

For the People

A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association

Volume 1, Number 1

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Springfield, Illinois

Abraham Lincoln, John Hay, and the Bixby Letter

by Michael Burlingame

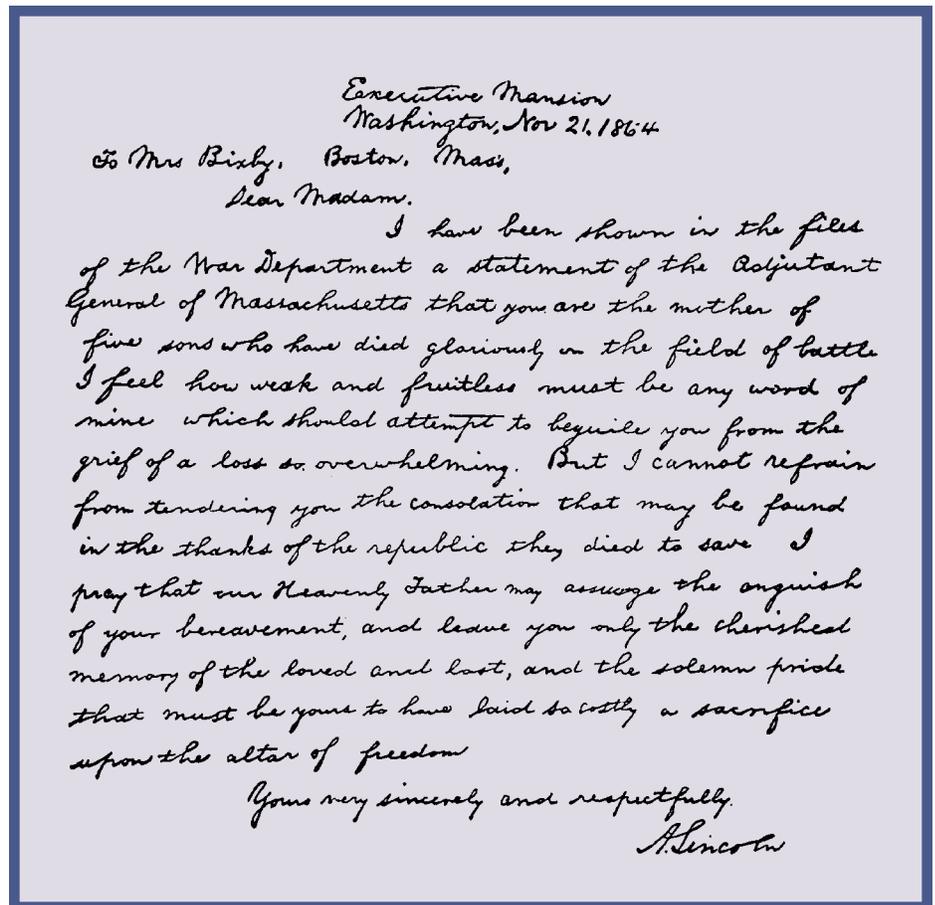
Most moviegoers are aware that Abraham Lincoln's letter of condolence to Lydia Bixby, a widow who purportedly had lost five sons in the Civil War, looms large in Stephen Spielberg's recent film, *Saving Private Ryan*. Dated November 21, 1864, the letter reads as follows: "I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the alter of Freedom. Yours, very sincerely and respectfully, A. Lincoln."

Although extravagant praise has been lavished on this document, it is surrounded by ironies. Mrs. Bixby was deemed "the best specimen of a true-hearted Union" ever seen, yet she was in fact a Confederate sympathizer who ran a whorehouse. In addition, Mrs. Bixby lied about her sons; despite her claim that five of them had been killed, she had really lost only two boys in the war.

Moreover, this beloved Lincoln letter was almost certainly composed by assistant presidential secretary John Hay. Several people, including the British diplomat John Morley, literary editor William Crary Brownell, United States Ambassador to Great Brit-

Although no direct, firsthand testimony shows that Hay claimed authorship of the Bixby letter, Hay did in 1866 tell William H. Herndon that Lincoln "signed without reading them the letters I wrote in his name."

Most Lincoln specialists have



The original copy of the Bixby Letter has never been located.

ain, Walter Hines Page, Louis A. Coolidge, a Washington correspondent for a Boston newspaper, and Spencer Eddy, Hay's personal secretary, testified that they heard Hay claim authorship or had heard that assertion made by a third party quoting Hay.

doubted that Hay composed the Bixby letter. In 1982, Mark E. Neely, Jr., declared: "There is not a scrap of reliable evidence to prove" Hay's authorship of the Bixby letter.

But there is. Hay's papers at
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For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association

President's Column

by Donald R. Tracy

When I had the good fortune to be elected as your President, I set forth four goals in my term that I believe are worthy, realistic, and attainable. 1. To increase membership from seven hundred to one thousand members, which is the level recommended by the publisher of our journal, the University of Illinois Press. 2. To put our publications, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* and *Lincoln Day By Day*, on our website on the Internet by February 12, 1999, and February 12, 2000, respectively. 3. To encourage greater involvement by younger people in the study of Abraham Lincoln. 4. To publish a first-rate quarterly newsletter.

There is no scarcity of newsletters in today's world. In my profession, the law, I am inundated with newsletters as I am sure you are in your profession. Likewise, newsletters abound and multiply in the historical community, particularly the Lincoln community. Nevertheless, I believe there is a need for our own newsletter for the following purposes: To promote greater participation by our members in our works and functions, particularly our annual symposium and banquet; to promote our scholarly publications; to provide our members with an additional opportunity to communicate with one another; and to allow our nonacademic members, who might not have the

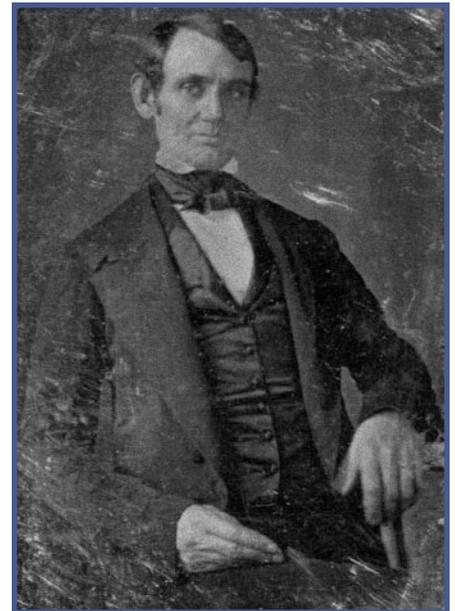
time to read all there is to read of Lincoln, to nevertheless be involved and interested through relatively short articles and book reviews that can be consumed in short order during breaks in action.

With these goals in mind, I am extremely proud to present to you this our first ever newsletter, an issue that takes a gigantic first step toward the goals aforementioned. My opinion on this, however, does not matter. What matters is your opinion. Therefore, please let us know what you think about this newsletter, whether you believe we should continue, and give us your ideas and suggestions for improvement.

In considering this, please keep in mind that the newsletter is not an inexpensive proposition. It is estimated that this newsletter will cost the Association \$10 per member. Our minimum annual membership is only \$25 and most of that is already committed to paying for our *Journal*, symposium, and other endeavors. If we are to maintain a quality, quarterly newsletter we will need to either convince the majority of our members to upgrade their membership (as many already have) or generate additional revenues in other ways. In sum, I hope you enjoy this newsletter and I hope you will write us with your views and suggestions. Also, remember to check our website at www.alincolnassoc.com for other news and information.

I Can't Recall the Name but the Face is Familiar

The earliest known image of Abraham Lincoln is housed in the collections of the Library of Congress. Generally attributed to Nicholas H. Shepherd and taken in 1846 or 1847, the daguerreotype is a companion image to that of Lincoln's young attractive wife, Mary Todd. Robert Todd Lincoln recalled both photographs being hung in the parlor of the Springfield home when he was growing up. Robert also remembered them being the first images of his father and mother. But a number of other



images have been recently advanced asking scholars and the public alike to accept the likenesses as genuine photographs of Abraham Lincoln. The Hoffman "Lincoln" daguerreotype had a computer imaging analysis support its claim while a vein pattern analysis rejected it. The image was rejected in a non-scientific public poll at the Old State

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Capitol with people voting eight to one against it. The same image was withdrawn from auction when it did not meet the minimum



reserve bid, adding collectors and institutions to the ranks of the image's naysayers. A recent photograph surfaced claiming to be taken in 1836 or 1837 showing Lincoln holding his law certificate. The main problem with this claim is that the photographic process was not invented until 1839. Perhaps the oral tradition is mistaken about the date. But unless further credible evidence surfaces to make a case for the image, it is yet another added to the list of questionable Lincolns.

The Abraham Lincoln Association

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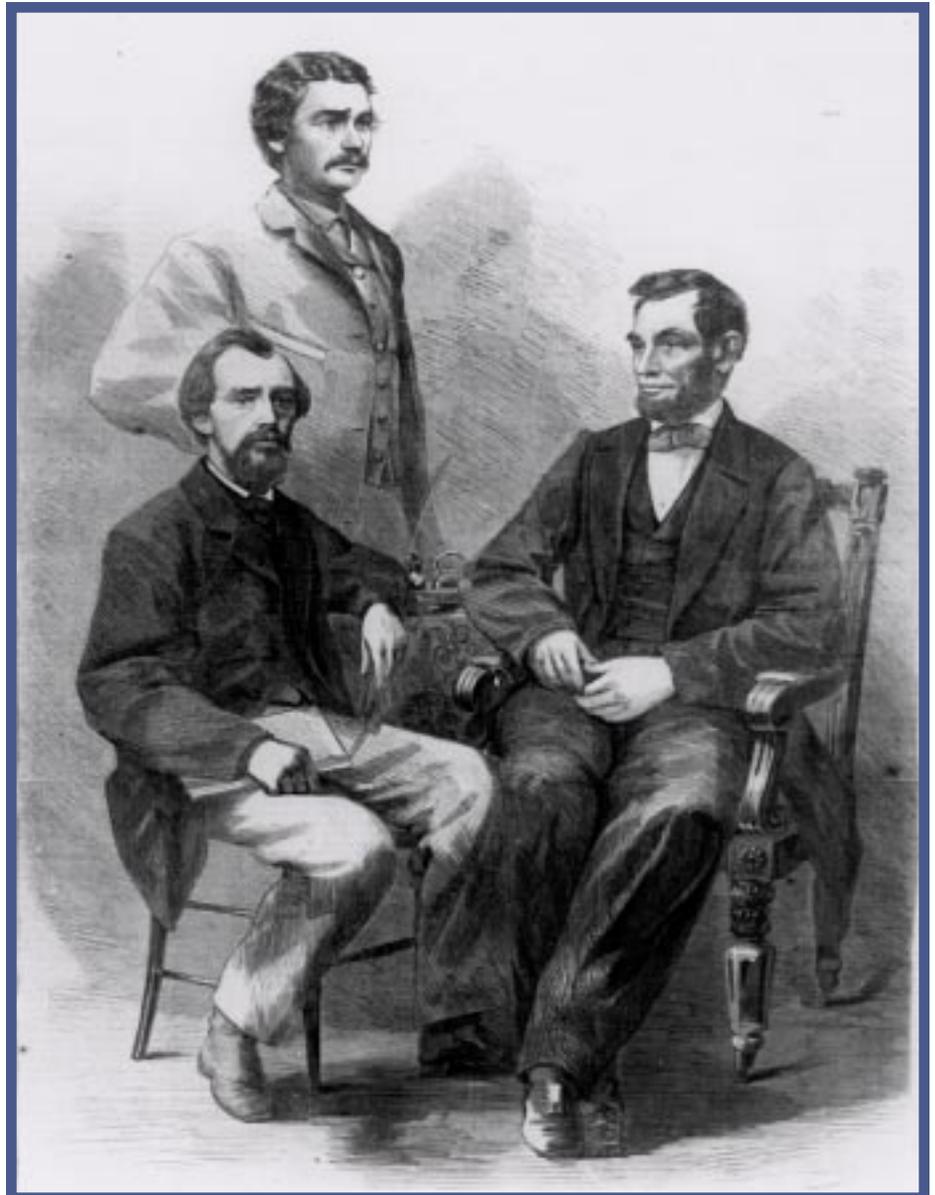
Abraham Lincoln, John Hay, and the Bixby Letter

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Brown University and at the Library of Congress contain scrapbooks full of newspaper accounts of Hay's own writings. Nestled among various poems and notices of Hay's lectures and books is a copy of the Bixby letter in each of two scrapbooks. Moreover, Hay frequently used words and phrases that appear in the Bixby letter, some which never appear in

Lincoln's works; others appear much less often in Lincoln's works than in Hay's. They include "be-guile," "I pray that our Heavenly Father," "I cannot refrain from tendering you," "glory," and "cherish."

This evidence suggests that it is highly probable that Hay, not Lincoln, is the true author of "the most beautiful letter ever written."



*John George Nicolay, John Milton Hay, and Abraham Lincoln
From Harper's Weekly, June 11, 1864*

Lincoln Never Said That

by Thomas F. Schwartz

While Abraham Lincoln may be one of the most quoted American Presidents he is unquestionably the most misquoted. More times than not, the origin of the spurious quotation is elusive. When one is able to locate the source of the non-Lincoln sayings, an interesting and often entertaining story results. It is hoped that this column might shed some light on some of the more egregious quotations attributed to Abraham Lincoln, and in the process provide some levity.

A number of years ago, folk singer Pete Seeger sent a fax to the Abraham Lincoln Association trying to verify the following excerpt supposedly contained in a letter written to Thomas Elkins on November 21, 1864: "We may congratulate ourselves that this cruel war, which has cost a vast treasure of blood and money, is almost over. But I see in the future a crisis approaching which fills me with anxiety. As a result of the war, corporations have become enthroned, and an era of corruption in high places will follow. The money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its rule by preying upon the prejudice of the people, until all wealth is concentrated in a few hands, and the republic destroyed. I feel at this time more anxiety for the future of my country than at any time in the past, even in the midst of war."

The tone and content foreshadows Dwight Eisenhower's warning of the dangers of the "military and industrial complex." But is it from the pen of Abraham Lincoln?

A widely quoted early source for the quotation appeared in George H. Shibley, *The Money Question* (Chicago: Stable Mon-

ey Publishing Company, 1896). Caroline Thomas Harnsberger's, *The Lincoln Treasury*, cites Shibley as her source but also warns the reader that "this letter, often quoted is considered by the Abraham Lincoln Association to be spurious." Archer Shaw's, *The Lincoln Encyclopedia*, also includes the letter without any editorial warnings. Shaw cites Emanuel Hertz's, *Abraham Lincoln, a New Portrait*, as his source. Hertz offers no source. And so depending on which reference work one con-

ters "denouncing the forgery." According to Nicolay's daughter, Helen, an exchange of letters ensued between her father and George C. Hackstaff of the Caldwell Remedy Company, regarding the propriety of using a spurious Lincoln quotation to promote patent medicines. Hackstaff took umbrage at Nicolay's accusations and demanded that Nicolay prove the utterance to be false. Nicolay countered that one could not prove a negative and it was incumbent upon Hackstaff to prove it was from an authentic Lincoln letter.

In spite of the efforts of



Pete Seeger

sults, the quotation will be found with and without editorial comment.

The item does not appear in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* nor is there any reference to it in the newspapers for that period. John G. Nicolay was frequently asked about it in 1890 and he traced its origins to a pamphlet by the Caldwell Remedy Company issued on May 10, 1888. Nicolay claimed that both he and John Hay, Lincoln's other personal secretary, responded to dozens of let-

Nicolay and Hay, the quotation would not disappear from print. Robert Todd Lincoln was asked about it on several occasions and took the opportunity on March 12, 1917 to set the record straight in a letter to Henry Clifford Stuart. It is worth quoting in its entirety for it expresses both Robert's detailed research into trivial matters regarding the memory of his father, and it also provides a glimpse of Robert's dry wit.

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Lincoln Never Said That

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“Your letter of the 8th inst., enclosing a copy of one addressed by you to Dr. Howard Taylor, reaches me here. Referring to them both I must reply that I cannot in the special way you suggest give you a basis for discontinuing your denial of Abraham Lincoln’s greatness. The quotation which you describe as being in ‘Lincoln’s letter to his personal friend Elkins, of Illinois, 1864,’ is essentially like, and perhaps exactly like, a supposed quotation which has in past years been brought to my attention many times and with varied citations and I have examined the question of its authenticity with care. My own private papers and memoranda in which the results of that examination are preserved are at my summer home in Vermont and not accessible at the present time so that I cannot reply to your letter in the fulness that I would like and must depend upon my memory, and am doing so entirely in writing to you.

The expression in question first appeared, so far as I know, a good many years ago as being part of one of President Lincoln’s messages to Congress; that was incorrect as is easily proved; then I saw it in various ways and lastly, I think, a few years ago in a speech in the United States Senate in which, as I remember, the senator used it as an expression of President Lincoln’s without discussing its authenticity. I suppose that he will hereafter be quoted as vouching for it.

It is not so easy to dispose of it as being a part of a private letter as it is as being a part of any message to Congress. I have substantially all of President Lincoln’s papers which were in his possession at the time of his death. It was not his habit to preserve copies of letters; he had no letter pressbook, but in his papers are a number of drafts of his letters and

some copies made by one of his secretaries at the time. These papers were all carefully searched in regard to the quotation in question and nothing whatever was found. The originals of his letters

but are held by myself, by Jessie W. Weik and by the Hay family; about Mr. Weik I know nothing, but I doubt whether Mr. Hay’s children have any such letters. They did have two important manuscripts which were properly owned by Mr. Hay and which they



Robert Todd Lincoln

were of course sent by him to the persons to whom they were written; scores of such letters have been sold by the persons to whom they were addressed or by their representatives; only a few days ago I saw the notice of a sale of five such letters. You say that you were informed that his letters ‘were not where they belonged’

have presented to the Congressional Library here.

I cannot remember just when it was, but it is a number of years ago that I discovered what I think is the true and only source of the supposed quotation. It originated, I think, at what is called a Spiritualist Seance in a country

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town in Iowa, a number of years ago, as being a communication by President Lincoln through what is called a Medium, and belief in its authenticity should therefore be held only by those who place confidence in the outgivings of so called Mediums at the gatherings held under their auspices.

As to the letter mentioned in your communication to Dr. Taylor, I can only say that I have no recollection of any personal friend of my father named Elkins. There may be or may [not] have been such a person; and if he received such a letter, as he is probably no longer living, perhaps an advertisement that his representatives could obtain an exceedingly good price for it might lead to its discovery, but personally I do not believe it could be discovered by such means or any other, for I do not think it ever existed.

In considering the subject yourself it does not seem to have occurred to you to take into account the condition of public affairs in 1864 and for a considerable time after President Lincoln's death. I am old enough to remember that time very well, but I do not recall that there was then, or for a good many years thereafter, any public discussion of the danger to the public of corpora-

tions or of combinations of corporations and I do not believe that there was then any feeling whatever adverse to corporations large or small. Yet in the quotation President Lincoln is made to say that 'as a result of the war, (which was by no means then ended,) corporations have been enthroned,' and to express a dread on his part in regard to a condition, the alleged description of which to me seems as much of an anachronism as is shown in the famous ivory carving at Antwerp representing soldiers with muskets as being present at the Adoration of the Magi.

In short, I regard the quotation as being simply an impudent invention."

Robert never sent this letter but took his father's advice and let the matter rest for two days. The letter he sent to Stuart on March 14, 1917, was much shorter and simply stated his dismissal of the quotation's authenticity: "Without attempting to give the details of my examination." As an attorney for the so-called "Robber Barons," Robert's initial response shows a marked defensiveness of corporate America. That aside, the preponderance of evidence undermines the credibility of the quotation as originating with Abraham Lincoln. Quite simply, he never wrote it.

been raised since January, 1998. Work has already begun on *Lincoln Day By Day*. Individuals should be able to access *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* by February 12, 1999.

It is not too late to contribute to this worthwhile project. Donations at any level may be made payable to the Abraham Lincoln Association/Library, One Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Our thanks to the following individuals and organizations who have so generously supported the project in 1998.

President's Club: Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Shapell; **Cabinet Members:** Illinois Historic Preservation Agency; **Ambassador's Club:** Mr. and Mrs. Dan Bannister, Molly Becker, Richard E. Hart, Fred Hoffmann, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Schanbacher; **Library Patrons:** R-Lou Barker, Robert Eckley, Donald R. Tracy, The Tracy Foundation, Josephine Saner; **The Keyboard Club:** Brown, Hay and Stephens, Willard Bunn, Jr., George Craig, Harlan Davidson Publishers, Cullom Davis, David Herndon, John Hoffmann, Illinois State Journal Register, Dr. and Mrs. Todd Janus, Hon. Richard Mills, James Myers, Matthew Pinsker, James Rawley, Mr. and Mrs. Raymer, Thomas Vince; **Wide Awake Club:** Winifred Barringer, Norman Boas, Paul Bremer, Richard Cain, Herbert Channick, Hon. Linda Cook, Lenore Farmer, Thomas Farrish, Paul Findley, Elbert Floyd, William Hanchett, Walter Hartsfield, Stanley Herrin, Charles Keaton, Daniel Kennedy, Mr. and Mrs. Lowe, Michael Mattingly, Thomas O'Mara, Mark Plummer, Carl Volkmann, Robert Wernle, Kenneth Winkle; **Library Friends:** Rita F. Amer, Gary Greenberg, Mark Hoyt, Robert Jeffers, O. J. Keller, Jerry Kluetz, Joseph McMenam, Arseny Melnick, LaVerne Millstead, S. Felton Mitchell, and John Waugh.

Virtual Library Update

The Abraham Lincoln Association Board approved the creation of an electronic Lincoln Library that would begin by placing *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* and *Lincoln Day By Day*, two of the most valued reference works created by the Association, online. To date, the first eight volumes of *The Collected Works* have been converted to a digital format. Through an agree-

ment with WordCruncher Technologies, a user can search the entire eight volumes by an individual word or a series of words. The words do not need to be in immediate proximity with one another. Another great advantage of WordCruncher is that it shows which words are most frequently used to modify the word or words being searched.

To date, over \$26,000 has

Concerning Mr. Lincoln

When Harry Edward Pratt, one of the great executive secretaries of the Association, published a compilation of letters offering descriptions of Lincoln, he entitled it *Concerning Mr. Lincoln: In which Abraham Lincoln is Pictured as he Appeared to Letter Writers of his Time*. The following letter was written as part of a series of correspondence with Abraham Lincoln, first as candidate and then as president-elect. Rufus W. Miles, the author, lived in Knox County, Illinois, and was first elected to the Illinois General Assembly in 1858. As a loyal Republican, he offered to send candidate Abraham Lincoln an Illinois eagle quill to pen his inaugural address if he won the presidential election. John G. Nicolay responded to Miles's first request on June 11, 1860 indicating that Lincoln, if elected, would "be glad to have you forward him the quill."

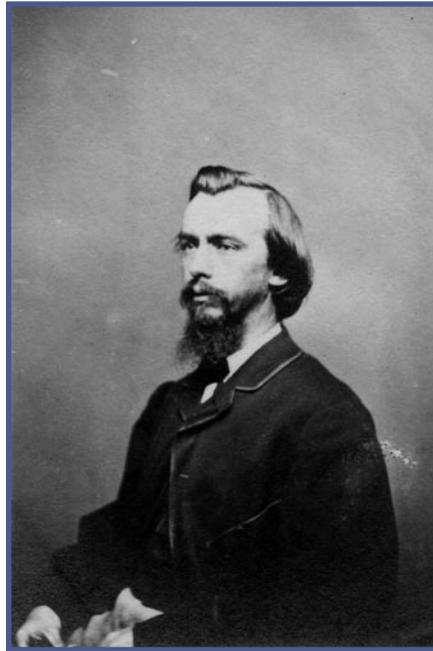
True to his word, Miles sent the quill enclosed in the following letter. From our perspective, it is surprising how prophetic Miles would be in his description. All spelling and punctuation remains as found in the original letter in the Henry Horner Lincoln Col-

lection at the Illinois State Historical Library.

"Persifer December 21st 1860
Hon A Lincoln,

Dear Sir

Please accept the Eagle quill (I promised you) by the Hand of our Representative A A Smith The



John George Nicolay

bird from whose wing the quill was taken was shot By John F. Dillon in Persifer Township Knox Co Illinois in February of 1857.

Having Heard that James Buccannon was furnished with an Eagle quill to write his Inaugural address with And believing that in 1860 a Republican would be Elected to take his place. I determined to save this quill & present it to the fortunate man whom he might be Report tells us that the bird which furnished Buccannons quill was a Captive bird. Fit emblem of the man that used it. But the bird from which this quill was taken yealded the quill only with its life Fit Emblem of the man who is expected to use it. For all true Republicans believe that you would not think life worth the Keeping after the Surrender of principle Great difficulties surround you. Traitors to their Country have threatened your life And should you be called upon to Surrender it at the post of duty your memory will live forever in the Heart of every Freeman. And that is a grander monument than can be built of brick or marble

'For if hearts may not our memories keep Oblivion haste each verstage sweep And let our memories end.'

Yours truly
R W Miles"

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Please enroll me as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association in the category indicated:

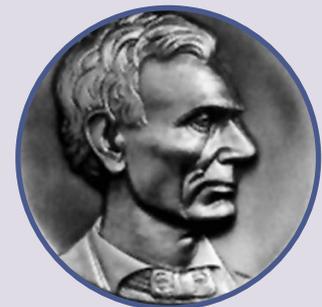
- Individual \$ 25.00
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- Sustaining \$ 125.00
- Benefactor \$ 250.00
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Website: www.alincolnassoc.com

In Memoriam

The Abraham Lincoln Association lost its best friend and longtime supporter with the death of Ralph Geoffrey Newman. He suffered a heart attack last fall and continued to fight various ailments until his death at 86 on July 23, 1998.

Those in the Lincoln field need little introduction to Ralph. He was a rare individual who could claim more accomplishments and friends in his long and full life than most of us could achieve in several lifetimes. Born on November 3, 1911, Newman began his career in minor-league baseball. An injury cut short his athletic career but he never lost his interest in America's national sport. At the height of the Great Depression, Newman purchased a failing bookstore and turned it into one of the most vibrant intellectual centers in Chicago. Regular customers included newspaper giants Carl Sandburg and Lloyd Lewis. Every major and minor collector sought out Ralph. Major documents and rare printed materials that graced the collections of Carl Haverlin, Philip Sang, Oliver Barrett, Alfred Stern,

the Illinois State Historical Library, the Lincoln Museum, and the Tokyo Lincoln Center were often the result of Ralph Newman's sleuthing.

Ralph was interested in cultivating the mind and imagination. Books and historical manuscripts were gateways to exciting stories and past lives and events. His encyclopedic knowledge of each book and manuscript he sold made collecting more than a hobby: it was an adventure. He was always the center of attention because of his charm, quick wit, and engaging stories. It is not surprising that Ralph was one of the founders of the Civil War Round Table and was frequently asked to head historical commissions and organizations. He also served as president of the Chicago Public Library board.

One of Ralph's great interests was not only the study of past events and people, but also being aware of the "living" history around us. He, along with a handful of others, encouraged the State of Illinois to establish the Lincoln Academy, whose purpose is to honor the achievements of

living Illinoisans. In 1982, the academy honored Ralph along with jazz artist Bobby Short, newspaper columnist Mike Royko, and distinguished lawyer Thomas R. Mulroy.

A colleague of mine who had never met Ralph but occasionally talked to him on the telephone thought him to be in his thirties or forties because his voice "sounded young." Indeed, his voice and manner reflected energy and intellectual curiosity. It was not surprising that even when I visited him in the hospital, Ralph focused on talking about the future and what needed to be done in the Lincoln field.

Our condolences go out to his wife Patricia, daughters Maxine Brandburg and Carol Parry Fox, and stepson Scott Simon. As was stated in his memorial service, "Ralph was an American original." A memorial has been established at Lincoln College in Ralph's honor. Contributions to the Ralph G. Newman Chair can be made out to Lincoln College and sent to Dr. Jack Nutt, Lincoln College, 300 Keokuk St., Lincoln, IL 62656.

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