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Smithsonian Uncovers Secret Message Inside Abraham Lincoln's Watch

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History announced it has found a "secret" message engraved in President Abraham Lincoln's watch by a watchmaker who was repairing it in 1861 when news of the attack on Fort Sumter reached Washington, D.C.

In an interview with The New York Times April 30, 1906, 84-year-old Jonathan Dillon recalled that he was working for M.W. Galt and Co. on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, where he was repairing Lincoln's watch. The owner of the shop announced that the first shot of the Civil War had been fired. Dillon reported that he unscrewed the dial of the watch, and with a sharp instrument wrote on the metal beneath: "The first gun is fired. Slavery is dead. Thank God we have a President who at least will try." He then signed and dated the inscription and closed the dial. Dillon told The New York Times in 1906 that to his knowledge, no one ever saw the inscription.

After being contacted by Dillon's great-great-grandson, Doug Stiles of Waukegan, Ill., the museum agreed to remove the dial to see if the watchmaker's message was inside.

The museum did find a message inscribed on the brass underside of the movement. The wording was slightly different from Dillon's own recollection. The actual engraving says:

Jonathan Dillon
April 13-1861
Fort Sumpter [sic] was attacked
by the rebels on the above
date J Dillon
April 13-1861
Washington
thank God
we have a
government
Jonth Dillon

There was another marking that says “LE Grofs Sept 1864 Wash DC.” In addition, “Jeff Davis” also was inscribed on the bridge of the watch.

“Lincoln never knew of the message he carried in his pocket,” said Brent D. Glass, director of the National Museum of American History. “It’s a personal side of history about an ordinary watchman being inspired to record something for posterity.”

During the 18th and 19th centuries, professional watchmakers often recorded their work inside a watch, and it would typically only be seen by another watchmaker. This inscription remained hidden behind the dial for almost 150 years.

Lincoln purchased the watch in the 1850s from George Chatterton, a Springfield, Ill., jeweler. Though Lincoln was not outwardly vain, the fine gold watch was a symbol of his success as a prominent Illinois lawyer. In the 19th century, men wore their watches in their clothing pockets. It was not until after World War I that wristwatches became more popular for use by men. The watch came to the museum in 1958 as a gift from Lincoln Isham, Abraham Lincoln’s great-grandson.

Lincoln was elected the 16th President of the United States in November 1860. In January 1861, South Carolina seceded from the Union, and was followed by the secession of six more states before Lincoln’s March 1861 inauguration. On April 12, 1861, the Civil War began with shots fired at Fort Sumter.

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Note to editors: The images have been photographed and filmed and are available by calling the museum’s Office of Public Affairs.