

# CLASSIC LINCOLN PHOTO RESURFACES

By BEN DOBBIN  
*Associated Press Writer*  
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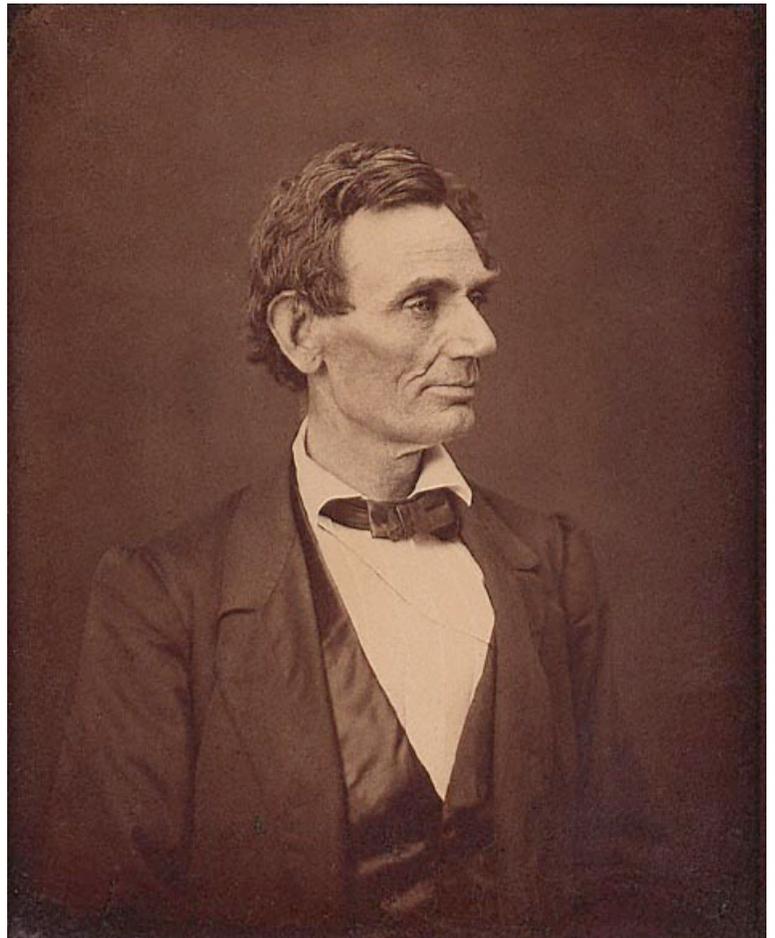
ROCHESTER, N.Y.—Seated by a window in the Illinois state Capitol in 1860, a beardless, bow-tied Abraham Lincoln held still for 25 seconds for what would become a classic campaign portrait of the soon-to-be president. It was undoubtedly a personal favorite.

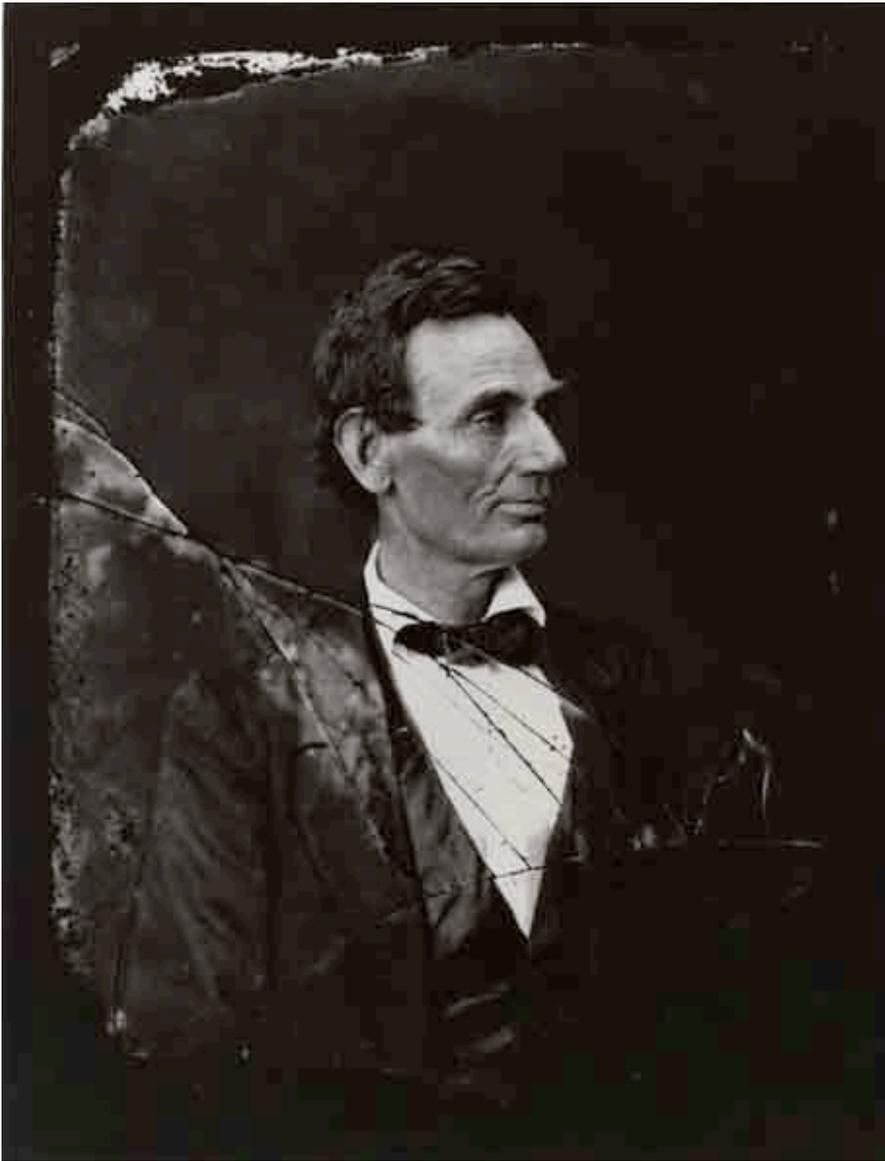
"That looks better and expresses me better than any I have ever seen," Lincoln, who had recently launched his run for the White House as the Republican nominee, said in a letter to photographer Alexander Hesler. "If it pleases the people, I am satisfied." Twenty years later, images of the slain Civil War leader were in high demand. Hesler's wet-plate collodion negative was used to create a high-definition, silver-gelatin interpositive—a new-technology format from which several thousand prints were generated and sold in the late 19th century.

Leap forward to 1933: During shipment by parcel post to St. Louis, the original glass plate is accidentally broken and ends up as a shattered artifact in the Smithsonian Institution's vault. But the 8-by-10-inch clone—evidently in the same package and similarly damaged—disappears. To mark the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth on Feb. 12, the long lost positive transparency goes on display beginning Sunday at the George Eastman House museum of photography and film.

It was sent there for repair in December 2006 by a Midwestern collector of Lincoln materials who didn't realize he owned what curators regard as a national treasure. He has declined to be identified. "This is the closest you will ever get to seeing Lincoln, short of putting your eyeballs on the man himself," said Grant Romer, an expert on Lincoln images and the museum's director of photograph conservation.

Next to the best-preserved paper prints, the three-quarter profile—shot with the aid of a head rest on a quiet Sunday in Springfield, Ill., on June 3, 1860—is striking in its clarity and tonal range. Visible in the backlit glass plate is every wrinkle and freckle on Lincoln's lopsided face, the irregular curve of his thick lower lip, unruly hairs in his bushy eyebrows, a mole on the right cheek. "It's almost more than





*The long-lost positive transparency damaged in 1933.*

you want to see," Romer said, laughing. With its dermatological detail, the picture becomes a vital authentication reference.

Lincoln was the first U.S. president to be extensively photographed—more than 125 highly collectible portraits of him survive—and "almost every year, somebody comes forward with a daguerreotype or a tintype or an albumen print from the period in which they think they see Lincoln," Romer said.

Although not as well-known as other Lincoln photos—"from a tousle-haired, Byron-esque pose" captured by Hesler in 1857 to the bearded and "sometimes absolutely haggard" views of Lincoln as president—the official campaign picture looks formal and dignified but also more handsome and fresh-faced, he said. "It's the most noble portrait of him, very heroic," Romer said. "It's just pure, straight, well-conceived portrait photography that does the trick, that really makes Lincoln look like the special character he was."

Intricate work went into conserving the rectangular plate, from removing surface dirt and piecing together 26 shards of glass broken in the lower left quadrant to creating a crystal-clear silicone rubber backing to stabilize the fragile glass and installing it in a custom-made wooden display case.

Except for some silver mirroring and flake losses mainly along the cracks, "it's in remarkably good shape," said Romer's deputy, Ralph Wiegandt, a conservator who oversaw the 18-month restoration. "The owner paid for all the material we used," Wiegandt said. "The research, the development of the restoration process, all of that, was part of our contribution to this seminal object."

The plate will be on view for a few months in a main-exhibit colonnade featuring iconic photographs by the likes of Nickolas Muray, Ansel Adams and Edward Steichen. It'll hang next to an 1881 albumen copy belonging to Eastman House, the colonial revival mansion of Kodak founder George Eastman where more than 400,000 highly valued photographs have been gathered up since 1947. In one alcove nearby is a straight-on picture in 2004 of another Illinois lawyer-politician who became president: Barack Obama.