

Number 2141

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Ford's Theater

The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln's Clothing

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation . . . Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, Editor
Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1569

Fort Wayne, Indiana

November, 1968

The Clothing Worn by President Abraham Lincoln The Night of His Assassination

Earlier this year the national press and numerous magazines have carried a great many articles concerning Lincoln's clothing worn the night of his fateful assassination. The recent acquisition of these valuable relics (called by one writer, a "macabre" collection) by the Ford's Theatre Museum has prompted the editor to review our file on this topic dating back to the year 1935 when the clothing was offered for sale to the Lincoln National Life Foundation.

The clothing was originally acquired by Alphonse Donn, (sometimes spelled "Dunn") as a gift from Mrs. Lincoln, shortly after her husband's death. Donn was one of four police officers assigned by William B. Webb, Chief of Police of the District of Columbia, to act as a special guard for President Lincoln. The other officers were John Parker, Alexander Smith and Thomas Pendel. Donn's assignment appears to have been that of door keeper or usher at the White House, although there is some indication that he may have accompanied Lincoln during some of his travels. Apparently, this doorkeeper was held in high regard by the Lincolns and on March 25, 1865, by telegram from City Point, Virginia, Mrs. Lincoln requested Donn to "Ask Cutbert why my telegram of yesterday has not been answered. Reply immediately."

On April 1, 1865 Lincoln wired Donn from City Point, Virginia to "Have Burke the Coachman have the close (sic) carriage at arsenal wharf at eight o'clock Sunday morning without fail and remain until Mrs. Lincoln arrives which will be about that time."

Even Robert T. Lincoln must have had a high regard for Donn because on May 22, 1865 he wrote on Executive Mansion stationery the following recommendation: "The bearer, A. Donn, has attended the door here for some time and has given entire satisfaction. I would cheerfully recommend him for a similar position in any of the Departments." Donn had no difficulty in retaining his position as he served in one capac-



From the National Park Service of the U.S. Dept. of the Interior

(Left to right) Iowa Congressman Fred Schwengel, president of the U.S. Capital Historical Society; William Rightsell, attorney for Mrs. J. Marion Smith; Mr. Henry Liebschultz, executive secretary of the ATA Foundation, Inc. and Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall examine the assassination clothing of President Lincoln in the museum of the Ford's Theatre.

ity or another at the White House continuously through the different administrations down to and including the administration of President Grover Cleveland.

The clothing, all of which may have been made for Lincoln's second inaugural in March 1865, that was presented to Donn consisted of a silk hat, fur collar piece, tie, overcoat, coat, vest (with a slit in the side which may have been made by the surgeons) and trousers. The gift resulted from "his devotion and faithful service to the President," and as "a token of appreciation for his services, and owing to his great love and respect for the President." The silk hat and fur collar piece were later given to friends by Donn. The black silk cravat or stock measures 14½ inches indicating Lincoln's collar size. The label on the tie is marked "Napoleon tie."

About ten days or two weeks after the assassination Donn invited a group of his friends to his home to view the relics, and after his arrival from the White House, they were put on display. From an affidavit executed by Bridget A. Rainey (Donn married a sister of her husband) on May 15, 1920 it is evident that Donn received the gifts the day his friends gathered in his home to examine his acquisitions.

It is believed that Mrs. Lincoln suggested to Donn that he lend to a Mr. Wilson, an artist, the clothing for a brief period which would be returned to the owner when Mr. Wilson no longer required the garments. In order that Mr. Wilson would comply with the request that the clothes be returned to Mr. Donn, Mrs. Lincoln wrote out the following order:

The suit of clothes used by Mr. Wilson will be delivered to Mr. Dunn, when he no longer requires them.

Mrs. Lincoln

May 20th, 1865.

On March 18, (1867) Mrs. Lincoln wrote Donn about the suit of clothes which was then in the possession of Mr. Wilson:

PRIVATE

Chicago, March 18th,

Mr. Dunn—

Mrs. Welles writes to my son Robert in regard to the suit of clothes I gave you—and which have been in the possession of Mr. Wilson the artist. She desires them for a Miss Vinnie Ream, an unknown person, who by much forwardness & unladylike persistence, obtained from Congress permission to execute a statue of my husband, the late President. From her inexperience, I judge she will be unable to do this, in a faithful manner. For your devoted attentions to President Lincoln, I gave you those clothes, and, after the loan you have made of them—without you see proper, you need not let them go farther. Retain them always, in memory of the best and noblest man that ever lived.

You will understand me, when I say that it is *now* time for you to claim them, and you need feel under no obligation to allow them to pass out of your possession at *this time*. Let me hear from you on this subject when you receive this letter—and show this letter to no one—only burn it. I feel as I gave them to you—I can dictate a little about them. Write on receipt of this. What you say will not be mentioned—as I remain your friend.

Mrs. Lincoln

Use *your own* discretion about lending the clothes but as they are a gift from me you are under no obligation to yield them into other hands. All this you will understand. I do not wish my name mentioned in it. Write me all about it.

Burn this and mention contents to no one.

PRIVATE

Donn looked favorably upon Miss Vinnie Ream's (who afterward married General R. L. Hoxie) request for the use of the clothing, as he wished to assist her in modeling the statue of President Lincoln which Congress had commissioned her to make. Wishing to solicit Mrs. Lincoln's approval, he wrote her about the matter and received the following reply:

April 2nd, 67

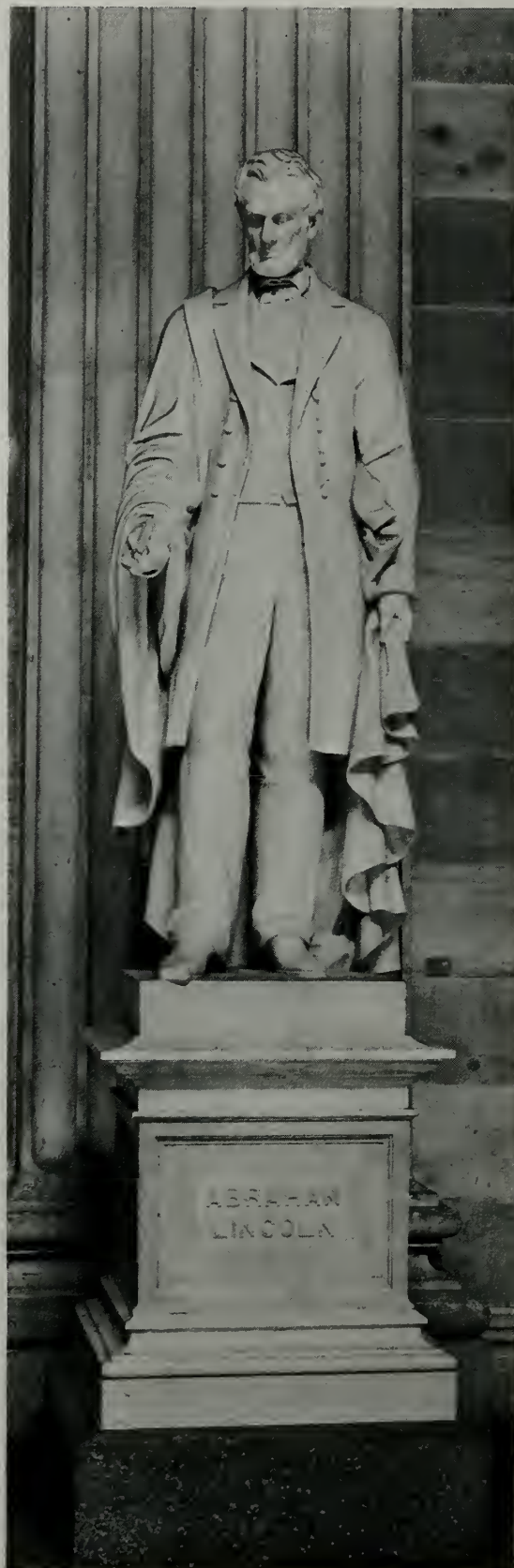
Mr. A. Donn—

I write you in haste, merely to say—that you can act as you please in the matter. This Miss Ream, is an entire stranger to me and mine—and I expect very inexperienced in her work, but I trust very sincerely, she may succeed.

I remain your friend.

Mrs. A. Lincoln

Before receiving Mrs. Lincoln's letter Donn made arrangements for Mr. Wilson to send the President's clothes to Miss Ream having received earlier the following letter from a Mr. Rice:



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

At the age of 19 Vinnie Ream was authorized by Congress to make a heroic statue of Abraham Lincoln, which was to cost \$10,000. On January 25, 1871 the marble statue was unveiled in the rotunda of the Capitol. This particular photographic view reveals the type of clothing Lincoln wore the night of his assassination.

New York City,
March 15, 1867.

My dear Sir:

I have seen Mr. Wilson today and he has promised to send the clothes to Miss Ream by express within two or three days. I think we will send them but I will keep Mrs. Lincoln's order until I know they are received and then send it to you. I have written to Miss Ream that they will be sent to her, and ask her to inform me if they are not received by the middle of next week. I shall be in New York again within a few weeks and will look further after the gentleman then if he fails to fulfill his promise.

Very truly,
Yours etc.
Rice

Mr. A. Donn,
Executive Mansion,
Washington, D. C.

When the sculptress received the clothing, she signed the following receipt:

April 22nd, 1867.

Received of A. Donn a full suit, consisting of coat, pants, vest and stock, of Mr. Lincoln's clothing.

Vinnie Ream

After Miss Ream returned the clothing to Donn, he took great precautions to preserve the relics, realizing that they were much more valuable than an ordinary suit or overcoat belonging to the President.

Perhaps the black wool overcoat, tailored by Brooks Brothers as well as the rest of the clothing, is the most interesting item of the lot as blood stains appear on the collar. In fact, in 1916 J. P. Turner stated in a letter that all the clothing was "disfigured by blood." Another interesting feature of the overcoat is the dark silk quilted lining embossed with the figure of an eagle holding two festoons in its mouth bearing the words "one Country, one Destiny." This garment may have been a gift of Brooks Brothers to the President. This firm indicated no interest in the purchase of the clothes when they were offered for sale. The label in the overcoat bears the following words: "Brooks Brothers, Broadway, Corner of Grand, New York." It has been stated that Lincoln, shortly before being shot by John Wilkes Booth, threw the overcoat over his shoulders because he felt cold.

Unfortunately the back and side of the overcoat have been rather badly mutilated. When Donn kept the clothing at his home to show to friends and visitors, he discovered that when his back was turned, strangers more fanatical than reverent, would cut snips of cloth for souvenirs. One day in particular (year 1876) after three strangers had called, Donn discovered that they had removed a large piece of cloth from the shoulder. There were also some moth holes in the front of the fine woolen broadcloth trousers (waist size 32), but they may have been made while Lincoln owned them or while they were placed in storage. Some shiny spots detected on the insides of the knees of the trousers can be attributed to horseback riding. The clothing since becoming the property of the National Park Service has been restored and cleaned (we hope the blood stains have not been removed) and is now exhibited in the Lincoln Museum which is in the basement of Ford's Theatre.

Donn was offered \$20,000 for the clothes by P. T. Barnum, of circus fame, but for sentimental reasons he could not be induced to part with them. At the time of his death, the clothes became the property of his son, Frank W. Donn, and at his death they became the possession of his wife, Mrs. Katherine A. Donn. Before her death she gave the clothing to Dorothy K. Donn (Mrs. J. Marion Smith), a granddaughter of the original owner.

On February 10, 1913, Dorothy Donn, residing at 829 Eleventh Street, N. E., Washington, D. C. wrote Mrs. Vinnie Ream Hoxie whose Lincoln statue was by then regarded as a worthy piece of sculptural art, the following letter:

829 Eleventh Street, N. E.
Washington, D. C.
February 10, 1913

Dear Mrs. Hoxie:

I read with great interest your article in last Sunday's Star of your visits to Abraham Lincoln before his death.

You will understand why I am so interested, when I tell you that my father has the suit of clothes that you used when you made this statue and we still have the receipt you signed when my grandfather loaned you the suit, signed by Vinnie Ream, your maiden name. Also some letters from Mrs. Lincoln regarding the suit. We still have friends who ask to see the clothes occasionally, but my father says when he was young, strangers would come every day to see them, and one day after three men had left the house we discovered the out-

side coat had a large piece cut from the shoulder. If you remember, the coat was worked on the inside lining with an eagle holding a streamer in its bill with "one country, one destiny" as the motto, and above it a large shield.

In about the year 1874 my grandfather was offered ten thousand dollars for them by P. T. Barnum, but he thought too much of President Lincoln to sell them for that purpose. My father tried to get Congress to buy them for the National Museum, but did not succeed.

I hope you will not think me forward in writing this to you, but I just had to tell you, as I am sure you must sometimes wonder what had become of the suit. I asked my father if I could write to you and he gave his permission, so that and the interest in your article are the reasons for writing to you.

If you would like to see the clothes again you can call any afternoon and my mother would only be too glad to show them to you. I am a school-girl, twelve years of age and would like very much to see the lady who made herself famous when she sculptured the great statue of Lincoln.

Your little admirer,
Dorothy Donn

In 1915 an effort was made by the United States Government to purchase the assassination clothes. Mr. Roberts of Massachusetts, in the House of Representatives, made an unsuccessful effort to secure funds by introducing the following legislation:

64th Congress

1st Session — H. R. 4712.

In the House of Representatives
December 14, 1915.

Mr. Roberts of Massachusetts introduced the following bill, which was referred to the Committee on the Library and ordered to be printed:

A BILL

Providing for the purchase of the suit of clothes worn by President Lincoln at the time of his assassination.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled.

That there is hereby appropriated, out of any unexpended moneys of the amount set aside for the construction and expenses of the Lincoln Memorial, the sum of \$7,500 for the purchase of the suit of clothes worn by the late President Lincoln at the time of his assassination in Ford's Theatre, in the city of Washington, District of Columbia, April 15th, 1865.

Sec. 2. That the chairman of the Lincoln Memorial Commission is hereby authorized and directed to make this purchase.

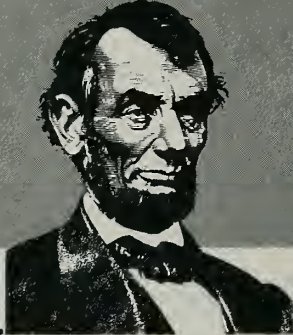
Probably the Massachusetts Congressman hoped to purchase the garments for display in the Smithsonian Institution. The bill did not pass, perhaps due to the stirring signs of the war times that made Congress wary about appropriating money for such purposes.

While the clothing was in possession of Mrs. Katherine A. Donn, an effort was made to have the garments purchased by a group of patrons for presentation to the Smithsonian Institution, as she was not in financial position to donate them herself, but felt that was the proper place for their safekeeping. Before such a project could get underway, the Smithsonian had to be assured of their genuineness and the officials of the institution communicated with Robert T. Lincoln, who was then living in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. While the nature of Robert Lincoln's communications (his original letter is said to be in the files of the Smithsonian) are not on record, the Smithsonian indicated that it would accept the garments as being genuine and authentic. Due to the failure of Mrs. Donn's attorney to obtain a sufficient amount in subscriptions to underwrite the purchase of the relics, this matter was never consummated.

As Mrs. Katherine A. Donn, sometime before her death, was very much in need of funds, she was induced to place on sale at auction in Philadelphia, Pa., the garments in question. This was an auction of historical items, and she received the assurance of the auctioneer that she would be protected if the fixed minimum price she placed on them was not obtained. The auction on February 19, 1924 was held in the galleries of Stan V. Henkels & Son, 1304 Walnut Street, Philadelphia. The highest bid by a mysterious stranger named Mr. Douglas was \$6,500 for the clothing and that was a bid to protect the interest of the owner.

Before her death Mrs. Katherine A. Donn presented the clothing to her only daughter, Dorothy K. Donn, who before leaving Washington placed the relics in a large national bank vault for safe keeping. Occasional messages were received from the bank that the storage package was suffering no deterioration. Later, the clothing was placed in a bank vault in Greensboro, N. C.

(To be continued in the December issue)



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation . . . Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, Editor
Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1570

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

December, 1968

The Spirit of the Times

Courier Extra.

THE EVACUATION COMPLETE.

ANDERSON SALUTES HIS FLAG.

Two of his Men Killed.

The Fort Burned to a Shell.

Lincoln will Retake Sumter at all Hazards.

RIOT IN PHILADELPHIA.

WASHINGTON TO BE TAKEN IMMEDIATELY.

New York, April 15.—(7 p. m.) A special dispatch from Washington says the War Department is engaged in calculating the quota of troops to march from New York to be sent to the regiment.

No detailed policy relative to the closing of the southern ports is yet decided, but arrangements are making to effect all communication by sea.

Scott is yet earnestly at work calculating the disposition of the force.

The Administration has reliable information that the Confederate States propose after reducing Sumter to march on Washington with 20,000 men.

Several additional companies are ordered to Washington.

A Washington dispatch given a rumor, that Gen. Scott has resigned, because his advice against reinforcing Sumter was disregarded.

Intimations of cavalry are stationed on all the roads leading to the capital, and two volunteer companies are in the capital, one in the Executive and one in the Patent Office.

Two millions of N. Y. regiments tendered their assistance.

The present indications are that Sumter will be retaken at all hazards.

A special dispatch from Charleston, says Anderson ordered his flag, formed his command on parade and marched out on the war.

The drum and his played Yankee Doodle during the salute.

A pile of cartridges burst in one of the magazines, killing two and wounding four men. One was buried in the fort in military honors. The other will be buried by the Confederates.

The wounded men will be taken to Charleston.

The fort was burned to a mere shell. The guns on one side of the parapet are entirely demolished, and others split, and the gun carriage knocked to splinters.

Anderson is reported to have ordered not to light the guns, but to silence the batteries.

Sumter has been garrisoned by the Palmetto guards under command of Colonel Ripley.

The fire has again broken out in the ruins of the Fort, and the engines have been sent away.

PHILADELPHIA, April 15.

Three small bomb explosions about the Tammany Hall newspaper office.

The main square is thronged with people. A large American flag is suspended across the street. Some damage has been done to the street by the explosion. It is now dark and the streets are dark.

Boston, April 15.

Political differences have been dropped, and the merchants and men of the city and state is to be ordered to the last flag of the Union.

Volunteers to the number of 20,000 have already been ordered their services at the adjacent general office.

Gen. Butler, an ardent supporter of Sumter, has ordered his services, with his entire brigade.

The Rioting in Louisville.

LOUISVILLE, April 15.

The recent war news has considerably perturbed the people, and they have not yet recovered from the 1861. Companies are being for the Southern Confederacy. It is rumored that several will start tomorrow.

The officers generally deplore the position of Lincoln's proclamation.

*Lafayette - then
of the war...*

This startling and sensational newspaper broadside was very likely published and distributed in Lafayette, Indiana, and because the name of the President and the Administration are featured so prominently it is considered a Lincoln item and has been placed in the Foundation's collection.

In addition to being a news media, the broadside served as stationery for E. G. Black to correspond with his cousin "E. G." whose initials oddly enough were the same as his own.

The exuberant young man wrote in pencil on the bottom of the broadside: "I think I shall volunteer then off to the war. (Write soon) E. G. Black."

Our hero then wrote, on the opposite side of the printed broadside, the following letter:

Lafayette April 15, 1861

Cousin E. G.

We are having exciting times here now to day the cannon is Booming and Military Bands are thrilling the very Souls of Union men while the stars and stripes are proudly floating from almost every house top. Business of all kind has almost suspended. There has been two volunteer companies organized here and another one is to be organized tonight. Nothing but war is talked of here and Lafayette I am proud to say will send a large number of men and as true as ever shouldered a musket, in Haste Ever E. G. Black. Give my love to All. This is the first day that (it) has not rained here since I can remember you can judge we have had rain.

The Clothing Worn by President Abraham Lincoln The Night of His Assassination

(Continued from the November Issue)

In 1935 an effort was made by Dorothy K. (Mrs. J. Marvin Smith) to sell the clothing. As she hoped that the relics might be obtained by a museum where they would be adequately exhibited and properly cared for, she contacted the Lincoln National Life Foundation at Fort Wayne, Indiana, Chicago Historical Society and other similar institutions. While no fixed selling price was instituted, every prospective buyer understood that the negotiations would start at around \$50,000. In 1935 and decades later institutional budgets for historical societies could not entertain such an expenditure.

Finally the matter came to a head in January 1968 with the reopening of the restored Ford's Theatre and its basement museum. Negotiations were instituted by Iowa Congressman Fred Schwengel, president of the United States Historical Society. Mrs. J. Marvin Smith, now a resident of Greensboro, North Carolina, agreed on a purchase price of \$25,000. She had previously brought the attention of the public (1967) to her valuable relics by the insertion of an advertisement in the New York Times:

Assassination Clothing

For sale: "Donn Collection of Lincolniana," consisting of clothing worn by Abraham Lincoln when assassinated, with supporting documents. Buyers only — contact: William T. Rightsell, Jr. Attorney at Law, Box 127 Greensboro, N. C. 27402.

Congressman Schwengel, working through Henry Liebschultz, executive of ATA Foundation, Inc., was successful in securing a \$25,000 gift from the American trucking industry from Universal Oil Products, Bostrum division of Des Plaines, Illinois and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, jointly with the American Trucking Association Foundation, which enabled the Capitol Historical Society to acquire the clothing from Mrs. Smith. On January 23, 1968 Mr. Schwengel entrusted the suit, with letters testifying to its authenticity, to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall.

The clothing, cleaned and completely restored, is today on exhibit in the Ford's Theatre Museum where it can be seen and enjoyed by the countless thousands who visit that historic building every year. It is regrettable that the carriage (now owned by the City of South Bend, Indiana) in which the Lincoln party traveled to Ford's, and the rocking chair (now in Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan) in which Lincoln was shot cannot also be placed in their proper environment for display.

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Additional materials on the clothing Abraham and Mary Lincoln wore the night of the assassination can be found in the “Curios and Relics, Clothing” files.

