



Episode 4, 2012: Lincoln Oath

Muriel Versagi: I'm Muriel Versagi, curator of the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum in Royal Oak, Michigan. A few years ago, our museum received a large donation from a local family. We found this scrap of paper in an envelope with several other documents. It reads, "Sergeant John S. Ennis, named within, take the oath of December 8th and be discharged. Signed A. Lincoln, January 16, 1864."

Who is Sgt John Ennis and why was it signed by Abraham Lincoln?

Tukufu Zuberi: Hello, how are you?

Muriel: I am good.

Tukufu: And what is this document about?

Muriel: It's a discharge for Sergeant John Ennis. Signed by A. Lincoln.

Tukufu Zuberi: You think this was a soldier in the Union Army and Lincoln was somehow giving him an honorable discharge or something?

Muriel: Personally.

Tukufu: You do notice there's writing on the back of this?

Muriel: That's what led us to believe that it's real because...theory? Lots of theories, um, paper was very scarce I'm thinking in the war.

Tukufu: January 16th, 1864. You do recognize that Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United States at that point?

Muriel: Oh yes, indeed.

Tukufu: Why do you think the President of the United States is going to be writing on scrap paper?

Muriel: That's what I want you to find out. I want to know -- we at the museum what to know -- if that's a real Lincoln signature. And who is Sergeant John Ennis? Who is he?

Tukufu: I'm going to do my best to find if this is in fact a Lincoln signature on scrap paper.

Muriel: I know, I know.

Tukufu: January 16th, 1864. Abraham Lincoln is trying to keep the Union together. He's already issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and just a few days before this date, January 16th, the Thirteenth Amendment has been introduced into Congress.

In the thick of war, and wrestling with the most divisive issue of his day, would this document really have crossed the President's desk?

The question is, why is Abraham Lincoln, if he signed this, discharging this particular individual who has taken some kind of oath.

And the size of the document is just plain odd.

It looks too little to be official. Come on! Let me call the office.

Robin Hutchins: This is Robin.

Tukufu: Did you find out anything about a Sergeant John S. Ennis?

Robin: I think I found your guy.

Tukufu: Researcher Robin Hutchins tells me that John Ennis was a flesh and blood soldier, but not what Muriel thought. He was a confederate, not a union soldier, and his rank was private, not sergeant.

He's from Warren County, Kentucky, a son of a wealthy family, and at around age 18, he joined the Confederate unit.

In 1863, a Private Ennis of the Kentucky 3rd Cavalry had been captured and imprisoned.

And the Oath of December 8th that Muriel's note refers to was an 1863 proclamation. It gave some confederate sympathizers the opportunity to switch sides.

It would allow individuals who had political allegiance to the Confederacy to now take an oath of allegiance to the Union and receive amnesty.

But Lincoln excluded confederate prisoners of war from taking this oath.

Private Ennis was a prison of war, so why would the President have intervened because one lowly rebel soldier wanted to go home?

I'm meeting with Dr. James Cornelius, he's curator of the Lincoln Collection in Springfield, Illinois.

Tukufu: This is what I have.

James: Let me have a look. There's something else on the back.

Tukufu: What is the President of the United States doing using scrap paper?

James: Yeah...

Tukufu: I mean, was there a paper shortage because of the war? Just something, it just...

James: No.

Tukufu: This does not make sense.

James takes me to the library's conservation lab to authenticate the signature.

James: Well the first thing we notice is that the ink is a nice kind of chocolate brown color. Iron gall ink. It fades. It's darker in some places.

Tukufu: Yeah.

James: It's lighter in other places.

Tukufu: So, that's good. Iron gall ink was used and that's period.

Next, James shows me something from their collection, an authenticated letter from the President to an Illinois senator.

So this is a known signature.

It certainly looks a lot like ours. Then he produces another, longer letter, signed, "A. Lincoln."

James: His ink is good, his paper is good.

Tukufu: Ok.

The only problem: this third letter is a known fake.

James: This was made in the 1930s, we think.

Tukufu: This was made in the 1930s.

James: Yeah.

Tukufu: The forged signature is similar to ours, but James can't tell exactly what we have.

He explains that Lincoln forgeries began to appear almost immediately after his death. Prices for the real thing motivate forgers today.

James: \$2,000, \$30,00 for just a piece of paper that only has his signature on it. On, up to a big full letter, maybe 100 words, depending on the subject, that could be worth \$20, \$40, \$60 thousand. The problem with this big forgery is more in his wording. He didn't understand the way Lincoln thought and wrote.

Tukufu: So where does that put me with ours. Is this an authentic Abraham Lincoln signature?

James: Let's flip it over once. Remember there's funny stuff on the back.

Tukufu: Yes.

James explains that sometimes the key to authenticating a signature is the content of the document and its context. Is it accurate, and can it be backed up by other information?

In this case, he explains that if a Confederate sympathizer was prepared to renounce his loyalty, he would often have someone write a letter to Washington D.C. on his behalf.

James: Well you remember how it says John F. Ennis, named within.

Tukufu: Right.

James: Within another letter. A letter, we guess, to Mr. Lincoln. That, we think, is what's on the other side.

Tukufu: But is there any other evidence that someone might have written to the president on Private Ennis' behalf? James has made a discovery.

James: This is a list of people who petitioned to be released from Camp Douglas.

Fourth from the end, Ennis, J-n-o, is in the 3rd Kentucky Cavalry. He wants to get out. Who petitioned to get him out? Honorable H. Grider. That's Congressman Henry Grider.

Tukufu: Lincoln had ordered that confederate prisoners could not take the oath. But James says he made exceptions, especially if the petitioner was a powerful congressman from his own state!

Henry Grider is the link between a little private, a nineteen year old kid, nobody's ever heard of him, and the President of the United States.

Did Private Ennis go free? Or was this letter, like the other forgery, a clever hoax?

James: I'll show you one other thing here.

Tukufu: So first of all let me start by saying Sgt. John S. Ennis was not in the Union Army. In fact he was a private. He was a Confederate soldier.

Muriel: Okay. That blows that theory.

I explain that James said in a world of skillful Lincoln forgeries, authenticating a signature sometimes depends on the content and context of the document.

James: I'll show you one other thing here. He was discharged.

Tukufu: Wow.

James: John Ennis signs the oath of loyalty. That's the clincher. Lincoln actually signed it. Word goes out through the military, by the telegraph to Chicago, three days later, the boy is free.

James: This is the real thing.

Muriel: Oh my God.

Tukufu: You have in your hand an authentic signature from President Abraham Lincoln.

Muriel: Oh, come – really?

Tukufu: There was one other thing: why had the letter been so fragmented?

James: You said earlier, "Lincoln didn't have a paper shortage," he didn't use scraps, he didn't need to.

Tukufu: Right, so what's going on?

James: Souveniring. Somebody cut these off of whole documents out of the War Department files. Here's another one. Look, it's even smaller than yours. That's a Lincoln signature.

Tukufu: Ok.

James: And on the back of it, upside down in this case, yours is sideways, is somebody else's letter.

Tukufu: Right.

Abraham Lincoln did not suffer from a lack of paper.

Muriel: For us, this little piece of paper will be the most important thing in our collection, this little scrap. Wow, oh geez. Thank you so much.