night Lincoln was told about the plot to assassinate him in Baltimore), spending summer vacations at the White House in 1861 and 1862, hosting Robert at the Meconkey home in West Chester, and joining in most of Mrs. Lincoln's much-publicized three-week summer trip in August 1861.

Young Meconkey detailed his experiences with the first family in numerous letters home to his parents, David and Sarah Meconkey, and his friend Jennie Johnson. Their family correspondence, currently housed in the Chester County History Center, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, constitutes an amazing insider look into the Lincoln White House and the first family during the first two years of the Civil War—and is a primary resource never before utilized in Lincoln scholarship other than in my Robert Lincoln biography, *Giant in the Shadows*.

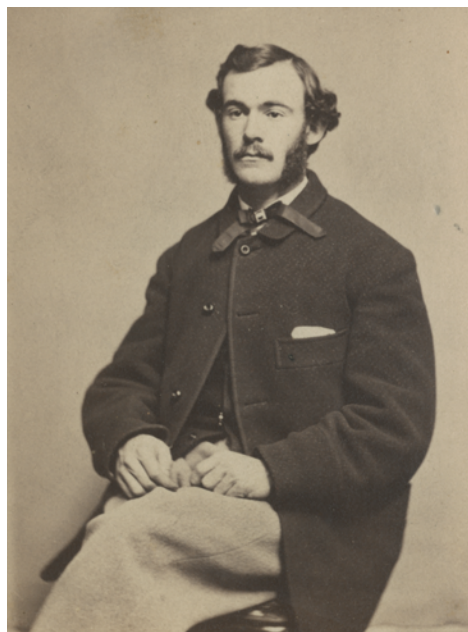
Transcribed below are ten letters from the Meconkey Family Papers, spanning from February 1861 to July 1862. Due to space limitations, any parts of the letters not specifically about the Lincolns or important historical moments—such as opening and closing lines, and family matters—have been omitted, as signified by ellipses.

Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Philadelphia, February 24, 1861

Dear Mother,

According to promise, I will endeavor to give you a brief account of my excursion to Harrisburg as a member of the suite of the President-elect. I caught a glimpse of Father as I drove off from the Continental in the carriage assigned to Bob & friends, but did not get a sight of yourself on Arch St. where I believe you told me that you would be. In our carriage was [George] Latham [a Springfield friend of Robert's], John Hay assistant secretary, Bob & myself. All young fellows, and quite willing & ready to acknowledge the fain glances & bright smiles directed to the vehicle containing the "Prince of Rails." We took the cars at West Philada, two in number, one for the committee the other exclusively for Mr. Lincoln & party. The car was nicely arranged, having inside two comfortable lounges, and very deep luxurious chairs. We were together like one family, each perfectly familiar with the others, and all distributing themselves over the car as their inclinations directed. The President & wife's easy manners and good humor throwing no restraint over the party, never requiring them to keep at a distance. Mrs. Lincoln was exceedingly kind and agreeable, treating Latham & myself in the same motherly way that she treated Bob. The old gentleman, sat in his chair, looking somewhat tired and fatigued, seemed to have no direction of his own affairs, but held himself agreeable to the wishes and say of Col. [Elmer] Ellsworth or [Senator Charles] Sumner, who have the direction of his movements.

You wished me to notice Mrs. Lincoln's dress—She had on a brown traveling dress, nice black cloth cloak, and dark velvet bonnet.



Robert Lincoln's friend George Latham (LFA-0289)



Pennsylvania Governor Andrew G. Curtin (OC-0517)

At Harrisburg Mr. Lincoln was taken in a carriage, open barouche, drawn by six white horses, we in two horse carriages, the military were drawn up on both sides of the road, making a grand appearance and salute—firing every half minute. We took dinner at six o'clock, had a nice cold lunch on the cars, and also one waiting at Harrisburg.

The bill of fare was very fine at Dinner.

Mr. Lincoln occupied the head of the table, Gov. [Andrew G.] Curtin on the right and Mrs. Lincoln on the left, and then the suite ranging on down the table. Mr. Curtin was the only person outside of the party. Mrs. L was dressed in a purple silk with rather bright flowers, and a very long trail, lace head-dress with gold flowers. She looked quite well.

While at the table a dispatch came from Mr. [William H.] Seward requesting Mr. Lincoln to come on privately. Several of the gentlemen Mr. L included retired to another room, but came back to finish dinner—some time in the night Mr. Lincoln gave the people the slip, and went on to Washington incog.—the party followed the next morn about nine o'clock, when I bid them goodbye, strolled around the city, up on to the State House etc until half past twelve when I also took my departure. In the West Chester car I met Mr. Chase who had been at West Chester, and who informed me that Father would be at the Jones Hotel this eve & where I shall go to meet him as soon as I've had tea. Affectionately

Your Son

Dick

Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Washington, D.C., July 25, 1861

Dear Mother,

Your letter of apprehension was brought to my room this morning—I mentioned the subject of it to Mrs. Lincoln at the breakfast table—who immediately sent me off to write, to relieve your fears—and to tell you from her, "that she felt safer, and considered Washington more secure [from Confederate invasion after the Union loss at the battle of Bull Run] than the border of Pennsylvania, and couldn't think of letting me go on so short a visit—".

There is not the slightest danger Mother, of their ever attacking the city—Mr. Lincoln is even in quite good spirits over the battle of the other day—he told us yesterday that he had learned that not more than 750 of our troops—all told—were lost the other day. That is the true state of affairs, as it comes out after investigation. The Zouaves, who were completely cut to pieces—have 600 of their number in Alexandria, and about 150 strolling around the streets here—which nearly concludes their original number.

Mrs. Lincoln just came in and said that she would write you a note herself, if she had time—to tell you, "that whenever it might become necessary to vacate the place, we will have a car at our command—that she felt safe nowhere but *here*—".

I visited the fortifications at Arlington Heights yesterday morning—and they can be held in the face of the whole Southern people by the troops now in possession of them.

The state of the case, is that, in the stampede the other day the *enemy did not make the slightest pursuit whatever*, and since the battle they have not advanced in any number, beyond their entrenchments at Manassas Junction. The reports you receive, I suppose, are startling, but the true state of the case is ever encouraging to our side. The Government is actively engaged in making preparations for offensive measures, and never felt more confident of security in their headquarters than they do at the present time. . . . My next letter, I will endeavor to make a *minutely descriptive one*, of the appearance and manner of conducting things in general—

Affec your Son

Dick



"Battle of Bull Run" by Kurz & Allison, ca. 1889 (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

**Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Washington, D.C., July 25, 1861**

Dear Mother,

This is Father's morning for a letter, but I have nothing but matters immediately concerning the White House to communicate, which I presume will more interest you than him, and which I have more confidence, will remain in your hands with *less circulation*—

I don't think it entirely becoming a guest to make public the domestic habits of the family whose good cheer he happens to share—therefore my wish [is] that it should go no farther than the family.

We rise in the morning, at the hour of half past eight—breakfast at nine—A servant always awakens, telling the time that breakfast will be ready—and comes again to tell us that it is upon the table—The cook is a French man, and of course is up to his business—The dishes are of handsome china, of the same quality, as your own sett [sic], varnished in blue—but to my eye, of an ungainly and course pattern—The food is kept upon a side table altogether, and handed by one of the intelligent waiters in silver vessels—whenever he perceives that your plate is empty of anything. In the center of [the] table, is a very large vase of flowers, and before each of the plates, in the morning, a handsome bouquet which you are expected to take upon rising from the table—The flowers come from an elegant and well filled conservatory adjoining the House—My seat at table is next to Mrs. Lincoln, and nearly opposite the President. Both of whom are excessively kind, and the former very attentive to my wants.

The morning, Bob and I spend as our inclinations dictate—have a carriage & horses always at our command—and the privilege of the whole house granted us—

The Dinner hour since I have been here, has been two o'clock, to suit Mr Lincoln's convenience as it is of regular courses, and lasts about an hour and [a] half—The set of dishes, are of course different in size, from those of the other meals, but belong to the same pattern—Supper generally at six o'clock—before supper we ride with Mrs. Lincoln, & Mrs. [Elizabeth Todd] Grimsley—a cousin—in the handsome carriage of the White House, and are the observed of all observers—

In the evening the ladies rec[eive] their company, which time is devoted to that purpose entirely—all callers of the day are put off until that time. Mrs. Lincoln never visits *any one*, but *everyone* can visit her.

The blue room is her reception room—the red room—is considered the family room, but I see that she takes her company to that room most frequently.

The chambers are so very pleasant that we all spend most of the day there—except the library, which belongs to Bob & myself exclusively—except when the ladies brave the smoke to play us a joke, or lay plans for some excursion of pleasure or other.

The furniture throughout the whole House is handsome—Our chamber is *elegant*—it is Mr. Buchanan's old room, now the guests' chamber, it has been entirely refurnished—furniture is covered with purple flowered silk, bordered with gold heavy—the cornice of the windows are very heavy gilding, with the sheath of the US—in the centre of each window—Over the head of the bed is some ornament of gilding heavy—from which curtains drape over the bed—the bed itself is exceedingly handsome the sides are stuffed with cotton, covered with the same silk covering upon the chairs and sofas—

Mrs. Lincoln is quite anxious that I should go with her to Long Branch [New Jersey, a fashionable summer resort], and I have about half promised that I would, for a few days.

It will be attended with but little expense. The entire party goes upon invitation of proprietor of Hotel.

affect

Dick



Elizabeth Todd Grimsley (LFA-0431)

**Richard Meconkey to Jennie Johnson
Executive Mansion, Washington, D.C., July 28, 1861**

Jennie: . . .

I had been to Philada. the day that I left, almost all-day, returned home at six o'clock in eve, immediately packed up and came off at seven o'clock to Washington. Where I have been having the most delightfulest time imaginable ever since. The entire family are just as kind as they can be, and every thing here that one could desire to furnish a good time, and Bob & myself I don't hardly think, are ones to refuse sport.

Mrs. Lincoln is a "perfect Brick"—generally up to some joke upon us, and you may bet that we reciprocate a little.

We all hands (The President only occasionally) go to ride every afternoon, in the Presidential equipage—and of course excite the attention of all passers by (which is very annoying to me, a modest youth) and salutes from the Soldiers throughout the city. Yesterday afternoon, the full Marine Band, gave their customary concert to the inmates of the White House in the yard fronting the Potomac—the Grounds were crowded by Ladies & Gentlemen of the City, and the entire affair quite brilliant. Next Tuesday evening, Mrs. L. holds another public reception, and means it to be the grandest of the season. The following Monday or Tuesday she leaves for "Long Branch" for the Summer—She has invited me most kindly to go with her and I rather think I will for a few days, but can't tell so long ahead. Bob & I will come to West Chester before we go anyhow, and then decide whether it will be expedient or not. I shall come home some time this week—about Thursday if I can get off. . . .

Dick

**Richard Meconkey to David Meconkey
Washington, D.C., July 31, 1861**

Dear Father, . . .

The public reception was held by the President last evening—it was not as brilliant as they had expected, but nevertheless very well attended, to me, it appeared crowded.

The Soldiers were the main body of the assemblage, last evening—several foreign ministers and very few Ladies (young) somewhat to the disappointment and chagrin, of Bob & myself.

The thing, however, was a novelty to me, and afforded enough that was new, to occupy my attention. The order of exercises, were briefly these—The President attended by an usher & his Private Sec. stood in the reception room, between

the Red & Blue rooms, and shook hands with the entire crowd, as they defiled past him. The Mrs. President stood some distance to the right of the "Tycoon" also attended by an usher, receiving, and being complimented by those of the crowd who wished to speak to her. Generally the *big stock*—Ambassadors, [William Howard] Russell & other reporters, & corpulent gentlemen—. Lord Lyons [British minister to the United States] was pointed out to me. Gen. [Winfield] Scott was not present.

Mrs. Lincoln seems quite unwilling that we should leave until the beginning of next week. But we are rather inclined towards withdrawing from the heat of the latitude, some time during the course of the present week. Bob will stay with me, until next Saturday a week, then probably join his Mother at Long Branch.

The Royalty of France [Prince Napoleon, Princess Clothilde, Duchess D'Abrantes, and suite of guests], who are now in New York—are expected here next Monday or Tuesday. Mrs. Lincoln gives them a grand Dinner, and just told me that I must stay and attend it—then all hands go north together—She & Mrs. Grimsley to Long Branch[,] Bob & myself to West Chester.

It will be some thing, to dine with a Princess & Duchess and I will consider her proposal. . . . Tell Mother that Washington, I think, is safe. . . .

Affectionately

Your Son.



Prince Napoléon Joseph Charles Paul Bonaparte of France, who visited Lincoln at the White House in August 1861, about the time this photograph was taken (LFA-0191)

**Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Washington, D.C., August 2, 1861**

Dear Mother,

Your letter[,] I believe I informed you in my last to Father, came to hand early part of the week. My visit has been more protracted, than I had proposed it when I left home—owing to the kind treatment and comfortable quarters, that I have experienced—and the many inducements to keep one, who has a vacation before him, to be spent in the literal sense of the word. I had nothing in particular, to require me to be at home, and concluded that, the urgent invitation of Mrs. Lincoln, to be present at the dinner to Prince Napoleon & the Cabinet, on Saturday (tomorrow) ought not to be disregarded. The Ladies of the Suit[e], will not be present—at which we are all considerably disappointed. It will be a Gentlemen's Dinner, exclusively, with exception of the Ladies of the House.

The Prince with two or three of his Suit[e]—Gen. Scott, Gen. McClellan and about half of the Cabinet. The whole number of persons at table, to be, twenty-nine.

The dinner hour, is *seven o'clock*. The whole operation will probably last two to three hours, which appears quite appalling to contemplate.

I will tell you all about it when it is through with.

Bob & I expect to come on next Monday—we can leave here at 2½ o'clock, and make home the same evening, in last train arriving about eleven I believe. I rode with the President last evening to the Navy Yard, to witness the trial of a new gun—he is very agreeable in his family—has an infinite stock of good humor and mirth in him, which he lets off by anecdotes & jokes. I would like to say in regard to his drinking propensities—that at the table, he rarely, now and then, takes a glass of Claret—and that his glass of Champagne invariably stands unemptied, when even the Servant fills it—which he does *only* when some Stranger is at the table, merely out of courtesy. He says that he has no taste for liquors. . . .

Affectionately

Dick

**Richard Meconkey to Jennie Johnson
New York City, August 15, 1861**

Jennie:

You perceive that we are still at New York—We go to Long Branch this PM. at 4 o'clock. Mrs. Lincoln & suite did not arrive until last evening[.] Letters came to West Chester stating that she would not leave Washington until yesterday (Wednesday) morning—but they came an hour too late to reach us—The weather has been disagreeable here, and for several other reasons, we are sorry that we didn't receive the letters, as in that case we should have remained in West Chester a few days longer, and should have accomplished *that trip to Pines*, and other trips, too aggravating to mention now.

Well I shall be home on *Monday evening* next—positively—My sojourn at Long Branch will necessarily be short—but I rather expect that it would get played out if I stayed over two or three days. So you can make the arrangements in regard to "*Radnor*," knowing that I will be at your service after Monday. By George—it makes me quake, when I reflect how soon my presence will be demanded at Cambridge. Only one week from next Tuesday and I pack my duds and travel. This entire vacation of nearly five weeks, thus far, appears like about ten days altogether. . . .

Most truly,

your friend

Dick.

**Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Niagara, August 28, 1861**

Dear Mother,

I have snatched a few minutes, while the rest of the party are preparing for tea, to write you briefly of our trip, thus far completed.

I met Bob, at the Continental, as expected, and came to New York in the night without accident or interruption.

Mrs. Lincoln & Ladies have been here since Friday, but after the manner of woman's extreme impunctuality, was not prepared to start for the Falls, until the evening of yesterday, thereby compelling us to travel all night. The plan however was a better one, I think, since we had sufficient time before dark, to see the beauty and magnificence of the banks of the Hudson. And at Albany after dark, took possession of an elegantly arranged sleeping car, chartered for us by telegraph. In which we enjoyed a good night's rest, and escaped the otherwise exceeding monotony of the long ride from Albany to Rochester. We had a special car from New York up the Hudson, which Gov. Seward had retained for himself being on his road home, from Washington, to spend a day with his family [in Auburn, New York], After an absence since December last.

The news of Mrs. Lincoln's and the Governor's presence on the train had been heralded over the route by telegraph—and of course every station that the cars stopped at, was crowded with people, cheering for the President, his Lady, his Cabinet, the Union, the Suite, and everything-in-general.

Mr. Seward left us at or near Rochester—

There we breakfasted, then took cars for Niagara [Falls], where we arrived about half past nine this morning. We all felt very dirty after our ride, of sixteen hours, and made straight for the bath-rooms, as soon as our baggage had been delivered. After a good souse and Clean Linen, Bob and I felt refreshed enough to take a stroll about the Falls, on the American side, before an early dinner. After we had dined, all hands took carriages, and drove to the suspension bridge, over into Canada, up to the Clifton House opposite the Falls, and there disembarked to enjoy the extensive view from the upper balcony. While I took the opportunity, of donning water proofs, and making an excursion beneath the Cataract.

I walked some hundred feet along the rocks, between the water and the precipice, with the spray dashing into my face and the water pouring over threateningly within a few feet of me. From thence we drove around through "Lundy's Lane" [War of 1812 battle site] back to the bridge and to our Hotel again. Bob and I leave for Boston, tonight at 10½ o'clock taking the sleeping car and will arrive at 4½ tomorrow. Mrs. Lincoln inquired after you and Father. Regrets very much that we leave so soon. I will write again on Sunday.

In haste, affectionately

Dick

**Richard Meconkey to Sarah Meconkey
Executive Mansion, Washington, D.C.,
February 10, 1862**

Dear Mother,

We have just returned from a fresh morning's ride upon the Avenue, in the President's carriage. It is quite amusing to notice people turn around, and stare and look, and endeavor to indelibly stamp upon their memories the features of the occupants of the White House, as they grandly roll by in the carriage of state. . . . Last week was without doubt the gayest week of the season—there appeared to be two or even three hops on hand, every evening—There were four different invitations sent us one evening.

On Saturday, Major [William Worthington] Russell made up an excursion of Senators & families—and big-guns generally—to leave the Navy Yard at 12 M [noon], upon a nice little pleasure steamer—for Mount Vernon—and below Indian Head, within range of the guns of the first rebel batteries. We could distinctly see their tents—and with a glass could easily distinguish heavy guns mounted upon bristling earth works.

There were a number of good-sized vessels laying off the point, awaiting the cover of night, to slip by their ineffectually secured cannon.

The party numbered about thirty couples—had the Marine Band aboard, the large Ladies Cabin below deck, rigged as a ball-room, and everything charming throughout the entire day.

It was a party, that had it fallen into the hands of the enemy, it would have enabled them to dictate their own terms in regard to treatment, and exchange, of prisoners of war.

We hold superintendence of a large spy-glass belonging to the house—and amuse ourselves at odd hours by studying the Virginia side of the river of which there is an excellent view from the top of the Executive Mansion. Those noble hills lopped of their rich timber growth, present a realizing sense of the barren and desolate waste caused by the ravages of war.

I hope you saw the Herald's account of the [February 5] Ball at the President's—I tried to secure a copy in order to send it to you but couldn't.



The White House (LFA-0384)

Tell Father that I would be very much obliged if he could enclose me five dollars in his next letter. I have had to lay out nearly that amount since I came in party dress—white cravat, white gloves etc etc, and will run short with the amount that he gave me at starting.

I shall try and inform you of every thing of interest that transpires in the course of the week.

Most affectionately

Your Son,

Dick

**Robert Lincoln to Richard Meconkey
Executive Mansion, Washington, D.C.,
July 25, 1862**

My Dear Dick,

I have been expecting to hear from you as I did not know when you would get home. I have been here just a week and very busy doing nothing. It is the dulllest place you ever saw, with one exception: Exeter on a rainy day.

We are living in a very pleasant place—the “Soldiers Home” but it is too quiet. I have not been out there since yesterday morning.

There is a large number of Generals here at present—among them Pope, Halleck, Burnside & Mitchell.

There are lots of men here after Collectorships, & whenever I go down to Willard’s I am the center of an admiring crowd. It has got played out. . . .

My regards to your family—

Yours

R.T.L.



The Ladies’ Parlor at Willard’s Hotel, ca. March 1861
(Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

A Note on Richard Meconkey

Two additional notes from Robert Lincoln, dated August 1862, asking his friend Dick to vacation with him at Long Branch, New Jersey, are the last two letters in the Meconkey family papers. Whether the two young men drifted apart and so stopped corresponding or any additional letters simply no longer exist is unclear. The two families appeared to be on good terms throughout the war, however. On October 9, 1862, President Lincoln requested Elbridge Meconkey (Richard’s older brother) be appointed a quartermaster if a position was available; and in early May 1864 Sarah Meconkey inquired after the president’s “health and personal welfare,” to which he replied on May 9, “I have been very anxious for some days in regard to our armies in the field, but am considerably cheered, just now, by favorable news from them.”

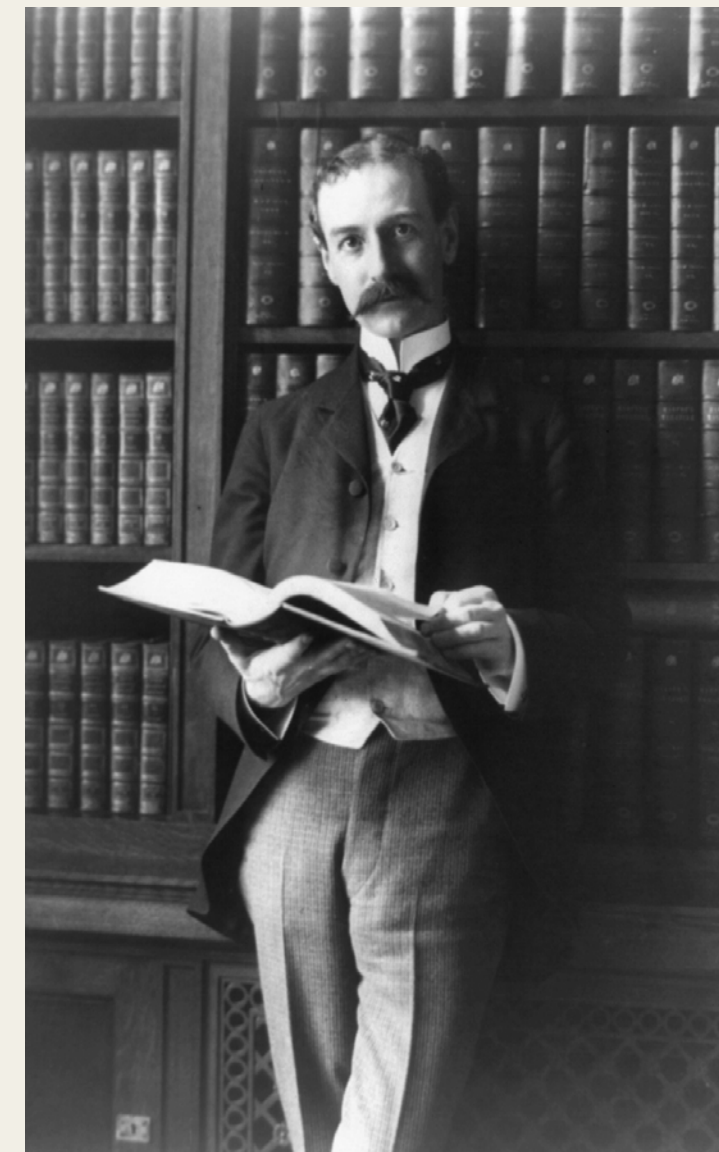
Meconkey dropped out of Harvard in March 1864, shortly before completing his senior year, due to “ill health.” Apparently, he suffered from some sort of mental or emotional breakdown and was placed in an asylum during the summer of 1864, according to the Harvard Class of 1864 Secretary’s Reports in the following years. His health “slowly but gradually” improved, and he turned to farming. By the end of 1872, “a change for the worse took place in his condition,” the 1874 report states. “He begged to be allowed his liberty a little longer, promising not to injure himself or others. On the afternoon of February 5, 1873, however, he managed to escape from his attendant, and was soon found alone in the reservoir, into which he had thrown himself. All efforts to resuscitate him proved fruitless.” He was 31.

Jason Emerson is the author or editor of seven books about Abraham Lincoln and his family, including *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln* (2012), *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (2007), and *Lincoln the Inventor* (2009). He is currently compiling a new edition of Mary Lincoln’s letters and asks anyone who owns or knows of unpublished Mary Lincoln letters to contact him at jsnemerson@gmail.com.

Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam
(Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

The Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers: *The Long and Winding Road to the Library of Congress*

by Michelle A. Krowl



The history of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress is characterized by both physical movement of the collection and long periods of inertia about its ultimate fate, each of which reminds us how truly remarkable it is that the collection survived and made its way to the Library of Congress.

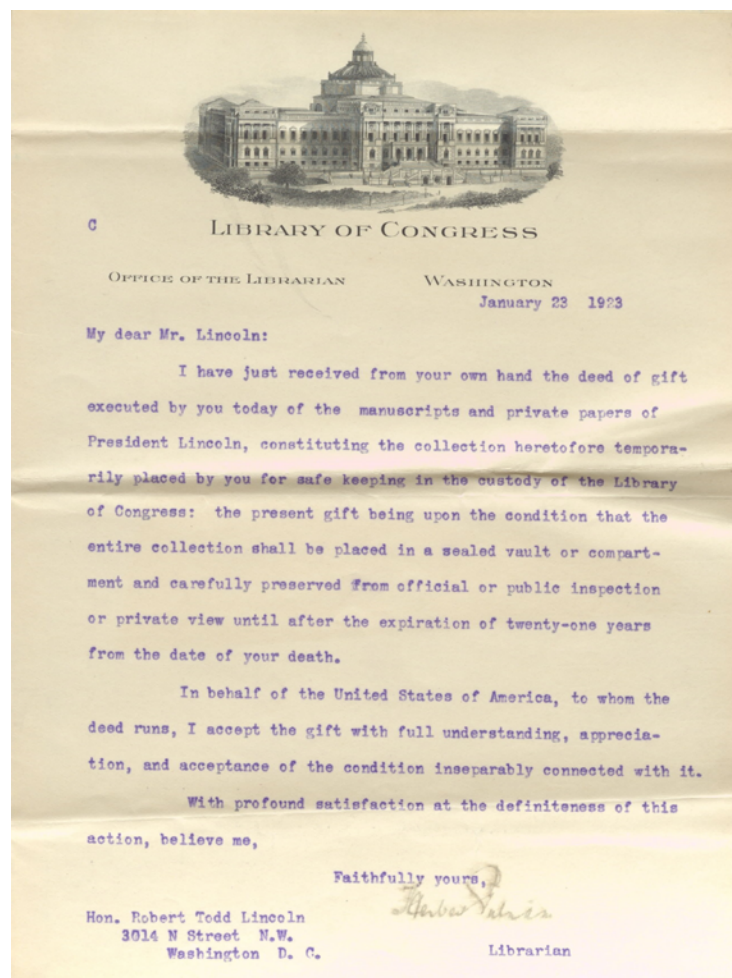
At the president’s death on April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln’s eldest son, Robert T. Lincoln, then only twenty-one years old, unexpectedly became the bearer of many familial responsibilities, including being the custodian of his father’s personal papers. Off and on for the next fifty-four years, the burden of Abraham Lincoln’s papers caused anxiety for Robert Lincoln as he endeavored to safeguard the papers and his father’s legacy, fended off incessant requests for access to the documents, and procrastinated in determining the destiny of the collection.

Soon after Abraham Lincoln’s death, Robert reached out to his father’s friend Judge David Davis for help with all aspects of Abraham Lincoln’s estate. Concerned about unnamed malign influences in Washington trying “to get hold of them,” Davis counseled that the president’s papers should be removed from the capital, to which Robert consented. Lincoln’s trusted presidential secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, who knew the collection better than anyone, packed up the former president’s personal papers at the White House. Robert likely assisted in this task, but his direct participation is difficult to determine, especially as his attention would have been diverted by numerous other details while preparing his mother and brother Tad to leave the Executive Mansion and move back to Illinois.

Whether or not Robert literally had a hand in the packing, by the end of April 1865, Abraham Lincoln’s personal

papers at the White House had been collected, packed, and shipped to Bloomington, Illinois, where they were stored in the vault of the National Bank of Bloomington. There they would be under the watchful eye of David Davis, whom Robert trusted implicitly. This represented the first of several occasions in which Robert was able to cede the physical responsibility for his father's papers to the men he most trusted with Lincoln's legacy.

Almost immediately, however, Robert began to fend off requests for access to his late father's papers in support of planned biographies and other projects. Perhaps the first he received came from Prof. Francis James Child of Harvard College, who tried to intervene on behalf of scholar Charles Eliot Norton. Robert replied on April 27, 1865, denying Norton access to the papers. "It will be impossible, however, for the complete work which Mr. Norton contemplates to be written for a number of years," Robert explained. "Exactly how long it is impossible to say because there are no doubt many documents (I myself know of several) which are necessary to the history but which would be damaging to men now living." Robert noted that he hoped to have the opportunity to go through the collection "within the next three or four years" in the company of Hay or Nicolay and one or two of Lincoln's trusted friends to "glean out what is useless and to classify the remainder in some sort." But Robert remained resolute that "no one will have access to them before that time."



Letter by Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam to Robert T. Lincoln, January 23, 1923 (No. 75, box II:4, Robert Todd Lincoln Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)

Robert's response to Professor Child established a blueprint for his standard response to each inquiry about his father's papers for decades to come. Time and again he expressed concern that his father's contemporaries would be represented in the papers in ways that would embarrass them, or their descendants, were the contents to become public during their lifetimes. He reiterated his hope that he would carve out time to go through the papers himself, or in the company of trusted associates, to get a better sense of their content. He anticipated weeding out extraneous materials and imposing some order on the documents. And he would not grant access to the collection until those conditions had been met. Unfortunately, for the vast number of Lincoln biographers, those conditions would not be met during Robert's lifetime, and Abraham Lincoln's papers would remain inaccessible to almost everyone.

Robert's position regarding his father's papers no doubt reflected at least several concerns. Robert's biographer, Jason Emerson, described Robert as the "defender of his father's ever-growing reputation," and thus providing access to the papers risked relinquishing control of the narrative. Robert also maintained a Victorian sense of privacy, and he worried that the contents of the papers might damage reputations or embarrass the family members of people with whom he interacted, which in turn could have been wounding to him personally or professionally. Of course, there was also the practical consideration that if he provided access to one biographer, it would be harder to deny the next one, which no doubt would have both increased the volume of requests exponentially and the logistical difficulty of making the papers available in a secure environment. Plus, as long as the papers were securely stored in the bank vault in Bloomington, he did not have physical control of the documents, which also proved a handy dodge. Thus, he remained largely in the dark about what the papers actually contained. For these reasons and more, Robert found it preferable to say no. Except to his friends John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Lincoln's two secretaries had long planned to write a biography of their beloved "Tycoon," which necessitated access to the papers they had packed up years before. Unlike other prospective biographers, Robert trusted Nicolay and Hay to not only represent his father in a positive light, but to also use Lincoln's papers with sensitivity.

By 1873, Nicolay and Hay had both returned to the United States from their postwar

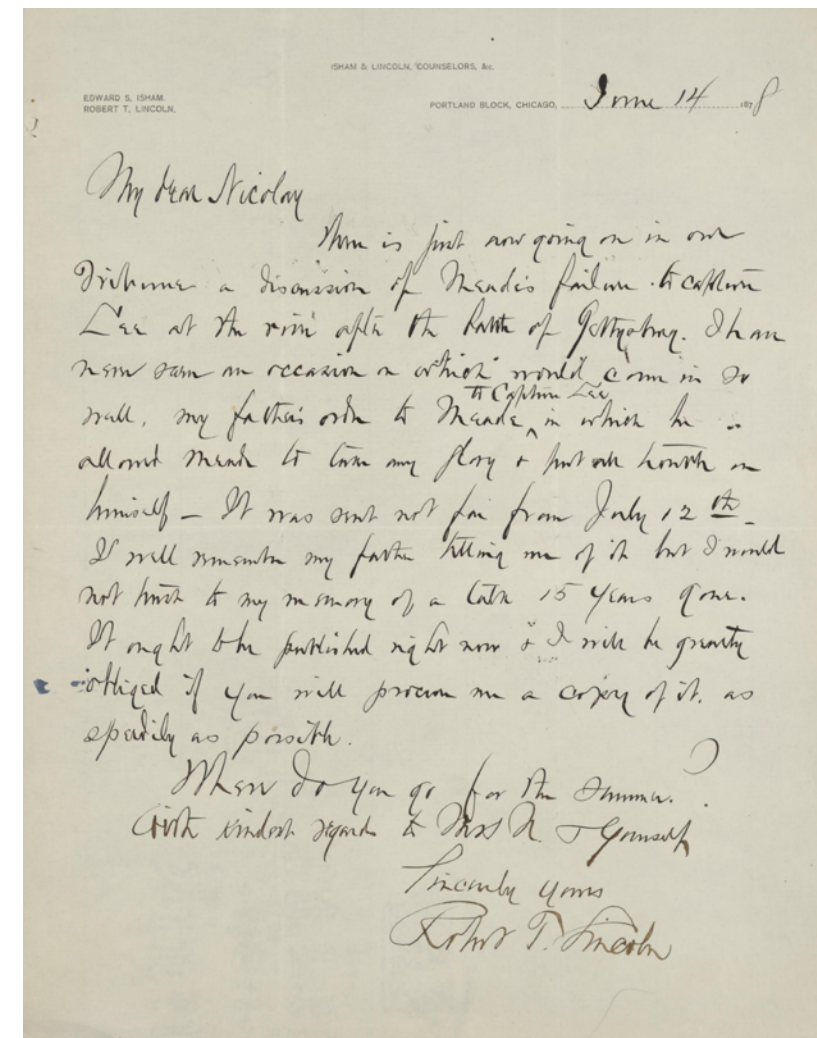
diplomatic postings in Europe and were getting more serious about undertaking the biography. Nicolay wrote to Robert in May 1873 "to ask you whether you have yet had your father's papers taken from Bloomington to Chicago, and whether you have done anything toward their examination and arrangement, as you told me you thought of doing when I last saw you in Washington." The deaths of Lincoln's Secretary of State William H. Seward in October 1872 and Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase on May 7, 1873, signaled to Nicolay the urgency to get started, as reinterpretations of the Lincoln administration had already begun. They would first need time to assess President Lincoln's papers before acquiring other source materials. "We must of necessity begin with your father's papers," Nicolay explained to Robert, "because everything else must be grouped and accumulated around them."

Perhaps prompted by Hay and Nicolay's pleas, Robert finally sent for his father's papers, which were shipped to him in Chicago from the bank vault in Bloomington. But he continued to find more reasons to delay undertaking a survey of them before releasing them to Hay and Nicolay. Nicolay wrote Robert again in March 1874, nudging his friend to release the papers to the secretaries so that they could get to work. "You remember that when I was in Chicago last summer you showed me a small open box of papers in your garret which you told me you had already looked through," Nicolay reminded Robert. "Why can you not nail up that box and forward it to me by express, and let me utilize the intervening two months between this and the adjournment of our Court in putting them into shape here?" Nicolay had been appointed as the marshal of the Supreme Court of the United States in December 1872, which had the advantage of giving him blocks of free time to work on the papers and access to a vault in the basement of the U.S. Capitol that would be secure from prying eyes. Appealing to Robert's memory of the recent conflagration that destroyed portions of Chicago in 1871, Nicolay added that his storage room in the Capitol was "more secure than any safe in Chicago against fire."

Robert finally relented and agreed to send his father's papers to Nicolay in Washington. By July 1874, the Lincoln papers had been delivered to John Nicolay at the Capitol. By entrusting the papers to Nicolay, Robert also relieved himself of responsibility for the collection. As long as Nicolay maintained physical custody of the Lincoln papers,

Robert knew they were in good hands, that Nicolay would guard access to them, and that to some degree they were now Nicolay's problem. As Lincoln scholar David C. Mearns of the Library of Congress later wrote, "then Mr. Nicolay undertook the gigantic task of putting them in order, sorting them, classifying them, establishing dates, relating them to other documents in his keeping, and, for him most important of all, devising, on the basis of their contents, plans for a comprehensive treatment of the Lincoln period."

With Nicolay's yeoman labor organizing the papers, and with research assembled by both authors, Hay and Nicolay were now ready to get down to the writing. Serialized articles first appeared in *The Century* magazine beginning in November 1886 and continued to February 1890. This was followed in 1890 by the publication of the full ten-volume biography, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*. In April 1894, Hay and Nicolay published a two-volume edited edition of Lincoln's writings, titled *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Nicolay also used the Lincoln papers to research and write his own articles about Abraham Lincoln, including those on the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's personal appearance.



Robert T. Lincoln to John G. Nicolay, June 14, 1878 (Box 4, John G. Nicolay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)

With their Lincoln publications, Hay and Nicolay relieved Robert of a few burdens with regard to his father's papers. They offered Robert the option to read and edit drafts of the manuscript before publication, and generally deferred to his preferences. This confirmed Robert's trust in the secretaries to use his father's papers in line with his comfort level as to the information shared with the public. And because both *Abraham Lincoln: A History* and *Complete Works* utilized the Lincoln papers Robert had loaned Nicolay, he could instead refer people who requested access to his father's papers to those publicly available sources.

According to Nicolay's daughter Helen, her father's possession of the Lincoln papers may have saved Robert from an impulse to jump into the fray when he read inaccuracies that could have been disproven by documents in the collection. In June 1878, Robert requested that Nicolay find a document in the papers with which to respond to a newspaper debate about George G. Meade and Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. Nicolay responded that as he was out-of-town, he could not retrieve the requested document. But, Nicolay went on, "even if I were yet in Washington I would first most earnestly ask you to recall the request. There is to be no end to these newspaper discussions and you cannot possibly correct them all. Where you do, the central document or fact is rudely torn from its necessary connections and misdated and misquoted, and by the third day flippantly condensed into three lines by the 'items' man. Since I have been collecting and arranging," Nicolay concluded, "I have been amazed to find how these things sink out of sight and become fossilized in newspapers." While Nicolay was no doubt accurate in his assessment of the ephemeral nature of newspaper wars and in counseling Robert to steer well clear of them, he was also likely exerting territorialism over the papers, giving him and Hay the exclusive "scoop" on the contents for their projects.

As for those papers themselves, they traveled a bit around Washington while in Nicolay's custody. While marshal of the Supreme Court, he had access to secure storage in the Capitol. But even before he resigned this position in December 1887 and presumably relinquished control over the Capitol space, he must have taken some documents home while working on the biography. When the Lincoln papers first came into Nicolay's custody, he lived at 230 First Street SE, but by 1876, Washington, D.C., city directories record him as living in the 100 block of B Street SE. By 1880, he had moved about a block away to 212 B Street, where he lived for the next twenty-one years.

When Nicolay died on September 26, 1901, his daughter Helen and Robert Lincoln were faced with the problem of what to do with the Lincoln papers. Fortunately, their good friend John Hay was then the secretary of state, and everyone agreed that the papers should be transferred from Nicolay's home on Capitol Hill across town to the vaults of

the State Department, which was then located in what is now the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next to the White House. But that solution proved to be a temporary one. Hay died in July 1905, which necessitated that Robert once again assume both physical and intellectual control over his father's papers.

In October 1905, Robert came to Washington to take possession of the papers, just over forty years after they had first become his responsibility in practically the exact same location. The seven steamer trunks were shipped to Chicago, where they would be stored in the safe in Robert's office for the next several years. Robert assigned his own trusted secretary, Charles Sweet, to "examine, organize, and 'overhaul'" the collection. Now that both Nicolay and Hay were gone, Sweet was the only person who knew the contents of the Lincoln papers. He would update Robert with his findings, and sometimes Robert would then gift documents to the relevant families.

This situation changed yet again around 1911 when Robert and his wife, Mary, moved from Chicago to Washington, D.C. After one year on 17th Street, they moved to 1775 N Street, near Dupont Circle. After Robert's secretary Charles Sweet died in 1912, Robert stored his father's papers in his own homes, or perhaps in a secure storage vault somewhere in Washington.

In January 1918, Robert moved again, this time to a mansion at 3014 N Street in Georgetown. But regardless of where he lived in Washington, he transported his father's papers with him as he moved with the seasons between Washington, D.C., and his summer home Hildene, which he'd built in Manchester, Vermont, in 1905. Although as a Pullman Car Company executive Robert had access to his own railroad car, the well-traveled Lincoln papers could have been easily destroyed in one railroad accident.

But the long-term safety of the collection was on Robert's mind, even as he shuttled the papers back and forth. Not long after Nicolay's death, Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam initiated a conversation with Robert about the disposition of his father's papers, encouraging Robert to consider the Library as a safe and appropriate repository for the archive. Robert replied in January 1902, admitting that "the subject you speak of is one which is often in my mind." He further admitted that Nicolay's long custodianship of the collection had allowed him to defer any decisions. But Nicolay's death brought the issue to the fore again. "If my son was still alive I should probably leave these papers in his hands," Robert noted, "but as it is, I think it my duty to select some depository for them, just what it will be I am not yet prepared to say."

Every so often Putnam gently nudged Robert about the collection, including after Robert again took possession of the papers after John Hay's death in 1905. But for years

Robert politely sent similar replies in which he cited ill health or other commitments as keeping him from examining the papers himself, which he claimed he wanted to do before making any decisions. "It is a subject which is constantly present in my mind," he reiterated in 1906, "and I do not intend to let it drag along much longer." For all Robert's worry about the papers, however, he continued to let the issue drag on year after year, deferring any final decisions while at the same time jealously guarding the collection.

The dam finally broke in 1919, when Robert deposited his father's papers at the Library of Congress. In addition to the years of gentle persuasion by Putnam, the timing may have been influenced by two related events. The planning of the Lincoln Memorial, with a projected completion date in 1919, may have prompted Robert to think even more seriously about his father's legacy. Perhaps more importantly, though, during the memorial process, Robert had been in close contact with Charles Moore, who had headed the Fine Arts Commission in Washington, D.C. In early 1919, Herbert Putnam appointed Moore as the new chief of the Library's Manuscript Division, which meant that Robert's new friend would have jurisdiction over the Lincoln papers should Robert decide to donate them. And as Moore noted in a March 5, 1919, letter to Robert, the Library had recently acquired the papers of former presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft, the latter of whom Robert knew personally and who had led the Lincoln Memorial Commission. Regardless of the reason, it was a turning point in the history of the Lincoln Papers when Charles Moore was able to pen a simple note to the chief of the Library's Mail Division on May 6, 1919: "Please have the wagon call at Mr. Robert T. Lincoln's house, 3014 N Street, N.W., for seven trunks of papers to be delivered unopened to the Manuscript Division."

Robert Lincoln's collection of Abraham Lincoln's papers duly arrived at the Manuscript Division in May 1919. But the deposit came with important restrictions, as noted in a May 7 memorandum by acting Librarian Appleton Griffin: "The papers of Abraham Lincoln belonging to the Hon. Robert T. Lincoln have been deposited in the Library under the following conditions: 1. The fact that the Papers are in the Library is to be kept from the public. 2. One of the officials of the Library is to examine and arrange them under the direction of Mr. Lincoln[.] 3. The Papers are to be consulted only after permission has been granted by Mr. Lincoln." Robert still exerted control over the collection after he entrusted the physical safety of the papers to the Library of Congress.

This remained true even when Robert officially gifted the Lincoln Papers to the Library in 1923. According to the deed of gift, "all of said letters, manuscripts, documents and other papers shall be placed in a sealed vault or compartment and carefully preserved from official or public inspection or private view until after the expiration of twenty-one (21) years from the date of my death. This condition is imposed by me because said papers contain many references of a private nature to the immediate ancestors of persons now living, which, in my judgment, should not be made public, and also much information and matter of a historical character which I have heretofore authorized and permitted JOHN G. NICOLAY and JOHN HAY to use in the preparation of their Life of my father." Robert modified the terms of his gift in 1926 to authorize the Librarian of Congress to have an index to the collection made, and to permit his

wife, Mary Harlan Lincoln, to examine the Lincoln Papers or grant others permission to do so.

When Robert died on July 26, 1926, the twenty-one-year countdown clock to the opening of the Abraham Lincoln Papers began. Appeals to his widow commenced, which she routinely denied. Mary Harlan Lincoln referenced her husband's position regarding the papers and decided to follow his example by erring on the side of caution. In the meantime, she, and then her daughter Mary Lincoln Isham, continued to donate additional items to the Library of Congress, including the contents of Lincoln's pockets on the night of April 14, 1865, the Bible he used at his first inauguration, and Mary Lincoln's pearls.

For most of the years between 1926 and 1947, what would become known as the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers remained sealed away in vaults at the Library of Congress. In line with Robert's restrictions, a Library staff member made a preliminary start on cataloging the materials but was unable to make much progress and the effort was abandoned. In the meantime, the Manuscript Division moved from the Main Building (now known as the Thomas Jefferson Building) across Second Street to the new Library of Congress Annex, now known as the John Adams Building, which opened in 1939. By coincidence, since Nicolay's 212 B Street house had been demolished to make way for the Annex, in a way the Lincoln Papers were coming home.

During World War II, the Lincoln Papers endured one other unexpected move. Given the vulnerability of Washington, D.C., to attack, the collections of the Manuscript Division were evacuated for safety during the war. Most of the Lincoln Papers, including the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection, were moved to Alderman Library at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. A few higher profile items, such as Lincoln's handwritten Gettysburg Addresses and the second inaugural, were moved to Fort Knox in Kentucky. Fortunately, the capital remained safe, as did the evacuated collections, which were able to return to Washington in September 1944, once the crisis had passed.

But another event was looming on the horizon: the projected opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection at the stroke of midnight on the morning of July 26, 1947, the expiration of Robert's twenty-one-year restriction.



Historian John E. Washington addresses guests at a celebratory dinner in the Library of Congress Whittall Pavilion prior to the official opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers, July 25, 1947 (Central File, box 714, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)

The first order of business was to finish processing the collection for research use. In the run-up to July 1947, C. Percy Powell and Helen Bullock bore the primary responsibility for arranging, cataloging, and indexing the collection. Powell had previously worked on the Library's Herndon-Weik Collection of Lincolnia, and was thus familiar with the subject matter and the requirements of the Lincoln Papers. Powell and Bullock prepared index cards for each item in the Lincoln Papers. The papers were organized, prepared for binding, and sent to the bindery in accordance with the preservation protocols then in favor. The roughly 18,000 documents in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection were bound in 194 volumes covered in blue buckram, with red leather labels, and gold identification lettering, which they still retain today.

Then there was the celebration itself. On Friday, July 25, a group of notables in the Lincoln world were invited to a pre-unveiling dinner in the Whittall Pavilion hosted by Librarian of Congress Luther H. Evans. Attendees included Carl Sandburg, Roy P. Basler, Alfred Whital Stern, James G. Randall, F. Lauriston Bullard, and John E. Washington.

As the dinner progressed, the attendees speculated on what might be included in the collection, or what they hoped to learn more about. Randall hoped "to find a fuller picture of Lincoln at work" through his speeches, messages, and letters. Bullard hoped, among other things, to know if Lincoln wrote the Bixby letter. Washington "spoke movingly of Lincoln's relations with Negroes and of his own hopes that there would be more facts on that subject in the Papers." Then, at the conclusion of the dinner, Colton Storm of the University of Michigan reported that "like thirty-one schoolboys unexpectedly released from school in spring, we scampered from the room and through the empty halls of the Library to the Annex. There the Papers waited."

In view of invited media outlets, at midnight the Librarian read Robert Todd Lincoln's 1923 deed of gift and pronounced the collection to be open. Under Evans's supervision, C. Percy Powell started opening the combination locks on the vaults holding the Lincoln Papers. Once the vault doors swung open and the Lincoln Papers became available, reporters asked Library officials and Lincoln celebrities for their initial reactions to what they saw. Some expressed their excitement over individual documents and what they might

learn from seeing the originals. Paul Angle of the Chicago Historical Society pointed to the human-interest stories, which he explained "fascinate me no less than its scholarly potentialities. There are just literally hundreds of letters here written by plain people that are forgotten by history long ago." James Randall's initial takeaway of the breadth and content of the papers was that "in short, they reveal this remarkable man's behavior in a cruelly exacting job."

After the preliminaries concluded about 1 a.m., the volumes were transported to the Main Building. The Lincoln scholars returned to the Whittall Pavilion, where they had a few precious hours to pour over the Lincoln Papers for themselves. As Randall noted in his diary, "for hours these men were as busy as bees, going to the index, then to the papers, back to the index, taking notes, going into huddles to exchange first impressions." When the scholars concluded, the Library staff went into action in the early morning hours preparing additional press releases for the media scrum around noon.

At 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 26, 1947, the public was invited to the opening of the Lincoln Papers. The festivities began in the Great Hall of the Library with speeches from the Librarian of Congress, Illinois Senator C. Wayland Brooks, who also chaired the Joint Committee on the Library, and a keynote address from Roy P. Basler, who is now best known as the general editor of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Among the invited guests at the public event were Lincoln descendant Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith and Dorothy Lamon Teillard, the elderly daughter of Abraham Lincoln's friend Ward Hill Lamon. She may have been the only attendee who had actually met Abraham Lincoln.

In the days and weeks that followed, the Lincoln Papers received a fair amount of attention in print and radio media. Thematic press releases from the Library of Congress generated new stories, while Lincoln scholars and Library staff were called upon to comment on the Lincoln Papers in media outlets. And with the collection open to the public, they were now able to visit the Manuscript Division reading room to explore for themselves.

And what did scholars and the public find? Well, no real bombshells, much to the chagrin of the conspiracy-minded public who wanted answers to long-circulated rumors about Lincoln's assassination. In fact, prior to the opening of the collection, Library staff and Lincoln scholars had been downplaying the chances of finding salacious material in favor of emphasizing the long-term research potential of the content. Since Hay and Nicolay had already brought to light many of the Lincoln documents in the collection, and since the bulk of the material consists of letters written to Lincoln, the real treasures to mine in the Lincoln Papers are the day-to-day operations of the Lincoln White House, the varied issues the public brought to his attention, and the overwhelming responsibility it was to be Abraham Lincoln while running both a nation and a war.



Carl Sandburg signs the guest register at the special opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, July 26, 1947 (Central File, box 714, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)



Reporter John Daly interviews Paul M. Angle, Carl Sandburg, and James G. Randall for a CBS radio broadcast on the opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, July 26, 1947 (Central File, box 714, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)



Librarian of Congress Luther H. Evans views volumes of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers after Robert Lincoln's twenty-one-year collection access restriction expired, Library of Congress, July 26, 1947 (Central File, box 714, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)



“Despite the dearth of scandal and surprise, it is the consensus of the Lincoln scholars and collectors who attended the ceremonies on July 26 that this is in fact the richest single collection of Lincoln material extant,” Helen Bullock wrote later in the year. David Mearns hit the nail on the head when he predicted that the opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection would “not mean sudden, blinding discovery but the opportunity for discovery. For the next twenty, fifty, perhaps one hundred years, they will be the objects of intense and devoted and searching scrutiny.”

This has proven to be true. Since their opening in 1947, the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection and the other materials that form the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress continue to be searched, scrutinized, and reinterpreted by each generation, often using new technologies to access and analyze the content. Whether accessed in their original format, or by the microfilm edition that stretches two miles long, or through published editorial editions like *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, or through the Library’s then-pathbreaking American Memory digital platform of the early 2000s, or since 2017 the enhanced and expanded Abraham Lincoln Papers online presentation, the Abraham Lincoln Papers continue to fuel new opportunities in Lincoln scholarship.

But the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection had one last move to go. When the new James Madison Memorial Building of the Library of Congress opened in May 1980, the Manuscript Division found a new home in a prominent position just off the main entrance. And within the division’s secure and climate-controlled stacks are the 194 volumes of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection with the other series that make up the Abraham Lincoln Papers. These well-traveled documents have now resided in each of the three Library buildings on Capitol Hill.

But regardless of what building houses the originals, or through which surrogate format the public accesses the content, there are still some fundamental truths about the Lincoln Papers. As David Mearns wrote shortly before the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection opened, “the curtain is going up. In a moment the Papers themselves will become your property. Mr. Lincoln carried them in his hat. You can carry them in your hearts where they belong.”

Michelle A. Krowl is Civil War and Reconstruction Specialist in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.



Visitors view selections from the newly opened Abraham Lincoln Papers in a temporary display at the public opening at the Library of Congress, July 26, 1947 (Central File, box 714, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)



Ambrotypes of Willie (left) and Tad Lincoln (right) taken at Springfield, Illinois, ca. 1859 (LFA-0568 and LFA-0569)

The Collected Works of Willie Lincoln

by Samuel Wheeler

Four months after Willie Lincoln’s death on February 20, 1862, Senator Orville Browning encountered President Abraham Lincoln at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. When the service ended, the president invited him back to the White House. There, in the library, Lincoln pulled a scrapbook from the shelf and began turning its pages. Inside were “some memoranda of important events,” Browning recalled—items from the inauguration of Illinois Governor Richard Yates, programs and articles from Lincoln’s own inauguration, the names and dates of Civil War battles carefully inscribed in a neat child’s hand, as well as newspaper clippings about the deaths of prominent soldiers. Lincoln explained that he had just discovered the scrapbook and believed it was “made by his little son Willie.”

Unfortunately, the scrapbook no longer exists. If it did, it might offer a rare glimpse of the Civil War seen through the eyes of the president’s precocious child—a boy whose parents never fully recovered from his untimely death.

Yet not all traces of Willie’s observations are gone. Today, six of his letters, as well as a poem, survive. Taken together, they form a small but poignant collection—what we might call “The Collected Works of Willie Lincoln.” They offer a glimpse of a remarkable child making sense of the world around him.

Historical commentary introduces each of Willie’s letters in the sections that follow. The transcriptions preserve original spelling and grammar, with periods silently supplied at the ends of sentences, and uncertain words enclosed in brackets. The sole exception is Willie Lincoln’s letter to Henry Remann on May 25, 1861, in which his original brackets have been retained. Unless otherwise noted, all letters are held at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

Willie Lincoln to Edward Rathbun, April 24, 1859

One of Willie Lincoln's earliest friends was a boy named Edward Rathbun, who lived directly across the street. Two years older than Willie, Edward moved to Springfield from New York with his mother and younger brother shortly after his father's death. They initially stayed with their uncle, Rev. Noyes W. Miner, a close friend of the Lincolns. On June 1, 1858, Edward's mother, Hannah, married Dr. John Henry Shearer, a physician who supported Lincoln and the Republican Party. After the Shearers moved to Pennsylvania in 1859, Mary Lincoln and Hannah exchanged a number of letters.

From this friendship comes the earliest surviving letter written by Willie Lincoln. The note is difficult to read today because the paper is stained. According to a 1901 recollection, the blotches on the letter were chocolate, the result of Edward storing Willie's letter in a box of candy. Although the date is smudged, the letter was likely written on April 24, 1859. On that Sunday, Mary Lincoln wrote a long letter to Hannah Shearer, filled with Springfield gossip. She probably encouraged her eight-year-old son to write a note to Edward, enclosing it with her own.

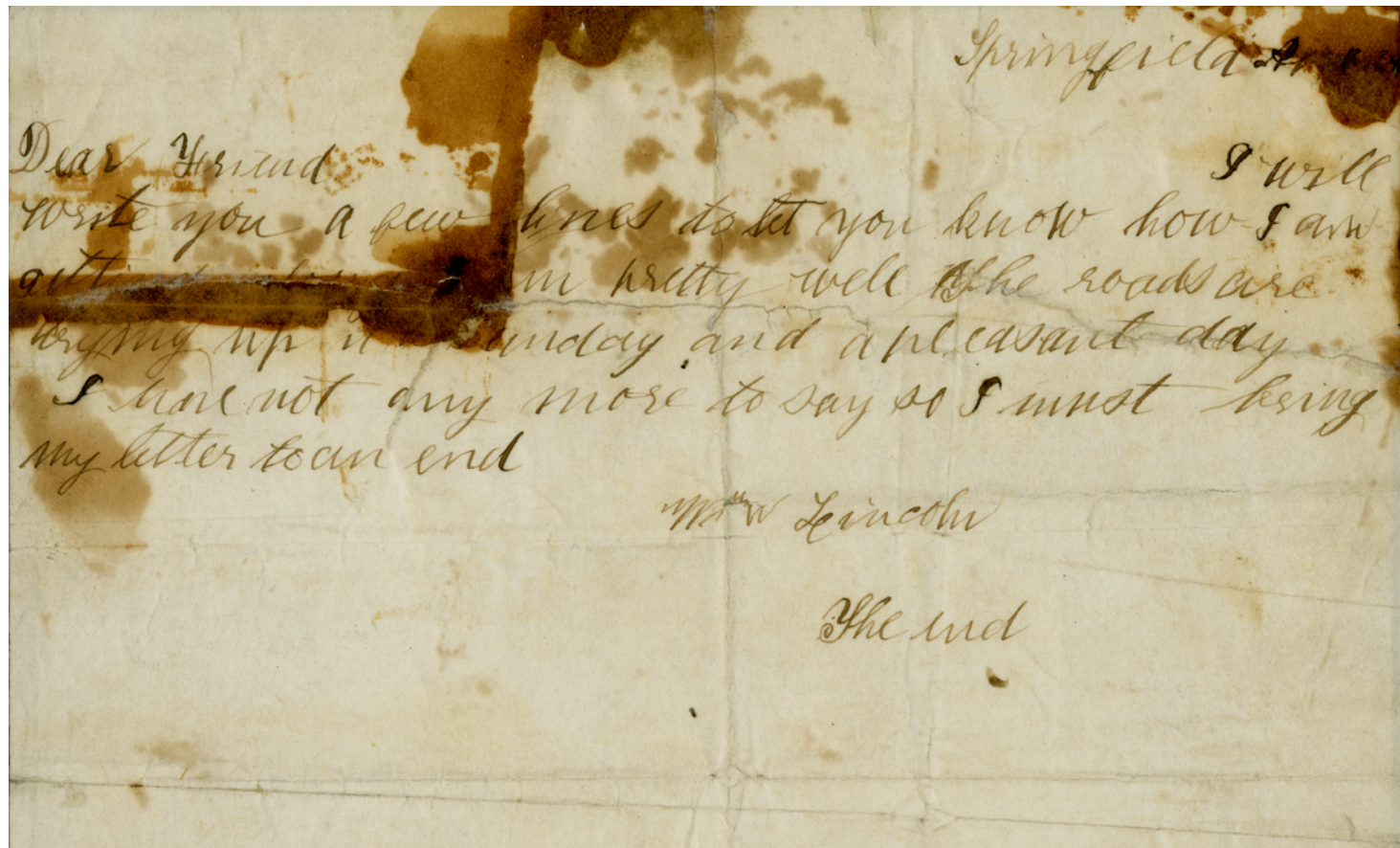
Springfield A[pril] [24] [1859]

Dear Friend

I will write you a few lines to let you know how I am getting [along]. [I am] pretty well. The roads are drying up. It is Sunday and a pleasant day. I have not any more to say so I must bring my letter to an end.

Wm W Lincoln

The end



Willie Lincoln's "chocolate" letter to Edward Rathbun, April 24, 1859 (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum)

Willie Lincoln to Henry Remann, June [6?], 1859, University of Chicago

Willie Lincoln's most frequent correspondent was Henry Remann, who lived just six houses away. The two boys shared a tragic family bond. Henry's father died of consumption on December 10, 1849; just two months later the Lincolns' three-year-old son, Eddy, died of the same disease. The two grieving families comforted each other. Widowed and pregnant, Mary Remann gave birth on April 6, 1850, naming her son Henry, after his father. Mary Lincoln, still mourning Eddy, gave her friend Eddy's clothing—many pieces sewn by her own hand—and encouraged her to save them for young Henry. Willie thus grew up playing with a neighbor boy who wore the clothes of the brother he never met.

In June 1859, Willie traveled with his father to Chicago, where he probably had business in the federal court. It was likely the eight-year-old's first train ride—a thrilling experience for a boy who loved railroads, collected toy trains, and pored over railroad timetables. Chicago, too, was a wonder. When Willie was born in 1850, the city held about 30,000 people, but by 1859 the population had swelled to nearly 100,000, making it the largest city he had ever seen. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that Lincoln was in Chicago as early as June 1, and on June 8 the paper reported that both Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas were in town at the Tremont Hotel—the city's premier hotel and the location where the pair launched their celebrated Senate campaign the previous year.

In this letter to Henry, Willie captured the excitement of his trip. He framed his experience in pairs, describing how everything in his hotel room came in "twos"—one small for himself and one large for his father. The rhythm in his storytelling is reminiscent of popular fairytales, especially "The Story of the Three Bears," first printed in 1837 and later adapted into the familiar "Goldilocks" version in 1850, the year of Willie's birth.

Chicago Springfield Ill June 1859

Dear Henry

This town is a very beautiful place. Me and father went to two theatres the other night. Me and father have a nice little room to ourselves. We have two little pitcher[s] on a washstand. The smallest one for me the largest one for father. We have two little towels on a top of both pitchers. The smallest one for me, the largest one for father.

We have two little beds in the room. The smallest one for me, the largest one for father.

We have two little wash basins. The smallest one for me, the largest one for father. The weather is very very

fine hire [here] in this town. Was [at] the exhibition on Wednesday before last.

Your Truly

Willie Lincoln.

Willie Lincoln to Henry Remann, May 3, 1861

While Robert Todd Lincoln was away at school in the east, Willie and Tad had front-row seats in Springfield to witness their father's political rise, featuring torchlit Wide Awake parades, rallies, and celebrations. They were at home in May 1860 when a delegation arrived to formally tell their father he had secured the Republican nomination for president. During the ensuing campaign, Willie eagerly joined the excitement, delivering impromptu speeches from the same porch to neighborhood children and passersby, urging them to support "Old Abe."

The most memorable figure that season was Elmer Ellsworth. He was a confident New Yorker, handsome, magnetic, and brimming with energy. Though he was only 23 years old, he was already something of a celebrity. He had commanded the National Guard Cadets of Chicago—a Zouave company famous for their acrobatic drills and precise formations—on a twenty-city northern tour that summer. In the fall of 1860, he came to Springfield, taking a desk in the Lincoln & Herndon law office while throwing himself into the campaign. He delivered stump speeches, worked tirelessly for Lincoln's election, and became a fixture at the Lincoln home, where Willie and Tad followed him with wide-eyed admiration. After the election, Ellsworth accompanied the Lincolns on their inaugural journey east, serving as one of Abraham Lincoln's bodyguards. To the boys, Ellsworth was more than a friend—he was a larger-than-life older brother, soldier, and showman rolled into one.

When they arrived in Washington, Ellsworth became a part of the household. He had his mail sent to the Executive Mansion and even slept in Robert's room while the president's oldest son was away at school. He grew close to Lincoln's secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay. When Willie and Tad caught measles in March 1861, Ellsworth did too.

By the time Willie next wrote to Henry Remann, the country had been utterly transformed. In the 81 days since the Lincolns left Springfield, the war began. After Fort Sumter fell, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers. Ellsworth immediately went to the White House, announcing his plan to raise a regiment in New York City drawn from the city's fire companies. Within three days of his arrival, he had enlisted 1,200 volunteers. The men elected Ellsworth their colonel and began preparing for war.

Ellsworth's choice of firemen was no accident. In 1861 New York firefighters were known as "b'hoys"—a slang rendering of "boys" that had come to symbolize working-class toughness, youthful bravado, and physical courage. Firemen were fit, disciplined, accustomed to teamwork, and fearless in the face of danger. These, Ellsworth believed, were precisely the qualities needed to make good soldiers.

The urgency was real. After Fort Sumter fell, Washington stood nearly defenseless. On April 19, a Baltimore mob attacked Union soldiers enroute to the capital, killing four and wounding dozens more. Reinforcements trickled in so slowly, Lincoln moaned, "I begin to believe there is no North." Finally, on May 2, at eight o'clock that evening, Ellsworth and his regiment arrived in Washington, marched past the White House, and set up camp in the House chamber of the U.S. Capitol. A reporter described Ellsworth's men as "thick-set, rugged, and tough fellows, capable of bearing any amount of hardship."

The next day, Willie Lincoln wrote his friend in Springfield, Henry Remann, with an update on Ellsworth.

Executive man Washington D.C. May 3, 1861.

Dear Henry,

I am sorry I have not wrote to you at all, since I left you all.

I told my brother bob in my last letter that there was at least ten thousand soldiers stationed at the capitol building. I suppose that you did not learn that Colonel, E. E. Ellsworth had gone to New-york and organized a regiment, divided into company's, and brought them here, & to be sworn in. I dont know when. Some people call them the B,hoys, & others call them, the firemen.

Yours respectfully,

Willie Lincoln.

Willie Lincoln to Henry Remann, May 25, 1861

The Civil War dominated the rest of Willie Lincoln's short life. After Elmer Ellsworth's Fire Zouaves reached Washington, Willie and Tad, as well as their new playmates, Bud and Holly Taft, watched the soldiers drill behind the Capitol, visited the camps, and met heroes like Major Robert Anderson, the defender of Fort Sumter.

By May, events had turned sharply. Alexandria, Virginia, lay only eight miles from Washington and was a key port and rail center. Shortly after the Virginia Senate voted for secession on April 17, a massive Confederate flag began flying above the Marshall House hotel in Alexandria. According to

Executive man Washington D.C. May 3, 1861.

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the B,hoys, & others call them, the firemen.

Yours respectfully,
Willie
Lincoln.

Willie Lincoln's May 3, 1861, letter to Henry Remann
(Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum)

Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln himself could see the flag through a spyglass from his window in the White House. After Virginia's voters ratified secession on May 23, General Winfield Scott ordered Union forces across the Potomac to occupy the city. Ellsworth's 11th New York Volunteers were chosen to participate in the operation.

At dawn on May 24, Ellsworth led his men into Alexandria. After confirming Confederate forces had abandoned the city, he ordered the destruction of railroad tracks and telegraph wires. Spotting the massive Confederate flag flying over the Marshall House, Ellsworth entered the hotel with a small force and cut it down. As he descended the stairs, James Jackson, the hotel owner and an ardent secessionist, leveled a double-barrel shotgun at Ellsworth and shot him at close range, killing him instantly. Private Francis Brownell immediately returned fire, killing Jackson.

When Lincoln heard Ellsworth had been killed, he wept openly. Ellsworth's body lay in state in the East Room before his funeral on May 25. The Lincoln boys were not shielded from the reality of war. Julia Taft remembered seeing

Tad and her brother at the funeral, perched on the back of General Scott's chair. When the funeral concluded, the procession followed Ellsworth's remains to the depot, where a train carried him back to New York for burial. The newspaper reported that Willie and Tad rode in the carriage, sitting beside their father and members of the Cabinet.

That same day, both father and son put Ellsworth's death into words. Lincoln penned a condolence letter to Ellsworth's parents, while ten-year-old Willie wrote to his friend Henry Remann in a steady hand, offering a factual, almost journalistic account that carefully recorded names and events, as if he was determined to report the tragedy, rather than reveal his own grief. It is the only surviving letter in which Willie used brackets, underscoring his determination to report the incident with precision.

Washington, D.C. May 25/61

Dear Henry

You request a letter, & here it is. I want you to give my respects to Edward McClernand, and tell him that I feel very sorry about his mother, and one more thing. Colonel E. E. Ellsworth went over to Alexandria, Va, and determined to take the secession flag down of the Marshall house. So he rushed up the steps untill he reached the pole, took down the flag, wrapped it around him [8 men with him], and coming down the steps [his comrade, Brownell, being in front of him] & Jackson [a secessionists] behind him, shot him immediately his [ellsworths] comrades] went & killed Jackson.

Yours truly

Willie Lincoln.

Memorial to Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth,
featuring photographs of Ellsworth, the
Marshall House in Alexandria, Virginia,
and Pvt. Francis E. Brownell, who avenged
Ellsworth's death (Prints and Photographs
Division, Library of Congress)

Willie Lincoln to Edward McCauley, August 21, 1861

Mary Lincoln loved to travel. In October 1859 she invited her former neighbor Hannah Shearer to join her in New York and the White Mountains, but the election changed those plans. The women reunited briefly in February 1861 when the Shearers boarded the inaugural train in Philadelphia and continued with the Lincolns to Harrisburg.

Once in Washington, Mary continued to travel as she made purchases to refurbish the dilapidated White House. When summer came, she planned a vacation for her boys and circle of companions. On July 11, 1861, she wrote Hannah Shearer, proposing a seaside holiday at Long Branch, New Jersey. Hotel owners there were eager to attract the First Lady and had been offering her free accommodations. Mary urged Hannah and her sons to join them. She painted a picture of sunbathing on the beach, an excursion to New York City, and a leisurely return to Washington, where Hannah would be free to spend as much time as she wanted. Ten days after Mary wrote this letter, Union troops suffered a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Bull Run. The reality of war postponed Mary's plans, but did not cancel them.

On August 13, Mary left Washington with Willie and Tad, cousin Lizzie Grimsley, and several others. Hannah and her boys joined them in Philadelphia. The party traveled to New York, where Robert joined, and by August 16, they were settled in the Mansion House Hotel in Long Branch. Reporters tracked their outings and commented on Mary's attire, while Robert and John Hay drew attention at dances and on crabbing excursions. Mary devoted much of her time to Hannah, who



was pregnant and unwell, while Willie and Tad were thrilled to reunite with Hannah's boys, especially Edward Rathbun, who had been Willie's first correspondent.

Before leaving Long Branch, Willie wrote to another young friend, Edward McCauley, in Washington. Unlike his other surviving wartime letters, this one made no mention of the conflict consuming the nation. Instead, it captured the observations of a ten-year-old on vacation, removed from the realities of war, just as his mother likely intended.

S. LAIRD.
MANSION HOUSE,

Long Branch, N. J. August 21 1861

Dear Edward

I am exceedingly anxious to know, how you, and the rest of the boys are getting along. I have been quite well ever since, I left you. (Today being Wednesday), Mother thinks of leave on Friday morning at 6, o'clock. Our expected destination is probably Newport R.I. The reason for this is, that our journey will last only a few days now, it will be all the same as if we had not been any where but here. You cannot imagine, how nice it is to see the people bathing at the beach, near by.

From your friend & playmate

Willie Lincoln

Willie Lincoln to Henry Remann, September 30, 1861

Within six weeks of moving into the White House, the Civil War began. Aside from a brief seaside vacation that summer, Willie Lincoln spent the rest of his short life in Washington, surrounded by war. He saw soldiers daily, watched his father study maps with generals, visited hospitals, and even attended funerals. He understood the war was real.

The games he played reflected it. With his brother Tad and friends Bud and Holly Taft, Willie built a fort on the roof of the White House designed to repel a rebel invasion, dug a rifle pit in the Tafts' backyard, and turned the Tafts' attic into a prison for rebel soldiers. The boys acquired a doll dressed like a Zouave soldier and named him Jack. They accused him of falling asleep while on guard duty, held a mock trial, and "executed" him by gunfire, before burying him in the White House garden.

By early August 1861 the Lincoln and Taft boys were dressing like Civil War soldiers—wearing the colorful Zouave uniform of their martyred hero, Elmer Ellsworth. They camped in tents on the lawn between the Executive Mansion and the State Department. Julia Taft recalled that the boys formed

a "soldier company" they called "Mrs. Lincoln's Zouaves" and enlisted as many boys as they could. Willie served as colonel, Bud as major, Holly as captain, while Tad insisted on being the drummer boy. Perhaps it was this unit that Willie proudly described in this letter to his Springfield friend Henry Remann—written with all the sincerity and formality of a real Civil War soldier in the field.

Washington, D.C, September 30/1861
Executive Mansion

Dear Henry,

The last letter you sent to me, arrived in due time, which was on Saturday. My companions and I are raising a battalion. When, I came here, I waited until the beginning of June, and then joined a another boy in trying to get up a regiment. We failed however, and I then attempted to muster a Company. That soon broke up. Thereafter a boy stated he commanded a battalion, and my Company and I at once joined, believing that he spoke the truth, but we found out that such was not the case. Disappointed in every way we set to work and raised one, which is in a high state of efficiency and discipline.

I am

Dear Henry

yours sincerely

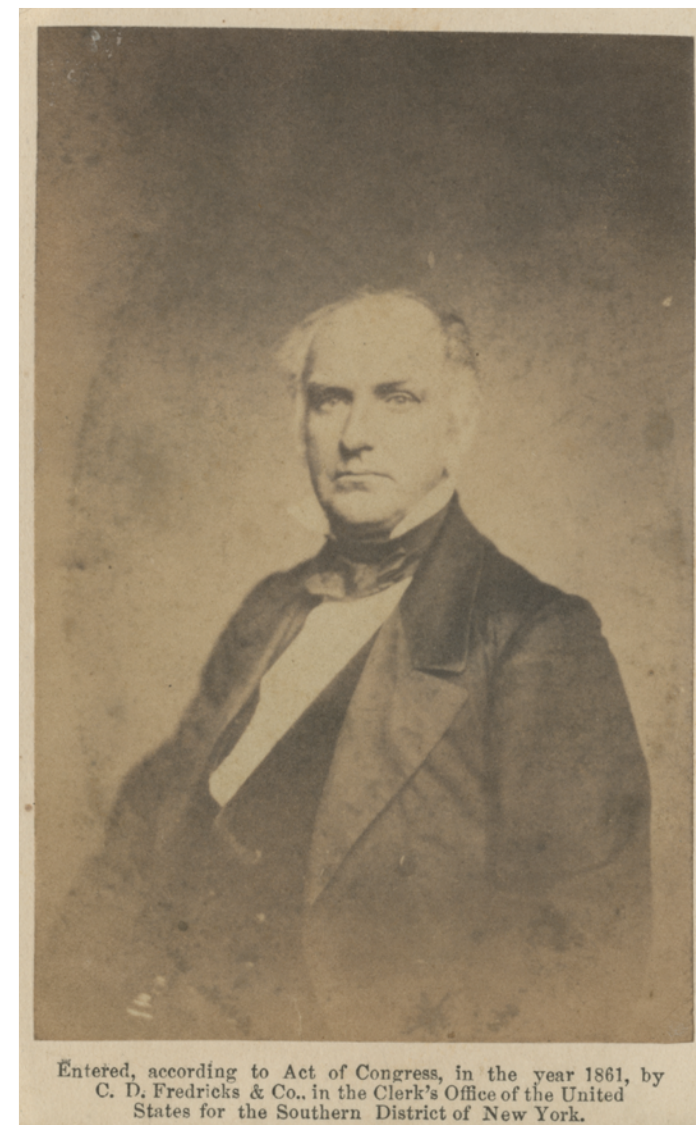
William W. Lincoln

William W. Lincoln to the Editor of the *National Republican*, October 30, 1861, published in *National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), November 4, 1861

Edward Dickinson Baker held a special place in the Lincoln family—he was the namesake of their second son, Edward Baker Lincoln. Lincoln and Baker first met during the Black Hawk War, remained close political allies, and when Baker stepped aside to let Lincoln run for Congress in 1846, the Lincolns honored him by giving his name to their child.

Baker's career took him from the Mexican War to California, and finally to a seat in the U.S. Senate from Oregon. On Lincoln's inauguration day in 1861, he rode with Lincoln from the White House to the Capitol and introduced him to the crowd. When the war came, Baker raised and commanded the "California Regiment."

On October 20, 1861, Baker visited the White House one last time. Lincoln sat against a tree on the lawn, while Baker reclined on the ground beside him. As they talked of old times, Willie Lincoln played in a pile of leaves. The next day, Baker led Union troops across the Potomac at Ball's Bluff,



Edward D. Baker, ca. 1861 (LFA-0176)

Virginia, where he was killed in action, becoming the only U.S. senator ever to die in combat. Lincoln wept at the news, calling it "the bitterest blow of the war."

Willie Lincoln was deeply aware of his father's grief. Just ten years old, he was already recognized by his White House tutor, Alexander Williamson, as a quick and able student with a particular gift for language. In the days following Baker's death, Willie composed a poem in his memory and carried it to the editor of the *National Republican*. According to later accounts, Willie had not told anyone he had written the poem and its publication came as a surprise.

However, if Willie had help composing the poem, it is possible help came from his father. Each of Willie's four stanzas to Baker follows a familiar structure of four lines, with the second and fourth lines ending in rhyme—the same pattern his father had used in one of his own poems. Like his father's most eloquent works during the Civil War, Willie used words to transform loss into meaning.

Washington, D.C., October 30, 1861.

Dear Sir: I enclose you my first attempt at poetry.

Yours truly, William W. Lincoln.
The Editor of the *National Republican*.

LINES
On the death of Colonel Edward Baker.

There was no patriot like Baker,
So noble and so true;
He fell as a soldier on the field,
His face to the sky of blue.

His voice is silent in the hall,
Which oft his presence grac'd,
No more he'll hear the loud acclaim,
Which rang from place to place.

No squeamish notions filled his breast,
The Union was his theme,
"No surrender and no compromise,"
His day thought and night's dream.

His country has *her* part to play,
To'rds those he has left behind,
His widow and his children all,—
She must always keep in mind.

A Note on Willie's Correspondents

Edward Rathbun was the recipient of Willie Lincoln's first surviving letter. After his family moved from Springfield to Pennsylvania, he and Willie saw each other only once more, during a seaside vacation at Long Branch, New Jersey. During that visit, Hannah was pregnant and not feeling well. When she returned from vacation, she gave birth to a son she named William Lincoln Shearer, who lived until 1932. Years later, he corresponded with Robert Todd Lincoln, whom he had never met, but knew about through his family's long friendship with the Lincolns. They maintained a warm correspondence, exchanging several letters.

On November 20, 1864, Mary Lincoln wrote Hannah Shearer a condolence letter after learning that Hannah's son Edward had died. Though more than two years had passed since Willie's death, Mary confessed she was still overwhelmed by grief, closing her letter with the hope that "our Angel boys, are reunited for they loved each other, so much on Earth."

Willie's most frequent correspondent, however, was Henry Remann. Although the boys never saw each other again after the Lincolns left Springfield for Washington, they exchanged letters throughout the war. By carefully preserving Willie's letters, Henry safeguarded his friend's memory, just



Henry and Josie Remann, childhood playmates of Willie and Tad. In this photograph, Henry is believed to be wearing clothing that had once belonged to Eddy Lincoln, who had died in 1850. As an adult, Josie would live in the Lincoln Home and work as its custodian, telling stories to visitors about the times she had visited the home as a child. (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum)



as his sister later helped preserve the Lincoln legacy. During the Civil War, Henry's oldest sister Josephine married Albert Stevenson Edwards, son of Ninian and Elizabeth Edwards, linking the Remanns to the Lincolns through marriage. In 1897, Albert became caretaker of the Lincoln Home at Eighth and Jackson Streets. After his death in 1915, Josephine succeeded him, followed in turn by their daughter, Mary Edwards Brown, who held the post until 1924.

Meanwhile, Henry remained in his childhood home at the end of the block. He allowed his sister and niece to display Willie's letters to him in the Lincoln Home and lived the rest of his life as one of Springfield's leading citizens. In 1904, when Springfield opened its new Carnegie-funded Lincoln Public Library, Henry Remann was appointed its first librarian, a fitting role for the boy who safeguarded the writings of Abraham Lincoln's son.

Samuel Wheeler is a historian specializing in the history of Illinois, the Civil War Era, and the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln. He earned his Ph.D. in history from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. For more than two decades, Wheeler has worked in the field of public history, most recently serving as the State Historian of Illinois and Director of Research and Collections at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield. He currently serves as the Director of History Programs at the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission.

From the Collection FAREWELL TO SPRINGFIELD

by Jessie Cortesi

Senior Lincoln Librarian, Allen County Public Library

The interim period between Abraham Lincoln's November 1860 election to presidency and his March 1861 inauguration in Washington, D.C., was one of profound change for the Lincoln family. An absolute flurry of activity descended upon the family's Springfield home, with well-wishers and office seekers alike endlessly flooding into the parlors and sitting room. The explosion of attention was not exclusively directed at Abraham, however. Mary, Robert, Willie, and Tad, too, became sources of great interest. From widely circulated cartes-de-visite portraits to making the cover of *Harper's Weekly*, the family together walked into the spotlight and onto the national stage. These photographs capture each member of the Lincoln family as they prepared to say farewell to their beloved hometown of Springfield, Illinois—and more importantly, their cherished friends, neighbors, and extended relatives there—before setting off for their new home in the nation's capital and taking up residence in the Executive Mansion.

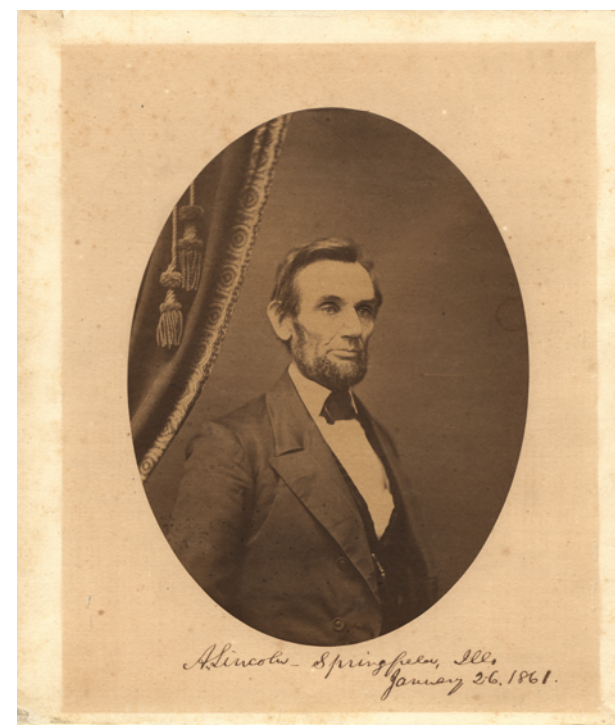


Mary, Willie, and Tad Lincoln, November 1860 (LN-2341)



Robert Todd Lincoln, 1860 (LFA-0092)

It was not easy to say goodbye. The president-elect's famous Farewell Address poignantly sums up the emotion he felt when the time for the family's departure finally arrived on February 11, 1861.



Abraham Lincoln, January 13, 1861 (OC-1521)

My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Lincoln LORE

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