

**“GOD BLESS THE METHODIST CHURCH”—A. LINCOLN:
FINDING THE LOST SPEECH**

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It is perhaps the most famous document related to Methodism from the American Civil War. Widely published at the time and since, Abraham Lincoln's speech to a delegation of Methodist leaders from the General Conference in May, 1864, is an elegant example of Lincoln's powerful prose and a testament to the importance of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the Union war effort. While the text of the document is well-known, the location of the original document written in Lincoln's own hand has remained a mystery for nearly a century. Further complicating the question was the creation of lithographic facsimiles of the document more than a century ago. Dispersed among Methodist ministers and laity, these facsimiles are now embedded in collections of original letters and sermons at churches, educational institutions, and private collections around the country. Over a century old themselves and bearing Lincoln's distinctive handwriting, the facsimiles mislead many into believing that they are the original document written by Abraham Lincoln.

The Papers of Abraham Lincoln is a long-term documentary editing project committed to locating, imaging, transcribing, annotating, and publishing all documents written by or to Abraham Lincoln, including his famous response to the Methodist delegation of May, 1864. In cases where the project cannot locate the original document, it uses an image of a facsimile, a photocopy, or even a typed or printed transcription. However, it is always best to have an image of the original document that Lincoln wrote or that was sent to him by a correspondent. Part of the project's mandate is to distinguish between original documents, mechanical facsimiles, contemporary handwritten copies, and forgeries. In August, 2011, a private owner from Michigan visited the project's offices in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield with what she believed was an original response to the delegation of Methodists who visited Abraham Lincoln in May, 1864. Further research about this document led to an unexpected discovery and an introduction to new techniques of distinguishing between original documents and lithographic facsimiles.

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, met in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania, in 1864. Held every four years, the General Conference was the preeminent gathering of the bishops and ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church. On May 14, the delegates elected a committee consisting of Bishop Edward R. Ames and four ministers to travel to Washington to present an address to President Lincoln supporting the administration and the war effort.¹ The committee met with President Lincoln at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, May 18. Lincoln had obtained the text of the address that they would be presenting and penned a reply in preparation for their visit. After they presented their resolutions, the President replied:

Gentlemen:

In response to your address, allow me to attest to the accuracy of its historical statements; indorse the sentiments it expresses; and thank you, in the nations name for the sure promise it gives.

Nobly sustained as the government has been by all the churches, I would utter nothing which might, in the least, appear invidious against any. Yet, without this, it may fairly be said that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the best, is, by its greater numbers, the most important of all. It is no fault in others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to Heaven than any. God bless the Methodist Church, bless all the churches, and blessed be God, Who, in this our great trial, giveth us the churches.

A. Lincoln

May 18, 1864

This response was immediately and understandably popular with Methodists and was printed in the proceedings of the General Conference and reprinted in Methodist newspapers throughout the North. Lincoln's brief response was also converted into a facsimile version using the lithographic printing process.

These lithographic facsimiles of the document, made in the nineteenth century, have complicated the identification of the original document. They consist of authentic Lincoln handwriting on paper that is more than a century old. Distinguishing between the original and many nearly contemporaneous facsimiles proved quite difficult, and facsimiles have often been treated as the original document.

When the private owner arrived, it was clear that what she owned was a facsimile. Dr. James Cornelius, the curator of the Lincoln collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, agreed. Although she also had original letters from an ancestor who was a Methodist chaplain, close inspection of the Lincoln letter revealed the even lines of a lithographic copy rather than the uneven tones of iron-gall ink.

This visitor from Michigan owned a lithographic facsimile, but the question remained of the location of the original. A quick review of project files revealed that in 2005, John L. Topolewski, the Associate Pastor of Owego United Methodist Church in Owego, New York, had contacted the project about the copy that the church owns. He ultimately published his findings in

¹ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Philadelphia, Pa., 1864* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864), 155-156, 373-375.

an article for *Methodist History*. He acknowledged that the church owned a facsimile, but concluded, “where is the original now?”²

The answer is, and has been since 1924, the Library of Congress. The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress consists of four series. Series 1, by far the largest, contains those papers in Abraham Lincoln’s possession at his death, which passed to his son Robert Todd Lincoln. The younger Lincoln transferred the collection to the Library of Congress in 1919 and formally donated it to the Library in 1923, with the stipulation that they not be opened for twenty-one years after his death. He died in 1926, and the series was opened to researchers in 1947. Series 2 consists of documents retained by John G. Nicolay, one of Lincoln’s private secretaries. Nicolay’s daughter donated these documents to the Library of Congress in 1959. Series 3 contains items acquired by the Library later and added to the original collection.³ Each of these three series has been microfilmed and digitized to make them available to a broad audience.⁴

Within Series 1 are two copies of the Address of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to Lincoln and a copy of Lincoln’s response, though not in his hand. According to the note on the reverse, it was “Returned to the President with the thanks of Mr. Hanscom.” Hanscom was the editor of the *National Republican* and likely borrowed the copy to publish it in his newspaper.⁵

Series 4 of the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress consists mostly of copies of documents held in other repositories, though the series does contain some original documents. Among the original documents in Series 4 is Lincoln’s speech to the Methodist delegation. It has been there since 1924 but apparently was not incorporated into Series 4 until the 1960s or later.

Roy P. Basler and his associates, when they published *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* in 1953, cited the original document to Mrs. Arthur Wendell of Rahway, New Jersey. Mrs. Wendell was the granddaughter of Joseph A. Wright (1810-1867), a prominent Methodist who was Governor of Indiana, a United States Senator, and Minister to Prussia.⁶ It appears now that Wendell’s copy was a facsimile.

The original document in Abraham Lincoln’s hand was apparently retained by William L. Harris (1817-1887), the Secretary of the 1864 General Conference and later a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. His son, William H. Harris, died in November, 1919, and his widow donated the

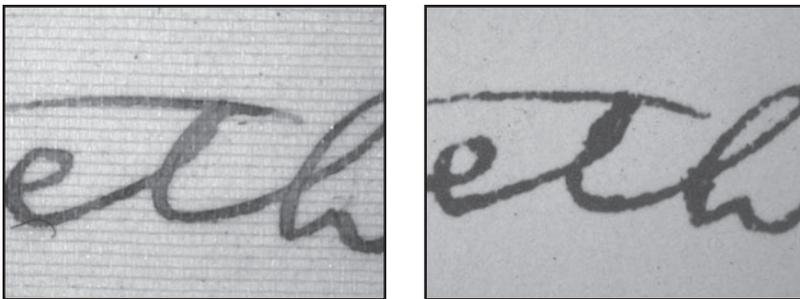
² John Leo Topolewski, “Lincoln’s Response to the Methodists,” *Methodist History* 44 (April, 2006): 133-139.

³ David C. Mearns, *The Lincoln Papers*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 1:3-136.

⁴ Available at the Library of Congress’s American Memory website: <http://memory.loc.gov/amem/allhtml/malhome.html>

⁵ *Daily National Republican* (Washington, DC), 18 May 1864, Second Edition, 2:1.

⁶ Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1953), 7:350-51.



Above is the comparison of the last three letters of “giveth” in the last line of the document. On the left is the handwritten document, and on the right is the lithographic copy. Note the texture of the silking reinforcement on the handwritten document.

document to the Library of Congress on March 17, 1924.⁷

How do the Papers of Abraham Lincoln know the document at the Library of Congress is the original document and not just another facsimile? With the expert assistance of Jeffrey M. Flannery, Head of Reference and Reader Services in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress; Yasmeen Khan, a Senior Rare Book Conservator at the Library of Congress; and some technical wizardry, the answer became clear.

During the course of a nationwide search for Lincoln documents, the Papers of Abraham Lincoln had discovered other facsimile copies of Lincoln’s short speech to the Methodist delegation. In addition to the facsimile at the Owego United Methodist Church, there are facsimile copies at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. A typed transcription even surfaced at the Polk County Historical Association in Tryon, North Carolina. However, because project staff had not yet conducted a search of Series 4 of the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, the existence of the original document in Series 4 remained undetected. A 1994 letter from John R. Sellers at the Library of Congress to former Illinois State Historian Thomas F. Schwartz suggested that there was another copy at the Library of Congress, but it remained unclear whether it was the original or simply another facsimile.

Assistant Editor Ed Bradley of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln contacted Jeffrey Flannery to inquire about viewing the document. Bradley examined the document in person and believed that it was the original. The short reply had been “silked,” or coated with silk and a mixture of starch and protein adhesive, to strengthen it. Common from 1900 to the 1940s, “silking” is considered too invasive as a conservation treatment and is no longer used today. Flannery offered to have the Conservation Department look at the document more closely, and the project gratefully accepted the offer.

Most of the documents Abraham Lincoln wrote and signed were created

⁷ Accession 2921 (March 1924), Accession Card File, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

using iron-gall ink. Manufacturers of iron-gall ink crushed galls from oak trees and mixed the result with water, iron sulfate, and gum arabic as a suspension agent. Unlike carbon-based inks, iron-gall ink reacted with both parchment and the cellulose in paper and could not be rubbed away easily. The ink used in lithography was carbon-based and has different characteristics from the iron-gall ink commonly used in preparing hand-written documents.

Senior Conservator Yasmeen Khan examined the document under high magnification and was certain that the ink was applied by a pen. Using the ARTIST multispectral camera in the Conservation Division, Khan created a false-color infrared 2 image that displays iron gall ink as red, while carbon-based inks appear gray and lithographic ink appears black. The results were dramatic and conclusive. Although she was not an expert on Lincoln’s handwriting, Khan concluded that the document at the Library of Congress was “written by hand in iron-gall ink or writing paper and not a lithograph printed under the extreme pressure of a lithographic press.”⁸

To perform effective comparison tests, Khan needed a lithographic facsimile of the speech; however, the Library of Congress did not have such a copy. I contacted Dr. Robert J. Williams, the General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church to discuss what we were learning. Dr. Williams is also the editor of *Methodist History*, and I thought he might be interested in what the project had learned at the Library of Congress that answered the question posed by Rev. Topolewski’s 2005 article, “Where is the original now?” Dr. Williams was enthusiastic about the findings and explained that Drew University, the home of the General Commission, had a lithographic copy of the speech.⁹ He also explained that he would be traveling to Washington soon and might be able to take the lithograph with him. He consulted with Dr. Christopher Anderson, the Methodist Librarian and Coordinator of Special Collections at Drew University, who graciously allowed Dr. Williams to take the lithographic print with him on his visit to Washington, DC.

In December, 2011, Dr. Williams delivered the lithograph from Drew University to Yasmeen Khan at the Library of Congress. Ms. Khan examined the lithograph under high magnification and also made a parallel false-color infrared 2 image of it using the ARTIST multispectral camera. Those tests confirmed that the document from Drew University was a lithographic print and that it was distinctly different from the original document at the Library of Congress.

The Papers of Abraham Lincoln’s staff expertise regarding Lincoln’s handwriting, the tests made at the Library of Congress, the assistance of Dr. Williams, and the cooperation of Dr. Anderson together combine

⁸ Yasmeen Khan, “Report on the Multispectral Imaging on the May 18th, 1864 letter from Lincoln to Methodist Episcopal Church Conference,” August 31, 2011, unpublished, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁹ Abraham Lincoln, Response to Methodist Delegation, May 18, 1864, Simpson Collection, General Commission on Archives and History, Drew University, Madison, NJ.

to demonstrate conclusively that the copy of Lincoln's response to the Methodist delegation that resides in the Abraham Lincoln Papers, Series 4, at the Library of Congress, is the original document written by Abraham Lincoln in May, 1864.