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Abraham Lincoln's Swedish Photographer

One of the earliest photographs of Abraham Lincoln was taken by a Swede, but who was he?

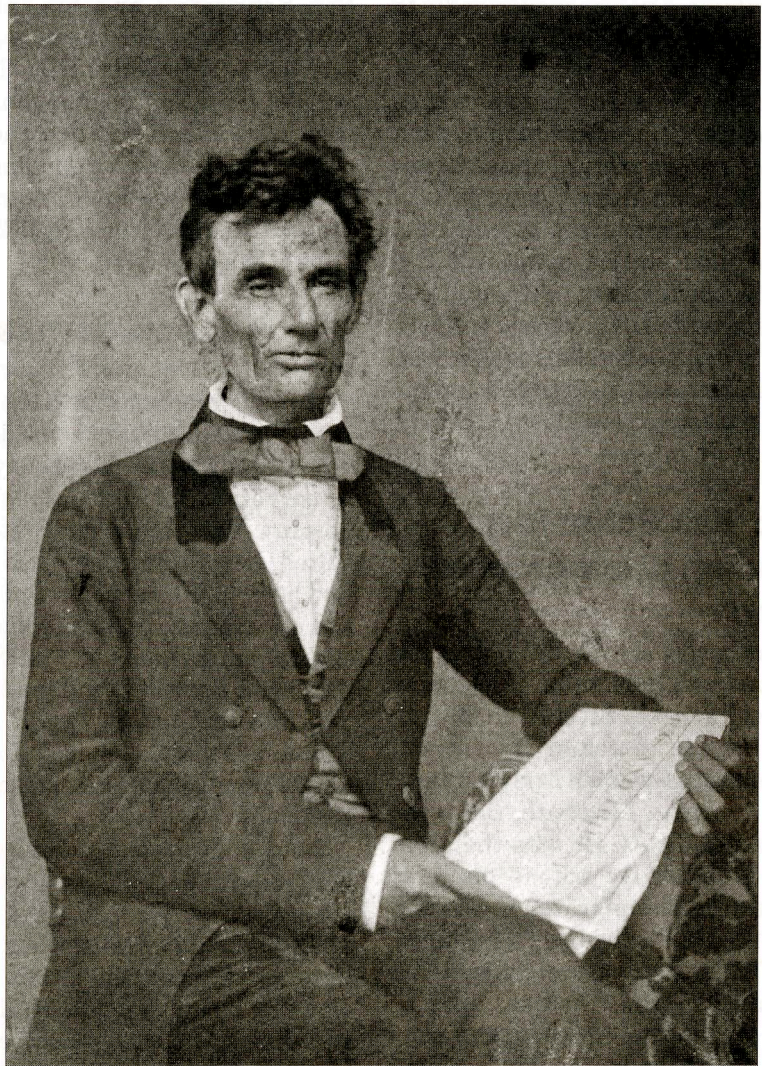
BY NILS WILLIAM OLSSON

Early photographs of Abraham Lincoln, before he became the thirteenth president of the United States (1861-1865), are quite rare. The earliest picture, of which we have a record, is a daguerreotype taken by a photographer in Springfield, IL, in 1846, by the name of N. H. Sheperd.

Lincoln was 37 years old at this time and had just been elected to the U. S. Congress. The second photograph was taken in Chicago 28 Feb. 1857 by Alexander Hesler. Lincoln, a one-term congressman, had gone back to Springfield in order to practice law, but could not resist the lure of politics and in 1856 ran for the U. S. Congress and was defeated.

At the Republican Convention in Philadelphia the same year he was nominated for the vice-presidency and garnered 110 votes, but not enough to get on the ticket. The third picture was an ambrotype, probably taken 28 April 1858 by S. G. Alschuler of Urbana, IL. The fourth likeness was another ambrotype on 7th May 1858 taken by A.M. Byers of Beardstown, IL (Lorant).

In the summer of 1858 Lincoln was back on the campaign trail, vying for a seat in the U.S. Senate against the incumbent, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, his Democratic rival. The debate was held in Chicago, where Douglas opened the campaign



Abraham Lincoln, July 11, 1858. Photo by Polycarpus von Schneidau. (Chicago Historical Society)

on Friday night, 9 July, lambasting Lincoln before a huge crowd. The latter returned the political salvos on Saturday night, 10 July, speaking from a balcony of the Tremont House. Though the crowd was smaller than the night before, it was said that "the enthusiasm was four times as great" (Lorant).

On Sunday, 11 July, Lincoln joined two friends for dinner, Isaac N. Arnold and George Schneider, after which the three strolled down Lake Street, passing a daguerreotype studio owned by Schneider's Swedish friend, Polycarpus von Schneidau. Schneider, the editor of a German anti-slavery newspaper, the *Staat Zeitung*, suggested that Lincoln pose for his friend. Lincoln did, holding in his hand a copy of the *Chicago Press and Tribune*, a newspaper friendly to Lincoln and his ideas. Von Schneidau's (sometimes spelled erroneously von Schneider) daguerreotype was to become the fifth known photograph of Lincoln. The picture shows a different Lincoln from earlier photographs. "There is a look of craftiness in the half-closed eyes and the slightly twisted lips, as though the campaigner has just scored a clever point. This is the intellectual Lincoln, his features alert and intense and his mind sharpened by the clash with Douglas" (Rinhart).

Who was Schneider's Swedish photographer friend?

He was born Carl Johan Fredrik Polycarpus von Schneidau in Skeppsholmen Parish in Stockholm 29 Feb. 1812, the son of Johan Henrik von Schneidau, a Swedish army captain, and Antoinetta Elisabeth, Baroness Cronhielm (SSA). He was the scion of an old family whose earliest ancestor had immigrated to Sweden from Austria during the Thirty Years War (Beerståhl). After a promising beginning in the Swedish military service, being assigned to the elite Svea Artillery Regiment, he was appointed aide-de-camp to Sweden's king, Carl XIV Johan. He advanced to a lieutenantcy and moved in the

highest circles, including Crown Prince Oscar.

But fate was to intervene. He met a young Jewess, Carolina Elisabeth Jacobsson, the daughter of a Stockholm merchant, and it was love on both sides. Convention prohibited an officer of an elite regiment to marry someone of a different religious faith and young von Schneidau saw no other solution but to resign his commission and emigrate to America (Samuel Clarke).

The year was 1842 and Stockholm newspaper had carried accounts, written by Gustaf Unonius, who the year before had emigrated to the United States. With his young wife he had settled in Pine Lake, Wisconsin, where he had organized a Swedish settlement named New Upsala. Von Schneidau and his intended wife, having read the newspaper dispatches, now decided to follow suit and departed for Copenhagen, where they were married. Then they continued on to Hamburg, where they boarded the vessel *Stephani* and arrived in New York City 26 July 1842 (Olsson-Wikén).

Life in the wilderness

Inspired by Unonius's reports they eventually reached Pine Lake in Wisconsin, a wooded tract some distance west of Milwaukee. Here they hoped to carve out for themselves a new destiny. The rigors of frontier life suited them ill, however, used as they had been to the comforts and amenities of urban life in Stockholm. When a shipboard injury to von Schneidau's foot flared up and made it impossible for him to carry out the chores of farming, he was forced to use his meager financial resources to hire help.

At this desperate juncture of his life an event took place which was to revolutionize his life. One day in 1843 the American author, Sarah Freeman Clarke, on a visit to Milwaukee, heard of a Swede, living in the wilderness, who possessed a collection of Rembrandts. Curious to learn more about this cache of valuable art in the Wisconsin woods, Clarke decided to investigate. She

arranged for transportation and soon found herself in the log hut of the von Schneidaus. When she inquired about the Rembrandts, von Schneidau pointed to sketches on the wall, "remembrances" of friends they had left behind in Stockholm.

Sarah Freeman Clarke was nevertheless impressed by the gentility of the couple and when Mrs. von Schneidau confided in her telling her of the disappointment and hardships of frontier life, she decided to do something about it. Through connections to some of the leading citizens in nearby Chicago she was able to arrange for the von Schneidau couple to move to that city in 1844, where Polycarpus von Schneidau found willing pupils interested in his classes in French, German, gymnastics, fencing, and dancing. The city was too small to offer permanent employment in these subjects, however, and his Chicago sponsors then urged him to learn the newly discovered art of producing daguerreotypes and shipped him off to New York to learn the technique as well as to purchase the necessary equipment.

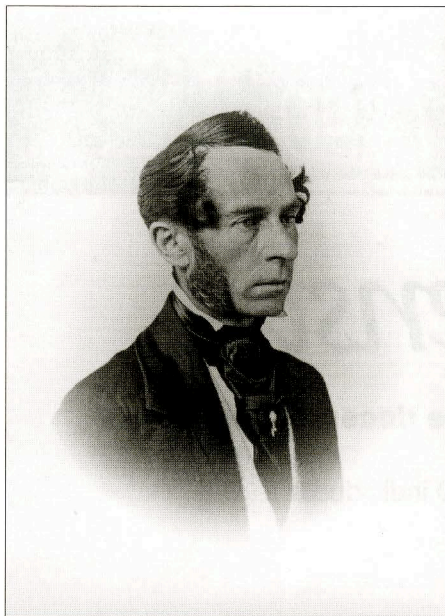
A modern craft

Upon his return to Chicago, von Schneidau opened the second daguerreotype studio in that city. He became a successful entrepreneur and as a craftsman he was highly considered by the citizens of Chicago. Although not the first daguerreotype photographer in Chicago, his products were considered superior to most of his competitors.

In 1851 he was awarded a gold medal by the Chicago Mechanics In-

Smith's Banking Office, Clark street. Commissioners of Deeds for New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Vermont, Virginia, &c. V. C. TURNER, H. A. CLARK.	claiming the art, a themselves to call an
P. VON SCHNEIDAU'S Daguerreotype Rooms, No. 65 Lake Street, over H. O. Stone's Store.	PA of all kin like life tures tak in this ci
J. H. KEDZIE, Attorney and Counsellor at Law, No. 71 Clark street, opposite the Court House. Collecting and Conveyancing promptly attended to. Soldiers' Warrants and extra pay obtained	FA J. B. J. wou citizens c GROCERY trade in t

Advertisement for P. von Schneidau's daguerreotype studio in Chicago in The Chicago Daily Tribune 23 April 1849.



Polycarpus von Schneidau. Probably a self-portrait from a daguerreotype taken in Chicago in the late 1840s or the early 1850s.

stitute for his excellent craftsmanship in photography. In 1853 he exhibited at the Crystal Palace in New York. Although he did not win a prize his portraits were judged "a collection of well selected heads" (Rinhart).

Although he often moved, his studios were always confined to Lake Street. According to an advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune* for 23 April 1849 he was then located at 65 Lake. From the Chicago city directories we can follow his moves. In 1849–1851 he was situated at 122 Lake. From 1852 to 1855 his address was 142 Lake Street and in 1855–1856 his studio was situated at 139 Lake. He is not listed in the 1856 nor the 1857 directories, probably because he was in Europe those years with his daughter Paulina, after the death of his wife in 1855. He seems to have returned to Lake Street in 1858, the year he took the picture of Lincoln.

Von Schneidau played an active role in the small Swedish community of the city. Thus he spearheaded a drive to establish the Swedish-Norwegian St. Ansgarius Protestant Episcopal Church in 1849 and successfully induced his old friend and co-settler at Pine Lake, Wisconsin, Gustaf Unonius, to move to Chi-

cago and shepherd the fledgling congregation. Unonius had been graduated as the first ordained Anglican priest from the Episcopal Theological Seminary at Nashota, near Pine Lake.

In 1852 von Schneidau became Swedish-Norwegian vice consul in Chicago and two years later Denmark asked him to assume the same role as Danish vice consul. By this time his health had begun to fail. Sources are not consistent as to the cause of his ailment. According to one version he was the victim of a severe arthritic attack (Freeburg). Others claim that the mercury vapors associated with his daguerreotype work was the cause (Samuel Clarke). The first version which suggests a case of arthritis is probably the correct diagnosis inasmuch as we possess a letter from him to his old friend, a Mr. McCagg in Chicago written in Berlin, Germany, 15 October 1857, stating that he was confined to bed "unable to move or turn myself."

He returned to Chicago in 1858 and resumed his work as a photographer. His health did not improve, however, and he died 27 Dec. 1859 in his 47th year.

His production was small but he left us a legacy of beautifully composed portraits of some of the residents of Chicago a century and a half ago.

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Error in SAG 2003/4

Unfortunately an error crept in and made the December SAG less than perfect. The articles by Stenåke Petersson and Hal Bern switched places at the last minute, and this was not altered on the cover, nor in the index. So references to pages 211–225 are wrong.

So sorry! The editor.