Who Stole the Gettysburg Address?

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The Gettysburg Address was missing. The “battlefield draft” that Abraham Lincoln had taken from his coat as he looked across the freshly dug graves on November 19, 1863, the two pages written in the president’s own hand and completed the morning of the great speech, the document that dedicated the nation to “a new birth of freedom,” had disappeared.

It was 1908, and in anticipation of celebrations marking the centenary of the slain president’s birth in 1809, Robert Todd Lincoln had vainly searched for the original manuscript of the speech among the papers inherited from his father. The document had last publicly surfaced in 1894, when John G. Nicolay, President Lincoln’s personal secretary and later custodian of the Lincoln papers, had published an article about the Gettysburg Address that included a facsimile.1 Nicolay had died in September 1901, so Robert turned to Nicolay’s daughter, Helen Nicolay. “We are having a good many inquiries at this time about matters relating to my father,” he wrote her on November 6, 1908, “and I venture to trouble you to ask whether you know where the original manuscript of the Gettysburg Address is.” But Helen replied with unwelcome news. “I do not know where the original ms. of the Gettysburg Address is. It is a mystery that has puzzled and distressed me for a long time. Now that you have asked me I am going to tell you the whole story.”2

The “whole story” of the “original manuscript” of the Gettysburg Address mystified not only Helen Nicolay and Robert Todd Lincoln, but it has also baffled historians, archivists, and students of Lincoln almost since the speech was given some seven score years ago. It is a story of surprising discoveries, allegations of theft,


2. R. T. Lincoln to H. Nicolay, November 6, 1908, and H. Nicolay to R. T. Lincoln, November 9, 1908, in “Some Correspondence Regarding a Missing Copy of the Gettysburg Address,” part 1, Lincoln Lore, no. 1437 (November 1957), 3.

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and assumptions that over decades have solidified into certainties. Above all, reopening the strange case of the disappearance and unexpected recovery of the Gettysburg Address allows us to finally solve some of the most vexing mysteries surrounding the most admired speech in the history of the republic.

As Helen told Robert, his inquiry only reinvigorated the search for the delivery text of the Gettysburg Address that she herself had begun in early 1902, shortly after her father’s death. Having previously served as her father’s secretary, Helen was at that time just beginning a series of “Boy’s Life of” biographies with a volume on Lincoln, and so the Gettysburg Address held more than mere family interest for her. Upon her father’s death, and with Robert’s approval, she had transferred the Lincoln papers to John M. Hay, who had been John Nicolay’s assistant in the Lincoln White House. After the Civil War, Hay had become a literary and political figure in his own right. He and Nicolay had coauthored a massive biography of Lincoln and then coedited Lincoln’s collected works, which was why Robert had originally given them custody of the Lincoln papers in 1874. By the time that Helen gave the Lincoln papers to Hay in December 1901, he had risen to be secretary of state under Theodore Roosevelt and was overseeing a budding American empire in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Cuba.3

Hay stored the Lincoln papers at the State Department, but then, as Helen Nicolay told Robert Todd Lincoln, “Mr. Hay told me shortly after the transfer was made—that your father gave my father the original ms. of the Gettysburg Address.” John Nicolay had never mentioned this to his daughter and former secretary. In a letter to James Grant Wilson, a respected figure who had known Lincoln, Helen wrote that she had then searched among her father’s papers for the valuable document, which “should now belong to me” but found nothing. This likely did not surprise her, because from that moment, that is, early 1902, “my impression is that it was inadvertently among the mss. which did not belong to my father but were only in his custody.”4 She explained in another letter that

4. H. Nicolay to R. T. Lincoln, November 9, 1908, and H. Nicolay to J. G. Wilson,
before turning the Lincoln manuscripts over to Hay, “I had found one or two apart from the rest, and thinking they were out of place put them with the others.” She even recalled the color and general appearance of the document.5

Helen Nicolay asked John Hay to look for the manuscript among the Lincoln papers at the State Department, but as of early 1902 nobody seemed to know its whereabouts. The fate of the missing manuscript was of special concern because the years before the First World War were the high point of the cult of Lincoln, when his Gettysburg Address was almost universally hailed as the most perfect brief speech in the history of the English language. By 1913 Congress had approved plans for the Lincoln Memorial, which was to have the Gettysburg Address carved on an inner wall, making the selection of the proper version of the address a national necessity.6

The search for the missing manuscript continued in 1905, when Secretary of State Hay died. His widow, Clara Hay, then transferred the Lincoln papers to Robert Todd Lincoln,7 but his own later search was as fruitless as Helen’s had been. Still, consummate gentleman that he was, Robert assured Helen Nicolay in 1908 that “if in the course of further examinations it is found, it will be considered as belonging to you; but I have little hope of such good fortune.” Helen responded optimistically that “if it has been stolen, it is too important a document to remain hidden indefinitely,” and that “if it is among my papers or yours it will of course come to light.” In either eventuality, the manuscript would presumably be restored to her. “I only hope for all our sakes,” she concluded, “that the mystery will soon be cleared up.”8

Yet the missing manuscript was found in neither the Nicolay papers nor the Lincoln papers, and when it was found, the cir-

November 3, 1908, Lincoln Lore 1437, 3.
5. H. Nicolay to R. W. Gilder, December 8, 1908, Lincoln Lore 1437, 4. Helen’s hasty remarks refer only to “my recollection of the color, looks ie. of the ms. my father had”; H. Nicolay to Clara Hay, December 12, 1908, Ibid.
6. In 1895 Congress had voted to place at Gettysburg a bronze tablet engraved with the address but had mandated a text that does not correspond to any in Lincoln’s hand or to contemporary newspaper accounts. The statute is reprinted in Henry Sweetser Burrage, Gettysburg and Lincoln: The Battle, the Cemetery, and the National Park (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), 211.
7. Mears, Lincoln Papers, 1: 91.
8. R. T. Lincoln to H. Nicolay, November 12, 1908, H. Nicolay to R. T. Lincoln, November 16, 1908, Lincoln Lore 1437, 3. Robert repeated to several people that the “original manuscript” belonged to Helen, for example, his letter to Gilder, November 23, 1908, RTL Papers, ISHL.
cumstances of its discovery only deepened the mystery. For in late November 1908, Clara Hay made a remarkable discovery among her late husband’s papers: a draft of the Gettysburg Address written in Abraham Lincoln’s own hand. Helen Nicolay expressed great relief that the text had been found, but recognized that its manner of discovery placed her in a difficult position. Hay was known to bind his personal collection of important manuscripts in leather volumes, and as Helen wrote to the editor and poet Richard Watson Gilder, the newly found manuscript was “bound like the other Lincoln mss. owned by Mr. Hay.” This left no doubt that Hay had considered the document to be his property. Yet, Helen Nicolay also reaffirmed that she had been “absolutely certain” that John Hay had told her that Lincoln had given the original manuscript of the Gettysburg Address to her father. And she strongly suspected that she had incorrectly placed it with the Lincoln papers that she had given to Hay.9

It is possible that Helen Nicolay was mistaken about what Hay told her, but it seems unlikely, for when she had asked Hay to look for the manuscript among the Lincoln papers at the State Department, he would have corrected any error. Nor is it likely that she made up the tale to gain possession of the manuscript, for she could never be sure what her father or Hay had told others. Besides, she had had sole custody of the Lincoln papers after her father’s death and removing one or several would have been a simple matter, particularly as many people assumed on their own that Lincoln had given the “original manuscript” to John Nicolay because he had first described the document in his 1894 article.10 Indeed, William H. Lambert, one of the “big five” Lincoln collectors, in 1909 described the original manuscript as “the Nicolay draft,” and it has been generally called that for the last century.11

If Helen Nicolay was correct in recalling that Hay had told her that Lincoln gave the original manuscript to her father, then she knew it should not have been among Hay’s papers. And so Helen retracted her story and cast doubt on her memory. “I have thought all these years, that the ms. he referred to was the Gettysburg

10. Robert Todd Lincoln had assumed Helen owned the original manuscript even before she told him of her conversation with Hay; R. T. Lincoln to H. Nicolay, November 12, 1908, Lincoln Lore 1437, 3.
Address,” she wrote with evident embarrassment. “This find of Mrs. Hay’s proves that to have been impossible.” Imagine, then, Helen’s relief and mixed emotions when she realized upon inspecting the newly found text that it was not the “original manuscript,” but a wholly different version, which is now generally referred to as the “Hay draft” of the Gettysburg Address. As Helen informed Clara Hay, the new “Hay Draft” differed from the facsimile of the “original manuscript” published by John Nicolay in 1894 in the paper used, number of words per line, number of lines, and editorial revisions in Lincoln’s hand.

The discovery of this new version of Lincoln’s speech attracted immediate attention within the close-knit world of Lincoln enthusiasts. James Grant Wilson was already slated to publish some of his recollections of Lincoln in the February 1909 *Putnam’s Magazine*, so he inserted a few sentences describing the Hay text in his article, along with a facsimile. It soon became apparent that the new document raised a host of difficult questions. “Touch any aspect of the address,” wrote David Mearns, former chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and an avid student of the Gettysburg Address, “and you touch a mystery.” And almost all of these mysteries involve the Hay text, this “most inexplicable” document.

Many have argued that it, and not the “original manuscript” described by John Nicolay in 1894, was the delivery text; others have suggested that Lincoln made it after his return to Washington from Gettysburg, either as a copy for the official files of the Gettysburg National Cemetery or as a souvenir for John Hay.


14. “Recollections of Lincoln,” *Putnam’s Magazine* 5 (February 1909): 515–29. Mearns and Dunlap stated that Lambert was the first to publicly mention the Hay text, in a lecture of 1906 that was published in 1909 as *The Gettysburg Address*. The published version, however, cites Wilson’s 1909 article, so Lambert must have revised his lecture to include the new discovery; David Mearns and Lloyd Dunlap, “Notes and Comments on the Preparation of the Address” in *Long Remembered: Facsimiles of the Five Versions of the Gettysburg Address* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1963), non-paginated.


16. Most notably Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 7: 18, who suggests that Lincoln created the text in no less than four different episodes of composition or revision across weeks or even months both before and after the speech.

17. This is Mearns and Dunlap’s view in *Long Remembered*. 
Lambert in 1909 argued that the Hay text was a second draft that had been written in Washington but inadvertently forgotten at the White House when the presidential party departed for Gettysburg. For lack of this draft, Lincoln reverted to the “original manuscript” when giving the speech. To support this remarkable tale, Lambert referred to unspecified information that John Hay had imparted to John P. Nicholson, chairman of the Gettysburg National Park Commission. Yet, there is no indication of this story in the detailed correspondence about the various versions of the Address among Lambert, Nicholson, and Robert Todd Lincoln in 1908 and that continued after the discovery of the Hay text in 1909. Indeed, on April 19, 1909, Lambert wrote to Nicholson, his supposed source, that “in my judgment” the Hay text was written before leaving Washington. For his part, Nicholson had contacted John Hay in 1904 to determine the most authoritative version of the speech, and in response Hay had sent him a lithograph of the last handwritten version, known today as the Bliss text. Had Hay told him such an interesting story as that suggested by Lambert, Nicholson would certainly have repeated it in his correspondence or in his many lectures and orations on Lincoln.

But perhaps the most troublesome problem regarding the “Hay draft” over the last century has been the question of why John Hay—in all his letters, or in the ten-volume history of Lincoln he coauthored with Nicolay, or in his magazine articles and public

18. Lambert, Gettysburg Address, 6.
19. Mearns and Dunlap’s account of this correspondence in Long Remembered mistakenly contains a reference to the Hay text on May 6, 1908, six months before Clara Hay discovered it. They cite the date of a letter that does not refer to the Hay text, while the quote they provide that does mention the Hay text is from an endorsement to the letter dating from a year later, May 8, 1909. The correspondence is now in the Judd Stewart Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. I am indebted to curator John Rhodehamel for his assistance with this material.
20. RTL Papers, ISHL. Similarly, Lambert wrote to Robert on March 20, 1909, that “I have concluded” that the address had been completed in Washington, but he gave no indication that a draft had been left behind; Judd Stewart Collection.
21. Lambert to R. T. Lincoln, May 15, 1909, Judd Stewart Collection. Lambert added that Nicholson had also told this to Henry Burrage, who then assumed that Hay owned the original of the text he sent Nicholson, and so had caused some confusion by writing in Gettysburg and Lincoln, 131, that Hay owned the “original manuscript.” Nicholson published the Bliss version that Hay gave him in the front matter to John P. Nicholson, ed., Pennsylvania at Gettysburg: Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments Erected by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2 vols. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Wm. Stanley Ray, State Printer, 1904).
lectures devoted to his time in Lincoln’s White House, or in his private diary—never once wrote that he owned a copy of the Gettysburg Address. Nicolay and Hay were lifelong friends, yet Nicolay went to his grave not knowing that his friend and coauthor owned a copy of the address in Lincoln’s hand. Similarly, Hay and Robert Todd Lincoln had grown close during the Civil War, and they remained friends and correspondents until Hay’s death, but Hay never told Robert that he owned a copy of his father’s most admired speech.

Hay certainly had many opportunities to mention that he owned a copy. “I own a few of your father’s MS. which he gave me from time to time,” Hay wrote to Robert on April 12, 1888, “as long as you and I live I take if for granted that you will not suspect me of boning [seizing] them. But to guard against casualties hereafter, I have asked Nicolay to write you a line saying that I have never had in my possession or custody any of the papers which you entrusted to him.” His fierce devotion to Lincoln, and to Lincoln’s documents, may be gauged by his added remark, “I have handed over to Nicolay to be placed among your papers some of these your father gave me. The rest, which are few in number, are very precious to me, I shall try to make an heirloom in my family as long as any one of my blood exists with money enough to buy a breakfast.” On June 19, 1890, Hay wrote to Gilder, editor of *Century* magazine, that he had “at last yielded to your furious importunity and have written an article on ‘Life at the White House in Lincoln’s Time,’” adding, “Nicolay thinks he will write one or two,” one of which was most likely his article on the Gettysburg Address. Six months later, Hay wrote Gilder that “Mr. Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech cannot be considered in any sense an extemporaneous effort. It was not only carefully considered but was reduced to writing before delivered and very little changed in the subsequent issue.”

Hay’s account is the same as Nicolay’s later *Century* article: Lin-
coln had prepared the Address before the dedication ceremony (“reduced to writing before delivered”) and then revised it after his return to Washington (“very little changed in the subsequent issue”); a copy of this revision known as the “Bliss” text is the version generally cited today as “the Gettysburg Address” because it is Lincoln’s last handwritten copy. The similarity of the accounts suggests that the two men had discussed the composition of the Address. If so, Hay said nothing to Nicolay about owning a draft of the speech, even though he must have known that Nicolay was writing an article about it. In contrast, Hay did write about owning other Lincoln manuscripts, most notably the Second Inaugural and Lincoln’s memorandum of August 23, 1864, predicting his electoral defeat.26

For nearly a century it has been assumed that because the “Hay draft” was found among Hay’s papers, Lincoln must have given it to him. To explain why Hay would have apparently lied by omission across forty years to all his friends and colleagues, Mearns and Dunlap suggest that Lincoln asked Hay not to tell Nicolay about having given him the document.27Conniving at such petty deception seems hardly Lincolnian, and there is no evidence for this except the assumption that Hay had always owned the copy found in his papers, and the fact that he never wrote that he did. But there is compelling evidence that John Hay did not always have possession of the text that now bears his name. In 1885 John Nicolay wrote Gilder that “The original ms. is now lying before my eyes,” that is, the manuscript that Nicolay said Lincoln held when giving the speech. Then, after describing Lincoln’s later revised version of the speech, Nicolay added, “I have also the ms. notes of the revision before me.”28

This sentence almost certainly refers to the “Hay draft,” as there is no fragment, note, or writing of any kind in Lincoln’s hand of

Chapters,” Nicolay wrote the Gettysburg Address chapter in their joint biography of Lincoln; Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.


27. Mearns and Dunlap, Long Remembered.

28. J. Nicolay to R. W. Gilder, September 19, 1885, Lincoln Lore 1437, 2. No study of the Address has discussed this sentence. Warren, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Declaration, 155, quoted from the letter but omitted this sentence, which undermines his argument that the Hay text was written before the Nicolay text. Mearns and Dunlap knew of the letter but did not recognize its importance; Long Remembered, note 52. Nicolay did not mention the Hay text in his Century article, most likely because, as Robert
the Gettysburg Address aside from the five well-known holograph versions of the Address. Three of these were never among the Lincoln papers, and the context of Nicolay’s letter proves that he was not referring to the original manuscript. In addition, the phrase “manuscript notes” well describes the Hay text, which, alone of the five texts, bears numerous revisions by Lincoln. All of which means that, as of 1885, the Hay text was among the Lincoln papers in the custody of John Nicolay. It means, too, that John Hay likely did not gain possession of the “Hay draft” until the Lincoln papers came to him upon John Nicolay’s death in 1901, only a few years before he himself died, explaining why Hay never wrote that he owned a copy of the Gettysburg Address.

There is only one piece of evidence that Hay may have once claimed that Lincoln gave him the “Hay Draft.” In 1913, some eight years after Hay’s death, Nelson Thomasson wrote that “my cousin Col. John Hay” had shown him “the original text” and that Hay had explained that “Lincoln wrote it out immediately after his return from Gettysburg and presented it to Mr. Hay, so that it could go down to time in the language that he had then written.” Thomasson specified that this occurred “the last time” he was in Hay’s home. Hay died in 1905, so this conversation may well have occurred after Hay received the Lincoln papers, and with them, most likely, the “Hay” and “Nicolay” texts, in late 1901. Thus, even if this somewhat contradictory account is accurate—and assuming that Thomasson meant to refer to the “Hay draft” when he

Todd Lincoln later surmised, “it was not regarded as important by Nicolay, being merely a step in the revision process”; R. T. Lincoln to Markens, December 8, 1915, in Angle, Portrait, 21.

29. In 1990 the late Lloyd Ostendorf stated that he had purchased the second page of a “sixth copy” of the Address from a person he would not name who claimed to have found it at an Ohio flea market. It is likely a forgery, but for another view see Ostendorf, “Turning the Pages of History: A New Draft of the Gettysburg Address Located.” Gettysburg Magazine 6 (1 January 1992): 107–112, and Frank L Klement, The Gettysburg Soldiers’ Cemetery and Lincoln’s Address: Aspects and Angles (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane, 1993), 139ff.

30. Thomasson’s note of February 21, 1913, was addressed to Senator Elihu Root in regards to the proper text for the Lincoln Memorial, but he sent it first to Clara Hay stating, in Clara’s words, “if I do not like it I can put it in the waste basket.” He evidently meant to give Clara the choice of what to present to the Senate. Clara asked Helen’s advice, who counseled sending the letter. Helen’s copy of this correspondence is attached to Clara’s letter of February 28, 1913, in the Nicolay Papers.


mentioned “the original text”—this cannot be taken as conclusive
evidence that Hay always had a copy of the Address.

Yet for Helen Nicolay, Clara Hay, Robert Todd Lincoln, and the
others involved in the search for the “original manuscript,” the
key question was not who owned the new “Hay” text—they did
not doubt it had belonged to Hay—but rather, when did Lincoln
produce the document, and under what circumstances? Helen
mentioned in passing that Clara Hay and Henry Adams believed
that Clara had “the ‘Second Gettysburg Address,’” likely meaning
the revised version Lincoln made after the speech. Helen Nicolay
rightly saw, however, that this could not be. John Nicolay’s
1894 transcription of that post-speech revision, which he called the
“revised autograph copy,” differed greatly from the newly found
“Hay draft.” John Nicolay had been a careful man, and the other
transcriptions in his article are exactly accurate in word usage,
although there are a very few differences in punctuation. Helen
Nicolay concluded from the differences that the Hay text was not
“the revised autograph copy” itself, but “an experimental draft”
of that revision. That is, Helen, who likely did not know that her
father in 1885 had described the Hay text as “ms. notes of the revi-
sion,” came to the same conclusion as he did about its origin, and
one that is probably accurate: the Hay text is an intermediate draft,
part of Lincoln’s revision process when reworking the speech after
his return to Washington, which later resulted in his last handwrit-
ten version that today is carved into the Lincoln Memorial.

Helen’s conclusion that the Hay text was a post-speech draft ac-
corded with Thomasson’s later story of what Hay had told him, but

changed punctuation was likely deliberate, for Helen wrote that her father on occa-
sion edited Lincoln’s punctuation, most notably by substituting semi-colons for the
last three dashes in the transcription of the Bliss version of the Gettysburg Address
given in the edition of Lincoln’s writings he coedited with John Hay, unsent draft
of a letter of February 25, 1913, to Senator Wetmore regarding the proper text for
the Lincoln Memorial; Nicolay Papers.

33. H. Nicolay to Clara Hay, December 12, 1908, Lincoln Lore 1437, 4. By 1913
Clara had forgotten Helen’s conclusion, as she referred to “our idea of the copy I
have being the one that was written out for the Baltimore Fair;” that is, the Bliss
text. Helen reiterated on March 3, 1913, that the Hay text was Lincoln’s “first draft”
of that version; Nicolay Papers. Clara’s confusion is all the more understandable
because John Nicolay’s transcription in the Century article of the “revised autograph
copy” is actually the Bliss version; in his reckoning the Bliss text was simply a copy
of the revision.

34. Alice’s conclusions are known only through a letter of November 27, 1915,
from Isaac Markens, her correspondent, to Robert Todd Lincoln, where Markens
neither Clara nor any of the Hay children is known to have stated that they knew the origins of the Hay text. Aside from Thomasson’s somewhat confusing statement, which seems to have been news to Clara Hay, there was no family tradition about how the document was created. In November 1915 John Hay’s youngest daughter Alice Hay Wadsworth, who at that time had custody of the manuscript, wrote that it was composed before the Nicolay text, but she evidently gave no indication that this information was based upon anything other than the wording of the text. In contrast, her brother Clarence, perhaps following Helen Nicolay’s lead, surmised in April 1916 that Lincoln had written the Hay text after returning to Washington from the dedication ceremony, though he admitted that after inquiring of Helen Nicolay and Robert Todd Lincoln, its origin was unknown.

Clara Hay’s discovery of the mysterious Hay text brought the searchers no closer to the “original manuscript.” Now that it was lost—or stolen—again, Helen Nicolay immediately re-asserted her claim to it. The new discovery “gives my recollection of the conversation with Secretary Hay about a Lincoln ms another ‘show’ for veracity,” she wrote to Gilder. Not only was Helen relieved, but the fact that the “original manuscript” remained missing saved Clara Hay from an awkward position as well. If the original manuscript were to be found in the Hay papers, she would either have to keep a document that Helen Nicolay and Robert Todd Lincoln believed had belonged to John Nicolay, or she would have to give up a valuable document simply on Helen Nicolay’s claim of ownership. Clara Hay was so distraught about the missing document that she gave Helen Nicolay as a Christmas gift that year Lincoln’s handwritten memorandum of August 23, 1864, in which he predicted—

noted, “I agree with Mrs. Wadsworth that this copy was written before” the Nicolay text. Markens then presented his own analysis of the wording as support. Had Alice given solid evidence, such as a statement by her father, Markens would have told Robert and there would have been no question of agreement or disagreement; RTL Papers, ISHL.


36. H. Nicolay to R. W. Gilder, December 12, 1908, *Lincoln Lore* 1437, 4. “Show” in this usage was a new and somewhat colloquial term for chance or opportunity, hence the quotation marks in Helen’s letter.

37. Clara asked Helen, who had no children, to bequeath it upon her death to the Hay children; Clara Hay to H. Nicolay, December 24, 1908, “Some Correspondence Regarding a Missing Copy of the Gettysburg Address;” part 2, *Lincoln Lore* 1438
ed that he would not be re-elected. Lincoln and most of his cabinet had signed the paper, so the document was of great monetary and historical value. Clara explained the gift by writing, “I think you have been cheated out of your share of the Lincoln manuscripts.”

It was a strange choice of words, but perhaps fitting.

For eight years after Clara Hay found the “Hay” text and nearly fifteen years after Helen Nicolay first realized that the “original manuscript” was lost or stolen, nothing was known of its fate. Finally, in 1915 came the decisive break in the case, and from an unexpected source. Among the many Lincoln enthusiasts of the day was Isaac Markens, an impecunious cotton broker who was conducting an extensive correspondence as part of his research for an enlarged version of his 1913 essay on the Gettysburg Address, *Lincoln’s Masterpiece.* On November 22, 1915, Markens wrote a letter to Robert Todd Lincoln which, the usually imperturbable Robert later responded, “startles me very much.” The “original manuscript” had been found at last, according to Markens, for it was now held by Alice Hay Wadsworth, the younger daughter of John and Clara Hay. What is more, according to Markens, Alice had informed him that Lincoln had given the original manuscript not to John Nicolay, but to John Hay, “after leaving Gettysburg as he was about tearing it up.” This story directly contradicted Helen Nicolay’s account of what John Hay had told her about the ownership of the “original manuscript.” Five days later Markens elaborated, “Mrs. W gives me details of Your fathers giving it to Col Hay after leaving Gettysburg & after your father had Started to tear it.” It seems the three surviving Hay children had jointly inherited it upon the death of their mother Clara in 1914. Well might Robert write back that “I shall be much interested in talking this over with Mrs. Wadsworth” upon his return from Vermont to Washington, D. C., where he spent the winters.

(December 1957), 3.


39. Markens was also corresponding with Helen Nicolay, but he deliberately avoided telling Alice or Helen what the other had told him; Markens to R. T. Lincoln, November 22 and 27, 1915, RTL Papers, ISHL; R. T. Lincoln to Markens, November 26, 1915, and December 8, 1915, in Angle, *Portrait,* 16ff. The photograph in Mearns
No record of Robert’s conversation with Alice has been found, but it appears that something finally brought an end to the mystery, because a few months later, on March 9, 1916, occurred a strangely serendipitous scene. In reporting the incident, Helen Nicolay first noted that she and Clara Hay had for years been “especially distressed” about the missing “original copy” of the Gettysburg Address. She then wrote that “Mrs. Alice Hay Wadsworth and I, while looking over manuscripts in her possession, found that all the worry had been needless, for Colonel Hay had bound the original draft with Mr. Lincoln’s final version in the sumptuous red morocco he used for his collection of important mss.” In another undated note describing the discovery, Helen repeated that “John Hay had the original MS. and one of the President’s MS final copies bound together.”

It is not credible, this remarkable tableau in which the Nicolay heir and a Hay heir by coincidence together find a document of untold historical and monetary value that had been missing for fifteen years. It seems instead that the Hay heirs already knew that the “original manuscript” was among their father’s papers, as shown not only by the Markens correspondence but also a letter one month later from Clarence Hay to Lincoln enthusiast Orton Carmichael, where he wrote, “There has been in the possession of my two sisters and myself two copies of the Gettysburg Address.” This phrasing

and Dunlap, Long Remembered (1963) of the second page of the manuscript shows a clear tear and a piece missing. The photograph in Carmichael, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (1917), the earliest I have seen, shows no piece missing, nor does it show a tear, but Markens stated that the tear had been mended.

40. Helen Nicolay, undated note, Lincoln Lore 1438, 3. The term “final version” here must refer to the Hay text, because Helen in the next sentence wrote that “a few days later” the Hay family gave the manuscripts to the Library of Congress, and the Hay children donated both the Nicolay and Hay texts a month later. Helen had described the Hay text somewhat differently in 1908 as “an experimental draft” and in 1913 as the “first draft” of the final version, but in this note she evidently did not think the distinction worth making or forgot the details of the texts.

41. This second undated note is written on a letter of December 18, 1908, from R. W. Gilder regarding the missing original manuscript. It was written in an unsteady hand, suggesting that Helen may have been quite old when she wrote it. It mistakenly states that the manuscript was found in 1913, but also repeats that “shortly after” the discovery the two documents were donated to the Library of Congress, which is known to have occurred in 1916; Nicolay Papers.

42. April 11, 1916, in Carmichael, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, facsimile of letter following page 92.

suggests the two copies had been in their possession for some time, and it is odd when applied to the “original manuscript,” which had supposedly been recovered only the month before. It is also strange that Clarence Hay did not mention the striking discovery of a manuscript that supposedly had been missing for fifteen years to his correspondent, for whom Clarence had made specific inquiries about the Address. This deliberate vagueness suggests that Clarence knew there were difficulties about when and how his family had acquired the two copies of the Address.

But if Alice Hay Wadsworth knew the location of the original manuscript, why did she arrange the *mise en scène* of March 1916? Why had Alice only months before disclosed the whereabouts of the manuscript to Markens, a virtual stranger, and feign ignorance with Helen, whom she had known since childhood? The answers to these questions finally resolve, after a century of doubt, the mystery of who owned, and perhaps more importantly, who did not own, the “original manuscript” of the Gettysburg Address. The “discovery” scene suggests that sometime between naively telling Markens of the manuscript in late 1915 and pretending to discover it with Helen in March 1916, Alice had found out something that induced her to bring the document to light in such a way as to imply that nobody in the Hay family previously knew where it was. This was precisely the period in which Robert Todd Lincoln had announced his determination to speak with Alice about the Gettysburg Address. Alice apparently learned enough to know that there was some question about the ownership of the “original manuscript” and that Helen Nicolay had a claim to the document. Perhaps this is why, too, she evidently never repeated her story of Lincoln giving the torn “original manuscript” to her father. Helen Nicolay would certainly have mentioned this interesting tale to others. Nor did Clarence Hay, Alice’s brother and co-heir of the document, ever indicate he had heard such a story, nor did Robert Todd Lincoln, and nor did any of the many deeply interested Lincoln enthusiasts of the day who were in almost constant contact with the principle members of the Nicolay, Hay, and Lincoln families.

Alice’s disappearing story of Lincoln’s tearing the “original manuscript” just before he gave it to John Hay may have been a misguided attempt to provide a provenance for the document, or it might be the result of some confusion. There is one other anec-

44. In one undated memo, Helen wrote that Hay had bound the original manuscript “with” the Hay text; in another undated note she stated that Hay had had them “bound together” and that Clarence Hay presented them to the Library of
dote of Lincoln’s tearing the Address, an article in the *New York Times* of February 12, 1909, that perhaps not coincidentally also involves John Hay. The anonymous reporter stated that on the train to Gettysburg, “Mr. Hay noticed that he [Lincoln] tore up the last of the two sheets of notes he had written the night before and substituted the revisions he had made on the train.” This cannot be the same incident that Alice related, for one incident is supposed to have occurred on the train going to Gettysburg, and the other as Lincoln was leaving. In any case, this tale probably is not accurate in citing Hay as a source. John Nicolay categorically denied that Lincoln composed any part of the Address on the train, and he would not have ignored Hay’s testimony on this point. Markens, however, twice wrote that Alice indicated Lincoln tore the manuscript “after leaving Gettysburg,” which may be an indication that Alice believed the incident took place on the train, for the phrase suggests movement more than a time period and is more specific than alternatives such as “after the speech” or “at Washington.” Possibly Alice had read the *Times* report and it had contaminated her memory; then, too, the “discovery” scene with Helen Nicolay demonstrates that Alice was not averse to deception in the name of a good cause. And even if Hay did say some such thing to Alice, that she is the only one whom he told—across some forty years in which interest in the Address had grown to astonishing proportions and during which several his friends and colleagues had written books and articles about the speech—suggests that Hay himself may have been giving his ownership of the “original manuscript” a belated provenance. In any event, Alice apparently learned enough from Robert Todd Lincoln or others to realize that the “tearing” story could not be true, or perhaps would not be believed, for there is no record that she ever repeated it.

With so much doubt surrounding the “original manuscript,” a socially decorous solution apparently seemed best to the wife of the newly elected junior U. S. senator from New York: “find” the document and disclaim any knowledge of it. And not just Alice, for Robert Todd Lincoln played his role, as it seems he never mentioned to Helen Nicolay what he had heard from Markens about the “original manuscript.” Even Helen Nicolay may have been willing to deliberately close her eyes to the fact that it was hardly possible

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Congress “in their red leather binding”; *Lincoln Lore* 1438, 3, note by Helen Nicolay attached to letter from Gilder to Helen Nicolay, December 18, 1908, Nicolay Papers. Carmichael, who was in contact with Clarence Hay at that time, wrote in *Lincoln’s
for “John Hay” to have bound the two texts together, for she and several others had examined the Hay text in 1908 and had never discovered the “original manuscript.” For Clara to bind the two together would require outright deception, and this is hardly indicated by the obvious sincerity of her many letters to Helen Nicolay over many years. Alice, on the other hand, may have believed the manuscripts belonged to her father, and she may not have known that Helen Nicolay had a claim to them. Much remains obscure about this episode, but there is little doubt that, in the Hay family, Alice (at least) knew the location of the “original manuscript” before March 1916 and that there was some compelling reason to resort to a staged discovery scene for the benefit of Helen Nicolay, the presumptive heir of the much sought after text.

With the rediscovery of the long lost “original manuscript” the question of ownership became unavoidable. Except for a week of confusion following the discovery of the Hay text, Helen Nicolay for the last fifteen years had been convinced that the manuscript belonged to her. But just as with the Hay text in 1908, finding the original manuscript among the Hay papers in 1916 raised difficult questions—and Helen resolved them by again renouncing her claim to the document. “The conversation with Mr. Hay took place very soon after my father’s death,” she explained years later, “at a time when I was both physically and mentally exhausted. We were discussing many Lincoln manuscripts, and he evidently referred to some other one, not to the Gettysburg Address.” Yet Helen still hedged with “evidently,” for it was unlikely that she could have misremembered that John Hay had not corrected her error when she asked him to look for the “original manuscript” at the State Department. Hay’s reasons for telling Helen that Lincoln had given it to her father cannot be known, but given the evidence it is easier to believe that Lincoln had not done so, than to believe that he had and that John Nicolay had somehow not mentioned this to his beloved daughter, long-time collaborator, and sole heir—or

Gettysburg Address, that Hay had the two manuscripts “carefully bound in a book,”

91.

45. H. Nicolay to Albert H. Griffith, October 20, 1923, Lincoln Lore 1438, 3.
46. Mearns and Dunlap, Long Remembered.
47. Warren, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Declaration, end sheet and 159.
to anyone else. John Nicolay’s entire life after the Civil War had revolved around his relationship with Lincoln, and it is inconceivable that he would not have been proud to claim ownership of a document that he had cared enough to write an article about.

Even if Helen Nicolay was wrong about what Hay told her, it is awkward that the “original manuscript” was found among John Hay’s papers after having long been among the Lincoln papers in the custody of John Nicolay. Several investigators have touched upon this problem, but none has confronted it. The preferred strategy has been to suggest that Nicolay gained possession of the original manuscript irregularly, so that Hay’s having it was a mere consequence of this first transgression. Mearns and Dunlap correctly noted that “Nicolay did not mention the draft until 1885, after he had received” the Lincoln papers from Robert Todd Lincoln. “Therefore,” they added circumspectly, but with no doubt as to their meaning, “it may be that Lincoln wished to retain the draft himself and that it was once in his papers.”46 They believed that Nicolay had claimed ownership, and if the document had originally been among Lincoln’s papers, then Nicolay must have seized it. They then breezily noted that the manuscript “passed” to John Hay after Nicolay’s death. In the same vein, Louis A. Warren wrote with careful choice of words that the Hay text was “presented to John Hay,” evidently by Lincoln, but that the original manuscript was “acquired by” John Nicolay. Warren then employed a well-chosen euphemism, stating that John Hay later “secured” the Nicolay copy.47 Yet it is incorrect to assume that John Nicolay claimed the original manuscript as his own. In 1885 he wrote only that the document was “before my eyes.” In 1895 he wrote unambiguously to James Grant Wilson that “the original Gettysburg manuscript is in my custody,” a phrasing that precludes any claim to ownership, while in 1900 he simply wrote that “I have the Gettysburg Address.”48 But a shadow has long been cast over him for merely stating that he had a document that Robert Todd Lincoln had placed in his hands.

If the analysis presented here is correct, both the “Nicolay” and

49. As the tireless Markens pointed out to Robert Todd Lincoln, there were only two drafts: Helen has complained that hers has disappeared, while Alice has two. “We may therefore guess something without my discussing this phase,” Markens coyly concluded, “unless you should have an explanation to offer,” November 22, 1915, RTL Papers, ISHL.
the “Hay” texts had been among the Lincoln papers, yet both were found in John Hay’s personal papers. Helen Nicolay had claimed for fifteen years that John Hay had told her that the “original manuscript” was her heirloom, and Robert Todd Lincoln had supported her assertion, but now John and Clara Hay’s children were found to be the heirs of not one, but two autograph copies of the Gettysburg Address. So they all arrived at a polite solution to the mystery of the ownership of the Gettysburg Address: they ignored it. On April 11, 1916, a month after the “discovery” of the original draft, the Hay children and Helen Nicolay simultaneously donated to the Library of Congress four of the most precious documents ever bequeathed to the nation. Helen Nicolay presented the August 23, 1864, memorandum given to her by Clara Hay, while the Hay heirs donated Lincoln’s handwritten draft of the Second Inaugural Address and the two versions of the Gettysburg Address. This joint gift was a fitting coda to the staged codiscovery of the two manuscripts, proving the good faith of the Hay heirs. They sought only to avoid embarrassing questions, not to seize a contested document.

Robert Todd Lincoln’s search for the missing Gettysburg Address had resulted not only in the recovery of the “original manuscript,” but the re-discovery of the “Hay draft,” which no one in 1908—aside, perhaps, from Thomasson—even knew existed. The “whole story” of the lost original manuscript and its recovery supports John Nicolay’s account of the order and relationship of the five texts in Lincoln’s hand: the version he called the “original manuscript” is likely the delivery text, while the “Hay draft,” which he ignored in his Century article as mere “notes” unworthy of discussion, was probably created during Lincoln’s revision of the Address sometime after giving the speech. Much that was thought certain about the history of the texts must now be reconsidered in light of the strong evidence that Lincoln gave neither Nicolay nor Hay copies of the Address. And it is long past time to recognize that John Nicolay did not steal the Gettysburg Address.

As for John Hay, wealthy, powerful, and talented as he was, he was also a collector, as his “sumptuous red morocco” volumes of Lincoln documents attests. Though not large by some standards, his Lincoln collection, in monetary and historical value, was per-

Illinois University Press, 1997), 111.
haps the most impressive ever assembled. No individual can ever again hope to own the August 23, 1864, memorandum, the original manuscript of the Second Inaugural, and the two earliest versions of the Gettysburg Address. Hay was no doubt subject to the same mixture of base and elevated sentiments of all collectors: a desire to possess and an aspiration to draw closer to the subject of interest, in this case a man whom he once compared to Christ. And perhaps, too, in his last years of tragedy and illness, punctuated by the death of a beloved son and several dear friends, the manuscripts brought Hay closer to the absurdly young and promising man that he had been in 1863. “I cling instinctively to life and the things of life,” Hay wrote in his diary only two weeks before his death, “as eagerly as if I had not had my chance at happiness and gained nearly all the great prizes.”50 That he wished to cling to Lincoln’s memory, and the memory of those November days at Gettysburg so vividly portrayed in his diary—the comradeship of song in the festive town the night before; Lincoln’s speech, delivered with unaccustomed grace; the “crowded and cheering streets” after the dedication—that Hay would cling to these memories, and to the cherished manuscripts of Lincoln’s most revered speech, is at once a testament to his remarkable spirit and to his fallible humanity.