



Introduction to Harvard's Lincoln

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Harvard's Lincoln

Introduction

HOUGHTON LIBRARY CELEBRATES the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth with *Harvard's Lincoln*, an exhibition that highlights selections from its extensive Lincoln collection. Harvard College Library's rich holdings devoted to Abraham Lincoln, which now reside in Houghton, were built primarily by two significant donations in the early decades of the twentieth century: the Alonzo Rothschild collection in 1916 and the William Whiting Nolen bequest in 1924. The College Library, of course, acquired Lincoln- and Civil War-related material long before the arrival of these collections, especially through the generosity of individuals who participated in or witnessed the events of one of the most critical periods of our nation's history. Despite the magnitude of the Rothschild and Nolen acquisitions, it appears that the College Library (and Houghton until recently) chose not to collect Lincoln material actively, though on occasion it accepted donations of Lincoln-related items. However, Harvard continued (and Houghton continues) to acquire collections and personal papers of individuals, many with Harvard connections, who made significant contributions to American culture and society of the time, including Charles Sumner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Robert Gould Shaw, Dorothea Dix, Charles Eliot Norton, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and William Dean Howells.¹ Holdings such as these, which complement the library's sizable Lincoln collection, have elevated Houghton's status to that of a leading repository for the study of American history during the Civil War era.

Alonzo Rothschild (1862-1915)

On 30 October 1862, more than a year after Confederate guns opened fire on Fort Sumter to begin the American Civil War, Alonzo Rothschild (figure 2) was born in New York City to German-Jewish parents. The fourth of six children, "Lonny" Rothschild was a frail boy who developed early in life an interest in books and reading. Upon completing grammar school, he enrolled in the College of the City of New York, but

¹ *Harvard Library Notes*, no. 16 (November 1925), 72. Robert Todd Lincoln, oldest son of President Lincoln, attended Harvard College from 1860 to 1864 and was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws in 1893. The Harvard University Archives house materials that document Robert Todd Lincoln's student career. See Harold Holzer's Foreword to this issue.

withdrew in his junior year as the result of devoting more time to a school newspaper he founded than to his studies. Rothschild had intended to complete his academic studies at Cornell, but financial constraints forced him to postpone his quest for a college degree. With his college career on hold, Rothschild tried his hand at journalism, spending several months working as a reporter for the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. Employment with a wholesale jewelry company interrupted for several years his plans for a journalistic career. However, it was through the jewelry business that Rothschild returned to journalism, when in 1885 he founded *The Jewelers' Weekly*, a publication devoted to covering news of the trade with minimal advertising. The publication was immensely successful and, as a result, Rothschild was able to retire within six years.

Independently wealthy at the young age of twenty-eight, Rothschild decided to continue his academic career and devote his time to writing. He attended courses at Harvard as a special student, and soon thereafter he and his wife moved from New York City to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Rothschild had married Meta Robitscheck while he was a student at Harvard; after living several years in Cambridge, they and their growing family moved to Foxborough, Massachusetts. It was during his residency in Cambridge that Rothschild developed an interest in studying the life of Abraham Lincoln. According to his son John, Rothschild had originally intended to write a monograph or two on Lincoln and his cabinet. As his research progressed, however, he decided to concentrate solely on Lincoln, producing *Lincoln, Master of Men: A Study in Character*, published by Houghton Mifflin's Riverside Press in 1906.² "A fascinating, sometimes brilliant study," in the words of one historian, Rothschild's work examines Lincoln's relationship with and eventual mastery of his leading political rivals, including Stephen A. Douglas, Salmon P. Chase, William H. Seward, and George B. McClellan.³ Rothschild was writing a second book on Lincoln when his life was tragically cut short by a swimming accident in 1915. Two years later "*Honest Abe*": *A Study in Integrity* was published through the efforts of his son John.⁴

In the course of research for his books on Lincoln, Rothschild assembled an extensive working library devoted to his hero. Comprising 1,000 volumes, including virtually all of the standard biographical studies of Lincoln published up to that time, 1,300 pamphlets, a remarkable assortment of magazine articles, and files of newspaper clippings on various aspects of Lincoln's life, Rothschild's collection was donated to

2 Alonzo Rothschild, *Lincoln, Master of Men: A Study in Character* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906). Biographical information is drawn from John Rothschild's memoir of his father that appeared in the latter's posthumous work, "*Honest Abe*": *A Study in Integrity based on the Early Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 285-306, and a newspaper (unidentified) obituary in the Lincoln collection at Houghton Library.

3 Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press), 161.

4 Rothschild, "*Honest Abe*." This work was published as Rothschild had left it when he died.

2 *Harvard's Lincoln*

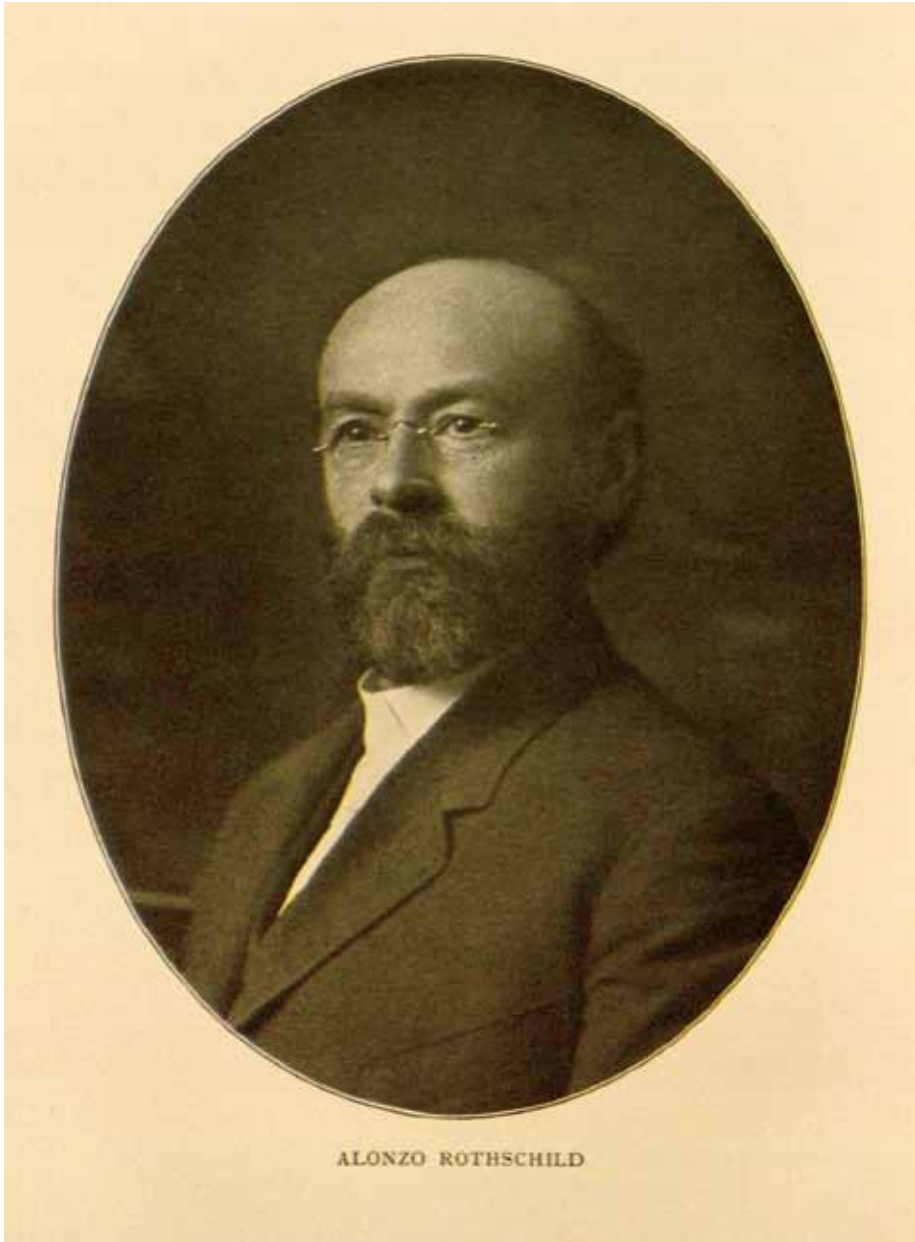


Figure 2. ALONZO ROTHSCHILD. From Rothschild's posthumous work, *"Honest Abe": A Study in Integrity based on the Early Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1917).

Harvard College Library in 1916 by his widow as a memorial to her late husband. While the Rothschild collection is devoted primarily to Lincoln, it also provides solid coverage of the Civil War, including a complete published record of the conflict (seventy volumes), issued by the United States War Department between 1880 and 1901. In 1920, four years after its arrival at Harvard, the Rothschild collection was placed in Widener Library's History Department room (Widener K).⁵

William Whiting Nolen (1860-1923)

The Rothschild donation was augmented in 1924 by the William Whiting Nolen bequest. Born in Philadelphia on 16 July 1860, the son of Charles Willard and Abigail Williams (Whiting) Nolen, William Whiting Nolen (figure 3) attended Central High School in that city, graduating in 1878. He entered Harvard in the fall of 1880, graduating *summa cum laude* in 1884. For two years following his graduation, Nolen served as an assistant in biology at Harvard, securing his master's degree in 1886, and then attended Harvard Law School from 1889 to 1891. He did not complete his legal studies, but instead became a private tutor, establishing his own school in Harvard Square. Assisting enrolled students as well as those who wished to enter Harvard, Nolen's school, not affiliated with or authorized by the university, became both popular and prosperous. Located for many years on Massachusetts Avenue close to Harvard Yard, first in Manter Hall and later in Little Hall (both buildings were later demolished and replaced by Holyoke Center), the school was equipped with laboratory space and living space for a small number of students. By the time of Nolen's death on 5 June 1923, the school was employing about fifty part-time teachers and instructing more than four hundred students annually.

Nolen, who never married, devoted his life to his school and to his students. He was known for his kindness to his student boarders, providing them with complimentary tickets to local concerts and theatrical performances. His students anointed him "The Widow Nolen" after a character in a play that several of them had attended. In the 1901 book, *Harvard Celebrities*, Nolen is depicted in caricature and verse. The latter, composed by Henry Ware Eliot, Jr. (Harvard, 1902), provides a glimpse of Nolen the tutor:

5 *Harvard Library Notes*, no. 16 (November, 1925), 71-2; *The Library of Harvard University: Descriptive and Historical Notes*, 4th edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 50; Harvard University, *Reports of the President and the Treasurer of Harvard College, 1916-1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 1917), 192.



Figure 3. WILLIAM WHITING NOLEN. Photograph, source and date unknown. HUG 300, Nolen, William Whiting, Harvard University Archives. Reproduction courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

No observer would suppose,
 From his unassuming clothes,
 This to be the famous Widow whom the
 student body knows;
 A man with wealth immense,
 Yet lacking all pretence,
 He makes the Cyclopædia resemble
 thirty cents.
 He can give the whole of Mill
 In one concentrated pill,
 Or discourse at moment's notice on the
 Freedom of the Will;
 He will translate Voltaire
 With the greatest *savoir faire*,
 And will read Indo-Iranian and never turn
 a hair.
 Dead or dreaming, drunk or sleeping,
 Nolen puts you through,
 But gratitude takes early wing when
 Nolen's bill is due.

His devotion to his school is exemplified by the fact that he would not let ill health prevent him from carrying out his duties. Despite being bedridden with heart trouble, he continued to teach until a few hours before his death.⁶

As the poem cited above asserts, Nolen was wealthy. His financial success had much to do with the income generated by his school; Nolen's school clearly provided a service for which there was great demand. While Nolen put much of the money he

6 Biographical information on Nolen comes from "W. W. Nolen Dies at Home in Little Hall" *The Harvard Crimson online edition* (<http://www.thecrimson.com>), 6 June 1923; "William Whiting Nolen '84-Benefactor," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (14 December 1957), 242, 246; clipping in the biographical file (HUG 300, Nolen, William Whiting), Harvard University Archives; and William K. MacKay Co, Inc., *Catalogue of the Private Library of the Late William Whiting Nolen of Cambridge, Mass.* (Boston: William K. MacKay Co., Inc., 1923) in the biographical file (HUG 300, Nolen, William Whiting), Harvard University Archives. Nolen's constant companion for many years was his pet dog, Babs, also known as the "Widow's Mite." Her obituary stated that Babs was popular with students and that she had "hobnobbed with a Roosevelt, a Morgan, an Astor and scions of many other notable American families." Obituary, from the *Boston Advertiser*, 11 December 1917. A clipping of this obituary is in the Nolen biographical file (HUG 300), Harvard University Archives. Frederick Garrison Hall, Edward Revere Little, and Henry Ware Eliot, Jr., *Harvard Celebrities: A Book of Caricatures & Decorative Drawings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1901), [4].

made back into the school, he also used it to assemble a large private library, purchase antiques, and build an extensive collection of Lincolniana. In addition to his vast Lincoln collection, Nolen's bequest to Harvard included "The William Whiting Nolen Loan Fund" for the benefit of needy students in Harvard College and "The William Whiting Nolen Scholarships" to be awarded annually to two students.⁷

The Lincoln collection Nolen bequeathed to Harvard College Library includes 1,000 volumes, close to 4,000 pamphlets, and a large assemblage of manuscript letters, broadsides, sheet music, portraits, prints, medals, badges, and sculpture. Among the many valuable items in the collection are various printings of the Emancipation Proclamation, copies of the playbill used at Ford's Theatre on the evening of Lincoln's assassination, a large collection of Currier and Ives political prints issued during the Civil War, an engraving which hung in the room in which Lincoln died (figure 21), a gigantic poster promoting the 1864 Union ticket of Lincoln and Andrew Johnson (figure 19), and an axe said to have been sold by Lincoln when he was a store clerk in Illinois (figure 17). According to Nolen's will, his bequest was to be kept as a separate collection and exhibited under the name of "The William Whiting Nolen Collection of Lincolniana."⁸

The Lincoln Room

The Nolen collection was installed in the History Department or Room K, located on the top floor of Widener Library, side by side with the Rothschild collection. Added to these collections were pamphlets and prints relating to Lincoln and the Civil War that were part of the Evert Jansen Wendell bequest and a large collection of southern Civil War ballads and songs compiled by Charles T. Abell. In recognition of its extensive Lincoln collection and its value to students and faculty, the library renamed Room K the Lincoln Room (figure 4). By the mid-1920s, Harvard College Library, with its Lincoln Room filled with books, pamphlets, prints, broadsides, statuary, and works of art, together with its extensive general collections relating to Lincoln and the Civil War, had become a leading repository of Lincolniana.⁹

7 "William Whiting Nolen '84-Benefactor"; "W.W. Nolen Dies at Home in Little Hall." Nolen's 10,000 volume library and antique collection were sold at auction in 1923 by William K. MacKay Company of Boston. His library contained several antiquarian books but was primarily a working library that was used by the school's staff and students. See William K. MacKay Co., Inc., *Catalogue of the Private Library of the Late William Whiting Nolen*.

8 *The Library of Harvard University*, 51; *Harvard Library Notes*, no. 16, 72-3; Harvard University, *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College, 1924-1925*, 203; and "'Widow' Nolen's Lincoln Collection all that Remains of Valuable Antiques which Once Filled Little Hall," *The Harvard Crimson online edition*, 6 December 1923.

9 *Harvard Library Notes*. For information on the Wendell bequest, see "World's Largest Library of Drama is at Harvard," *The Harvard Crimson online edition*, 16 October 1920. Evert Jansen Wendell, an



Figure 4. LINCOLN ROOM (WIDENER LIBRARY). Photograph, source and date unknown. HUV 49 (Folder 10), Harvard University Archives. Reproduction courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

The Golden Age of Lincoln Collecting

In a lecture on the history of Lincoln collecting delivered in 1983, the legendary Chicago book dealer Ralph Newman noted that there were more than 250 individuals who had assembled collections of one thousand or more items.¹⁰ Although Newman discussed only the best known of this large cadre of Lincoln collectors, he did provide an extensive list of more than one hundred collectors at the end of his published remarks. Despite having amassed collections of a thousand or more items, however, Rothschild and Nolen were not listed. (It is not known if they were included in Newman's larger list

1882 graduate of Harvard, died in France in 1917. He left Harvard a massive collection of material relating to American and English performing arts (now in the Harvard Theatre Collection), including books, pamphlets, playbills, photographs, sheet music, and prints.

10 Ralph Geoffrey Newman, *Preserving Lincoln for the Ages: Collectors, Collections, and Our Sixteenth President* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1989), 3. Newman was once quoted as stating that there were as many as 10,000 Lincoln collectors by the 1940s. This citation appears in Edmund B. Sullivan, "The Collectible Mr. Lincoln," *The Rail Splitter* 1 (April 1995), 1.

of 250 plus collectors.) What Newman does makes clear is that Nolen and Rothschild were active during a golden age of Lincoln collecting that had commenced almost immediately following the tragic death of our nation's sixteenth president.

Four of the leading collectors, Charles Woodbury McLellan (1836-1918), William Harrison Lambert (1842-1912), Osborn H. Oldroyd (1842-1930), and Daniel Fish (1848-1924) were young men during Lincoln's presidency. Among the notable collectors who came of age in the decades following Lincoln's death were Joseph Benjamin Oakleaf (1858-1930), Frederick Hill Meserve (1868-1962), Judd Stewart (1867-1919), Oliver R. Barrett (1873-1950), and Henry Horner (1879-1940). Rothschild and Nolen were part of this second generation of Lincoln collectors. The extensive collections formed by these men eventually ended up in institutions: Fish's collection is housed in the Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana; the bulk of McLellan's collection is at Brown University; the Huntington Library and Museum acquired many of the items collected by Lambert and Stewart; Oakleaf's collection was purchased by Indiana University; and Horner's collection is part of the Illinois State Historical Library, which is now part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Oliver R. Barrett's Lincoln collection was one of the finest ever assembled. Concentrating on manuscripts and documents, he was able to acquire Lincoln material relating to his early life and career in New Salem and Springfield, Illinois, including a leaf from Lincoln's "Sum Book" written when he was a young boy, an 1835 land survey in Lincoln's hand, documents from Lincoln's law practice, letters from Lincoln to Mary Todd Lincoln, several letters from Lincoln to his close friend Joshua Fry Speed, and a scrapbook on the Lincoln-Douglas debates assembled by Lincoln himself. Barrett's collection, sold at auction in 1952 for more than \$273,000, made its way to several institutions, including the Library of Congress, the Illinois State Historical Library, the Chicago Historical Society, Indiana University, Brown University, the Lincoln Memorial University, and the University of Oklahoma.¹¹

One of the most interesting Lincoln collectors was Osborn Hamilton Ingham Oldroyd. Oldroyd, whose initials spell OHIO, the state in which he was born, became enamored with Lincoln after reading an 1860 campaign biography. Upon completing his service in the Union Army, Oldroyd devoted the rest of his life to collecting books, pamphlets, manuscripts, ephemera, and artifacts and relics relating to Lincoln's career. He was the live-in custodian of Lincoln's former home in Springfield, Illinois, from 1883 to 1893, and while there he convinced Lincoln's oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, to

¹¹ Newman, *Preserving Lincoln*, 12-17; Sullivan, "The Collectible Mr. Lincoln," 1. See also *The Oliver R. Barrett Lincoln Collection* (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1952). The reputation of Barrett's collection was such that Carl Sandburg, the poet and noted Lincoln biographer, wrote a book about it. See Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector: The Story of the Oliver R. Barrett Lincoln Collection* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950).

present the house to the State of Illinois. Oldroyd later moved his extensive collection to the Petersen House, in Washington, D.C., the residence located across the street from Ford's Theatre where Lincoln was carried and died after he was shot by John Wilkes Booth. During his time in Springfield and in Washington, Oldroyd was assiduous in acquiring Lincoln material. His massive collection, consisting of a number of items owned by Lincoln as well as several assassination relics, was purchased in 1926 by the United States government for \$50,000. Some of this material is currently on view in the museum at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.¹²

Lincoln at Houghton

Alonzo Rothschild and William Whiting Nolen were actively building their collections during a period when it seemed like almost everyone was collecting Lincoln. Of course, Lincoln collecting did not cease with the passing of Rothschild's and Nolen's generation. It continued to be—and is today—a vibrant and highly competitive field. Currently, there are many active Lincoln collectors, but the dearth of newly-discovered material and the extremely high market value of many Lincoln items mean that only a privileged few have been able to assemble collections of the magnitude of the several pioneering collectors mentioned in this essay.¹³

Lincoln scholars owe an enormous debt to collectors, past and present, and to the institutional collections they have created and enhanced. There have been more books and articles written about Lincoln than about any other American, and there is absolutely no sign that the Lincoln “industry” is slowing down.¹⁴ During this bicentennial year of Lincoln's birth, scholars are continuing to examine and re-examine the life of the sixteenth president. As the result of their endeavors, we are continually discovering that there is yet still more to learn about Lincoln's life and legacy. The study of Lincoln and his time will require access to primary resources, be they original documents or digital surrogates, residing in various institutional repositories, including Houghton Library.

12 William Burton Benham, *Life of Osborn H. Oldroyd* (Washington, D.C., 1927); Newman, *Preserving Lincoln*, 14.

13 The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum recently acquired the collection of Louise Taper, one of today's leading Lincoln collectors. Her collection, which sold for millions of dollars, includes more than a thousand documents, letters, and artifacts, as well as several iconic Lincoln items, such as his beaver stovepipe hat and clothing worn on the night of the assassination. *Four Score and Seven: A Publication of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation* (Spring 2008), 1.

14 Gerald J. Prokopowicz, in his recent book, *Did Lincoln Own Slaves? And Other Frequently Asked Questions about Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 246, cites a 2002 WorldCat search that listed 14,985 entries for Abraham Lincoln. Only three other historical figures had more entries: Jesus Christ (80,834), William Shakespeare (35,904), and the Virgin Mary (20,948).

The exhibition *Harvard's Lincoln* presents a selection of materials from Houghton Library's collection of Lincolnia that is astonishing in breadth as well as diversity. The exhibition includes several recent acquisitions as well as books, manuscripts, and artifacts from the collection of William Whiting Nolen. Houghton's Lincoln collection has been assembled in a fashion very much in keeping with the library's tradition: through years of assiduous and visionary collecting by and the benevolence of interested and knowledgeable donors. The purpose of the exhibit is threefold: to commemorate the Lincoln bicentennial and to promote Houghton Library's relevant collections; to assert the library's commitment to meeting the needs of its users, especially Harvard's faculty and students; and, finally, to pay tribute to Alonzo Rothschild and William Whiting Nolen, two donors whose generosity built the foundation on which Houghton's Lincoln collection rests. It is to them that *Harvard's Lincoln* is dedicated.

Contributors

HAROLD HOLZER, co-chairman of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and vice chairman of the Lincoln Forum, is the author of the award-winning 2008 book *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861*, the 31st of 33 books he has authored, co-authored, and edited, most recently the Library of America's 2009 volume, *The Lincoln Anthology*. Winner of a 2005 Lincoln Prize for *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, Holzer will serve as guest historian for the forthcoming New-York Historical Society exhibition *Lincoln and New York*.

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