

Documenting the Lincoln Museum Collection

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THE Lincoln Museum, in the heart of downtown Washington, D. C., is housed in the old Ford's Theater, where President Lincoln was assassinated. Its history may be said to begin with Osborn H. Oldroyd of Ohio, an admirer of Abraham Lincoln. In his eighteenth year, during Lincoln's first campaign for the Presidency, Oldroyd was inspired by a little book, *The Life, Speeches, and Public Services of Abram Lincoln*.¹ He was eager to learn more of this man who could reach such heights with no more than six months' schooling.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Oldroyd² was one of the first to enlist when Company E, 20th Ohio Infantry, was organized in his neighborhood. He spent nearly four years in defense of the Union, upholding the principles of his hero. At the age of 22, after his discharge from the Army, he determined to devote his life to the pursuit of knowledge about this great man. With unflinching devotion he gathered pictures, speeches, newspaper articles, books, furniture, and other Lincoln mementos that he could obtain by gift or purchase. He sustained himself and his family by selling some of the relics he collected. This gathering of Lincolniana continued for over 66 years.

In 1883 Oldroyd moved into Lincoln's old home in Springfield, Ill., and his collection continued to grow. After ten years' residence in Springfield he moved his collection to Washington and took up residence in the Government-owned Petersen House at 516 10th Street, N. W. This was the house into which the President was

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¹ This work of 117 pages was published by Rudd & Carleton, New York, and was deposited for copyright on June 8, 1860. It bore the full title *The Life, Speeches, and Public Services of Abram [!] Lincoln Together With a Sketch of the Life of Hannibal Hamlin. Republican Candidates for the Offices of President and Vice-President of the United States*.

² See William B. Benham, *Life of Osborn H. Oldroyd* (Washington, D. C., 1927).

carried, across the street from Ford's Theater, after Booth's fatal shot. It was here that Lincoln died on the morning of April 15, 1865, approximately nine hours later.

Oldroyd was given permission to occupy the Petersen House and to exhibit his collection there. The structure is now called the House Where Lincoln Died and is a national shrine. It has recently been restored, and the room in which Lincoln died is furnished as it was on that fateful April morning nearly a century ago.

In 1926 the Federal Government purchased Oldroyd's collection for \$50,000. The purchase was consummated by a commission, composed of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and the Attorney General, created by an act of Congress for the purpose.³ In deference to Oldroyd's age and to his reputation for honesty, the report of the commission authorized purchase of the collection and payment to him without the necessity of his preparing an inventory.

The objects in the collection, estimated to be 3,000 at the time of its purchase, were still housed in the Petersen House, known at that time as the Lincoln Museum and also as the house where Lincoln died. Oldroyd, then in his 84th year, was given permission to use his accustomed desk in the house during the years that followed. The employment of a custodian by the Government relieved him of the caretaking duties.

Congress having failed to make any provision for the care of the collection, the commission put it under the jurisdiction of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, an independent agency of the Federal Government. The Director of the Office was of the opinion that the Lincoln objects would be turned over to the Smithsonian Institution subsequent to purchase and he took initial steps to effect the transfer. The mementos remained, however, in the Petersen House in the custody of Public Buildings and Public Parks.

Death took Osborn Oldroyd late in 1930. The following year his widow and her brother, B. F. Stoneberger, were given permission to sort Oldroyd's personal effects from the objects that the Government owned. After this sorting was completed under the supervision of the Government custodian, five truckloads of "rubbish" were disposed of. The Oldroyd correspondence concerning the Lincoln objects has never been found. Was it among the "rubbish"—thought to be worthless—destroyed during this sorting project?

³ An act of May 11, 1926 (44 Stat. 531).

Late in 1931 the move of the Lincoln Museum collection from the Petersen House to the old Ford's Theater across the street was begun. There the collection was opened to the public in early 1932.⁴ Executive Order no. 6166 of June 10, 1933, abolished the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital and transferred its functions to the Department of the Interior, where they were consolidated within the National Park Service. The direct responsibility for the Lincoln Museum now rests with National Capital Region, one of six National Park Service regions.

Since its beginning the Lincoln Museum has been handicapped by lack of funds. Sufficient money for the growth of the collection and for the employment of personnel necessary to properly organize, catalog, and preserve the thousands of items in the collection has not been available. While the museum contains many valuable works of art, public interest is not in those but rather in Abraham Lincoln the man, the leadership he exercised, the kind of furniture he used as a young lawyer, and the history of his period. Among the exhibits are pieces of furniture used by Lincoln and copies of documents that delineate his life and illustrate history preceding and during the Civil War. These are chronologically arranged to take the viewer from Lincoln's early childhood, young manhood, marriage, and two campaigns for the Presidency to the period of the Civil War. The story of the assassination in the theater is presented in the exhibits.

The spirit of the exhibits livens the interest of viewers. Hundreds of questions are answered at the Lincoln Museum every day. Information for answers to oral and written questions must be readily available. The National Park Service's policy for museums, in effect at all times, is to disseminate authentic historical information concerning the area served and to develop a records system that will provide ready reference material.⁵

In addition to the Lincoln Museum exhibits, the first floor contains a very fine collection of books on Lincoln, valuable Civil War books, and rare books on slavery. The books are not lent but are used for research by members of the staff. The research collection, however, consists mainly of documentary material, sheet music, Civil War envelopes or wrappers, magazine articles, broadsides, photostat copies of letters, and photographs pertaining to Lincoln and his contemporaries.

There is evidence (in the form of ledgers and several partial sets of catalogs) of several attempts to catalog the Lincoln objects.

⁴ Lincoln Museum records, Accession no. 1.

⁵ Ned J. Burns, *Field Manual for Museums* (Washington, D. C., ca. 1941).

The first catalog, handwritten in ink by Charles M. Coe, consists of a set of eight ledgers listing the objects in the Oldroyd collection as of 1896. In addition to this there are several partial sets of catalog cards made since the Government's purchase of the collection by temporary employees whose term of employment ended before the catalogs could be completed.

Coe's catalog of 1896 is still of some archival value. It is true that it lists many items that were not in the collection at the time of its purchase, and of course it cannot include additions of the past 67 years. Its entries, however, give good descriptions and histories of many items still in the collection. This catalog contains what is called an index but is really a classification scheme that serves as an index. The partial sets of catalog cards are of little or no value as research tools because of inadequate descriptions.

When the collection was the responsibility of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks accessions were documented by letters of acknowledgment to donors. These were filed chronologically. After the Museum became the responsibility of the Department of the Interior, a donor card and a catalog card were made for each acquisition in addition to preparing a letter of acknowledgment. The catalog was found to include cards for all objects received since the Oldroyd purchase of 1926. Again, however, inadequate descriptions reduced the catalog's usefulness for research. The supporting papers for each object were in the form of correspondence, all filed chronologically. This system needed changing.

As previously mentioned, there is no correspondence pertaining to the Lincoln objects before 1926. Coe's catalog furnishes some data on the Oldroyd objects. Correspondence from 1926 provides information needed for accessions received beginning in that year. It was decided to sort from the records all papers pertaining to each object received since the Oldroyd purchase and to develop therefrom a set of individual accession folders and an accession ledger. The accession folders now provide information and history for each object. From these a set of catalog cards is being made for each object, together with a catalog folder, a donor card, and an index.

Compiling the accession folders has not been a simple job. It amounted to doing a major research project. The difficulty was due partly to the several filing systems used over the past years and partly to multiple nonstandard cross indexing. This operation required pulling correspondence pertaining to individual donations that, as has been noted, was mixed with papers concerning other

subjects. The correspondence had been filed chronologically, under 13 different file categories, and it covered a period of more than 30 years. It has been necessary to examine and sort every piece of paper in 20 file-cabinet drawers.

The loss of the Oldroyd correspondence and the lack of an Oldroyd inventory are handicaps of the first order. Nevertheless, authentic information is being developed at the Lincoln Museum concerning the objects in the Museum, the Abraham Lincoln story, and the Civil War period. The subject-person index, being developed as the catalog expands, renders this information readily available for current use. The Museum hopes soon to add photography to its resources contributing to the cataloging process.

Obligation

I earnestly urge that the recommendation that the records of the several wars in which our country has been engaged be placed in the sub-basement . . . be disapproved. One of the strongest reasons for the construction of the State, War and Navy Department Building was the need for the preservation of these records, and to place them in sub-basement rooms would be a violation of every consideration for their safety, as well as for the efficient dispatch of the business connected with them.

These records are consulted many thousands of times during the course of a year and the rooms to which it is proposed to move them are wholly unsuited for record-filing purposes. These rooms are damp and records placed therein would deteriorate rapidly. Moreover, the sub-basement is not a proper place for clerks to work, even for a short time. Some of the records which the majority proposes to put in these rooms are the records of the Confederate Government, now in rooms 90, 92, 94, 96 and 98, an invaluable collection, which is composed wholly of original records and comprises the largest collection of records showing the transactions of the Executive Departments of that Government, and which should be preserved most carefully. If destroyed, they can never be duplicated. I think that we owe more to these invaluable records and to the working conditions of the clerks than to put them in the sub-basement rooms.

—H. P. McCAIN, The Adjutant General of the Army, minority report of the Special Board on Reassignment of Space in State, War and Navy Building, Dec. 8, 1916 (letter no. 24/134 in the general correspondence, 1907-21, Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, in the National Archives, Record Group 42).