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The Washington Post

Va. historian denies tampering with Lincoln pardon

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The Associated Press
Tuesday, January 25, 2011; 8:35 AM

WASHINGTON -- An amateur Virginia historian is denying allegations by the National Archives that he changed the date on a presidential pardon issued by President Abraham Lincoln.

Seventy-eight-year-old Thomas P. Lowry of Woodbridge, Va., said Monday that he was pressured by federal agents to confess. The Archives says Lowry has confessed to using a fountain pen to change the date on a pardon by Lincoln from 1864 to 1865.

The change made it appear that Lowry had discovered a document languishing in the Archives that was likely Lincoln's final official act before he was assassinated.

Lowry told The Washington Post that he considers the records sacred and that he's "a man of honor." His wife told the newspaper the change was made by a former Archives staffer. The agency denies that charge.

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Press Release
January 24, 2011

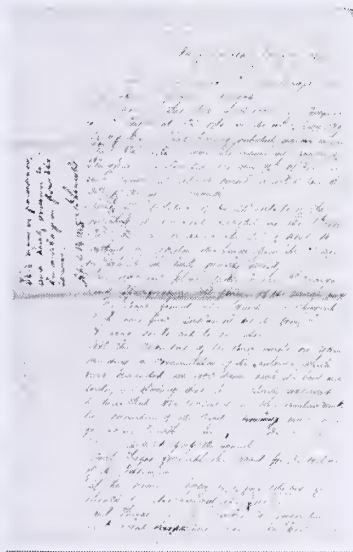
National Archives Discovers Date Change on Lincoln Record

Thomas Lowry Confesses to Altering Lincoln Pardon to April 14, 1865

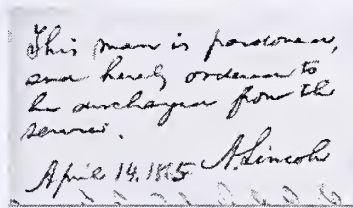
Washington, DC...Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero announced today that Thomas Lowry, a long-time Lincoln researcher from Woodbridge, VA, confessed on January 12, 2011, to altering an Abraham Lincoln Presidential pardon that is part of the permanent records of the U.S. National Archives. The pardon was for Patrick Murphy, a Civil War soldier in the Union Army who was court-martialed for desertion.

Lowry admitted to changing the date of Murphy's pardon, written in Lincoln's hand, from April 14, 1864, to April 14, 1865, the day John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. Having changed the year from 1864 to 1865, Lowry was then able to claim that this pardon was of significant historical relevance because it could be considered one of, if not the final official act by President Lincoln before his assassination.

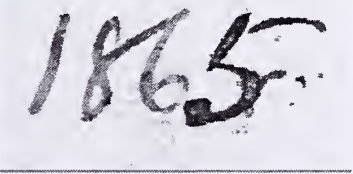
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President Lincoln pardon for Patrick Murphy, a Civil War soldier in the Union Army who was court-martialed for desertion. *Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives.* ARC Identifier: 1839980



Close up of altered date and Abraham Lincoln "A. Lincoln" signature from a President Lincoln pardon for Patrick Murphy, a Civil War soldier in the Union Army.



Close up of the altered date: Long-time Lincoln researcher Thomas Lowry admitted to changing the date of Murphy's pardon, written in Lincoln's hand, from April 14, 1864 to April 14, 1865. *Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives.*

The Washington Post

Historian accused of altering Lincoln document at National Archives

Advertisement

By Lisa Rein and Jennifer Buske
Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, January 25, 2011; 12:04 AM

It was the largest find in Civil War history in a generation: Hours before he was gunned down at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln pardoned a Union soldier court-martialed for desertion and saved him from execution.

The pardon, written in Lincoln's hand, was discovered 13 years ago by Thomas P. and Beverly Lowry, amateur historians from Prince William County who were poring over rarely touched files at the National Archives. Part of a treasure trove of courts-martial with Lincoln's signature and comments, it was a testament to the president's compassionate nature.

Thomas Lowry, 78, was catapulted to fame as a chronicler of Civil War military justice. The pardon, exhibited at the Archives' rotunda in downtown Washington, became a new thread in the narrative of one of history's most famous assassinations.

Except that it wasn't.

The Archives on Monday accused Lowry of altering the pardon in plain view in the agency's main research room to amplify its historical significance. Lincoln had indeed issued a pardon to Pvt. Patrick Murphy, but the 16th president did it exactly one year to the day before he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. Archives officials, after a year-long investigation, say Lowry signed a written confession Jan. 12 that he brought a fountain pen into the research room sometime in 1998 and wrote a 5 over the 4 in 1864, using a fade-proof ink.

Lowry, a retired psychiatrist who discovered the pardon in an unsorted file box, has denied any wrongdoing. He said he was pressured by federal agents to confess.

"I consider these records sacred," he said in an interview Monday at his Woodbridge home. "It is entirely out of character for me. I'm a man of honor."

His wife, Beverly, said the change was made by a former Archives staffer, a charge the agency denies.

There were no security cameras at the time to record what happened in the room. Lowry cannot be charged with a crime because the statute of limitations on tampering with government property is five years.

As the accusations flew over who altered the documents, Archives officials acknowledged that, in balancing security with providing open access to government records, they were too trusting. "It's

horrible," the agency's head, David S. Ferriero, said in an interview. Ferriero, whose title is archivist of the United States, said the Lowrys became well known to the Archives staff and other researchers as, over a period of years, the couple indexed tens of thousands of courts-martial of Union soldiers. "This is a situation of having instilled a lot of trust in a regular user and not being suspicious," Ferriero said.

Lowry said that when he found the pardon, the "5" appeared to be a little darker than the other numbers in "1865." But he chalked it up to the fountain pen Lincoln used. "If we thought there was something funny about it, we would have called somebody," he said.

The inspector general for the Archives, Paul Brachfeld, said Lowry "willingly provided specific details" of how he altered the pardon, which reads: "This man is pardoned and hereby ordered to be discharged from the service." Signed "A. Lincoln," it is one of 570 documents with Lincoln's signature the couple discovered in the Archives.

"He became known as somebody who found an amazing document," Brachfeld said. "You take a figure like Lincoln, you say he signed this on the day he died and amplify it, and it became one of our more important documents."

The case was brought to Brachfeld's attention by Trevor Plante, an Archives official specializing in Civil War history who gained acclaim in 2007 when he discovered a long-lost telegram Lincoln wrote in 1863 to his general-in-chief.

Plante had frequently shown the Lincoln's pardon of the soldier to visitors on VIP tours, asking the Archives staff to bring it out from the stacks.

The Archives does not inventory its holdings because they are so vast, so the Lowrys' discovery "had huge implications," Plante said Monday. "The story of this pardon has been told over and over for the past 13 years. It's everywhere in Civil War history."

With each passing viewing, he grew more suspicious that something wasn't right. The ink on the "5" in 1865 always looked too dark, and it appeared to him that another number was written under it.

"It was one of those gut feelings you get," Plante said. "Something wasn't right."

His suspicions were confirmed when he consulted a respected collection of Lincoln's writings edited by Roy P. Basler in the 1950s. Basler reprinted the pardon of Murphy with the date April 14, 1864. "In the 1950s, that was the date, so at some point it changed," Plante said.

The Lowrys moved to the Washington area from California in the late 1990s to research military records of the Civil War, and through their work at the Archives they have indexed thousands of courts-martial. Lowry is the author of a dozen histories of the Civil War. His latest, with co-author Terry Reimer, is "Bad Doctors: Military Justice Proceedings Against 622 Civil War Surgeons," and is scheduled for release next week.

Lowry cited the altered record in his book, "Don't Shoot That Boy! Abraham Lincoln and Military Justice," published in 1999.

Investigators said they began corresponding with Lowry about the pardon about a year ago and asked for his help in identifying who might have tampered with it. During the course of the e-mail correspondence, Lowry became more reticent, and they became more suspicious. Since his discovery, few other researchers had signed out the pardon, they said. They eventually decided to make an

unannounced visit to Lowry's home.

Lowry said he was in his bathrobe shaving when he heard a knock on his door on the morning of Jan. 12. It was two agents with the Archives.

Lowry recalled sitting at his dining room table with the men and repeatedly telling them that he never changed the pardon. Eventually, however, investigators said Lowry confessed to making the alteration and offered details.

On Monday, Brachfeld, the inspector general, said of Lowry, "We have a written confession in his own hand."

Lowry said he signed the confession because the Archives agents said "it would never be publicized" and that he would not face any consequences. "They promised that if I agreed to make a confession, they would just leave me alone."

Lowry said he has not hired an attorney and doesn't think it would make a difference.

The pardon will be removed this week from an evidence room at the inspector general's office and brought to the Archives' preservation labs, where experts will try to restore the original date. Plante says he's not optimistic, though, since "Lowry purposely used ink that's going to last a very long time."

"It makes me very angry," Plante said. "We have a level of trust with researchers, and that trust was broken."

Archives officials said Lowry will be banned from all Archives facilities for life.

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The Washington Post

Lincoln pardon to be pulled

By Lisa Rein
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, January 27, 2011; A17

A pardon signed by Abraham Lincoln, with a date altered to make it appear to be one of the president's final acts before his assassination, will be taken out of circulation at the National Archives, which disclosed the tampering this week.

The document, which the Archives says was changed by a Woodbridge history buff to amplify its significance and promote the man's career, will be kept in a locked vault at the agency's downtown Washington headquarters, officials said Wednesday.

"People are now going to come through the door and say they want to see it," said Trevor Plante, the Archives' acting chief of reference, whose suspicions about the timing of the pardon were confirmed this month by investigators from the inspector general's office.

"It's now even more historically significant because of this case," he said. "If they're manhandling the document, it will be too much wear and tear."

An investigator at the Archives said the pardon would be a target for theft if the original were available to the public. "It's now a document of such notoriety," said Mitchell

Yockelson. "There's no reason to ever pull it out again."

The original record of Lincoln's decision to spare a mentally incompetent Union Army private the death penalty for desertion will be replaced by a high-resolution scan. The reproduction will go into a box in the Archives' stacks, with a note of explanation about the case, said Plante, who delivered the document Wednesday morning to the Archives' preservation lab.

Archives officials said that Lincoln did pardon Pvt. Patrick Murphy but that it was issued April 14, 1864, exactly one year before his assassination. They said amateur historian Thomas P. Lowry wrote a 5 over the 4 in 1864 sometime in 1998 using a fountain pen. The lab will examine the alteration and determine whether it can be reversed. But

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The Washington Post

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preservation officials said such an effort would almost certainly do more damage.

"If we were to attempt to remove that five [in 1865], we would be causing more damage, and we still wouldn't have the original four" in 1864, said Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, chief of the conservation lab. "What was is lost. But we will have a dossier on this for the public, a thorough explanation of what happened."

Lincoln's compassionate act was hailed by Civil War scholars as a major historical find when the pardon was discovered by Lowry and his wife, Beverly, in 1998 in a box of rarely touched documents at the Archives. The couple are amateur historians who specialize in Civil War military justice. The discovery jump-started Thomas Lowry's writing career, and the Archives exhibited the pardon in its downtown rotunda.

Archives officials said Lowry admitted this month to altering the document. Lowry, however, denies doing so. Although he acknowledges that he signed a written confession when two federal agents came to his house Jan. 12 after a year-long investigation, he said he was pressured to confess.


He cannot be charged with tampering with government property because the statute of limitations has lapsed.

Archives officials said it is the first case of tampering they know of at the agency, whose vast holdings include letters, reports, maps and charts, photographs, moving images and sound recordings of the federal government. The collection covers 31 million cubic feet. Much of it has never been sorted.

"He duped not only the National Archives but everyone with an interest in the Civil War, American justice and President Lincoln," said Yockelson, who specializes in military history. "What we're doing now is righting a wrong in history."

When Lowry announced his discovery to Archives officials, they did not check the pardon's veracity because they had no reason to suspect it was a forgery. The agency does not vet documents found in its original holdings, Plante said, even though the pardon contained a clue that it may have

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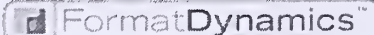
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been altered. A line in red link at the bottom has a reference to the soldier's court-martial, issued by the Army's adjutant general. The year was 1864.

Plante said the curator who handled the case assumed the date was a reference to the year of the court-martial, not the pardon.

"We assume something found in our holdings is untampered with and correct," he said.
"She took it at face value."

Plante said he received an e-mail this week from the curator, who now works at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

"She is as shocked as everybody else."

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*The New York Times***Opinionator**

JANUARY 26, 2011, 3:23 PM

A Blot on Lincoln Historians

By HAROLD HOLZER

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

Tags:

abraham lincoln, Fraud, pardons, the civil war

Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives. This letter, signed by Abraham Lincoln, pardoned Private Patrick Murphy, a Civil War soldier in the Union Army.

These facts remain true: on April 14, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln sent a routine, one-sentence, handwritten order to Joseph Holt, the judge advocate general, pardoning a California soldier, Private Patrick Murphy, who had been sentenced to be shot for desertion. "This man is pardoned, and hereby ordered to be discharged from the service," the

president wrote.

The original manuscript was never a secret, nor, until recently, a particularly well-known document. It has long resided at the National Archives in Washington, and it appeared in print more than half a century ago as part of the eight-volume "Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln" (Volume 7, Page 298, to be exact). It is one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pardons Lincoln issued during the Civil War to commute the death sentences of accused deserters, sleeping sentries and other offenders.

Yet for the last decade, the Murphy order has been just about the most famous Lincoln pardon of all, because its apparent date, April 14, 1865, made it one of the last things Lincoln wrote before his assassination at Ford's Theater. Its significance was pointed out in 1998 by Thomas Lowry, a Virginia psychiatrist, who was immediately lauded as a leading Lincoln scholar. But in the last two days the document has become even more famous — as an egregious fake, or more accurately, an authentic document allegedly "doctored" to make it seem more than it really was.

Yesterday, the National Archives announced that Dr. Lowry had admitted that he had used ink to change the date "1864" to the more dramatic "1865." Dr. Lowry, it seems, simply wanted the publicity for "unearthing" a relic testifying to Lincoln's compassion and reverence for life even hours before his own death.

Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives A detailed view of the altered date.

To complicate matters further, Dr. Lowry later insisted a reporter from this paper that his confession had been coerced by burly security officers, and that he had admitted deception only to end their relentless hours of questioning. Nonetheless, the National Archives has banned Dr. Lowry from its premises for life, effectively ending an acclaimed research career. Those who have known this gifted scholar for years — myself included — are left scratching their heads, searching their souls, and burning up e-mail threads wondering how he could have gone so wildly astray.

But why is anyone shocked? The entire historical profession should be ashamed for heralding Dr. Lowry without doing a moment's worth of due diligence. Indeed, the episode speaks to Americans' insatiable yearning to have their myth-nourished clichés about Lincoln confirmed afresh, and repeatedly — and that goes for historians as well as the general public.

No Lincoln book is complete without reference to his inclination to clemency, often, it is alleged, against the will of military commanders and courts struggling to maintain order and discipline in a huge army of volunteers and conscripts. Stubbornly tender, Lincoln supposedly took every opportunity to commute capital sentences, arguing that his “boys” were better off spared than executed, and might well learn a lesson from their close brush with a firing squad.

What we've tended to ignore in this miasma, and what Dr. Lowry's deception has helped us overlook, is a harder and less popular truth about Commander in Chief Lincoln: that he was overall a rather brutal warrior, ready to deploy the most advanced and lethal weaponry to win the war. He proudly backed General Ulysses S. Grant against critics who said he took too many casualties in his relentless attacks on Confederate forces. And he was prepared to see Atlanta and Richmond sacked and burned if it would restore the Union more quickly.

Under Lincoln, Union troops developed and exploded huge mines, perfected rifled artillery that boasted long range and deadly aim, deployed monstrous ironclad warships and even dabbled in the use of niter — a sort of primitive napalm — to clean out rebel positions.

None of this seemed to tug at Lincoln's conscience the way Private Murphy allegedly did. But in reality, as he put it once, “those who make a causeless war should be compelled to pay the cost of it.” A war to suppress an enormous rebellion, he insisted coldly, could not be waged with mere “elder squirts, charged with rose water.”

No one, not even Dr. Lowry, has ever attempted to quantify Lincoln's full record as a pardoner, or to weigh it alongside his willingness to employ devastating weaponry. Nor has anyone compared Lincoln's batting average in clemency cases to that of, say, wartime presidents like James K. Polk, Woodrow Wilson or Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Now, unfortunately, the record will be further clouded by the aroma of fraud, complacency and disgrace: the sad truth that someone tampered with an unremarkable pardon to make it burnish a legend; that no one noticed the out-of-synch “5” that now seems so obviously a discordant blob on the original; that none of us bothered to check the Lincoln archive to cross-reference a long-known document; and that no one has taken a closer look at Abraham Lincoln's overall attitude toward clemency in war.

Shame on whoever tried to make of the Murphy order more than it is. And shame on all of us in the Lincoln studies profession for accepting it without question.

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Harold Holzer is the chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation and the author, co-author or editor of 36 books on Lincoln and the Civil War era, including Lincoln at

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