



To See or Not to See: Displaying a Presidential Murder Weapon?

Created by Jake Flack

6th-12th Grade

Introduction

When a museum designs an exhibit, the curators must decide what will be included in or excluded from the display. Imagine you are in charge of designing an exhibit about the assassination of President Lincoln. Should the deringer pistol used by John Wilkes Booth to shoot Abraham Lincoln be displayed in the new exhibit? What do you think?

Context

Four American presidents have been assassinated, all by firearms. Two of the murder weapons are on public display; two are not.

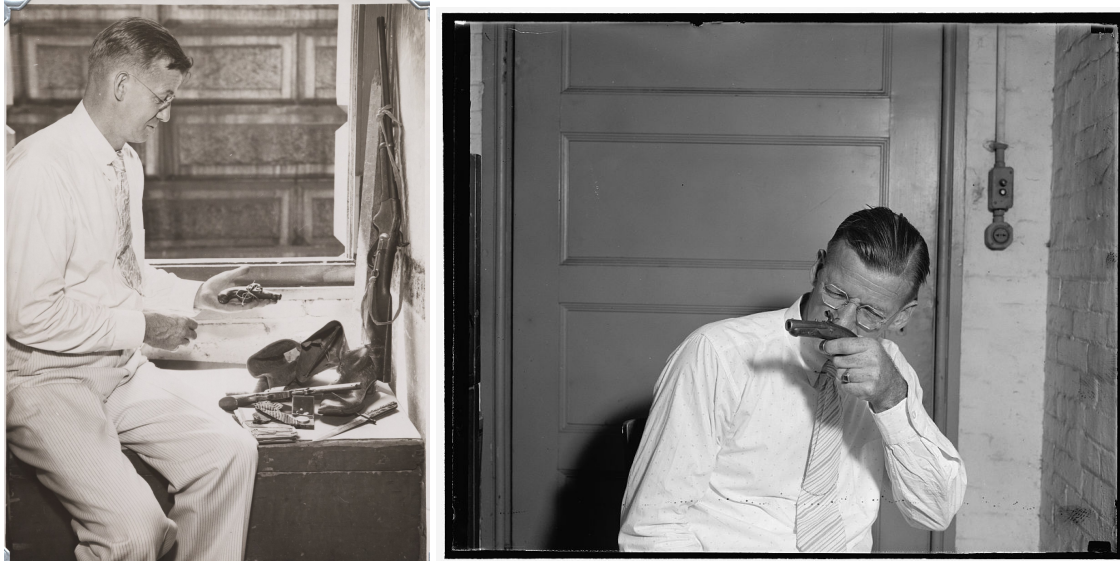
- The pistol used to shoot Abraham Lincoln in 1865 is currently displayed in Ford's Theatre.
- The pistol used to shoot James Garfield in 1881 was lost by the Smithsonian.
- The pistol used to shoot William McKinley in 1901 is currently displayed in the Buffalo History Museum.
- The rifle used to shoot John F. Kennedy in 1963 is held at the National Archives and is not displayed to the public; the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas displays an identical weapon.

The U.S. Army Judge Advocate General kept the weapon John Wilkes Booth used to kill President Abraham Lincoln. Eventually, it wound up in the headquarters of the U.S. Department of War (today part of the Department of Defense).

Turn the page to see what happened when the weapon was displayed for the press.

Showing Off the Weapon

In 1937, Edwin Pitts, Chief Clerk of the Judge Advocate General's Office, displayed the weapon, along with other evidence from the trial of Lincoln assassination conspirators, for the press.



Edwin B. Pitts, Chief Clerk of the Judge Advocate General's Office, holds the gun used by John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln, while showing other assassination artifacts in possession of the War Department. Photos taken on August 10, 1937. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-23180 (left) & LC-DIG-hec-23179 (right).

What do you think?

Comment on the following questions:

1. Are these artifacts being properly stored and handled? Explain why or why not.
2. Should the public be able to see these artifacts?
3. If you had a precious artifact should you be able to sell it, or should it be in a museum?

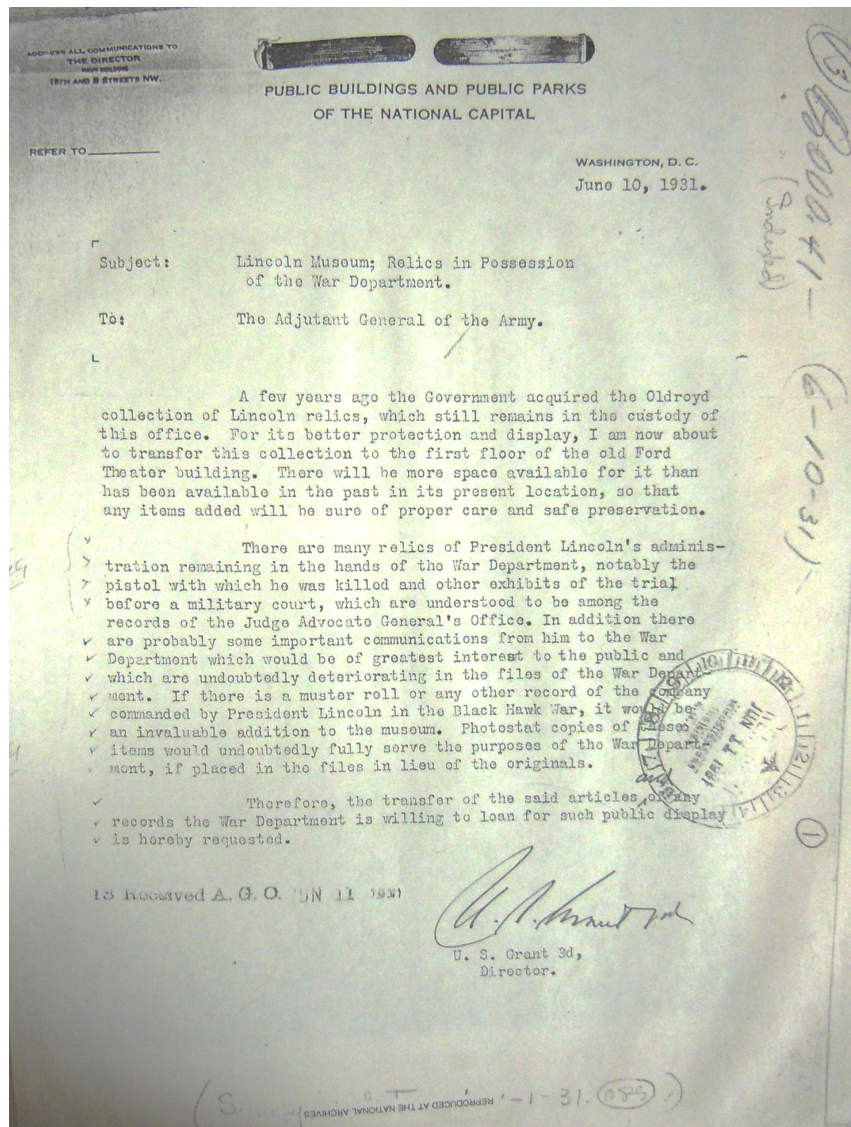
Turn the page to see what happened when the people planning a new museum at Ford's Theatre asked to display the gun.

Displaying the Gun at Ford's Theatre: The Request

On June 10, 1931, General Ulysses S. Grant III—in charge of planning the new Lincoln Museum at Ford's Theatre—sent a letter to the Adjutant General of the U.S. Army, requesting to display the gun Booth used to kill Lincoln.

Look at this letter—read it closely. Use the glossary at the end of this activity to help with words that might be unfamiliar.

Then, answer a question about the letter.



What is U.S. Grant, III, asking for in his letter? Circle your answer.

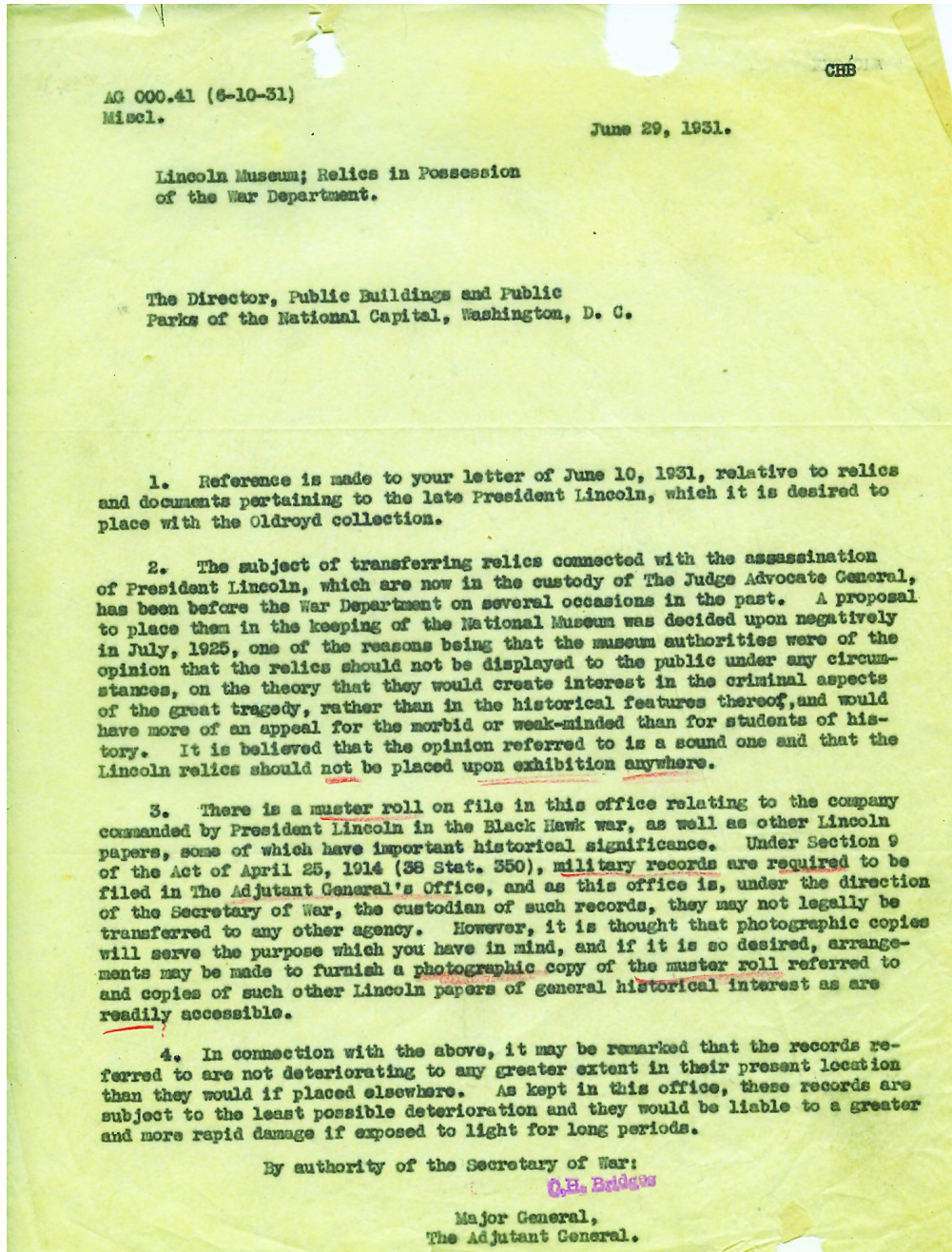
- To honor his grandfather
- To display the deringer

Displaying the Gun at Ford's Theatre: The Reply

In this response letter from the War Department, General C.H. Bridges denies the request to move the Deringer and other artifacts to the new museum.

Look at this letter—read it closely. Use the glossary at the end of this activity to help with words that might be unfamiliar.

Then, answer some questions about the letter on the next page.



Questions about the June 29, 1931 letter

1. What was decided in July 1925 about displaying relics of the Lincoln assassination?
2. What were the reasons for that decision?
3. What was General Bridges' decision in 1931?
4. Do you agree with General Bridges? Why or why not?

Turn the page to give your opinion on what should happen with the deringer today.

Your Turn

Imagine you are the curator of Ford's Theatre Museum and the exhibits are to be redesigned. Your job is to select what will be in the new exhibits, and make a recommendation to your boss, the Director. You must decide if the deringer pistol used by John Wilkes Booth to shoot Abraham Lincoln should or should not be displayed in the new exhibits. What do you think?

Write a two-paragraph letter to the Director of the Ford's Theatre Museum, giving your recommendation on what to do with the deringer.

Answer this question:

Should the deringer be on display or not?

Provide at least two reasons to support your opinion.