



Dec-2003

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Thomas R. and Turner, Jennifer A. (2003). Abraham Lincoln and the Plymouth Forefathers Monument: Researching Lincoln in the Electronic Age. *Bridgewater Review*, 22(2), 3-6.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol22/iss2/5

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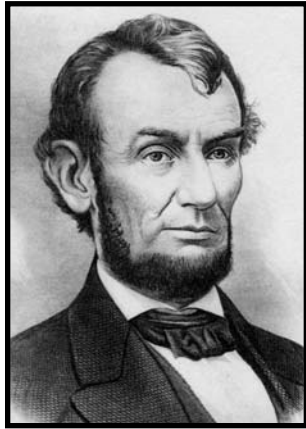
Abraham Lincoln and the Plymouth Forefathers Monument:

Researching Lincoln in the Electronic Age

by Thomas R. Turner and Jennifer A. Turner



The presidential papers of Abraham Lincoln have been available to scholars since 1947 when they were publicly opened twenty-one years after the death of Robert Todd Lincoln, the president's eldest and sole surviving son. Robert took charge of the papers after his father's assassination, sometimes carrying them between homes in Washington, D.C. and Chicago and also to his summer residence *Hildene* in Manchester, Vermont



Courtesy BSC Special Collections

before donating them to the Library of Congress. Robert occasionally made the documents, which consisted mainly of incoming correspondence, available to friendly authors such as Lincoln's secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay who utilized them in writing their monumental ten-volume Lincoln biography. However, he refused access to other writers who he feared might be too critical and who could not be counted on to sufficiently defend Abraham Lincoln's legacy, a legacy of which Robert himself had become one of the chief guardians.

Additionally, the papers were also made available in a microfilm edition so that researchers did not have to travel to the Library of Congress but could work in other libraries that had acquired the microfilm. A finding guide was developed, but since it consisted primarily of an alphabetical listing of those who had corresponded with Abraham Lincoln it was cumbersome to use. Anyone who has worked with microfilm can attest to the difficulty in locating a specific item on a single roll of microfilm, as well as the limitations of microfilm readers that make it difficult to decipher often-illegible nineteenth century handwriting. In short, while the Abraham Lincoln papers were an invaluable resource for Lincoln and Civil War scholars, they were not entirely easy to utilize.

In spite of this shortcoming, authors writing about the sixteenth president used many parts of this vast correspondence. But the sheer volume of the collection, which runs to about 20,000 items, always seemed to hint that there might be additional insights about Lincoln's life and career if only there were some way to make the papers more user friendly.

That need has now been answered due to significant advances in technology in recent years and specifically the *American Memory Project* at the Library of Congress. The Lincoln documents have been scanned and placed in a database that allows the user to search not only chronologically, but also by name of correspondent and keywords. Additionally, many of the documents have been transcribed under the supervision of Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, the site of one of the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates. It is now possible to sit at a computer and view any document in the collection, to print a copy, and in many cases to read a transcription.

One interesting example of the type of insight such a search can yield involves the Forefathers Monument in Plymouth, Massachusetts. During a sabbatical, one of the co-authors of this article, while searching the microfilm edition, came across a certificate indicating that Abraham Lincoln had donated money to the building of this famous memorial. However, that was not the topic being investigated and no written note was made about this document, although a mental note was taken that this might be an interesting issue to pursue more thoroughly another time. Since no follow-up was made over a number of years, an attempt to locate the document would now have required a search of forty to fifty reels of microfilm looking for an individual document, a task that appeared rather daunting and uncertain enough of results to justify the time expenditure required.

Using *American Memory* and typing in the word Plymouth, however, not only yielded the sought-after certificate but additional correspondence about the president's contribution to the Forefathers Monument as well as an attempt to enlist his name in support of other nineteenth century monument projects. While the idea for a monument to honor the Pilgrims was pro-

posed as far back as 1794, the plan received a boost with the founding of the Pilgrim Society in 1820, the two hundredth anniversary of the landing. However, it was not until the mid-1850s that the Society had accumulated enough funds to search for an architect. Although several individuals submitted designs, the Society finally settled on Hammatt Billings.

Billings was a well-known 19th century artist and architect, although by the 20th century he had become a much more obscure figure until his reputation was somewhat rehabilitated by James O’Gorman of Wellesley College in his biography entitled *Accomplished in All Departments of Art, Hammatt Billings of Boston, 1818-1874*. The artist had made his reputation with designs for businesses, theaters, libraries, funerary monuments, and especially his illustrations for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. According to Professor O’Gorman, the main reason that Billings was eventually forgotten was that he was a generalist in what was becoming an age of specialization. While he was skilled in many areas, he was not so outstanding in any one area as to be remembered as an expert.

Billings undertook the monument project at an auspicious moment. Throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, there seemed to be a growing national consciousness that developed in particular around the legacy purported to have been created by the founding of Massachusetts by the Pilgrims and by extension the creation of the United States. Prominent public speakers of the day, such as Daniel Webster and Edward Everett, delivered many addresses at annual celebrations of the landing at Plymouth Rock as well as other commemorative events. For example, at a Forefathers Celebration in 1853, Edward Everett equated the Pilgrims and their ideology as the basis for American freedom and civil liberties. He said, “The political code of the Pilgrims united religion and liberty, morals and law.”

In the same period, while there was also growing interest in the Pilgrims, as seen by the numerous literary works to appear on the Pilgrims in the 1850s such as William Bradford’s *Of Plimoth Plantation*, the vision of the Forefathers Monument also became a symbol of national unity in a period of increasing sectional tension. In many ways, the iconography of the monument, which describes the physical journey of the Pilgrims as well as the social and civil institutions established under them, became a way to demonstrate the founding, creation, and sustaining of a national union increasingly called into question by divisive incidents in the 1850s such as the Fugitive Slave Act, Bleeding Kansas, and Harper’s Ferry. As O’Gorman emphasizes, it was that concept of a national tradition that Billings and his patrons looked in creating the monument. He notes,

“the monument was designed to remind all citizens, both North and South, of their collective heritage—Billings’ aim was to give shape to the words of the great orators of his day in the cause of preserving national unity—through the celebration of a shared heroic origin.”

In any event, once Billings had secured the contract, he hired the Reverend William Harding as general fundraising agent since the cost of the completed project was estimated to be the not insignificant sum of \$300,000. Billings planned to build the monument in the grand style; the original design stood 153 feet high, although the project took a lot longer to build than planned and the final memorial was reduced to an 81 foot height. Parenthetically, Billings also submitted plans for a massive statue to honor Daniel Webster to be erected in the Boston Public Garden and another colossal monument to the Minutemen on Lexington Green, but neither of those projects was ever built. Indeed, Billings, who died in 1874, did not live to see the Forefathers Monument completed. The project was finished by his brother, Joseph, and was dedicated on August 1, 1889.

On April 15, 1861, subscription agent Renewick Dickerson wrote to the president in reference to the Forefathers Monument,

Under ordinary circumstances I would have been thrice happy to have had your name on my book but I forbear inviting your cooperation in this momentous crisis—Please accept the enclosed Honorary Certificate of Life Membership to the Pilgrim Monument Association.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that on April 12 the Confederates had attacked Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Dickerson’s letter shows that even in times of grave crisis, chief executives are also called on to deal with more mundane matters. The wording of Dickerson’s letter is interesting, leaving open the possibility that the agent actually made the contribution in Lincoln’s name in order to utilize the president’s prestige to solicit other contributions. However, the fact that Lincoln received a receipt for \$10 suggests that he actually made the donation and that Dickerson’s reference is merely to his inability to get the president to sign the subscription book.

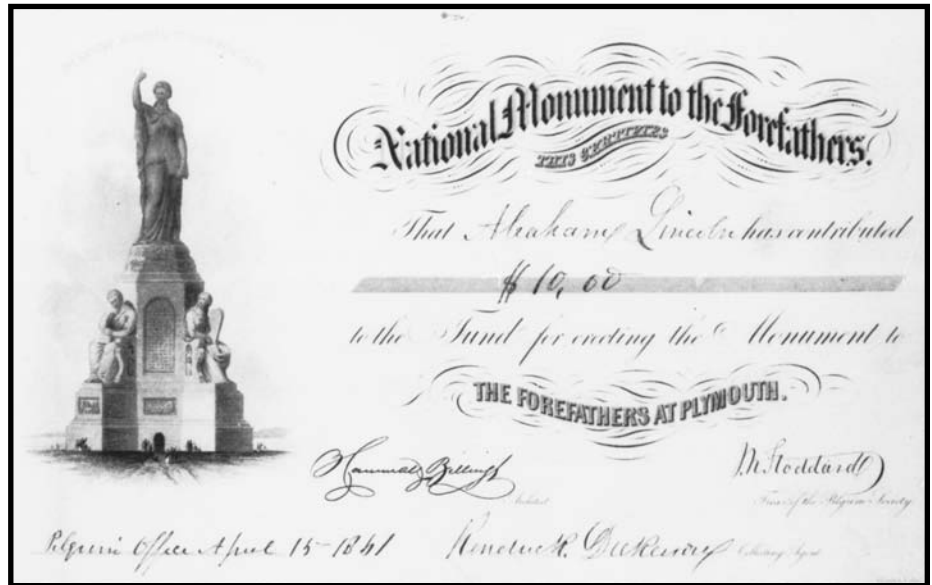
In return for his \$10, Abraham Lincoln received honorary life membership in the Pilgrim Society, a receipt illustrated with Billings’s drawing of the proposed mon-

ument, along with a solicitation notice to the American public, which is also decorated with the Billings sketch. A search of the Pilgrim Society archives, however, failed to turn up any records of Lincoln's life membership, although two other presidents, John and John Quincy Adams, were listed as life members. Lincoln's contribution was also quite modest, since had he donated at least \$50 he would have received a bronze medal.

In light of their future joint speaking venture at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, it is interesting that Edward Everett was another major supporter of the Forefathers Monument. Everett was invited to deliver the major oration for the battlefield commemoration while the president was asked to provide a few brief and fitting remarks. Everett immediately recognized the greatness of the Gettysburg Address, writing to the president on November 20, "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

Another item that Lincoln received was a printed circular with letters from several prominent individuals, including Everett, praising the monument project. In the files of the Pilgrim Society there is also a letter from Everett about his own donation. His contribution of \$150 entitled him to one of the medal statuettes molded by sculptor John Adams Jackson as an incentive for the premium donors.

As noted, the Forefathers Monument was not the only project that sought the president's backing. Another monument that Billings was associated with was the effort to build a 60' statue to honor the minutemen on Lexington Green. Charles Hudson, a prominent citizen of Lexington who had served with Lincoln in Congress in the 1840s, was charged with developing the idea and Everett also served as president of the Lexington Monument Association and became its chief fundraiser. Similarly to the Forefathers Monument, Billings produced a certificate of membership depicting the Lexington battle and a drawing of the proposed monument. Unfortunately, the Civil War intervened to postpone the project and after the war interest had waned and the large statue was never erected, although a smaller version was built.



President Lincoln received this receipt for his \$10 contribution to the building of the Forefathers Monument.

Although the monument was never completed, Hudson wrote to the president on July 10, 1861,

Knowing that your time must be occupied by weighty matters of state, I crave your attention but for a moment. We have formed a design of erecting a Monument at Lexington commemorative of the opening scene of the Revolution—A Monument equal in art beauty and grandeur to anything in the country—& worthy of the event—. The object of this letter is to ask permission to add your name to the list.

It should also be noted that in December of 1863, one Charles Parsons wrote on behalf of the West Point Battle Commission, soliciting an endorsement for a proposed monument to mark the graves of veterans at the Military Academy. Unlike his response to the Forefathers Monument, there is no evidence that the president ever replied to either of these letters.

One question Lincoln's contribution does raise is whether there were some special circumstances that caused him to take a particular interest in the Forefathers Monument. We know that Lincoln's ancestors migrated from England to Massachusetts in the 1600s and there was a vague tradition of this in the Lincoln family. While correspondents occasionally tried to question Lincoln about his ancestors, there is no evidence that he ever learned directly about any connection with the Bay State.

If that link cannot be made directly is there any evidence in Lincoln's extensive correspondence that he exhibited an interest in the Pilgrims? *The Collected Works*

of *Abraham Lincoln* have long been available in an eight-volume set along with two supplemental volumes that total over four thousand pages. However, the index to Lincoln's own writings is even less usable than the index to the *Abraham Lincoln Papers*. If one were totally unfamiliar with the *Collected Works*, a search through thousands of pages would be required in order to determine if Lincoln ever made reference to the Pilgrims.

Once again, however, technological innovations have opened new ways to access Lincoln's writings. The *Collected Works* have been digitized at the University of Michigan and typing in the word Pilgrims reveals that the president was invited on November 28, 1864, by Joseph Choate, Chairman of the New England Society in New York City, to be present on Thursday, December 22 at its annual festival to commemorate the Pilgrim landing. While he was not able to attend, Lincoln replied to Choate, praising the sacrifices that American citizens were making in the Civil War and adding:

The work of the Plymouth emigrants was the glory of their age. While we reverence their memory, let us not forget how vastly greater is our opportunity.

Of course it was during Lincoln's presidency that Thanksgiving, which was an important regional New England feast day, gained national prominence. While one would expect to find scenes of the first Thanksgiving on a monument commemorating the Pilgrims, at the time the Forefathers Monument was being built, it was not a widely celebrated holiday. In fact, throughout the 1850s, Sarah Josepha Hale used her women's magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* to promote the annual observation of Thanksgiving as a national anniversary that would help to preserve the Union. Although Hale eventually succeeded in gaining the sympathetic ear of Abraham Lincoln, her desire to use Thanksgiving as a way to further construct familial and national unity did not help prevent the Civil War. Interestingly, Lincoln cited the current troubles of the Civil War in his Thanksgiving Proclamations and did not reference the Pilgrims. It is clear that to Lincoln the Pilgrims were not icons of a dead past. While it was fine to memorialize the Pilgrims, his own generation had even more of an opportunity to carry forward the work they had begun.

Admittedly some might argue that the fact that Lincoln contributed \$10 to the building of the Forefathers Monument adds little to our knowledge about the bigger issues of his presidency such as emancipation or Civil War military strategy. While this is true, we would contend that his donation does reveal his interest in

American history, particularly the colonial and revolutionary past, his own sense of civic duty, and possibly an interest in his own ancestry. It is ultimately from these smaller building blocks that a fuller portrait of any historical figure emerges.

It is also important to consider that the monument itself took decades to build, and in general, funds came in slowly and were significantly disrupted by the coming of the Civil War. So, it is fairly significant that in the midst of a growing national crisis, Lincoln took the time to send money and reply to the subscription letter. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that while there is no clear link between Lincoln's interest in the Forefathers Monument and in his creation of a national holiday based on the Pilgrim founding, clearly nationally prominent leaders were conceptualizing ways to demonstrate the importance of civil union rather than civil disunion.

Modern electronic innovations have made it much easier to search the large collections of Lincoln documents that are available, and while there are probably no huge surprises waiting to be discovered, there may still be other smaller but nonetheless valuable insights that will further enhance our understanding of Abraham Lincoln.

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