THE LAST FULL MEASURE OF DEVOTION

Collecting Abraham Lincoln

FEBRUARY 7–APRIL 27, 2009
Library West Hall

THE HUNTINGTON
Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
In December 1849, Abraham Lincoln, then a U.S. Representative from Illinois, received his first request for an autograph. He found the attention rather amusing. “If you collect the signatures of all persons who are no less distinguished than I,” he replied to the autograph seeker, “you will have a very undistinguished mass of names.”

He, of course, was proven wrong. A rush to collect everything connected with Lincoln—his autographs and memorabilia as well as books and articles written about him—began soon after his rise to political stardom. By the time of Lincoln centennial celebrations in 1909, collecting had evolved into a distinct field of American antiquarianism known as Lincolniana.

This exhibition explores the rich history of Lincoln collecting. It also pays the ultimate tribute to the collectors by presenting Abraham Lincoln in his own words—as saved by Lincoln collectors and preserved at The Huntington.
The Huntington Collection

Henry E. Huntington’s vision of a great American research library could not have been fulfilled without an extensive Lincoln collection. Between 1914 and 1924, Huntington, aided by his agents and library staff, made a series of well-planned acquisitions of Lincoln materials. The Huntington Library, a “library of libraries,” became home to some of the most important Lincoln collections.

The first was the collection of papers of Ward Hill Lamon (1828–1893), Lincoln’s friend and law partner, known for a controversial 1872 biography, *The Life of Lincoln*, ghost-written by Chauncey F. Black. Early in 1914, Huntington acquired his voluminous papers.

This photograph of Abraham Lincoln by Alexander Gardner, taken on Feb. 5, 1865, was one of the last photographs ever taken of the president.

Shortly after the Lamon purchase was finalized, the Anderson Galleries in New York announced the sale of the immense Lincoln collection of William Harrison Lambert (1842–1912). Lambert’s Lincoln materials were considered the best outside the Lincoln family. Huntington secured the largest portion of the collection.

By the late 1910s, Huntington had established a reputation as a Lincoln collector. In 1919 Judd Stewart (1867–1920), who had been amassing Lincolniana for more than 30 years, offered his collection to Huntington. Stewart’s collection was regarded as second only to that of Lambert. The purchase was finalized in 1922.

In 1924, The Huntington Library, working with the collector and book dealer A. S. W. Rosenbach (1876–1952), bought a large portion of the collection of papers of Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy. The cumulative results position The Huntington as one of the prime repositories of Lincoln material in the country.

Often referred to as Lincoln’s “death warrant,” this handwritten pass dispatched Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln’s friend and self-appointed bodyguard, to Richmond, Va., on April 11, 1865. Lamon was still away from Washington three days later, when the president was fatally shot at Ford’s Theater.
AN EVOLVING INTEREST
Collecting Lincoln changed over time; it was not always a sign of the universal admiration of the man. The first Lincoln collectors were his contemporaries. They knew Lincoln as a highly polarizing figure, as controversial in death as he was in life.

Collecting Lincoln began with a hunt for autographs and mementos. Many sought Lincoln’s autographs out of the genuine affection for “Honest Old Abe.” Sojourner Truth was proud that Lincoln wrote in her autograph book “with the same hand that signed the death warrant of slavery.” Many, however, were souvenir hunters and “autograph fiends” driven by pursuit of celebrity.

The story of Lincoln’s death became part of America’s popular imagination almost immediately after the tragedy. Souvenir hunters snatched up every memento of the assassination, funeral, and trial of the conspirators. In the meantime, a heated debate over the meaning of Lincoln’s death ensued. As preachers and their flocks struggled to come to terms with the tragedy, hundreds of funeral sermons were printed within a month of the assassination—and promptly became collectors’ items.

The fierce debates over Lincoln’s character and leadership continued until the end of the century, fed by the reminiscences and biographies flooding bookstalls. Ranging from hero worship to scathing exposés, these books themselves became objects of hot pursuit.

Lincoln biographers were also Lincoln collectors. Lincoln’s own papers, inherited by his son Robert Todd Lincoln, remained off limits until 1947. (The only exceptions were two historians—John G. Nicolay and John M. Hay—authorized to write a history of the Lincoln administration.) Lincoln biographers had to rely on other, yet to be uncovered, materials.

One such collector/biographer was William H. Herndon (1818–1891), Lincoln’s law partner and friend. Herndon compiled a vast “Lincoln Record”—a collection of documentary and oral testimony of Lincoln’s early life. In 1869, finding himself unable to complete the book, Herndon sold a transcript to Ward Hill Lamon.

Another important figure was Ida M. Tarbell (1857–1944), a gifted journalist hired in 1894 by McClure’s Magazine to write a documentary biography of Lincoln. Aided by a network of researchers, Tarbell unearthed a mass of new documentary evidence gleaned from newspapers, courthouse records, and private collections. The effort spearheaded by Herndon and Tarbell helped move the focus of collecting from mementos and relics to historical evidence. It also created a market demand for Lincoln autographs, which also generated a cottage industry of Lincoln forgeries.
At the turn of the century, as the Civil War generation was fading away, Lincoln took his now familiar place in the American pantheon alongside Washington and Jefferson. Politicians and activists claimed him as their patron saint. Lincoln’s image was used to endorse public causes or to sell products, and his words helped settle nearly every dispute. Lincolniana was now as venerated as the writings of the Founding Fathers. A document in Lincoln’s handwriting was the holy grail to the new generation of collectors.

Without the collectors, the full story of Abraham Lincoln would have never been told. They were the ones who doggedly tracked down numerous letters, notes, photographs, speeches, pamphlets, and broadsides that otherwise might have been lost or remained in obscurity. The great paradox of Lincoln collecting was a contrast between the ideal Lincoln that inspired the collectors and the man revealed in the historic materials they had helped to preserve. This Lincoln is found in the items on display in the second portion of the exhibition, which follows him from the humble beginnings in New Salem, Ill., to his last days.

Olga Tsapina
Norris Foundation Curator;
American Historical Manuscripts
**RELATED PROGRAMS**

**A Visit from Abraham Lincoln**
Visitors can hear a live reading of the Gettysburg Address delivered by Abraham Lincoln himself (portrayed by actor William T. Peck) and enjoy Civil War-era music performed by the Band of the California Battalion in a public program on Saturday, Feb. 21, from 1 to 2:30 p.m. on the Library lawn. General admission.

**Curator Tour**
Curator Olga Tsapina will lead a private tour of the exhibition on Thursday, Feb. 26, at 4:30 p.m. Members: $15. Non-Members: $25. Advanced registration required. 626-405-2128.

Introduction page, clockwise from top left: Photograph of Abraham Lincoln taken by Alexander Hesler in 1860 after Lincoln won the Republican presidential nomination; a scrapbook of Lincoln’s speeches on “Negro equality” that he prepared in 1858 during his celebrated debates with Stephen A. Douglas. Pasted into the book on the right-hand page is a printed excerpt from an earlier debate with Douglas in 1854. Lincoln’s handwritten notes are on the left. [Transcript: “The following extracts are taken from various speeches of mine delivered at various times and places, and I believe they contain the substance of all I have ever said about “Negro equality.” The first three are from my answer to Judge Douglas, Oct. 16, 1854, at Peoria.”]; official ballot for the Republican ticket of Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin in the 1860 presidential race.

Above: Autographed photograph of Lincoln, presented to War Office employee W. H. H. Jones.

Cover: Photograph of Abraham Lincoln includes a handwritten note reading “Let it be done,” signed and dated by Lincoln on March 17, 1865. (The photograph itself was taken in 1864 at Matthew Brady’s Washington, D.C., studio by his business partner, Anthony Berger. It is known as the “five dollar pose” because the likeness was used as the basis for the engraving on the $5 bill.)