



Figure 1: The 1865 “Cracked Plate Portrait” of Abraham Lincoln (National Portrait Gallery)

Objects that made history: artifacts from the life of President Abraham Lincoln

An old, cracked picture, a pair of spectacles mended with string, and the contents of a wallet were once part of history. They are kept by museums because they tell us about the times, life, and character of the heroic president Abraham Lincoln.

The “Cracked Plate Portrait” (Figure 1) held by the National Portrait Gallery, dates from February 1865. In those days, photographs were recorded on glass, and then transferred to paper. The chemicals used gave the pictures a warm golden-brown “sepia” tone. The photographer accidentally broke the glass plate. Because Lincoln was assassinated, there was never a chance to

take another picture. That's why the last portrait of Abraham Lincoln has a crack running across the top. The deep lines across Lincoln's face and the shadows under his eyes tell us that he was working really hard at his duties as president and had a lot of responsibility weighing on him. His gentle smile makes him seem like a kind and wise person. His tie is crooked. This tells us he was a humble man, and not overly concerned about his image.

The Smithsonian Museum holds a special and sad collection. It includes the contents of Abraham Lincoln's pockets on the fateful night at the Ford Theatre when he was shot by an



Figure 2: Left: the contents of Abraham Lincoln's pockets on the night of his assassination.

Right: Abraham Lincoln's quartz and gold watch fob (Library of Congress).

assassin. One item was a pocket knife. Another was a "watch fob" (Figure 2). In those days before wristwatches were invented, men wore pocket watches. They were attached to chains with

a decorative weight that made it easier to pull the watch from the pocket. Often they had decorative family crests. Lincoln's was a small pendant made from quartz. What made it special was the quartz was flecked with gold! Did Lincoln have a gold mine connection?

Abraham Lincoln's eye-glasses (Figure 3) are part of the collection. The silver frames are stamped with "A. Lincoln, President of the United States." The sides slide mechanically to the spectacles can be folded into a small space, and hold securely to the face when the wearer is busy working. President's glasses are slightly broken at the hinge, and held together with string! This is another clue that the president was a humble and thrifty man.

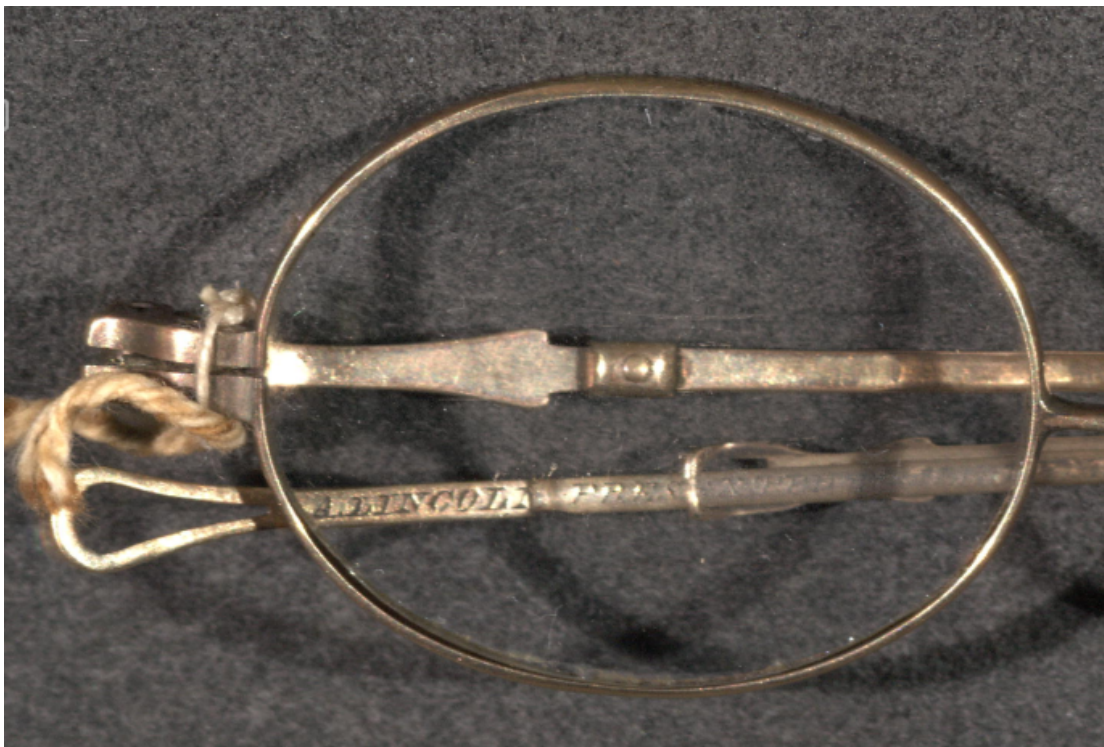


Figure 3: Abraham Lincoln's spectacles, with a hinge repaired with string. (Library of Congress)

President Lincoln's wallet, strangely, held a \$5 dollar Confederate bill. Since he was the leader of Union forces, this is a bit of a mystery. He also had tucked into the wallet, some newspaper clippings with articles that said favorable things about him. Apparently, this

was the way that the President encouraged himself! He was humble, but he did appreciate nice things being said about him.

A hand-tooled leather Bible, which once belonged to the president has recently been found and donated to the Lincoln Presidential Library. It was originally donated by Lincoln's widow to a minister to provide evidence of his faith and combat rumors that Lincoln was an atheist (Katz and Brown).

A crooked tie, a pocket knife, mended glasses, a Bible, and old newspaper clippings give us unexpected clues about an iconic figure of history. The Bible represented his faith. The knife was a tool that showed he was a hands-on person who could fix and work on things. A cracked picture symbolizes breaking new ground, and sacrifice. Lincoln is important because he represents the best of the American spirit: hard work, and determination to overcome the forces of injustice. The secret contents of his pocket show us he allowed himself some little indulgences: a gold-flecked watch fob, and a wallet, which rather than money, stored newspaper editorials that warmed his heart. These simple objects shows us a little of the fashion and technology in those times, and that this great, legendary man was very human.

Works Cited

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