



# Foreword to Harvard Library Bulletin, Volume 19.3-19.4

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# Foreword

*Harold Holzer*

**B**ARELY A WEEK AFTER ABRAHAM LINCOLN LEARNED that the Union Army had suffered one of its worst defeats ever at Fredericksburg, he received still more bad news—from Harvard. On 9 December 1862, the president of the college wrote the President of the United States to report that Lincoln's son Robert had been "publicly admonished for smoking in Harvard Square after being privately admonished for the same offense." Warned Thomas Hill, "I trust, sir, that you will impress upon him the necessity not only of attention to matters of decorum, but of giving heed to the private admonitions of his instructors."<sup>1</sup>

Nor was smoking Robert's sole campus indiscretion. Hill's predecessor, C. C. Felton, had written to Lincoln only months earlier to inform him that Robert had been ordered "to make up during the vacation"—to forego a trip home in order to catch up on course work. Robert's overall conduct had been worsening: "[T]he Professors have been pained to notice that he has seemed to be on intimate terms with some of the idlest persons in his class. His studies generally have suffered detriment...." "I trust," Felton ominously concluded, "this is only a temporary aberration....I have no doubt a word or two from you will set every thing right; for I feel quite sure that he has no bad habits as yet."<sup>2</sup>

If Lincoln did what a typical parent might do today—rave, rant, and threaten via email or telephone—and indeed sent scolding notes to Robert, those letters have sadly been lost to history. But written they most likely were. What Harvard father—and this writer counts himself one as well—would allow his vanity and "investment" to be jeopardized by puerile misbehavior? Something must have inspired Robert to grow up quickly. The irreverent junior who earned demerits at Harvard soon morphed into a sound student, not to mention, ironically, a staid attorney-businessman who hated nothing more than public attention and scandal. It would have been wholly in character for him later to destroy whatever rebuke his disappointed father might have dispatched.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hill to Abraham Lincoln, 9 December 1862, copy in Thomas Hill Papers, Harvard University Archives (UAI 15.892), reprinted in Harold Holzer, ed., *Dear Mr. Lincoln: Letters to the President* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 314-315.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Felton to Abraham Lincoln, 20 January 1862, copy in Harvard University Archives (UAI 15.890.3 v.5). Reprinted in Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln Mailbag: America Writes to the President 1861-1865* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 42.

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What is more intriguing is the fact that Hill's letter *to* the White House somehow disappeared as well. After all, Lincoln's secretaries fastidiously retained all incoming White House correspondence. Then how did the Harvard letters vanish? Probably by the same hand that destroyed the responses they likely inspired. For after the President's death, it was Robert who took personal control of his father's papers. And it was Robert who probably uncovered the mortifying material within the trove and destroyed it. Fortunately, Harvard kept its own records more faithfully: it was in the school's files that scholars later found copies of the elusive bad-conduct letters to President Lincoln.

Today, these amusing episodes are instructive chiefly because they serve to remind us about two imperatives that resonate throughout the Lincoln Bicentennial Harvard exhibition and catalogue: preservation and education.

Though censorious where his own reputation was concerned—and deserving of reproach for removing “objectionable” material from the record while he served as its caretaker—Robert, it should be acknowledged, did guard the vast majority of the Lincoln papers faithfully for the rest of his long life (though even in death he made certain they would not be quickly tapped by historians).<sup>3</sup> He seldom let the letters out of his sight, taking them with him wherever he traveled, often transporting them in their own private railroad car. If they could not be in a professional conservator's hands, at least they were well cared for by this devoted, if conflicted, amateur. Moreover, Robert was frequently generous to private collectors and writers—like those whose holdings are reflected in this exhibition—providing information and images upon request.

As far as education is concerned, Robert's very attendance at Harvard reminds us that no president ever enjoyed the benefits of formal schooling less and valued it more than Abraham Lincoln. Education, he argued from his earliest days in politics, was “the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.”<sup>4</sup> It provided not only the means to rise from poverty, but the chance to reap the hard-won benefits of American freedom. “In this country,” Lincoln insisted, “one can scarcely be so poor, but that, if he *will*, he *can* acquire sufficient education to get through the world respectably.”<sup>5</sup>

Like many parents similarly deprived of “sufficient education” of their own, Lincoln made certain his eldest son enjoyed all the academic chances he had lacked. Robert attended the Eastbrook Academy in Springfield, Illinois, and later the preparatory school of the Illinois State University (which, as fancy as it sounded, held classes in a onetime church). Then, after Robert predictably failed in his first attempt to pass the

3 The papers went to the Library of Congress after Robert died in 1926, but were not opened until 1947, twenty-one years later.

4 Open letter to the voters of Sangamo County, 9 March 1832, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 1:8.

5 Eulogy on Henry Clay, 6 July 1852. *Ibid.*, 2:124.

Harvard entrance examinations in 1859, Lincoln sent him to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire (annual tuition: \$24), and even paid a personal inspection visit to the campus in February 1860, following his triumphant speech at New York's Cooper Union. He wanted to make certain his son was doing well—and he was. Robert successfully entered Harvard on his second try for admission. Despite his 1862 high jinks, he eventually straightened himself out there, graduating in June 1864 and ultimately earning a law degree from Harvard, too, after taking time off to enter the army and serve briefly on the staff of General Ulysses S. Grant.

Although Abraham Lincoln could not tear himself away from Washington to attend his son's Harvard graduation, he surely offered his proud congratulations in writing. But, alas, that letter, if it ever existed, has likewise vanished, no doubt thanks again to the privacy-obsessed Robert. We can, however, imagine Lincoln's sentiments from a surviving note that the future president sent to his son's best friend when he, like Robert, failed in his first attempt to enter Harvard. "I have scarcely felt greater pain in my life than on learning yesterday from Bob's letter, that you had failed to enter Harvard University," Lincoln told young George Latham in 1860. "And yet there is very little in it, if you will allow no feeling of discouragement to seize, and prey upon you. It is a certain truth, that you can enter, and graduate in, Harvard University: and having made the attempt, you must succeed in it. 'Must' is the word. I know not how to aid you, save in the assurance of one of mature age, and much severe experience, that you can not fail, if you resolutely determine, that you will not." Concluded Lincoln in words he might have offered his son, or any other student striving to learn, "In your temporary failure there is no evidence that you may not yet be a better scholar, and a successful man in the great struggle of life, than many others, who have entered college more easily."<sup>6</sup>

As it happened, such encouragement had far more impact on Robert than on his friend. George never did make it to Harvard; he detoured instead to Yale. But while Robert did not enter the university "easily," Harvard eventually accepted and transformed him, preparing him for lifelong learning, financial success, public service, and devotion to the memory of his father—even if he did later purge some of the archives of this extraordinary experience.

As this exhibition so vividly reminds us, Harvard continues to stress similar virtues today. And it does significantly better than Robert T. Lincoln, Class of 1864, in proudly preserving and sharing as much of the record as it is fortunate enough to possess.

6 Lincoln to George H. Latham, 22 July 1860. *Ibid.*, 4:87; original in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York Public Library (GLC 3876).



Figure 1. UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST. *Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)*. American, late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Oil on canvas. 60 x 52.8 cm. Harvard University Portrait Collection, H462 Bequest of William Whiting Nolen, 1924. Reproduction courtesy of the Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library.

## Contributors

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