

Collecting and gambling

By James M. Cornelius

The largest auction of important Lincoln items in the last 5 or 10 years was held on his 213th birthday by Heritage Auctions of Dallas. If you saw the words ‘incipient inflation’ (i.e. ‘loose money’) in a headline of late, no longer is it incipient. Spendiness was on full display that weekend.

The collection of Dr. Blaine Houmes (d. 2021) of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, constituted most of the 530 offerings. Highlights included the letter Lincoln wrote to the Army of the Potomac on 22 Dec. 1862 trying to bolster the men’s morale after their crushing defeat at Fredericksburg; and a previously unknown piece of cold dry truth to a woman in Iowa who sought a job for a friend. The harried chief executive wrote her, “The most I can say is that when the time comes, if it has been made to appear that the appointment of your friend to the Post-Office at Oskaloosa, will be as satisfactory to the people there, as would that of any other person, he will probably receive it; otherwise not.”

Mary Lincoln was known to have helped Abraham in the 1850s with get-out-the-vote notes over his name but in her hand, and here is an even earlier example, perhaps the oldest, as Lincoln himself in 1849 sought to become head of the General Land Office in D.C. Mary’s rocking chair from Dr. Patterson’s sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois, was also sold — bidding began at \$7,500.



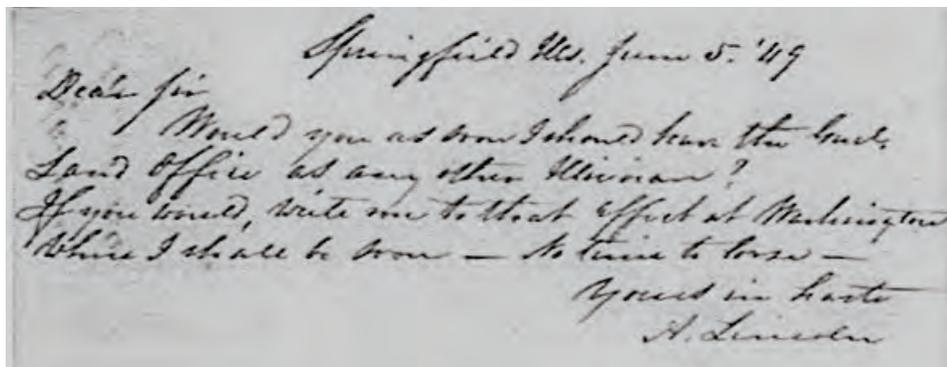
The elephant first became the symbol of Lincoln’s Republicans in Springfield in 1860, and the same beast was used for this 1865 broadside about the fall of Richmond.

Hammer prices were a lot higher than that estimate, and for nearly everything else, by factors of 2 to 10. The entire sale netted the auctioneers \$4,216,108. That figure includes about 30% on each lot for taxes and the seller’s premium. Two items accounted for nearly one quarter of all: \$499,000 for the key to the Lincolns’ box at Ford’s Theatre on *The Fateful Night*; and \$519,000 for a gorgeous handmade, incised pocketknife, with presentation case, given to the president by a Pennsylvania maker in 1864. With it you get Lincoln’s thank-you note (signature only, below Nicolay’s text) as proof.

More startling than these upper echelon views were those from the

mezzanine. A nice but not rare Currier & Ives color print of candidate Lincoln sold for \$5,250. David Brainerd Williamson’s two books of 1864-65 on Lincoln, a “Life and Public Services” plus an “Illustrated Life and Martyrdom,” hauled in \$6,875. Humble tax ledger or poll-book pages from Menard or Greene county, merely listing Lincoln’s name (not in his hand), reached 4 figures. Newspapers did well, too. A certain speech reported in a certain Gettysburg weekly is now worth thousands; handbill extras from, say, Princeton, Indiana, Springfield, Illinois, or Castine, Maine, telling of his election or death did the same. A piece of Laura Keene’s dress from *That Night* cost a dressey \$37,500, and had already been used (so rumor has it) as the DNA baseline sample to distinguish Lincoln’s from Major Rathbone’s blood.

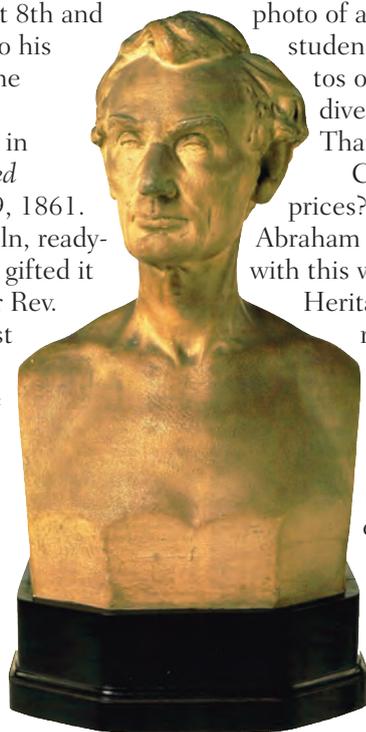
But can you display that baseline on the same shelf with this writer’s favorite item? Leonard Volk cast Lincoln’s face, and sketched his torso, in Chicago in March 1860. Those life masks were and are widely sold. But on May 19th, after Lincoln was nominated at the Wigwam, Volk carried probably his first ‘cabinet bust’ of the



Mrs. Lincoln was an asset to Lincoln’s career in Illinois (see text).

nominee to the door at 8th and Jackson to present it to his subject. You can see the engraving of it in 'Mr. Lincoln's Front Parlor' in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of March 9, 1861. A month earlier Lincoln, readying to leave town, had gifted it to friend and neighbor Rev. Noyes Miner. The bust remained in the Miner family until the Heritage sale, where it commanded \$199,000. Coupled with a large Bible given to Lincoln in Philadelphia in 1864, which Mary Lincoln gifted to Rev. Miner in 1871 (now in the Presidential Museum), we might reconsider how important that humble Baptist minister was to the Lincoln family. His sister, Hannah Shearer, was among Mary's most intimate correspondents.

Take heart, Democrats: items about Stephen A. Douglas and George B. McClellan also sold well. So too a



As close to the animal himself as Lincoln could ask for.

photo of an unknown 1860s college student, surrounded by small photos of Lincoln and a politically diverse group of contemporaries. That's \$800 of vicarious fame.

Can't meet those big-city prices? Dan Weinberg of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, along with this writer, visited the new Heritage Auctions preview showroom in Chicago on a snowy day 10 days before the Dallas sale. Beautiful items, up close, nice staff, and we rolled our eyes at the low opening bids. Now everyone can roll them back at the high results. If a good copy of the 1907 book *Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth* by Finis Bates looks high at \$400, remember that a canny hunter can bag one downstate or upcountry for half that price. For the *Political Debates of Lincoln and*

Douglas, one third. For the beautiful Alexander Hesler photo of Lincoln from June 3, 1860, framed and sold through this magazine? In Dallas, many multiples of the ISHS price.

Yet the game's afoot, and from

Dallas you could gamble, because this and other auctioneers now offer a new service. On their site, as soon as you have ponied up, say, \$2,500 for an 1860 brass campaign medallion or a recruiting poster or a sheaf of 31 cdv's of the Great Emancipator, you can offer it up the same day on that same site, for a profit to you, *if you can catch a buyer*. Such immediate re-sale was the fate of nearly 40% of the main lots that day, implying that people bought only because they sought to flip the item(s) for cash, rather than keep. Bidder-gamblers tried this maneuver especially with assassination-related items — but scarcely at all with Lincoln materials from homey places like Champaign or Morgan County. *Those* are for collectors who mean it.

N.B. At an auction a week earlier in Massachusetts, a merely life-sized bronze of the great 'Standing Lincoln' in Lincoln Park, Chicago, sold for \$1.2 mn. Augustus Saint-Gaudens's widow did the casting. What's she got that Lincoln ain't got? 

James Cornelius is a Lincoln student and bibliophile in Springfield. He thanks train-spotter Kim Bauer and poll-watcher Kent Tucker for assistance with this summary.

"The Conversation"

Last year the Illinois State Historical Society commissioned a limited special bronze casting of John McClarey's statuette "The Conversation," which features seated representations of President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass in their first conversation in the White House, which took place on August 10, 1863. The Society is offering the statuette to individuals who contribute to the ISHS endowment campaign at the \$2500 level. Each statuette is signed and numbered, and comes with a certificate of authenticity and the gratitude of the Society's Board of Directors.



To order "The Conversation," call 217-525-2781 today.