

Brian Caplan '82

Collector of Lincoln Memorabilia

To mark the two hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, Brian Caplan '82 will exhibit a portion of his extensive collection of Lincoln memorabilia at the Robert D. Farber University Archives through June. Caplan is a partner in the law firm Caplan & Ross in New York City.

1. How did you get started collecting?

My father lived in the Amish country in Pennsylvania, and there was little to do when visiting him there other than going to a local auction house once a week. One day, I bought a dozen FDR buttons that were being sold in a lot. That morphed into collecting political memorabilia, and then, ultimately, Lincoln and Civil War memorabilia.

2. How extensive is your collection?

Between photographs and artifacts, I have thousands of items. As for value, let's just say I have no money in the bank; it's all in my collections.

3. What's your most treasured piece?

The most historically significant piece is a note Lincoln wrote on May 6, 1861, in which he asks if "the men" have made their appearance yet, and if so, who is tending to them. The note in a vacuum doesn't have a huge amount of significance. But if you do a little bit of historical digging, you'll find that the note was written two days after Lincoln had called up 17,000 new troops, approximately three weeks into the Civil War, to protect Washington, D.C., from a Confederate invasion. An auctioneer told me, "If you can ever find the general order written a few days earlier, where Lincoln was calling up the troops, you'd really have a match made in heaven. But the odds of your ever finding such a general order is extremely unlikely." Six months later, I went to a Civil War show. On the last day, I was

looking through a dealer's notebook, and the general order was staring me in the face. The guy wanted twenty dollars for it.

4. What would the average person be surprised to learn about Lincoln?

Lincoln was a practical joker and a great storyteller before he became president. Having seven states secede from the Union between his election and his inauguration put a weight on him until the day he was killed. But not long before his assassination, there is an indication in at least one document in my collection that Lincoln's lighter side might have been reemerging.

5. What advice would you offer someone who wants to start collecting historical memorabilia?

First, read a couple of books to learn about the cast of characters you're interested in. Next, subscribe to auction catalogs and browse eBay to see what interests you and what you can afford. Then decide which area of collecting you want to go into—for example, photography, documents, or three-dimensional artifacts. And then slowly but surely build up a collection through antiques shows, flea markets, eBay, and auction houses.

—Ken Gornstein



MIKE LOVETT