



## Season 6, Episode 4: Lincoln Forgery

Wes Cowan: Our last story questions whether this piece of sheet music came from President Lincoln's private collection. On April 14, 1865 – five days after the Civil War ended – one final shot was fired...killing Abraham Lincoln. As president, he was despised by the South, considered soft by many in his Republican Party, and accused of tyranny for suspending civil liberties during the war. But in death, he became a symbol of liberty and the savior of the union. His body was embalmed, and his coffin directed West along the rails to Springfield, Illinois. As many as one million mourners viewed the procession and the entire nation hungered for a piece of their American martyr. More than a century later, in a box bound for an estate sale, Karen Bowers of Portland, Oregon may have discovered an unusual Lincoln memento.

Karen Bowers: it gave me pause to think that I might actually be holding something that had been in Abraham Lincoln's hands.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan and I've come to meet Karen to take a closer look at what's she's found.

Karen: Hi Wes come on in.

Wes: Thank you.

Karen: Well have a seat and we'll see if we can figure out what this is.

Wes: Alrighty great what do you have here?

Karen: Well it's a bound volume of sheet music. It's dated back to the 1860s. It has a couple little extra things that I think you'd like to see. Starting with the front page bearing a signature.

Wes: Of Abraham Lincoln.

Karen: Right.

Wes: Wow that's pretty neat.

Karen: In addition to that there's some notorial acknowledgements that come up much later than Lincoln's death.



Wes: This is from a collection of old paper destined for destruction at housecleaning time at the residence of Mrs. A Lincoln in 1866 and was rescued by her coachman William P. Brown and then it looks like it's signed by...

Karen: Mr Brown.

Wes: Mr Brown. And then it says this signature is genuine Frank E. Thatcher. And he says he's a notary public in Muskegon County, Michigan with a commission expiring in August 1933 and then here's his notary seal.

Karen: Here's another signature back here that doesn't employ his whole name. It just has his initial.

Wes: A. Lincoln. Okay...but the statement associated with this signature tells a slightly different story. In the first version, William Brown rescued the sheet music; but here he claims it was given to him by Mary Lincoln, the president's widow. I'm not sure what to make of this, but it's certainly a curious artifact. This is kind of neat. Where did you get this?

Karen: Well it came to me in an estate that was packed in the 1930s in the city of Chicago, moved to California, ended up in a basement in Portland, Oregon and I had the pleasure of opening it and unpacking it in the 1990s. It was stored away for 60 years.

Wes: Wow what a story. Well, now Karen what do you want me to find out?

Karen: Could it possibly have been his possession and if so how lucky am I to be able to handle it?

Wes: I am going to have to take this with me if you don't mind.

Karen: Yes.

Wes: And I am going to find out the answer for you. The binding of this sheet music was probably done around the turn of the century. Looking through this – you know, all the sheet music in here of the period, they all have copyright dates before Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. I like the signature in a lot of ways but there is something about it that gives me pause. Why would Lincoln have signed his name in different ways? And why did the coachman, William Brown, give different stories on how he came across the sheet music? This guy William P. Brown, what kind of a story is that, he signing this in – sometime in the 1930s, almost 70 years after Lincoln's assassination. Was he even alive at the time? And was he really the Lincolns' coachman? I do some digging, and make a discovery in a newspaper article from 1931.



Wes: Lincoln's driver is Serene at '93, Brown negro and Civil War veteran lives with wife in Michigan. Ravenna, Michigan. That's in Muskegon County where our notary was commissioned. Brown is believed to be the last man living to have been in the employ of the Lincoln family, so maybe Brown did get the autograph from the president's widow? I'm meeting Mary Lincoln's biographer, Jean Baker, at the Abraham Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Illinois. She explains that when Lincoln arrived in the White House his primary objective was to preserve the Union. But Mary became a somewhat self-absorbed and materialistic first lady.

Jean: She is going to have elaborate, expensive parties that she as a host is going to be attired in the very best fabrics and gowns imaginable. Lincoln was angry enough to accuse her of buying flubadubs when the soldiers of the army of the Potomac didn't even have blankets.

Wes: In the end, the assassin's bullet turned Mary's world upside down, leaving her with substantial debts...and her beloved husband's possessions.

Jean: She goes to New York to try to sell her old clothes but the problem is they're used gowns, they're perspiration-stained, and the New Yorkers make great fun of her.

Wes: But if Mary was in financial trouble, why would she have thrown or given away potentially valuable mementos? I show Jean our book, and she tells me how Mary did give some Lincoln memorabilia to close friends – including Lincoln's cane, which she presented with this letter to artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter.

Jean: "It is a very plain cane, yet it has his name upon it and will be treasured by you and yours."

Wes: Well one thing is for sure. It is possible that Mary Lincoln could've given her coachman the sheet music. The thing that I'm still not sure of, though, is the signature.

Wes: Ellen Schuetzner is a handwriting analyst who's seen many Lincoln signatures, both forged and real. And as I told you there is a signature of Abraham Lincoln and then there is another example here "A. Lincoln".

Ellen: Those signatures look pretty good. They seemed to follow copy book style that Lincoln would have used.

Wes: Ellen explains how most adult's handwriting is powerfully influenced by how they were taught as children, particularly how they learned to copy letters.

Ellen: This is a sample called modified round hand that somebody in the 1800 would have used to learn how to write. And if you look at the style of the "A", you will find that it is.



Wes: It's virtually identical. Ellen compares our "A. Lincoln" autograph to several authentic Lincoln signatures.

Ellen: It's in the details that we find out how good it is. Between the A and L in the "A. Lincoln" signatures you will see a nice spacing but when you look at the questioned signature it's a very short spacing.

Wes: Oh I really see what you are talking about, in our question signature the A and L almost touch. It's time to put our Abraham Lincoln signature under the microscope.

Ellen: Take a look at the computer screen.

Wes: Oh that is a great toy.

Ellen: Right now we are looking at the loop of the A. You will see that there is an extra pen stroke in there that doesn't belong.

Wes: Yeah, so I see. This diagonal line and there are two of them side by side.

Ellen: It's what we call a pen lift, usually they are following a model signature and they pick the pen up to see where they – exactly they are on the page. And then they put the pen back down where they think it goes and we have a pen lift.

Wes: Well wait a minute don't most people do that?

Ellen: Not necessarily and certainly not usually in the middle of a line.

Wes: Ellen shows me another suspect pen stroke above the second "A" in Abraham.

Ellen: It's called patching. It's where a writer comes back to correct the first line because he or she wasn't satisfied.

Wes: So Ellen in your opinion, the signatures that I have in my book are they real?

Ellen: There is no evidence to indicate that either one of them is genuine.

Wes: If it's a fake, who's duping whom, and why? Hi, nice to meet you.

Libby: Nice to meet you lets go this way.



Wes: At the Chicago History Museum, curator Libby Mahoney explains that Lincoln's assassination spurred a morbid kind of souvenir collecting.

Libby: In fact the day after Lincoln was shot people went into Ford's Theater and were just tearing it apart for souvenirs. This is a piece of wallpaper documented by the note attached reportedly from the actual box where Lincoln was sitting on the night he was assassinated.

Wes: And that's got a great letter there dated in 1868....Several of the items in the collection have uncertain provenance: like this comb and brush that came with a testimonial from Mary's dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley.

Libby: She claimed that these were used by Abraham Lincoln. But that doesn't really prove it one way or the other.

Wes: So why would you want to keep these things then and if you don't know that they really belong to Lincoln.

Libby: Because they help us document not only the life of Lincoln but his legacy how he is been remembered.

Wes: Libby also explains how Lincoln memorabilia came into fashion again in the 1920's and 30's. That's the period when our signature was notarized.

Libby: D. W. Griffith made a film about Abraham Lincoln, a biography that was an epic film that attracted a lot of attention. The Lincoln tomb was rededicated for the last time and generally speaking, there was a resurgence of public interest in American history.

Wes: You know I am getting a much better idea what was going on here, there was an interest in Lincoln memorabilia, our con artist saw an opportunity and he exploited that opportunity.

Wes: Libby doesn't know who our forger was. Did the coachman and the notary public cook up a scheme to cash in on Lincoln's popularity in the 1930's? I'm headed to Printers Row Fine and Rare Books to meet William Butts, a dealer in historical autographs and documents who's seen his fair share of Lincoln forgeries.

Wes: So bill do you think this guy Brown who might have actually been Lincoln's coachman and this notary Thatcher – were they in together on this forgery?

Bill: No I think they had nothing to do with it. They were both innocent dupes who got caught up in what was one of the greatest forgeries scandals in the 1920's and 30's.



Wes: Bill explains how Lincoln's popularity in the early 20th century made any authentic memorabilia valuable. It also spawned an infamous scam run by a career criminal and the son of a notable man of letters.

Bill: We have some examples.

Wes: Let's go take a look.

Bill: These are all different forgery products by Eugene Field II and his partner in crime Harry Dayton Sickles.

Wes: Wait a minute... Eugene Field II; is that the son of the poet Eugene Field?

Bill: That's right and he is best known for Little Boy Blue. When he died in 1895, his son Eugene Field II started selling of his father's very famous and very large library of fine bindings, signed copies, things like that.

Wes: Bill shows me his collection of Sickles and Field phony Lincoln documents, including an 1830s dictionary of the New Testament.

Bill: We don't know exactly how they met but Harry Sickles was a career forger and I think it was his brainchild has started putting off forgeries starting with Eugene Field Sr.

Wes: It wasn't until 1931, when the article on the former coachman, William Brown, was published that Sickles and Field saw an opportunity. Bill explains that the Brown signature on our document is indeed authentic. With interest in Lincoln at an all time high, the crooks convinced Lincoln's former coachman that it was *his* signature that they were interested in.

Bill: So they had Brown sign perhaps a couple hundred pieces and then they contacted a notary public from the area, named Frank Thatcher. All Thatcher thought he was doing was just testifying to originality of William Brown signature and then the Lincoln's signature got added later.

Wes: Neither coachman nor notary had any idea they were part of a fraud. Bill says a couple hundred Sickles and Field Lincoln fakes have been identified, but there's no telling just how many victims they cheated.

Wes: And did they ever get caught?

Bill: Well Field and Sickles never were arrested. Never served a day in jail. In 1931 Paul Angle, a well-known Lincoln historian, issued this to the members of the Abraham Lincoln Association.



Wes: This warning will certainly be of interest to Karen. First thing I want to tell you is that these Lincoln signatures are total forgeries.

Karen: Well that could happen.

Wes: Yep and in fact the forgeries are only a small part of a much bigger story.

Wes: I tell Karen about Sickles and Field, and their lucrative forgery scheme. They were finally exposed by the Lincoln Association.

William: Well, in 1931 the Abraham Lincoln Association issued this warning to its members. It reads "Warning the officers of the Abraham Lincoln Association have just learned that several members of the association have been solicited to purchase so called Lincoln autographs which purport to come from one Brown."

Karen: "This material consist almost entirely of sheet music, old maps and rare books usually autographed A. Lincoln. Members who may be offered items from this collection would do well to exercise more than ordinary precaution before purchasing."

Wes: This sheet music is part of one of the great forgery stories surrounding Abraham Lincoln of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Karen: OK. well we know the answer to our mystery don't we?

Wes: Now what are you going to do with this?

Karen: I think I'll just keep it, hang it up here on the wall, and it'll remind us of our wonderful experience with you Wes. Thank you so much.

Wes: Thank you.