

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library And Museum Obtains Revealing Lincoln Letter

by Christopher Wills

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SPRINGFIELD, IL. – In 1843, Abraham Lincoln poured out his political frustrations in a letter to a friend. Support in Sangamon County was slipping away, he complained. Critics were falsely painting him as a rich aristocrat opposed to religion, and a brush with dueling was being used against him. Still, Lincoln offered his friend strategies for how they might win despite the odds.



That revealing letter has not been seen by the public for generations, but the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum has acquired it and will feature it in a new display opening Nov. 1. The exhibit explores a key period when Lincoln was trying to make the leap from state office to the national level, a time when he also got married, bought a house and had children.

Lincoln wrote the letter to Martin Morris, a friend from his days living in New Salem. It has remained in his family's hands ever since. The public's only access has been to a copy that Morris made (including many spelling errors) and gave to Lincoln's law partner and biographer, William Herndon.

Now scholars and the public will be able to see for themselves exactly what Lincoln wrote, thanks to the generosity of Scott Terry of Bellevue, Wash., who is Morris's great-great grandson. He has donated the letter to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

"This is a fascinating letter that reveals a side of Lincoln we don't often see," said Christina Shutt, executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. "Lincoln enthusiasts everywhere owe Mr. Terry a debt of gratitude for making the letter available to the world."

"It is indeed an honor to present this important letter to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum," Terry said. "After I inherited it from my dearly departed mother, Bette Nance Terry, in 2016, I began to research the story behind it. The more I learned, the more it became clear to me that this historically significant document needed to be placed in an institution that would protect and properly care for it and make it available to everyone, from scholars to the general public, to study and enjoy. After searching potential recipients for the letter, one place stood out above all the rest, the ALPLM. It is truly heartwarming to know this wonderful place in Springfield, Ill., will hold this treasure in perpetuity."

When Lincoln wrote the letter, he was 34 and newly married. He had served four terms in the Illinois legislature and was jockeying to land a seat in Congress, but his prospects were not good.

"The people of Sangamon have cast me off," he wrote to his old friend, who knew him when Lincoln was a poor nobody trying to establish himself in New Salem. "It would astonish if not amuse, the older citizens of your county ... to learn that I have been put down here as the candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction."

Lincoln said religion was being used against him, as was the fact that a political dispute had nearly ended in a duel the previous year. "It was every where contended that no christian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no church, was suspected of being a deist, and had talked about fighting a duel," he wrote.

Lincoln didn't win a congressional seat that time or the next. Finally, in 1846, Lincoln was elected to the U.S. House.

“When we look at Lincoln in this period, we see something that is familiar to us today: a young politician putting down roots, raising a family and letting potential voters get to know him,” said Ian Hunt, the ALPLM’s chief of acquisitions. “This was a pivotal time in Lincoln’s life. If he had lacked the ambition, skills or patience to make the jump to Congress, he might never have been elected president.”

Starting Tuesday, the letter will be displayed in the ALPLM’s Treasures Gallery along with other artifacts from that period. The display will include Lincoln’s contract to purchase his Springfield home, the skirt Mary Todd wore when she married Lincoln, a campaign ribbon for the presidential candidate Lincoln backed in 1844 and letters between the Lincolns.

One thing the letter reveals is that Lincoln did know how to spell “aristocratic,” “exceptions” and other words that Morris misspelled when he wrote out a copy.

The letter and related treasures will be on display through May 17.

The mission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum is to inspire civic engagement through the diverse lens of Illinois history and sharing with the world the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln. We pursue this mission through a combination of rigorous scholarship and high-tech showmanship built on the bedrock of the ALPLM’s unparalleled collection of historical materials – some 13 million items from all eras of Illinois history.

For more information, visit www.PresidentLincoln.Illinois.gov or follow the ALPLM on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).