

Historian accused of altering Lincoln document at National Archives

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It was the largest find in Civil War history in a generation: Hours before he was gunned down at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln pardoned a Union soldier court-martialed for desertion and saved him from execution.

The pardon, written in Lincoln's hand, was discovered 13 years ago by [Thomas P. and Beverly Lowry](#), amateur historians from Prince William County who were poring over rarely touched files at the [National Archives](#). Part of a treasure trove of courts-martial with Lincoln's signature and comments, it was a testament to the president's compassionate nature.

Thomas Lowry, 78, was catapulted to fame as a chronicler of Civil War military justice. The pardon, exhibited at the Archives' rotunda in downtown Washington, became a new thread in the narrative of one of history's most famous assassinations.

Except that it wasn't.

The Archives on Monday [accused Lowry](#) of altering the pardon in plain view in the agency's main research room to amplify its historical significance. Lincoln had indeed issued a pardon to Pvt. Patrick Murphy, but the 16th president did it exactly one year to the day before he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. Archives officials, after a year-long investigation, say Lowry signed a written confession Jan. 12 that he brought a fountain pen into the research room sometime in 1998 and wrote a 5 over the 4 in 1864, using a fade-proof ink.

Lowry, a retired psychiatrist who discovered the pardon in an unsorted file box, has denied any wrongdoing. He said he was pressured by federal agents to confess.

"I consider these records sacred," he said in an interview Monday at his Woodbridge home. "It is entirely out of character for me. I'm a man of honor."

His wife, Beverly, said the change was made by a former Archives staffer, a charge the agency denies.

There were no security cameras at the time to record what happened in the room. Lowry cannot be charged with a crime because the [statute](#) of limitations on tampering with government property is five years.

As the accusations flew over who altered the documents, Archives officials acknowledged that, in balancing security with providing open access to government records, they were too trusting. "It's horrible," [the agency's head, David S. Ferriero](#), said in an interview. Ferriero, whose title is archivist of the United States, said the Lowrys became well known to the Archives staff and

other researchers as, over a period of years, the couple indexed tens of thousands of courts-martial of Union soldiers. "This is a situation of having instilled a lot of trust in a regular user and not being suspicious," Ferriero said.

Lowry said that when he found the pardon, the "5" appeared to be a little darker than the other numbers in "1865." But he chalked it up to the fountain pen Lincoln used. "If we thought there was something funny about it, we would have called somebody," he said.

The inspector general for the Archives, [Paul Brachfeld](#), said Lowry "willingly provided specific details" of how he altered the pardon, which reads: "This man is pardoned and hereby ordered to be discharged from the service." Signed "A. Lincoln," it is one of 570 documents with Lincoln's signature the couple discovered in the Archives.

"He became known as somebody who found an amazing document," Brachfeld said. "You take a figure like Lincoln, you say he signed this on the day he died and amplify it, and it became one of our more important documents."

The case was brought to Brachfeld's attention by Trevor Plante, an Archives official specializing in Civil War history who gained acclaim in 2007 when he discovered a long-lost telegram Lincoln wrote in 1863 to his general-in-chief.

Plante had frequently shown the Lincoln's pardon of the soldier to visitors on VIP tours, asking the Archives staff to bring it out from the stacks.

The Archives does not inventory its holdings because they are so vast, so the Lowrys' discovery "had huge implications," Plante said Monday. "The story of this pardon has been told over and over for the past 13 years. It's everywhere in Civil War history."

With each passing viewing, he grew more suspicious that something wasn't right. The ink on the "5" in 1865 always looked too dark, and it appeared to him that another number was written under it.

"It was one of those gut feelings you get," Plante said. "Something wasn't right."

His suspicions were confirmed when he consulted a respected collection of Lincoln's writings edited by Roy P. Basler in the 1950s. Basler reprinted the pardon of Murphy with the date April 14, 1864. "In the 1950s, that was the date, so at some point it changed," Plante said.

The Lowrys moved to the Washington area from California in the late 1990s to research military records of the Civil War, and through their work at the Archives they have indexed thousands of courts-martial. Lowry is the author of a dozen histories of the Civil War. His latest, with co-author Terry Reimer, is "Bad Doctors: Military Justice Proceedings Against 622 Civil War Surgeons," and is scheduled for release next week.

Lowry cited the altered record in his book, "Don't Shoot That Boy! Abraham Lincoln and Military Justice," published in 1999.

Investigators said they began corresponding with Lowry about the pardon about a year ago and asked for his help in identifying who might have tampered with it. During the course of the e-mail correspondence, Lowry became more reticent, and they became more suspicious. Since his discovery, few other researchers had signed out the pardon, they said. They eventually decided to make an unannounced visit to Lowry's home.

Lowry said he was in his bathrobe shaving when he heard a knock on his door on the morning of Jan. 12. It was two agents with the Archives.

Lowry recalled sitting at his dining room table with the men and repeatedly telling them that he never changed the pardon. Eventually, however, investigators said Lowry confessed to making the alteration and offered details.

On Monday, Brachfeld, the inspector general, said of Lowry, "We have a written confession in his own hand."

Lowry said he signed the confession because the Archives agents said "it would never be publicized" and that he would not face any consequences. "They promised that if I agreed to make a confession, they would just leave me alone."

Lowry said he has not hired an attorney and doesn't think it would make a difference.

The pardon will be removed this week from an evidence room at the inspector general's office and brought to the Archives' preservation labs, where experts will try to restore the original date. Plante says he's not optimistic, though, since "Lowry purposely used ink that's going to last a very long time."

"It makes me very angry," Plante said. "We have a level of trust with researchers, and that trust was broken."

Archives officials said Lowry will be banned from all Archives facilities for life.