



## LINCOLN LIBRARY

Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection at Allen County Public Library

### STEREOCARD COLLECTION

FROM THE LINCOLN FAMILY ALBUM, OSTENDORF, AND LINCOLN NATIONAL  
PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS

2 boxes

### Historical Note

Stereocards were two nearly identical photographs pasted side by side on a rectangular piece of cardboard or other stiff backing. Although the difference is hardly noticeable to the viewer, the images are taken from slightly different angles. The photographs were taken at the same time with a camera with dual lenses placed about two inches apart. The distance between the lenses simulated the distance between the pupils of the eyes.<sup>1</sup>

Stereocards were viewed with a stereoscope. Also known as a stereopticon, stereograph, or stereo viewer, the stereoscope was designed by Sir Charles Wheatstone. Wheatstone, a British physicist, realized the eyes took in two images from slightly different angles, combined the angles in the brain, and created a three-dimensional image. Wheatstone's stereoscope used mirrors that reflected two separate two-dimensional images at two different angles into the viewer's eyes. Once the images converged in the brain, the item appeared as a single three-dimensional figure to the viewer.<sup>2</sup>

Viewing stereocards was a very popular form of entertainment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Stereoscopes and stereocards first gained their popularity at the British Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851. Queen Victoria was so impressed by the stereoscope that she owned one herself.<sup>3</sup>

Oliver Wendell Holmes redesigned Wheatstone's cumbersome and difficult to use mirrored device to create a handheld stereoscope. Holmes's version consisted of a mask with two openings for the eyes to look through. This mask had a long piece of wood extending from the middle. On this piece of wood was a sliding tray on which a stereocard was placed. When the mask was held up to the face, each eyehole allowed each of the user's eyes to focus on the photograph on that same side. The sliding tray would be moved by the user until the images on the stereocard came into focus, thus creating a single three-dimensional image out of two separate two-dimensional photographs. Holmes's redesign transformed the stereoscope into a small, affordable item that many middle-class families could purchase and enjoy.<sup>4</sup> (See figure 1.)



Figure 1. - stereoscope

The stereocards used for Holmes's stereoscope came in a wide range of sizes, but most measured approximately seven inches by four inches. Some stereocards were "warped" or curved to supposedly "increase the sense of depth" to the photographs presented. Mass production of stereocards took off in the 1880s, with larger companies producing millions of stereocards a year. Within the United States alone, it is believed there were around 12,000 individual companies making stereocards. The large number of producers and the large output of stereocards are evidence of their appeal. At the height of their popularity, six stereocards could be purchased for a dollar and were available either at publishers' studios or from traveling salesmen.<sup>5</sup> (See figure 2.)

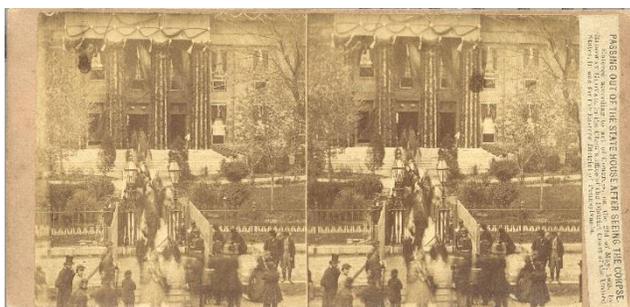


Figure 2. - stereocard

Stereocards frequently depicted scenes of "exotic and faraway" places like Egypt and Asia. The stereoscopic image allowed viewers to travel across the globe and experience unique scenery not otherwise available to them. Scenery, however, was not the only popular subject of stereocards. Artwork, landmarks, and famous people and buildings were also popular. Series of pictures were also published, providing several photographs of the same subject, such as the interior of a presidential home, sights from a city, or scenes of a battlefield. Captions were often added to stereocards describing when and where the photograph was taken, or explaining the scene.<sup>6</sup>

## **Scope and Content**

Abraham Lincoln posed for stereoscopic images taken by photographers Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Thomas Walker.<sup>7</sup> The collection of stereocards held by the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection includes over 300 stereocards from the Lincoln Family Album, Ostendorf, and Lincoln National photograph collections. Images on the stereocards include a wide range of subjects in addition to Lincoln portraits, such as the Lincoln home in Springfield, Lincoln's funeral processions, government buildings in Washington, D.C., and Civil War scenes. The scenes can be attributed to photographers Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, James F.

Gibson, Thomas Walker, as well as staff photographers from the E. & H.T. Anthony and Keystone View companies.

There are two major groups that make up the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection's complete stereocard collection. The first group—more than 80 stereocards—is part of the Ostendorf Collection and includes portraits of Lincoln, commemorative sculpture, funeral processions, and government buildings in Washington, D.C.

The second large group of stereocards is part of the Lincoln National Collection and comprises more than 230 stereocards. Subjects include Lincoln portraits, Civil War scenes (some of battle casualties), federal government buildings, sculpture, Lincoln's funeral processions, commemorative arrangements of skeleton leaves, and the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield.

In addition, 4 stereocards are part of the Lincoln Family Album Collection.

The stereocard collection is housed in two stereocard boxes. Box 1 contains the Ostendorf Collection and Lincoln Family Album Collection stereocards. Box 2 contains the Lincoln National Collection stereocards.

All of the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection's stereocards can be viewed online at <http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/cdm/search/collection/p15155coll1/searchterm/stereocard/field/all/mode/all/conn/and/order/title/ad/asc>

or

<http://www.lincolncollection.org/search/results/?q=stereocard>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jib Fowles, "Stereography and the Standardization of Vision," *Journal of American Culture*, 17(Summer 1994): 89.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca P. Butler, "Are the Stereoscope, Stereopticon, and Stereo Viewer One and the Same?" *TechTrends* 51(Sep/Oct 2007): 17; Silverman, 730, 736-738.

<sup>3</sup> Fowles, 89.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Silverman, "The Stereoscope and Photographic Depiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," *Technology and Culture* 34 (Oct 1993): 729-730.

<sup>5</sup> Fowles, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Fowles, 90.

<sup>7</sup> "Stereoscopic Pictures of Lincoln," *Lincoln Lore*, no. 632 (May, 1941).

Emily Fischer, April 2008  
Revised by Jane E. Gastineau, June 2015