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## Yours Truly, Abraham Lincoln

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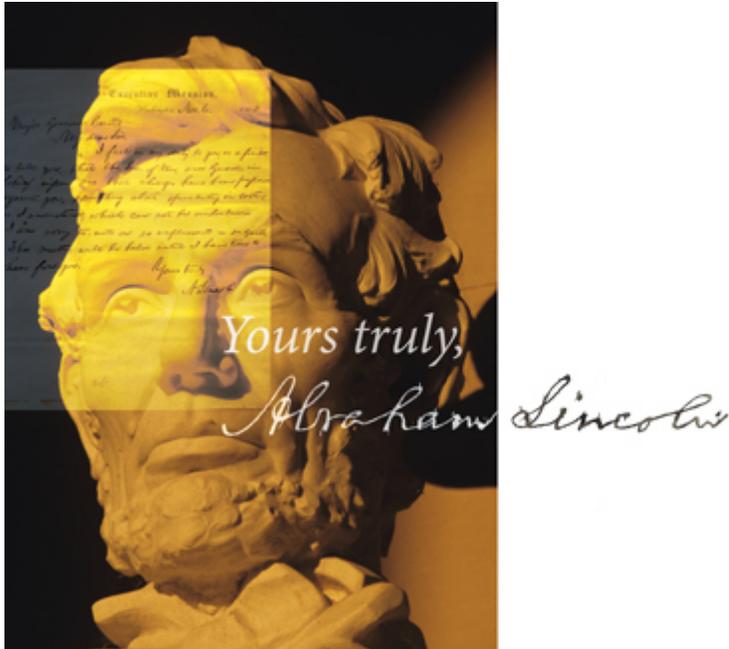
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## **Erika Nunamaker '01 joins a huge document hunt in search of the true Lincoln.**

**Story by Rebecca Welzenbach '07**

Since the age of 16, Erika Rozinek Nunamaker '01 has been in love with a tall, dark stranger. But what started as a simple crush — a picture in her wallet, a trip to his hometown — is now a daily pursuit. Nunamaker spends her days seeking out and poring over his correspondence and other documents, hoping to reveal something new about a man who left behind so many mysteries.

She isn't alone in her intense curiosity. Millions have been drawn to the life of Abraham Lincoln, widely heralded as America's greatest president. But few people get the kind of access to their hero that Nunamaker enjoys as a research associate for the Papers of Abraham Lincoln project. Based in Lincoln's "hometown," Springfield, Ill., the project may be the biggest ever document hunt. Its goal: to track down and make a permanent record of everything written by or to Lincoln during his lifetime (1809-1865).

To work with such documents is a dream come true for Nunamaker, who really does carry Lincoln's picture in her wallet. "In everything he does he seems to have been very kind and honest," she says. "There's something that people can relate to about him."



**Erika Nunamaker stands in front of a portrait of Lincoln at the Old State Capitol Building in Springfield, which is home to the Papers of Abraham Lincoln project.**

now under way, cover his pre-presidential life and White House years. The end product will be an online database with a digital image of every document, each fully transcribed, annotated and cross-referenced, to help readers make the most of the yellowed pages and spidery 19th-century writing.

In 1953, Lincoln scholars combined forces to create *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. With the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, scholars like Nunamaker are building on that success, the primary difference being that this is the first project of its kind to be “born digital,” she says. Not only will that allow the collection to be made available on the Internet, but additions to it can easily be added over time.

For now, Nunamaker is absorbed in the joy of discovery. She estimates that the project is about a third of the way through its collection phase. Traveling in pairs, the researchers make two-week trips to wherever there are documents — mostly in libraries, museums and even private homes. Using laptops and scanners that they tote in large, wheeled suitcases, Nunamaker and her

Nunamaker suggests that Lincoln holds fascination because his personal life remains largely unknown. “All the little pieces of evidence are dots that you can connect to form different pictures,” she says. “People are just endlessly redoing the pictures.”

Robert Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature at IWU, is one of those scholars working to connect the dots. Bray authored an award-winning biography of Methodist evangelist Peter Cartwright, who ran against Lincoln for Congress, and he is now at work on a book about Lincoln himself. He notes, “Lincoln said very little about himself. This is one of the real negative facts of Lincoln studies. You have to put his life together from what other people said about him.”

Bray helped introduce Nunamaker to the world of Lincoln studies as a student by encouraging her to attend conferences and introducing her to fellow scholars. He says that the Papers of Abraham Lincoln “will be one of the biggest things to come along in a long, long time. I think it’s about as exciting as it gets in Lincoln studies.”

The project’s first phase encompassed Lincoln’s legal career. Phases two and three,

colleagues capture high-resolution color images of all the Lincoln letters, appointments, commissions, pardons, orders and resolutions they can find.

Lincoln himself, according to legend, used to carry letters, bills and other documents inside his stovepipe hat. Today those same papers are meticulously protected by most libraries and museums. Privately owned documents are a different story. “A lot of people frame their documents, and you don’t want them to,” Nunamaker says, because of the paper damage caused by constant exposure to light. She remembers scanning one document, a family heirloom, glued in the 1930s into a damaging frame. Unable to remove the document from the frame backing, Nunamaker’s colleague suggested that the owner take it to a professional conservator, who estimated the cost of restoration at \$1,000.

Still, that’s pocket change in the world of Lincoln collectors. According to Susan Krause, assistant editor of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, there has long been a brisk market for such documents. Almost any signed Lincoln manuscript is worth thousands of dollars. Abe’s reply to a girl who had urged him to grow whiskers — “Do you not think people would call it a silly affection [sic] if I were to begin now?” — recently sold for over a million dollars.

Because such documents are so valuable, museums and libraries are loath to ship them to Springfield for scanning. And, for the researchers, the computer equipment they use is difficult to check on an airplane. As a result, Nunamaker and her colleagues always trek from city to city by car. “We go to such lengths for some of these documents,” Nunamaker says. “On one trip to New Jersey and Pennsylvania, we drove 17 hours over two days. We got to Toms River, New Jersey, and we scanned one appointment that was signed by Abraham Lincoln.”

Those hours and miles add up when you take into account that the complete collection will feature between 100,000 and 200,000 images. According to Krause, there is no way to know the potential total: “We have researchers going through the National Archives right now, and they’re coming up with new documents all the time.” There is also no official record of privately owned documents, which remain unknown until owners come forward with them.

Though the odds may be long, Nunamaker says, “I think we’re all secretly hoping” to find a Lincoln diary or his correspondence with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. “The personal letters are the most revealing,” but most of them are lost. In the few surviving letters of the couple, “he’s so teasing and playful. [He and Mary] just seem kind of happy together,” she says. Scholars hypothesize that the rest of those letters may have been consumed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, when Mary was living there. Other material may have been destroyed by Lincoln’s son, Robert, who was very protective of his famously unstable mother. “It just breaks my heart,” Nunamaker says. “I think Mary might have a better reputation if their letters could tell her side of the story.”

Seeking the essence of Lincoln’s world through first-hand sources is a habit Nunamaker learned while double-majoring in history and English at IWU. She garnered honors for research that used letters, diaries and newspapers to analyze the role women played in the 1860 election that made Lincoln president, despite the fact that women at that time couldn’t vote. Nunamaker’s final paper, “Trembling for the Nation: Illinois Women and the Election of 1860,” led to a

presentation at the Conference on Illinois History in 2002 and was later published by the *Journal of Illinois History*. “That’s extremely uncommon, to have an undergraduate paper published in a history journal,” notes Associate Professor of History April Schultz, her advisor on the project.

Nunamaker’s interest in women’s history also led her to a three-year internship at Bloomington’s historic David Davis Mansion, built in 1872 by Davis, a Supreme Court justice and Lincoln’s longtime friend. From putting together a marketing brochure to creating her own women’s history tour as a field trip for her class, Nunamaker “got familiar with how you run a small museum,” says Marcia Young, the site’s superintendent.

That included learning the museum’s approach to historical material. “We read everything in the house as a document,” Young says, in order to share with visitors “the cultural and social history that these artifacts tell us.” Learning that approach came in handy during Nunamaker’s graduate studies at the University of Delaware and Henry DuPont Winterthur Museum, where she earned a master’s degree in Early American Culture. Her degree emphasized “reading” evidence such as furniture, decor and other artifacts to understand the values of the people who used them. Her paper analyzing one of Lincoln’s couches and what it reveals about his early career was published this spring in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*.

These days, Nunamaker focuses on investigating documents, not furniture. When she’s not traveling, her workdays are often spent at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, just a short walk away from her office in Springfield’s Old State Capitol Building.

The museum, opened in 2005, has become a huge tourist attraction, but it is the library that gives scholars a thrill, offering “the biggest Lincoln collection in Illinois,” says Bryon Andreasen, a research historian for the library. “The only place that has more than we do is the Library of Congress.” Andreasen is also gatekeeper to a vault of Lincoln artifacts, ranging from the revolver of Lincoln’s bodyguard to Mrs. Lincoln’s inaugural gown, to the tablecloth used at their wedding.

Nunamaker calls the museum’s abundance of material an “embarrassment of riches.” Krause calls it “the mother lode.” That this treasure trove of invaluable documents and artifacts is located in the heart of Illinois is no surprise to Bray, who notes that “Illinois has been its spiritual home. Everyone who’s serious about writing about Lincoln comes to Springfield.”

Young adds, “it’s wonderful for us” that Nunamaker chose to return to Illinois and “share the benefits of the wonderful education she’s received.” Nunamaker’s ties to the region are strong.



**Last fall, Nunamaker made a stop in Bloomington to scan Lincoln papers stored at the McLean County Museum of History. The museum’s collection includes facsimiles of some Lincoln writings and two original letters.**

She has remained close with professors and mentors, even returning to IWU this spring to teach a history class on material culture.

While Nunamaker pursues her dream job, she is also gearing up for the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birthday in 2009, helping plan events for a bicentennial celebration in Lincoln, Ill., where she resides with her husband, Derek — a 2001 IWU graduate who works in technology deployment services at State Farm Insurance.

That's right: the Nunamakers live in Lincoln, Ill. But while Derek tolerates with good humor the "other man" in his wife's life, there are limits.

"I wanted to live on Lincoln Street," Erika says, "but my husband said no."

*Editor's Note: The story's author, Rebecca Welzenbach '07, started classes this fall at the University of Michigan to earn a master's of science in information. "My concentration will be in archives and records management," writes Rebecca, "so I'll learn about how to do basically what Erika Nunamaker does: protect and manage one-of-a-kind documents so that people today and in the future can make use of them." At Illinois Wesleyan, Welzenbach majored in English literature, was chosen for both Phi Kappa Phi and Phi Beta Kappa scholastic honors and served for two years as a writer in the University Communications office.*