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Douglas L. Wilson

Knox College, dwilson@knox.edu

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Wilson, Douglas L., "A Note on the Text of Lincoln's Second Inaugural" (2002). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 391.

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A Note on the Text of Lincoln's Second Inaugural

Douglas L. Wilson

Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is perhaps as familiar and frequently read as any text in American English. Engraved in stone on the North wall of the Lincoln Memorial in 701 words, it is a text that many of Lincoln's countrymen can recite from memory and has often been called his "greatest speech."¹ For the other leading candidate for that honor, the Gettysburg Address, there are five known copies in Lincoln's handwriting, none of which is exactly the same. It is said to be a restful day in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress when no one turns up bearing one of the many facsimiles and claiming to have discovered another original. But there is nothing remotely like this in the case of the Second Inaugural, nor has there ever been any serious controversy about its text.

As one might expect, it is a text that is readily available on the World Wide Web, having been posted by scores of patriotic and educational organizations. It would be more accurate, however, to say that *texts* of the Second Inaugural are readily available on the web, for they are not all the

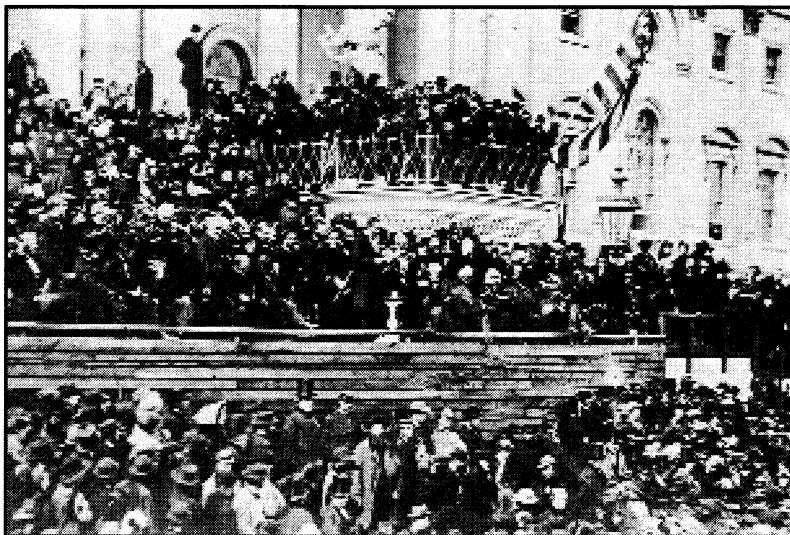
Douglas L. Wilson is George A. Lawrence Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of English at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, where he serves as codirector of the Lincoln Studies Center. His books and editorial work include: *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*; *Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years*; *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 2nd Series. He is currently a member of the executive committee of The Presidential Papers of Abraham Lincoln Online and chair of its editorial board.

same. Far and away the most common text offered is that taken from a congressional publication, *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States: from George Washington to George W. Bush*.² Unfortunately, this text proves to be a classic example of the kind of editorial treatment that inadvertently undermines the

author. One of the most admired features of Lincoln's address is the second paragraph's conclusion, where he attempts to characterize the outbreak of the Civil War in spite of the desire on both sides to avoid it. By way of emphasizing the war's inexorable onset without assigning blame, Lincoln ends this section of his address with a stark, four-word sentence: "And the war came." The silence created before this quietly

foreboding sentence, and therefore the full stop that creates it, would seem obvious ingredients in the success of Lincoln's rhetorical strategy. Nonetheless, in the text reprinted in the government-sponsored publication named above and replicated across the internet, Lincoln's strategic choice of sentence structure has been editorially "corrected" by making this sentence part of the previous one, thus blunting the rhetorical effect that Lincoln had carefully created.³ If any argument were needed for documentary editing's importance, not only to scholarship but to the general reading public, one need look no further.

Lincoln's first serious editors were his secretaries and biographers, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, who compiled the initial attempt at a complete edition of Lincoln's works in 1894, an edition they expanded and reissued in 1905. It was undoubtedly their version of the Second Inaugural that served as the basis of the highly stylized text on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial, dedicated in 1922.⁴ The source text



President Lincoln delivers Second Inaugural Address, 4 March 1865

Architect of the Capitol, LC-USA7-16837

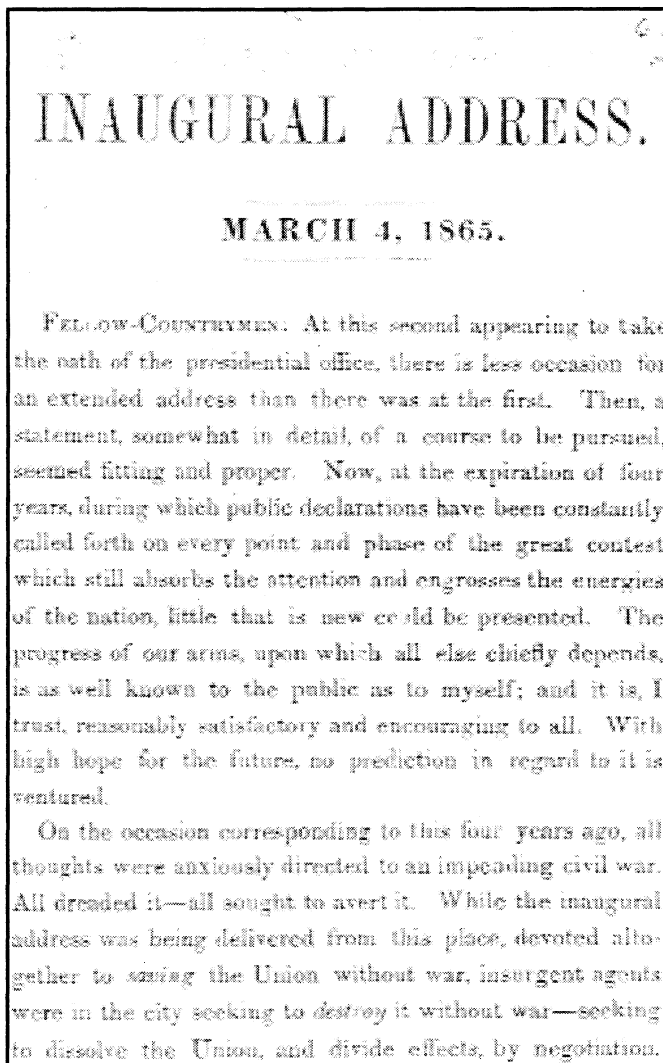


Figure 1

for Nicolay and Hay's own rendering of the Second Inaugural, however, was never specified and remains somewhat unclear.⁵ But in the work that replaced Nicolay and Hay's as the standard edition, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953), Roy P. Basler and his associates based their text on a document of undeniable authority, Lincoln's handwritten manuscript.⁶

Lincoln gave his only known manuscript to Hay and inscribed it "Original manuscript of second Inaugural presented to Major John Hay," although "original" must be understood with some latitude. Presented to the Library of Congress in 1916 by Hay's family, the manuscript proves upon close examination to be a fair copy, rather than a composition draft, with only a few revisions. Numerous differences in accidentals—punctuation, capitalization, italicization, and spelling—make it unlikely that this manuscript was the source for Nicolay and Hay's text. But even if it was, using

the only known manuscript afforded the Basler team a means of recovering an authentic Lincolnian text that was unencumbered by well-intentioned editorial corrections and improvements.

Since its appearance in the *Collected Works* in 1953, this has been the text of the Second Inaugural cited by scholars, but it turns out not to be the only text that bears authority. In preparation for the 100th anniversary of the Second Inaugural in 1965, David C. Mearns and Lloyd A. Dunlap, both experienced Lincoln scholars working at the Library of Congress, uncovered clear evidence that Lincoln had caused his speech to be printed in advance and that newspapers had been provided copies of this printed text. They found in Nicolay's papers a request from a Washington newspaper editor, Thomas B. Florence, who wrote on White House stationery: "I called to enquire how the Constitutional Union can obtain for publication copies of the Inaugural of the President of the U. S. to be delivered to-morrow. Be good enough to include that paper with those who may be favored by the distribution if any such purpose is contemplated."⁷ The next day, only a few hours after its delivery at the Capitol, the text of Lincoln's address appeared in the *Constitutional Union* with the note: "We are deeply indebted to Hon. J. C. Nicolay, the polite Secretary of the President, for his gentlemanly courtesy in promptly furnishing us with early copies of the Inaugural Address."⁸

Mearns and Dunlap noted that the text printed in this newspaper perfectly matched that of an "extremely rare" three-page leaflet titled "Inaugural Address. March 4, 1865"⁹ (see Fig. 1). This makes it reasonably certain that the leaflet was produced in very small numbers to serve primarily as a press handout. While there are no verbal differences between the corrected manuscript and the three-page leaflet, there are a great many other differences—nearly thirty by my count—in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and hyphenation.

But such differences are not unexpected. Lincoln certainly depended on his printer—an Indiana politician named John Defrees—to correct his spelling, and he probably tended to defer to him in other matters, such as capitalization, hyphenation, and punctuation. Defrees reported to Lincoln's biographers on some of his disputes with the president over the form of his state papers. "He used too many commas," Defrees told Josiah Holland, "and I had frequently to labor with him to reduce the number. At other times he would tell me that he would furnish the words—and I might put the periods to suit."¹⁰

Here, then, is a textbook example of the "socialization" of texts, the process whereby others besides the author are accorded some role in producing printed texts. Professional

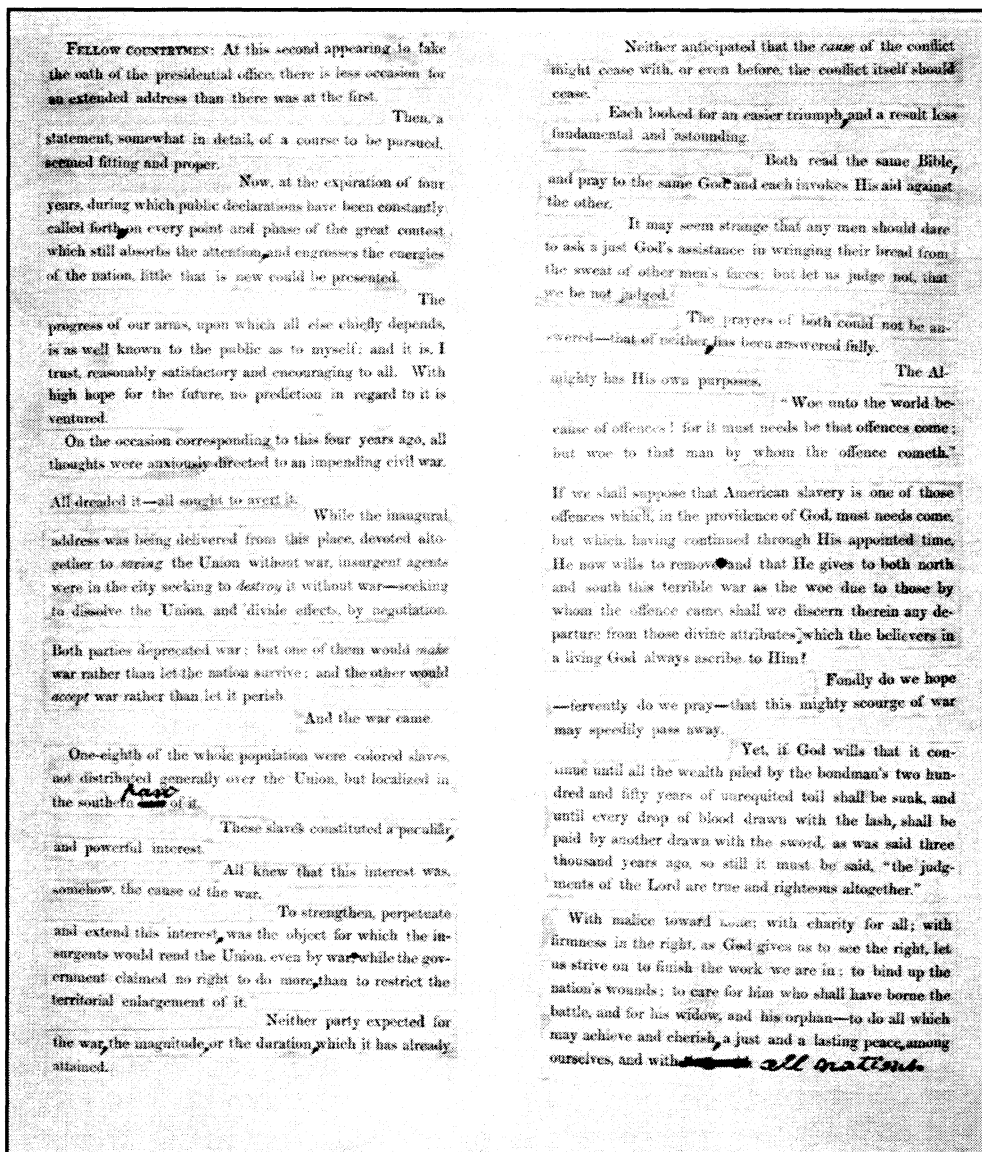


Figure 2

editors will be quick to see another telling implication that rarely registers with others. If this three-page press handout of the Second Inaugural was actually set from Lincoln's manuscript and corrected by him, then it, too, has considerable authority. Nicolay and Hay probably used this version of the Second Inaugural as the basis of their text, and insofar as the form of the printed text can be said to have superseded that of the manuscript, it has arguably *more* authority and a greater claim to be the final text than the manuscript itself. So it would seem, but was it so set?

In short, it was. That the three-page printing was set from Lincoln's manuscript is abundantly clear from the evidence of yet a third document with considerable authority of its own, a galley proof of the three-page leaflet with changes that appear to be in Lincoln's hand (see Fig. 2). Both the typeface

and the lines of type in the galley proof precisely match those of the leaflet, convincingly linking them as coming from the same setting of type (see Figs. 1 and 2). Moreover, the manuscript's original wording (before its two strikeouts) appears in the galley proof, which tells us conclusively that the galleys were set from the manuscript.¹¹

The galley proof in question is part of a document that Basler and his associates do not refer to and may not have been aware of. It was given to the Library of Congress along with the manuscript of the Second Inaugural by John Hay's family and therefore was for many years housed with the Hay Papers. Unlike the manuscript, which is included in the 1960 microfilm edition of Lincoln's papers, this document seems never to have been officially designated as part of the Lincoln collection and is, and probably always has been, difficult to identify and locate.¹² The Hay family may be the source of the suggestion, repeated by Mearns and Dunlap, that this document served as "the reading copy" of the address that Lincoln employed at the inauguration ceremony. As Mearns and Dunlap

observed, the galley proofs had been "carefully clipped and pasted on a large sheet of cardboard in a careful arrangement to indicate pauses for breathing and emphasis."¹³ This roughly accords with the contemporary description of the journalist and Lincoln confidant, Noah Brooks, that Lincoln's reading copy was "printed in two broad columns upon a half-sheet of foolscap,"¹⁴ and it seems a plausible explanation for the form and condition in which the document survives. Certainly, it is hard to imagine who else besides Lincoln would have had both reason and opportunity to so clip, arrange, and mark changes on these galley proofs, or what other purpose this particular document could possibly have served.

If we accept this cut-and-paste document as Lincoln's reading copy, which I am prepared to do, it has much to

teach us. For one thing, it exhibits the printed text in an uncorrected state, so that comparing the manuscript with the galley proof makes it possible to gauge the changes in Lincoln's text that were initiated by the printer. In the same way, comparing the galley proof with the final printing of the three-page handout enables us to gauge the extent to which Lincoln accepted or rejected the printer's proposed changes to a text intended for the press and public.¹⁵ As suggested earlier, it should come as no surprise that Lincoln accepted a majority of the printer's changes, all of which, of course, were non-verbal. Of equal interest in assessing the impact of the printer on the finished form of Lincoln's writings is the number of proposed changes Lincoln rejected. True to what the printer told Lincoln's biographers, he eliminated fourteen of Lincoln's commas from the manuscript text. Of these proposed purges, Lincoln accepted eleven for the text of the three-page press handout. It is revealing, however, that in preparing the set of proofs he retained as copy from which to read, he restored six of these commas and added another six.¹⁶

The most significant implication of accepting the paste-up of the galley proofs as Lincoln's reading copy is, without doubt, the standing this gives to its text. In incorporating changes not present in earlier versions, and in being the text from which Lincoln actually delivered his address, the reading copy arguably supersedes all others as Lincoln's final text of the Second Inaugural Address.¹⁷ Its words, one should be clear, are the same as those of the corrected manuscript and the three-page press handout, but the differences, while all matters of spelling and punctuation, are nonetheless numerous and real.¹⁸

Since all three of the texts discussed here are authoritative, the question naturally arises, which one should be cited? Documentary editors, particularly when working in the spacious realms of cyberspace, can easily avoid this problem by presenting the texts of all three documents. Nor is this a serious problem for most other scholars, who are used to confronting a range of textual choices and citing the text that best suits their purposes. But students, non-specialists, and ordinary readers, to say nothing of anthologists, require an authoritative text. For Lincoln's Second Inaugural, one of the most important documents in American history, it seems remarkable that the text of choice in the future will likely be one that has thus far never previously appeared in Lincoln's published works—the one he fashioned out of galley proofs and read from on 4 March 1865.¹⁹

Notes

1. See, for example, Garry Wills's essay, "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1999), 60–70; and Ronald C. White Jr.'s *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).
2. Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1989. Senate document (United States. Congress. Senate), 101–10. This is the "Bicentennial edition" of a title that has been updated several times.
3. This text can be traced to an earlier, more comprehensive governmental publication, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (1898), ed. James D. Richardson.
4. Besides the obvious departure—the designer's decision to capitalize all the letters and eliminate most punctuation—there is a significant difference in paragraphing. Nicolay and Hay expand the number of paragraphs to six, while the Lincoln Memorial version adheres to the authorial four.
5. The most likely source for Nicolay and Hay's text would appear to be that of the three-page press handout described below. These editors did not scruple, however, at changing Lincoln's spelling of "offence" and "offences," lowering the case of his references to the deity, and, in their 1905 edition, changing Lincoln's "bondman's" to "bondsman's."
6. Roy P. Basler et al., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:332–33.
7. David C. Mearns and Lloyd A. Dunlop, Library of Congress Press Release (8 February 1965), 3. For locating the press release, I am greatly indebted to the detective work of Jeff Flannery of the Library of Congress Manuscript Division. The Florence letter can now be found in the Abraham Lincoln Papers on the Library of Congress web site.
8. *Ibid.* The middle initial of Nicolay's name given in the story is an error.
9. The Library of Congress has two copies of this rare leaflet. I am grateful to Clark Evans of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division for locating this item, and for other valuable assistance.
10. Quoted in Allen C. Guelzo, "Holland's Informants: The Construction of Josiah Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln*," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 23 (1):46 (Winter 2002).
11. It also tells us that these changes—two words stricken and replaced—were changes made after the manuscript had been sent to the printer (see Fig. 2).
12. This document is now treated as part of the manuscript and is housed with it in the vault in the Conservation Laboratory. It can be seen, with the manuscript, on the Library's web site under Presidential Inaugurations. For arranging access to the manuscript, I am grateful to John R. Sellers of the Manuscript

Division. For help in examining both documents and for providing access to records, I am much indebted to Maria Nugent of the Conservation Laboratory.

13. Mearns and Dunlap, 2. “Cardboard” is perhaps misleading; the paper on which the proof is pasted is somewhat stiff and heavier than ordinary paper.

14. This description is from a dispatch dated 12 March 1865 and is reprinted in Michael Burlingame, ed., *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), 168.

15. This assumes that the galley proofs that served as Lincoln’s reading copy were retained and that a different set, with Lincoln’s corrections, was returned to the printer. It also assumes, of course, that the printer invariably followed Lincoln’s corrections.

16. In addition, two of Lincoln’s semi-colons were converted by the printer to commas, but Lincoln restored both to their original status as semi-colons.

17. This does not take into account a portion of the third paragraph that Lincoln copied out at the request of Amanda H. Hall two weeks after delivery. See *Collected Works*, 8:367. Predictably, it is not identical to the same passage in the three authoritative versions discussed here. For providing a reproduction of the Hall letter, I am indebted to Kim Bauer of the Illinois State Historical Library.

18. In addition to the six new commas cited above, the differences between this text and the three-page handout include a comma after “terrible war” that Lincoln restored to his text in the handout but left out of the reading copy.

19. An annotated transcription of the reading copy is available on the Library of Congress web site: Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000–2001]), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/alhome.html>, accessed March 2002.



Logan County Courthouse (reconstruction on original site), Postville, Illinois
Abraham Lincoln represented clients before the Logan County Circuit Court in this courthouse from 1840 to 1847, as part of his travels on the Eighth Judicial Circuit

Photo courtesy of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln
<http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org>