

Dressing Mr. Lincoln - by Denise N. Winter

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Expanded here in honor of the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War
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Researching extant clothing from the past can be a very rewarding experience as it can tell such a story. As a historical clothier and researcher, I have a great interest in men's tailoring and tend to view history in general through the filter of clothing, its construction, and fabrication.

Abraham Lincoln has been in front of me my entire life with that famous face on currency and in history books. Until recently, I had never had any desire to venture into his world other than that. Then last year, I had an opportunity to delve further into Lincoln's world through his wardrobe when Lincoln enactor John Voehl, of Abe Lincoln Alive, was in need of historically accurate clothing for his portrayal of Lincoln. We both thought this was going to be a straight-forward effort – standard wear for an 1860's gent.

I began to wonder if there was something special about Lincoln's clothing, the way he wore it, or the construction of it. Initial searches on the internet led me to a clue that something was embroidered on the inside of his coat – *One Country, One Destiny*. The continued research unveiled the story of a president, his clothing, an assassination, and one of the oldest clothing manufacturers in the United States. Intrigued, the next step was to contact the Ford's Theater National Historic Site to see if any of Lincoln's clothing actually existed. I was able to contact the curator there and found to my astonishment, his clothing did exist. After signing a few releases, I was able to obtain photos of the clothing in which he was fatally shot on the night of April 14, 1865.

The moment I saw the images, the project struck a personal chord and Lincoln became human to me. I could just imagine a husband and wife out for an evening of theater never knowing that it would be their last together. On that fateful night, his life was taken from him and those who loved him. And the clothes are left to tell the story.

Even though I was not able to get up close and personal with the clothing, it was an honor to view them and recreate the reproductions as closely as possible to the originals. As you will see by the photos of his vest, frock coat and trousers, it would be very difficult to reproduce the items just from these images alone. It required some educated guesses on my behalf based upon prior research, study, tailoring experience, and customer budget.



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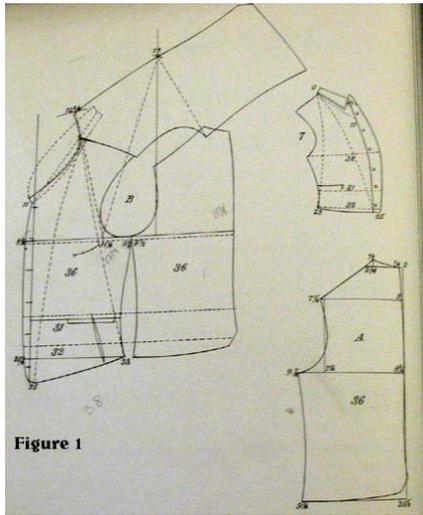


Figure 1

The reproduction clothing was to include: double-breasted frock coat, vest, and trousers. Patterns for the Voehl project were drafted for the reproductions based upon the Salsbury System of Measurement and Drafting, 1866 (Figure 1). Photos of the interiors of the original garments were not available. That made it necessary to finish the interiors of the reproductions based upon previous research and extant garments from my personal collection.

Lincoln Vest (Figure 2): The shawl-collared, single-breasted, four-pocket vest is fairly standard for the period. The original is black wool with drab polished cotton back. Buttons are flat, round and covered. The vest has a dart at the bottom of each side front. The reproduction vest was made out of black wool flannel with a cotton satin back. Six flat-top buttons covered with silk are front closures. Buttonholes are hand bound.



Figure 2

Lincoln Trousers (Figure 3): Black wool with waistband, fly front, and metal suspender buttons. The most noteworthy aspect of the trousers is the design of the front pockets. Rather than being pockets that a hand can slide right into, they have a squared flap with a single button closure (Figure 4). The reproduction trousers were made with

black wool flannel and metal buttons of a similar look.



Figure 3

Lincoln Frock Coat (Figure 5): The original frock coat is black wool, double-breasted. There are four buttons on each side front that are flat covered. The sleeves have a façade cuff with stitching. The reproduction frock coat was made with black wool flannel as well and lined with black cotton satin. Buttons are covered with silk ottoman.

Saving the best part for last, there is an additional coat with quite a history. The now-very-famous overcoat was made for Mr. Lincoln by Brooks Brothers, a ready-made clothing manufacturer located in New York, New York. The company was a key player in the uniform business of the civil war. Situated in the heart of the city, the building was nearly destroyed during the earlier draft riots.

It turns out that Mr. Lincoln was a frequent customer of Brooks Brothers and in honor of his second inauguration, and as a promotion for the store, they made him a very special, elaborate overcoat. The coat was displayed in the Brooks Brothers store window as



Figure 4

advertisement before finally being presented to Mr. Lincoln.

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The original overcoat (shown in the photos) is a double-breasted coat made of the fine wool with silk edging around the outside of the collar, cuffs and pockets. Almost the entire inside of the coat is hand-quilted. The right and left interior front panels feature the design of an eagle symbol holding two streamers with the words 'One Country, One Destiny'. This amazingly detailed coat also resides at the



Figure 5

Ford Theatre Museum but is in poor condition having been ravaged over the years by souvenir collectors who have removed a section of the upper shoulder area bit by bit. (Figures 6 & 7)

Gloria Swift, Curator, Ford's Theater Museum, shared that the Lincolns went to the theatre that April night in 1865. Mr. Lincoln had refused security even at the urging of his staff. (One would imagine that a President would have a gentlemen's aid at least by his side to open doors, hold his overcoat, etc. but that wasn't the case.) He was wearing the full set of clothing that exists at the museum, sans the overcoat. Chilled, he reached for the overcoat which had previously been draped over the chair and wrapped it around his shoulders. Shortly after, he was fatally wounded.

Brooks Brothers, founded in 1818, is an American institution and eager to keep its rich history alive. In 1990, in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, the company made two reproductions of the famous overcoat. One of which would be gifted to Ford's Theater Museum, the other to be

used for display. Accuracy in reproducing the original was extremely important and experts were called in to analyze the original coat. The reproductions were to be copied down to the textile content which included high quality wool and beaver. The estimated cost to reproduce each coat is \$8,000.00 to \$10,000.00. The coats were made by master tailors on staff. The eagle design on each side of the interior panels, and other elaborate quilting, was free-hand quilted by machine on the reproductions. Additionally, Brooks Brothers donated 370 hours of restoration work to the originals.



Figure 6

According to Kelly Stuart, Brooks Brothers historian, the eagle design was drawn by a boy in the shop and later became immortalized by seamstresses who quilted the design into the silk lining of the coat. In 1918, the coat and its history were featured in an article in a local newspaper that talked about the amount of time that it took to quilt the coat. After the article ran, the newspaper received a letter from

Agnes Breckenridge, then 89 years of age. Agnes stated that she had done the original quilting for the coat project in the 1860's and corrected the newspaper regarding the amount of hours that it took for the quilting. Apparently, the newspaper was incorrect.



Figure 7

The original overcoat has been on public display at the Ford's Theater Museum for many years, but recently they have decided (for purposes of preservation) to rotate the original with the reproduction donated by Brooks Brothers.

The information in this article but scratches the surface of
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the whole story, some of which we can never know. The clothing tells us a multi-faceted story of how the history of one man's clothing can affect many lives. Each facet is faced with the people who wove the fabrics, tailored the coats, quilted the insides, stitched the seams, and conducted the fittings. And, even that anonymous young boy who drew the eagle design. Wonder if the relatives of that boy even know about his contribution to history? Then there was the man who wore the clothing who never had the opportunity to live out his life yet resides on the face of our currency and turned out to be one of the most historically significant men in our country's history.



Mr. Voehl and I have decided that due to the elaborate nature of the great coat, we will have to *think* on that for a while longer before embarking on the project!

Special thanks to Gloria Swift, Ford's Theatre National Historic Site and Kelly Stuart at Brooks Brothers for their support and information. John Voehl of Abe Lincoln Alive, and Bill See Photography.

Biography: Denise Winter, proprietor of Denise Nadine Design, has been designing and constructing historical clothing and costumes for both ladies and gentlemen for many years. She has a passion for the research of clothing and customs of the 19th century. Workshops and lectures are available on all sorts of related topics and she can even teach Victorian dance!

www.denisenadinedesign.com

Photo Left: John Voehl of Abe Lincoln Alive, enacting Lincoln (Photograph by Bill See Photography) - Visit John's website at:

<http://www.abelincolnalive.com/>

John Voehl, active since 1996, has provided over 500 presentations and appearances in 20 states to public and private schools in all grades through universities, scouts, churches, historic, civic, social, convention, patriotic, historical and corporate venues. Continually visiting more significant Lincoln and Civil War historical sites.

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About the Reproductions



Interior of extant frock coat (1850-1870) from author's collection. Quilted lining indicative of military coats of the period.

Interior of the Voehl reproduction frock coat made by Denise Winter. Note: The original Lincoln coat had flat metal buttons. We choose flat covered - still correct for the period.



Reproduction of the Lincoln vest made by Denise Winter.

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Reproduction of the Lincoln trousers made by Denise Winter.

Photo Captions:

Figure 1-Caption Example of tailored vest from Salsbury System of Measurement and Drafting 1866., from the book *Civil War Gentlemen*, R. L. Shep & W.S. Salsbury.

Figure 2-Caption Original Lincoln vest – Four pocket, shawl collar. Photo courtesy of Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, National Park Service, FOTH

Figure 3 – Caption Lincoln original trousers – Photo courtesy of Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, National Park Service, FOTH

Figure 4 – Caption Close up of Lincoln trouser pocket - Photo courtesy of Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, National Park Service, FOTH

Figure 5 – Caption Lincoln original double-breasted frock coat – Photo courtesy of Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, National Park Service, FOTH

Figure 6 – Caption Full length view of the original Lincoln overcoat made by Brooks Brothers. Note the destruction on the shoulder by souvenir hunters - Photo courtesy of Ford's Theatre National Historic Site, National Park Service, FOTH

Figure 7 – Caption Close up the original overcoat eagle design quilted into the silk lining - Photo courtesy Brooks Brothers, New York, NY

Figure 8 – Caption Lincoln enactor John Voehl www.adbelincolnalive.com wearing reproduction suit made by Denise Winter, Photo courtesy of Bill See Photography