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HISTORY

Who Owns Lincoln's Papers?

Important presidential documents are in the hands of anonymous private collectors. It's time they shared these treasures with the public.

BY LOUIS MASUR

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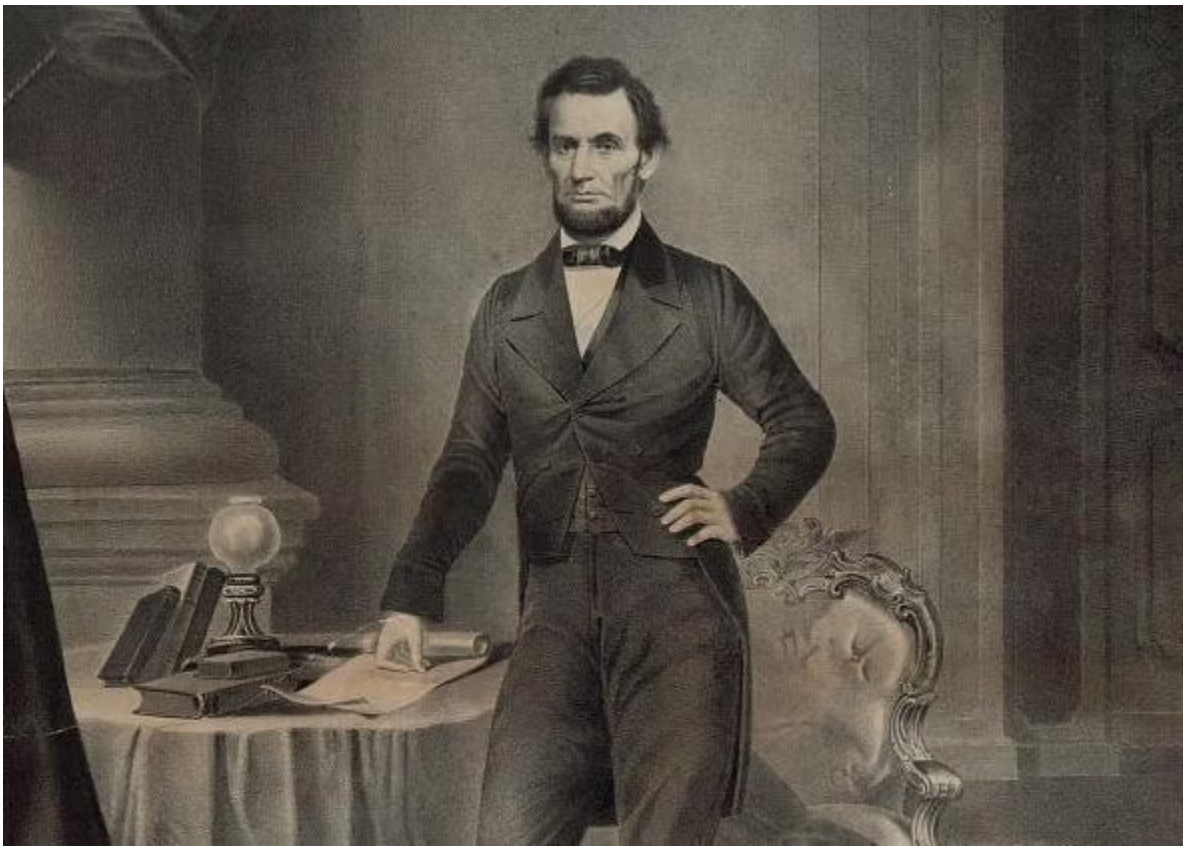


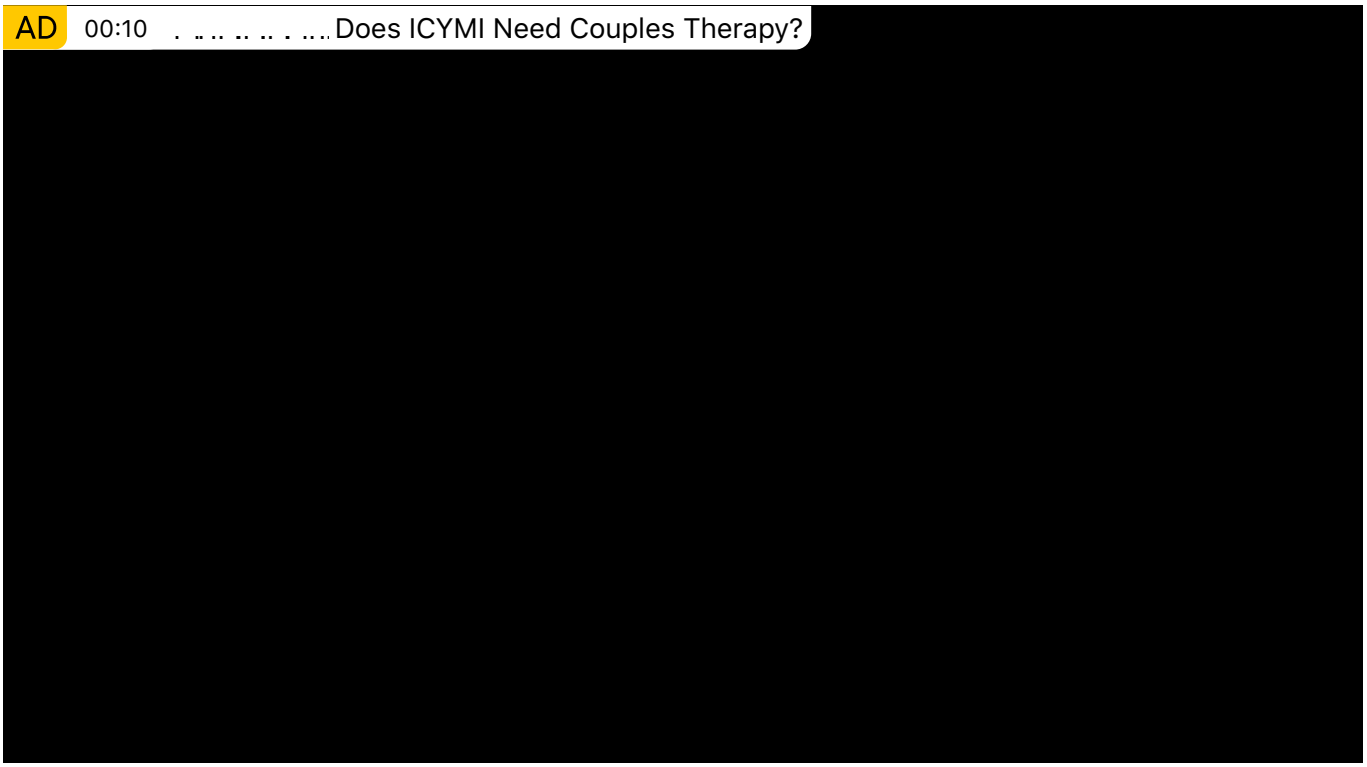
Anything in Abraham Lincoln's hand has always drawn feverish attention.

Image by Herline & Hensel. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Malcolm Forbes, the wealthy publisher and business leader who died in 1990, loved to purchase historical objects. He bought jewels, paintings, and toy soldiers, among other collectibles. But nothing excited him more than the 4,000 presidential manuscripts he owned. These included letters from nearly every president. He owned one from John Adams lamenting his defeat in the election of 1800 and one from Harry Truman in which the then–

vice president expressed shock at learning that Franklin D. Roosevelt had died and he was now to assume office.

Forbes especially revered Lincoln. In 1984, he purchased a document that had only recently been found in the secret compartment of a table. It was Lincoln's final speech, delivered on April 11, 1865. Forbes purchased the 12-page autograph manuscript for $231,000. Asked about the price he said, "I think it's a bargain. It's a better portrait of Mr. Lincoln than any other document or painting." Starting in 2002, Christie's sold off the Forbes Collection of American Historical Documents in multiple auctions that spread over several years.



Auction houses have witnessed robust sales in historic documents ever since, with everything from a Daniel Boone letter ($16,250) to manuscripts of early Bob Dylan songs (estimated at $100,000) selling for astronomical prices. Presidential papers, in particular, are in high demand: The estimate for the recent sale of George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation was $8.4 million.

Anonymous collectors currently own two of Abraham Lincoln's most important speeches. His handwritten, four-page Nov. 10, 1864, address reflecting on his re-election sold for $3.44 million in 2009, a record at the time for an American historical manuscript. In 2002, Christie's sold Malcolm Forbes' copy of Lincoln's last speech for $3.08 million. It has not been seen publicly since.

It is likely that the same collector owns both documents, but so far there are only rumors as to his identity. One possibility is a foreign investor with a penchant for Americana. More likely is an American billionaire philanthropist who is known for purchasing rare and valuable manuscripts. In the course of writing a book about Lincoln's last speech, I made efforts to reach the owner's representatives, without success.

Anything in Lincoln's hand has always drawn feverish attention. On his website, Seth Kaller, a Lincolniana expert (he orchestrated the 2010 sale of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s copy of the signed Emancipation Proclamation, for $3.8 million), appeals to potential clients with the tag "history you can own." His current offerings include a letter signed by George Washington in 1781 ($40,000), a missive from Andrew Jackson in 1835 (a seeming bargain at $9,500), and an important Lincoln letter from 1864, in which the president pressed Arkansas to adopt a new state constitution that abolished slavery. The price is listed as on request.

The Presidential Records Act of 1978 assures that the official records of each president and vice president will remain in the public domain and are to be overseen by the National Archives, founded in 1934. Under its terms, the manuscript of a presidential speech cannot be given away or sold. The act followed congressional action taken in 1974 to assure that Richard Nixon's papers were placed under federal custody so there would be no interference with the ongoing investigation into Watergate.

The Presidential Records Act does not apply to any administration prior to 1981, however. When Lincoln died, his papers were sealed and sent under guard to a vault at the National Bank of Bloomington, Illinois. In 1874, Robert Todd Lincoln, the president's son, entrusted the papers to John Nicolay, one of his father's private secretaries still living in Washington, and he remained custodian until his death in 1901. They then passed to Secretary of State John Hay, who had also served Lincoln, and, after his death in 1905, were returned to Illinois. In 1923, Lincoln's son deeded the papers to the Library of Congress.

When they were opened to the public in 1947, originals of many documents were not to be found in the collection, including Lincoln's last speech. This was no great surprise. Lincoln often discarded his writings. None of his noteworthy pre-presidential addresses survive in manuscript. In office, he was known to give away manuscripts as souvenirs or to raise funds for charity. For example, he donated the draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Sanitary Fair in Chicago. (It would perish in the fire of 1871.) Robert Todd Lincoln continued the tradition. In 1916, he presented the manuscript of his father's November 1864 post-re-election speech to Rep. John W. Dwight of New York in appreciation for Dwight's role as

Republican majority whip in securing funding for the Lincoln Memorial. "I wish you to have something tangible as a testimonial of my feeling," he wrote. Dwight's widow left it to his hometown library; this is the speech that set a record when it was sold in 2009 to raise money for an extension to the library.

Today, the only publicly available copy of the full manuscript of the final speech is a photocopy of a Photostat used in the 1950s by the editors of Lincoln's collected works. Such scholars as the editors of the ongoing Papers of Abraham Lincoln project would welcome a chance to photograph and study the original manuscript to learn more about its composition. Lincoln completed the first two pages on the day of delivery but had drafted the remainder of the speech months earlier. The composition puzzle—figuring out which parts of the speech were written when—can only be solved by direct examination of the ink and paper.

Beyond academic concerns, there is a public interest in seeing the physical document. Lincoln's last speech is not just any Lincoln text. In his address, he articulated his plans for reunion and publicly endorsed limited black suffrage for the first time. Hearing that, John Wilkes Booth, who was in the crowd, declared "that is the last speech he will ever make." Three days later he made good on his threat.

The idea of owning history may thrill those who trade in exclusivity. But when collectors do not afford scholars and the public access to important documents, private ownership conflicts with democratic values. Those who purchase historic documents have a responsibility to make these manuscripts available. Some notable Lincoln collectors, such as Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman, have done so by creating an institute, an archive, and a website. A recently opened exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum, "Lincoln Speaks: Words That Transformed a Nation," contains dozens of notable letters and speeches, drawing heavily from Gilder and Lehrman's collection. But other collectors hide both their identities and their acquisitions.

While it isn't feasible to extend legislation governing presidential records to earlier administrations, Congress can expand National Endowment for the Humanities funding for presidential papers projects. These projects have been uncovering new material, and funds are needed to track the originals and make high-resolution images. For example, the Retirement Series of the Papers of Thomas Jefferson is transforming our understanding of his life at Monticello from 1809–1826, and the Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower are now available online and include previously classified material. Perhaps auction houses can be urged to notify presidential libraries and editorial projects when materials come up for bid.

Viewing a manuscript makes history tangible. That is why the National Archives displays the nation's charter documents. Anyone can read the Declaration of Independence; but to see the original is to imagine the drama and meaning of history in ways that no transcript can provide. Private collectors need to recognize their obligation as citizens to loan Lincoln's speeches, and other significant documents, to cultural institutions. The American past belongs to the American people, not only to those who can afford to purchase it.
