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Article Summary: Two Abraham Lincoln ambrotypes (in-camera original images) are housed in Nebraska. One portrait commemorates the day in 1858 when Lincoln won the acquittal of an accused murderer. The circumstances of the second ambrotype are less certain, but some scholars believe that it commemorates Lincoln's nomination to run for president in 1860.

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Names: Alvin Saunders, William "Duff" Armstrong, Abraham Byers, Grenville M Dodge, Frederick Hill Meserve, Carl Sandburg, William Church, Frank Baldwin, Joseph Barrett, William Marsh

Place Names: Lincoln, Nebraska; Beardstown, Illinois; Springfield, Illinois

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Photographs / Images: Lincoln portrait taken in Beardstown, Illinois, on May 7, 1858; "campaign ambrotype" thought to have been taken in May 1860 as a record of Lincoln's nomination as the Republican candidate for US president

NEBRASKA'S LINCOLN AMBROTYPES

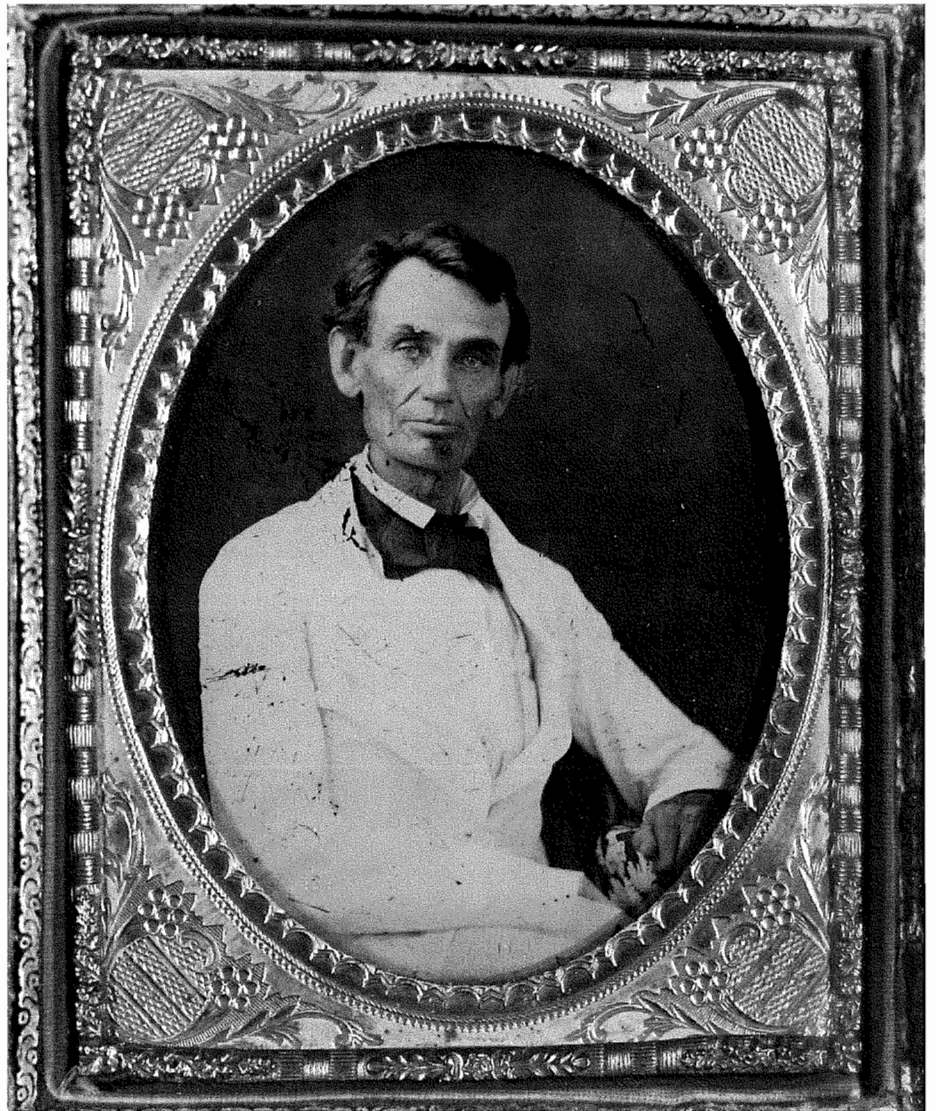
By Jill Marie Koelling

It is no surprise to Nebraskans that the state has important connections to Abraham Lincoln. The Homestead Act of 1862, and the first homestead claim, filed west of Beatrice by Daniel Freeman in 1863, both occurred during his term in office. The construction of the transcontinental railroad, which bisects the state, was greatly influenced by Lincoln's belief in westward expansion. And, on April 15, 1865, the day after Lincoln's assassination, the commission appointing Alvin Saunders to his second term as governor of the Territory of Nebraska was found on his desk; it is presumed to be the last document Lincoln signed.

But these are not the only Nebraska connections with Lincoln. Of the 131 photographs of the martyred president known to exist, two are in Nebraska: One is in the University of Nebraska Special Collections Library, the other at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Lincoln was the first president to recognize the power of photography, and according to Lincoln expert Lloyd Osterndorf, he was photographed by thirty-six different photographers on sixty-six different occasions during his lifetime.¹ The earliest photograph of Lincoln is a daguerreotype taken in 1846, just seven years after two French inventors, Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niepce, introduced photography to the world. A daguerreotype is a direct-positive image (there is no negative) exposed on a polished copper plate coated with a light-sensitive silver emulsion.

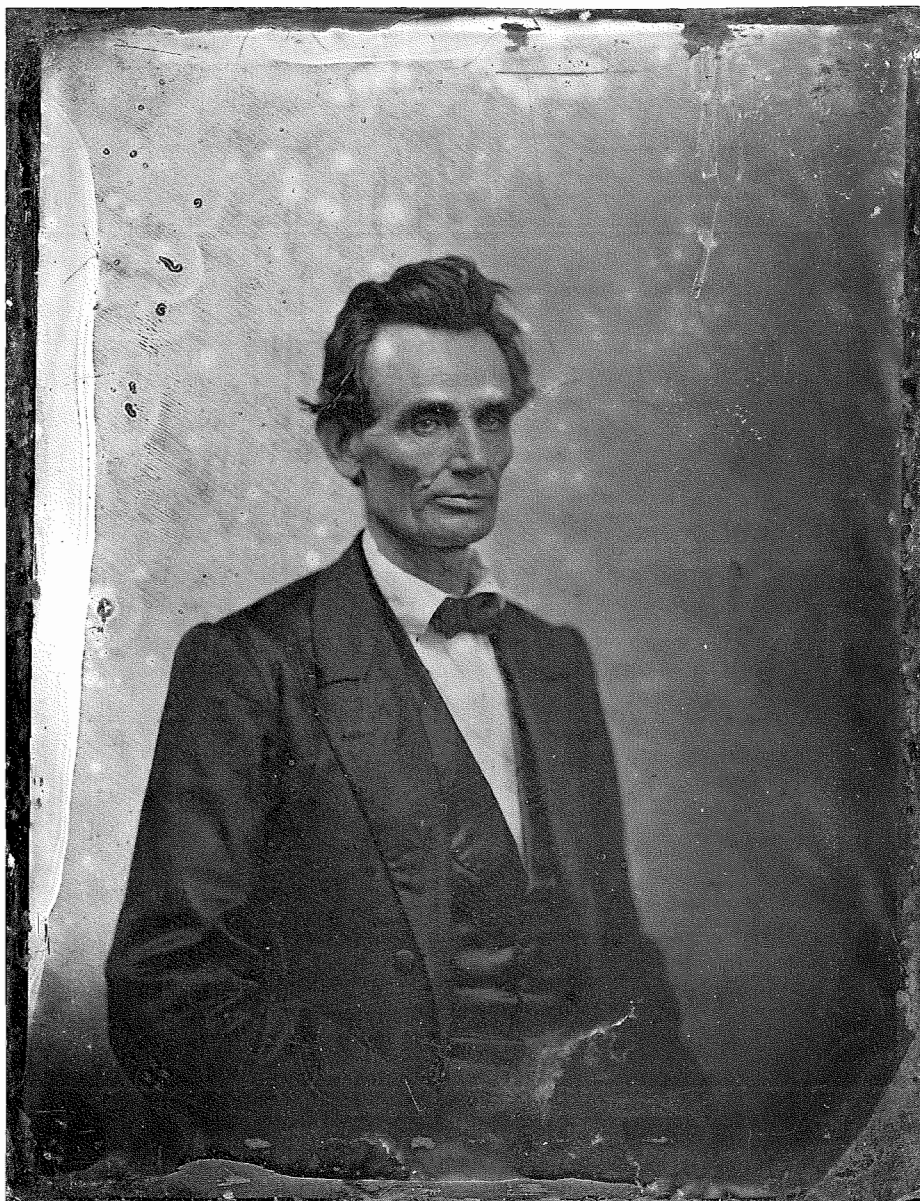
Jill Marie Koelling is curator of photographs for the Nebraska State Historical Society.



The ambrotype portrait of Abraham Lincoln housed in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Special Collections Library was taken in Beardstown, Illinois, on May 7, 1858, the day he won the acquittal of an accused murderer. Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The two Lincoln photographs now in Nebraska are ambrotypes—wet-plate collodion positive images on glass, a faster, less expensive process that replaced daguerreotypes in the 1850s. The term wet-plate refers to the process of coating a glass plate with a glue-like, collodion emulsion and exposing it while the emulsion was still wet. It took fifteen minutes to coat the plate, place it in the camera, expose it, develop the image, and stabilize, or “fix” it, and dry the plate. The resulting image is an underexposed negative, but when backed with black paper it appears positive, because the silver remaining in the image reflects light, but the black backing does not. Both daguerreotypes and ambrotypes usually were kept in small presentation cases, and the two are sometimes confused. They can be distinguished easily, however, because at some viewing angles a daguerreotype appears to be a negative, but an ambrotype appears to be a positive from all angles. A third type of wet-plate photographic image, introduced later, is the ferrotype, commonly called a tintype. No tin was used in the process, however, which was made using a collodion emulsion on a thin sheet of blackened or japanned steel.

There is one important difference between conventional modern photographs and ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, and ferrotypes: Each individual image produced by those early wet-plate processes is an in-camera original. In other photographic processes, a negative is exposed in the camera, and what the viewer sees is a positive print made from the negative. Many prints can be made from the original negative, and the prints themselves are not images exposed by light reflected from the subject, but are made elsewhere at a later time with light passing through the negative. The two Lincoln ambrotypes, like all wet-plate photographs, are in-camera originals—each one is the actual emulsion-coated glass plate that was in the camera when Abraham Lincoln sat for the portrait.



The Nebraska State Historical Society's portrait of Lincoln is often called the “campaign ambrotype” because it is thought by some scholars to have been taken in May 1860 as a record of his nomination as the Republican Party candidate for President of the United States. The donor, however, declared that it was taken in 1859. NSHS-761P-1

In all there are twelve known ambrotypes of Lincoln.

The ambrotype in the University Special Collections Library is of importance to Lincoln scholars. It was taken on May 7, 1858, the day he won “his most celebrated criminal case,” the acquittal of an accused murderer, William “Duff”

Armstrong, the son of Lincoln's long-time friend, Jack Armstrong. The prosecution's star witness, Charles Allen, said that, although “it was eleven o'clock at night and Allen was standing 150 feet away,” he saw Armstrong strike the victim by the light of the nearly full moon. Lincoln asked Allen to repeat

Nebraska's Lincoln Ambrotypes

his story several times during cross-examination, then produced an almanac and revealed that by eleven o'clock on the night in question the moon had already set. The room erupted in laughter, and Armstrong was acquitted.²

After the trial, as Lincoln walked down the familiar streets of Beardstown, Illinois, where the trial was held, an acquaintance, Abraham Byers, asked him to sit for a portrait. According to Byers, Lincoln complained that his suit was rumpled and he would not make a good subject. Lincoln often joked about his appearance, at one time saying, "Did you hear the fellow in Tremont call me two-faced? I put it to you, boys, if I had two faces, would I be wearing this one?"³ Byers prevailed, however, and the photograph shows Lincoln dressed in a light linen suit, seated, with one hand resting on the arm of the chair. It is the only portrait of him dressed in anything but a dark suit. The ambrotype is mounted in a beautiful case with an intricately adorned brass mat.

In his most recent book, *Lincoln Photographs: A Complete Album*, Lloyd Osterndorf states that two exposures were taken at the sitting, the one now in University Special Collections Library having been retained by the photographer, the other disappearing until it was published in 1895 in *McClure's* magazine. In *The Face of Lincoln*, James Mellon says that a poor quality copy of one of the two exposures was exhibited at Lincoln's tomb in Springfield, Illinois, but is now missing. Only a few copy prints of the second image were known to survive. Osterndorf does not mention the copies nor does he state whether or not the second ambrotype, from which the *McClure's* image was made, still exists. It is possible that the *McClure's* image actually was made from the original ambrotype that Byers kept. Osterndorf does, however, classify the two exposures as a single image in his list of Lincoln photographs.⁴

When Byers died in 1909, his ambrotype became the property of his second wife, Zora, who later married a man

named Johnson. Olive Byers Hayes, daughter of Abraham Byers and his first wife, lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, and may have brought up the idea of donating the portrait to the University of Nebraska. In any case, Zora's husband sought the advice of W. E. Barkley, a friend of Abraham Byers, who suggested that the Don L. Love Library, then under construction on the university campus, would be a good place to permanently house the ambrotype. The regents officially accepted the ambrotype in 1943, but it did not actually arrive in Lincoln until the summer of 1947.⁵

A little more than two years separate the Byers ambrotype and the one held at the Nebraska State Historical Society, but it, too, documents an important turning point in Lincoln's life. In August 1859, Lincoln was in Council Bluffs, Iowa, checking on land holdings acquired in payment of a debt and as a homestead allotment received for service in the Black Hawk War. In Council Bluffs he met Grenville M. Dodge, a railroad engineer who had just completed a preliminary survey through the Platte River valley and was pushing for a transcontinental rail route across Nebraska. "We sat down on the bench on the porch of the Pacific House and he [Lincoln] proceeded to find out all about the country we had been through, and all about our railroad surveys...in fact, he extracted from me the information I had gathered for my employers, and virtually shelled my woods most thoroughly," Dodge remembered.⁶

Nine months later, on May 18, 1860, Lincoln was nominated as the Republican Party candidate for President of the United States. The next day convention delegates went to Springfield to notify Lincoln of his nomination, and he officially accepted on May 23. Following the nomination, campaign biographies started to appear, and his portrait and life story were in demand. At this point in the story, however, the tale of this photograph, often called the "campaign ambrotype," becomes complicated by multiple voices and varying recollections.⁷

Over the past sixty years, the ambrotype taken as a record of Lincoln's nomination has been published in varying forms, and its circumstances variously explained by three well-known Lincoln photograph scholars. In 1944, Frederick Hill Meserve and Carl Sandburg published *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln*. Sandburg had become a well-known Lincoln biographer, and Meserve, described by Sandburg as a "tireless zealot," was an avid collector of Lincoln photographs. Meserve's interest in Lincoln stemmed partly from his father, who fought in the Union Army in the Civil War and saw President Lincoln on three occasions, once shaking his hand.⁸

Meserve probably was the first collector to focus on collecting every known photograph of Lincoln, calling him "perhaps the most-photographed American of his time." Meserve's first list of Lincoln photographs was privately published in 1911 with numbers assigned to the photographs by chronological order. As time passed and Meserve learned more about the images the order changed, but the original numbers were retained because they had become so closely linked with the images. The campaign ambrotype held by the Historical Society is number M-109.⁹

Meserve concludes that it was taken by William Church in Springfield, Illinois, on May 20, 1860. He also states that two other exposures were made at the same time at the request of "Mr. J. Henry Brown of Philadelphia, who used them in painting a portrait" of Lincoln. It is not known from whom Meserve obtained this information and his copy of the campaign ambrotype.¹⁰

The ambrotype was donated to the Historical Society in 1956 by Charlotte B. Ward, who had received it from her father, Dr. Henry Baldwin Ward, dean of the Medical School and head of the Zoology Department at the University of Nebraska. Dr. Ward had inherited it from his uncle, Frank Baldwin, a publisher who had asked Lincoln to sit for the portrait.¹¹ It is uncertain whether Baldwin made the request alone, or jointly with

Joseph Barrett, who had been hired by Baldwin to write a campaign biography of Lincoln. After the Society obtained the ambrotype it was put on display briefly to honor Lincoln's birthday.

The first published reproduction of the image made from the original ambrotype appeared in James Mellon's *The Face of Lincoln* in 1979. Contrary to Meserve's belief that the photograph was taken on May 20, 1860, two days after Lincoln's nomination, Mellon states that Joseph Barrett, who claimed to have been present when Lincoln sat for the portrait, wrote that it was taken on May 24. Mellon notes that Marcus L. Ward also claims to have asked Lincoln for a portrait and arranged a sitting on May 20. Neither Ward nor Barrett mentions the other. Mellon attempts to resolve the date conflict, but notes that either date is possible. He questions Lincoln's suit having stayed in good condition for four days, but allows that Lincoln might have had it cleaned and pressed in the interim.¹²

Osterndorf believes there were two sittings, and the Historical Society's ambrotype was taken on May 24 by William Marsh. No photographer named William Church is listed in the Springfield City Directory for 1860–1861.¹³

The donor, Charlotte Ward, who suggested still another date for the sitting, adds another layer of complexity. Shortly after the donation, in a letter to James C. Olson, director of the Historical Society, she wrote that the "ambrotype was taken in Springfield in 1859 at the request of my great uncle Frank Baldwin of Cincinnati, who was a business man and a publisher. He was in Springfield, Illinois, and asked Lincoln, whom he knew and admired greatly, to sit for the portrait, which he did." She also states that a friend of her father wanted the original, but he refused to give it up and a copy was made. The name of the friend and the date of the request are not known.¹⁴

The debate concerning this portrait will probably continue for as long as there is an interest in Lincoln. As time passes, memories fade and are influenced by other events, dates run together and facts become distorted. The Lincoln campaign ambrotype is a perfect example of the complexity of history and our reliance on memories to establish fact. What cannot be questioned, however, is the power of these ambrotypes, original, in-camera images of Lincoln at the peak of his legal prowess, confident, calm, and empowered.

Notes

¹ Lloyd Osterndorf, *Lincoln Photographs: A Complete Album* (Dayton: Rockywood Press, 1998), Preface.

² David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 150–51.

³ Jan Morris, *Lincoln: A Foreigner's Quest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 78.

⁴ Osterndorf, *Lincoln Photographs*, 14; James Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln* (New York: Viking Press, 1979) 191.

⁵ Anne Longman, "Picture of Lincoln, Virtually Forgotten for 90 years, in Possession of U. of N.," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Feb. 12, 1948.

⁶ Dee Brown, *Hear that Lonesome Whistle Blow* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), 41.

⁷ Donald, *Lincoln*, 251, 253.

⁸ Frederick Hill Meserve and Carl Sandburg, *The Photographs of Lincoln* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1944), 17.

⁹ *Ibid.* 25, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 42.

¹¹ James C. Olson to Charlotte Ward, November 23, 1955, RG14. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereafter NSHS).

¹² Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln*, 194.

¹³ Osterndorf, *Lincoln Photographs*, 41.

¹⁴ Charlotte Ward to James C. Olson, Feb. 1, 1956, RG14, NSHS.