

DID *TAD LINCOLN* CARVE A MYSTERY?

Furniture could be a unique piece of American history

Could a piece of furniture that’s now safely tucked away in a rural West Virginia community bear the handiwork of a youngster from one of the most prominent families in American history?

Accounts from the period clearly portray Tad, the youngest of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln’s four sons, as a hellion who fully took advantage of a tolerant upbringing to create all manner of chaos during his time in the White House.

Born Thomas Lincoln III, the boy was given his nickname by his father, who described the baby was “as wiggly as a tadpole” with a head too large for his small body. He was nearly eight years old when his family, including brother Willie, older by two years, came to Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1861.

The boy’s unruly behavior was documented before their arrival in the nation’s capital. William Herndon, the future president’s law partner in Springfield, Illinois, recalled that the youngsters had pulled books off shelves and more or less turned the office upside down, all without a word of rebuke from their adoring father.

Nothing changed in that regard after the Lincolns moved into the White House. If anything, Tad became even more rambunctious and was given freer rein by his parents, especially after they lost Willie to typhoid fever in 1862. Stories relate that Tad, a boy with a speech impediment and what would today be diagnosed as a learning disability, interrupted important meetings, charged visitors to see his father and brought pet goats and ponies inside.

With such historical evidence to affirm Tad’s boisterous behavior, the thought of the boy carving his name on the top of a chest of drawers is easy to believe.

Brian and Rachel Ellison of Reedy, West Virginia, have just such a piece of furniture, and think it might very well have been the president’s son who carved the letters “TAD” into the surface of the circa 1850-1860 chest of drawers.

“I’m hoping,” Brian said of a possible connection between the furniture and the Lincoln family. “The evidence hasn’t pointed me away from it yet.”

Collectors of pre-1900s antiques, the Ellisons first saw the chest of drawers when they went to an auction in Clendenin, West Virginia, in November 2012. The two-day estate sale at an auction house included a number of high-end antiques, Brian noted.

“I recognized (the chest) was from the mid-1800s because of its style and the part of the country (Ohio) it came from,” he recalled.

Brian also noticed the mysterious carving. “It just intrigued me seeing that etching on top of it,” he said. “I can remember hearing about Tad Lincoln in grade school and stories about his mischief in the White House.”

At the end of a long day at the auction house, the flame mahogany chest came up for bid. Brian was getting a hot dog from the concession stand when the piece he had seen much earlier, mistakenly announced as a cherry chest of drawers, went on the block. No mention was made of the “TAD” carving.

“Luckily, Rachel remembered I was interested in it,” Brian said. “She kind of winged it.”

Rachel remembers seeing the chest that that piqued her husband’s interest.

“They just brought it out and said this was the next piece,” Rachel said. “Nobody else was really interested, just a couple and they fell off pretty quickly.”

The winning bid Rachel submitted was for \$300, below the \$400 Brian had said he would be willing to offer.

“So she got a good deal,” Brian, obviously pleased, said.

According to an appraisal, the chest has a grade of good to very good as far as condition. It was made in the American Empire style that was popular in the United States during the period from 1840-1860. The Lincolns were known to favor the style, and Mary Todd Lincoln insisted on refurbishing the White House after it fell into disrepair during the term of Abraham Lincoln’s bachelor predecessor, James Buchanan.

The Ellisons as of yet have no definitive proof that the chest they bought at auction was ever in the White House. An appraiser’s report stated the facts as they currently stand:

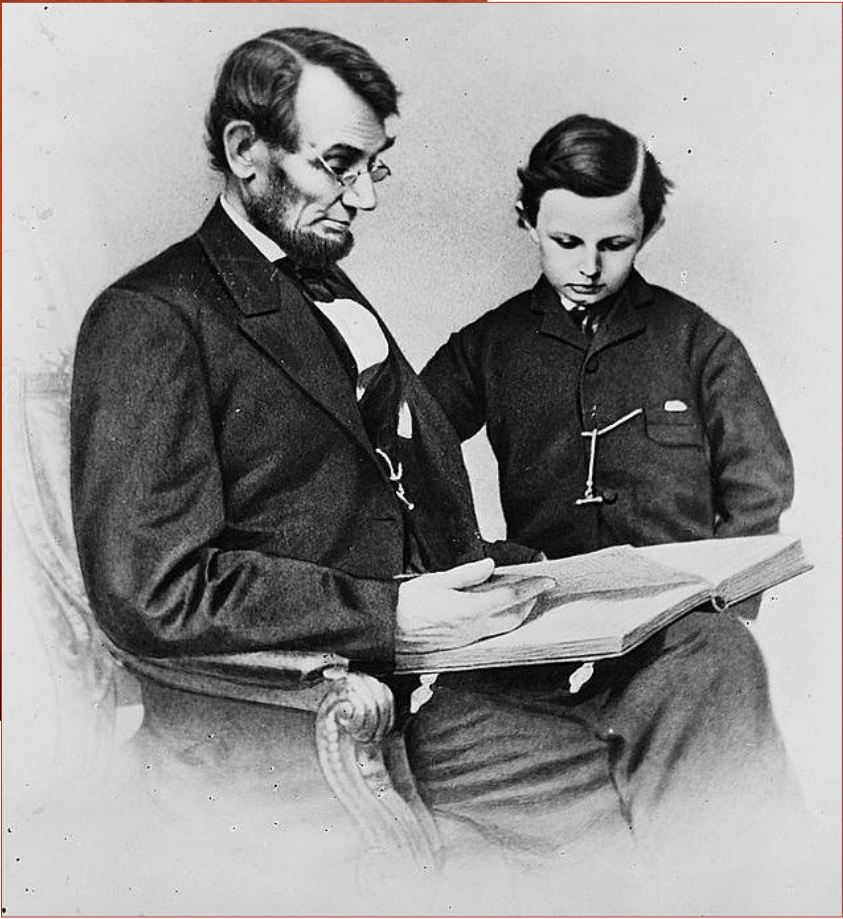
“As tantalizing as this carving may be there is no provenance or substantiating evidence or inventories of the Lincoln family that can support what is an otherwise relatively common example of American Empire furniture as having belonged to the Lincoln family.”

In the realm of antiques, provenance, otherwise known as the source and ownership history, is paramount. The appraiser of the Ellison piece did find that the carving, which has been covered by shellac, comes from the Lincoln era. The value was determined to be \$400 without further provenance, although a definitive Lincoln connection could push that to \$50,000 or beyond, Brian said.

“Provenance, provenance, provenance,” Brian repeated. “Unfortunately, we know that.”



“TAD” is carved into the the top of the chest of drawers, possible by Tad Lincoln, shown at the right with his father, President Abraham Lincoln.



The circa 1840-1860 chest is fashioned from flame mahogany.



While they have yet to make the Lincoln connection, the Ellisons continue searching for clues and have no intentions on abandoning the chase.

Greg Hoover, an antiques dealer in the Canton, Ohio, area, had purchased the chest earlier in 2012. Brian said Hoover, who handles up to 500 pieces of furniture each week, was unable to remember where he got it.

“So we’re stuck in northeast Ohio,” Brian said.

The provenance is still uncertain, but the Ellisons believe the chest itself offers some physical evidence to help support their case. Brian has found what may be a maker’s mark, something that the appraiser did not note, inside one of the drawers. There are also several intriguing scratches on the back of the piece that might have been more handiwork by the young Tad.

One of the crude works just might depict Abraham Lincoln fishing, with a cat on his lap, possibly “Tabby” or “Dixie,” two favorites of the president during his time in the White House.

Another etching with a more disturbing interpretation could show the president’s head snapping back at the moment he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at Ford’s Theatre in April 1865.

Brian suggests as well that one of the works pictures details of the shirt the martyred president wore in his coffin from a viewpoint the young Tad might have had.

People might see different images on the back of the chest, but Rachel said she agreed with Brian about one as soon as she saw it.

“With the etching of the fisherman on the back, he didn’t tell me what he had seen,” she said. “He just said, ‘Look at this,’ and I saw it was a fisherman.”

Someone also used a knife to carve the word “DOG” on the front panel

of a drawer.

Tad had a history of carving his name on pieces of furniture, as is documented by a display in the Lincoln Heritage Museum in Lincoln, Illinois. It includes a rocking chair prominently featuring “TAD” carved into the back.

The Ellisons hope to solve the mystery surrounding their unique piece of furniture, which sits along a wall in a room that includes photos of Abraham Lincoln and details from the chest – along with a Lincoln teddy bear.

Publicizing their find on the internet could help bring them some answers.

“Maybe, just maybe, someone will recognize it,” Brian said.

Tad Lincoln, the president’s beloved son, died at the age of 18 in Chicago, possibly of tuberculosis, in July 1871. Now, nearly a century and a half later, a link to his life just might be carved into a chest of drawers currently residing in the West Virginia hills.

“The biggest part is the mystery,” Rachel said.

“What if... What if it was (Tad) who carved his name on there?” Brian added. “But if nothing else, I still own a beautiful piece of furniture.”



Brian Ellison shows off the back of the dresser (left), which contains several images, including one (above) he believes depicts President Lincoln fishing while a cat rests on his lap.