



## Episode 10, Lincoln Letter, Illinois

Elyse Luray: Our first story examines a curious note that may have been signed by Abraham Lincoln. It's August, 1858, almost four years before the Civil War. The national spotlight is on a key senate race in Illinois where a powerful and pro-slavery Democrat, Stephen Douglas, is being challenged for his seat by an undistinguished Republican, 49-year-old Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's battle with Douglas that summer will determine the course of his career and ultimately the fate of the nation. Now, a firefighter from Tampa, Florida has made what may be an astonishing discovery. A cryptic letter dating to that summer of 1858, with what appears to be the signature of Abe Lincoln. I'm Elyse Luray and I've come to meet Joe Skanks to find out more about the letter he found in his hometown.

Elyse: Hi, Joe. I'm Elyse.

Joe Skanks: Hi, nice to meet you. Come on in.

Elyse: Thanks. So, you found this, what, in a flea market?

Joe: Actually, no. I found it at a yard sale. I really like the old photos and I bought a stack of them and brought them home.

Elyse: Oh, these are nice.

Joe: Yeah, aren't they? I started shuffling through them to see what I had bought and I found this. It's a letter and it's signed by A. Lincoln.

Elyse: And how'd you feel when you saw A. Lincoln?

Joe: I'd heard of people finding things in collections, and so on, but I never dreamed I would find something like this.

Elyse: The A. Lincoln on Joe's letter appears to be writing in response to an earlier letter to someone named Whitney.

Joe: It says, "August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1858, Springfield. Dear Whitney, yours of the 31<sup>st</sup> is just received. I shall write to B. C. Cook at Ottawa and to Lovejoy himself as to the subject you suggested. Pardon me for not writing a longer letter as I have a great many letters to write. Your friend as ever, A. Lincoln."

Elyse: So what exactly can I find out for you?



Joe: If the letter is authentic and what it's about.

Elyse: Okay. Well, if it is a real Abraham Lincoln letter it's quite an extraordinary find. The probability of you finding a real Lincoln letter in a stack of photographs in Florida...not so sure about it, but I'll see what I can do. I'm going to have to take it with me.

Joe: Okay. But be careful with it.

Elyse: I will.

Joe: Thank you.

Elyse: The letter is so short, it's hard to figure out what it's about. I've seen paper from the mid-1800's, and the paper looks period, so that's a good thing. There are some condition problems which helps me date it. It bothers me that there's two dates, and one of them is in completely different ink than the other. And when I look closely at the lettering, it's so strange because some of it is in brown ink and some of it is in black and brown ink. It just doesn't look right to me. I need to get a second opinion on this. But in the meantime, I want to see if I can figure out what might have been on Lincoln's mind that summer. I want to find out specifically what's happening in August, 1858, who the letter's to and more about the content. Lincoln is running for the Senate seat of Stephen Douglas, the powerful Democrat who pushed the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress four years earlier. The law gave voters the right to choose whether the new territories of Nebraska and Kansas would permit slavery. The legislation sparked violence in Kansas. It also led to the formation of the Republican Party. It seems that the Whitney that Lincoln is writing to is Henry Whitney, a conservative Republican. Alright, I know that Lincoln's a Republican. And, it says here that he was running for U.S. Senate against incumbent Democrat Stephen Douglas. He's writing to Henry Clay Whitney, who is a fellow Republican and is advising Lincoln on the senate race. This is interesting. One of the people Lincoln refers to in the letter, Owen Lovejoy, is a radical Republican known for his opposition to slavery. It says he was an outspoken abolitionist, considered too polarizing by political moderates. But I'm still not clear why Lincoln is writing to Whitney, or what the letter means. I'm meeting with Illinois State Historian Tom Schwartz.

Tom Schwartz: This way.

Elyse: Okay. He says our letter has long been known to historians, but that the original is believed lost. Lincoln is writing in response to a warning he has received from Henry Whitney about the dangers for the Republican Party if Lincoln gets too close to the abolitionist Owen Lovejoy.



Tom: Well, Whitney was a lawyer, like Lincoln, and more conservative views. So, Whitney saw Lovejoy as not only a threat to carrying forward Republican victories, but ultimately as perhaps even an element that should be excluded from the Republican Party.

Elyse: Tom shows me the original letter Whitney had written to Lincoln. In it, Whitney warns that the influence of the abolitionist is so feared by many in his own party, some Republicans are plotting to throw the election to Lincoln's democratic opponent.

Tom: Whitney's warning Lincoln of the plot within the Republican Party. That the Republicans who dislike Lovejoy also dislike Lincoln. And were willing to give this election to Douglas.

Elyse: But why would some Republicans sabotage their own candidate? Tom says the new party was facing a very old issue. Illinois borders the South and many voters were simply not ready for an abolitionist message.

Tom: And that term abolitionist was frequently, had the undercurrent of racism. And if we abolish these slaves, they're going to move next door to you. Feeding that irrational fear that blacks were somehow non-human and a threat to white supremacy.

Elyse: Our letter suggests that Lincoln appreciates how associating publicly with the firebrand Lovejoy might actually setback the cause of freedom.

Tom: I think he shared Whitney's concern that it could do damage in the short run. This fragile Republican coalition of all these disparate groups could be undone if it was seen as representing the most extreme views of the party.

Elyse: Our letter clearly deals with a crucial moment in Lincoln's career. But is it authentic? I'm meeting with Lincoln expert John Lupton at the Illinois Historic Old State Capitol Building.

John Lupton: Yeah, there's a lot of Lincoln history in this building.

Elyse: John is also familiar with our letter and says it must be considered in light of Lincoln's historic "House Divided" speech. It was delivered in this building as he accepted the party's nomination to run against Douglas. "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." John says Lincoln's public opposition to slavery, delivered two months before our letter was written, created a sensation.

John: The conservatives were not too fond of it, because they were afraid that Lincoln was maybe leaning too far to the abolitionist side. And, of course, the abolitionist side very much loved it.



Elyse: But even some of Lincoln's supporters thought the speech too radical. And he spent much of the summer attempting to persuade the party that he was the right man to lead them. That's the subtext of our letter. Why is it so cryptic?

John: Well, he was being a little bit guarded because he was trying to balance the different factions of the party and he was really just trying to stay in the middle of all of it.

Elyse: He was the ultimate politician?

John: Absolutely. Lincoln is an excellent politician. He's really navigating these political waters quite well.

Elyse: John's taking me to the Lincoln Library Conservation Lab. He's thrilled at the possibility Joe has stumbled upon a lost piece of Lincoln history. Okay, John...here it is. What do you think? The two-tone ink that I notice in my evaluation is also bothering John. But most of the handwriting seems familiar.

John: It's definitely distinctive of Lincoln's handwriting – the way he crosses his T's, the way he signs his name.

Elyse: Well, that's good.

John: The handwriting looks very good.

Elyse: Why would the date appear twice on the document?

John: Someone may have just written in there, just to show what the date actually was, because where the tear is, that's where the second would have been. I was able to look at the document....

Elyse: Under the microscope, the mystery deepens.

John: You can definitely see some traces of iron gall ink which was commonly used by Lincoln and, you know, many of his contemporaries. You can tell by the way it fades into the paper and just the way it ages over time.

Elyse: So the ink is period to the piece.

John: The ink is period to Abraham Lincoln's time.

Elyse: But it seems the writing has been tampered with. Someone has scrawled over the letter.



John: Now if you look at the next number, the five, you can see that there's something on top of the five, like this big heavy black ink. It's not contemporary to the time period. The entire letter is that way. There's this black ink written over everything.

Elyse: Why would somebody trace over it? John thinks he knows the answer. Long after the Civil War, Whitney had published copies of his correspondence with Lincoln. But the copy he published had long troubled historians.

John: The handwriting is just a little bit shaky in the facsimile. It wasn't quite as fluid as how Lincoln normally writes.

Elyse: It seems the suspicious copy was simply the result of the technique Whitney had used to make it – first highlighting our letter, then tracing it.

John: Here's Lincoln's signature. If you look at this A, you'll notice that the overwrite in the heavy black ink goes straight up and down, which is what it looks like in the facsimile. But if you look at the monitor, you can see a curlicue in there.

Elyse: So, what does that mean?

John: That means underneath all this black ink is Lincoln's original handwriting. So we have an original Lincoln document.

Elyse: Joe's going to be thrilled. But I'm still not entirely clear on how Lincoln dealt with the alleged Republican plot against him. Did he distance himself from the abolitionist Owen Lovejoy, as his letter perhaps suggest? I'm hoping Lovejoy scholar Bill Moore can help.

Bill: Bill Moore. Come on in.

Elyse: He explains how by that summer of 1858, Owen Lovejoy was one of the most committed antislavery politicians in the country.

Bill: Owen makes a speech about seeing the slaves on an auction block. And he says, "Can you hear the auctioneer now? Hear him saying, man for sale, man for sale!" And he says, "Who allows this little white man to be able to put these strong black men and women up for sale?" And then he points out and he says, "We have all done that. We, who are voters who vote for our congressmen, because congressmen made them slaves and we can unmake them."



Elyse: But as he ran for the Senate, Lincoln saw his fellow Republican's public passion as a liability. Lincoln was against slavery, but he was not an abolitionist. Our letter illustrates how Lincoln worked to assure conservatives he could lead the party and hold Lovejoy at an arm's distance.

Bill: Lincoln had to distance himself from Owen Lovejoy publicly.

Elyse: Privately, however, it was a different matter.

Bill: By 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Lovejoy are a political team. Lovejoy working openly for Lincoln, but Lincoln working behind the scenes.

Elyse: What Bill shows me next allows me a unique look into the guile and character of a future president. I tell Joe his document is at the heart of one of our most conflicted moments in history and is indeed an authentic Lincoln letter. Congratulations. It's quite a find.

Joe: I have those chills that I got when I first saw it.

Elyse: In Joe's letter, Lincoln is leaving the impression he will distance himself from Lovejoy and promised to write to him. That letter does not survive. But Bill Moore shows me Owen Lovejoy's response to Lincoln, written just days later.

Bill: He ends the letter, "Yours for the ultimate extinction of slavery, Owen Lovejoy." And that refers to Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in which he says, if we can put slavery and stop it in the territories, it will be in the course of ultimate extinction.

Elyse: Bill says the intimacy of the Lovejoy letter and the tone of the final sentence makes clear that Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy shared a common purpose.

Bill: It was one of the great relationships of our political generation. People who could trust one another. Who could disagree with one another. Lincoln has to come around to ending slavery, and it was a hard thing for him to do. But Lovejoy had to come around in the beginning to just settle for stopping the spread of slavery. And they both worked back and forth and behind the scenes.

Elyse: So the paper that you picked up for \$8 at a yard sale, turns out to be a very important document in American history.

Joe: It's an amazing feeling.



Elyse: It's real.

Joe: And I possess it. Thank you so much.

Elyse: In the weeks after our letter was written, Lincoln would debate Stephen Douglas with an eloquence that gained him national attention. Lincoln lost the senate that year, but he won the popular vote. And he would go on to win a far bigger prize, his party's nomination for president. That nomination and Lincoln's fight against Douglas were the wins that carried him to the White House.