

This Day in History... October 15, 1860

Did an 11-Year-Old Girl Convince Lincoln To Grow A Beard?

On October 15, 1860, 11-year-old Grace Bedell wrote a letter to presidential nominee Abraham Lincoln. She suggested he grow a beard – which he did shortly after!

During the 1860 election season, young Grace Bedell saw a picture of Abraham Lincoln and told her mother he'd look better with a beard and that she intended to tell him so. And in fact, she did. On October 15, she wrote a letter to Lincoln, telling him she wanted him to be president and that she would vote for him if she could. She also urged him to grow a beard. Grace told Lincoln he would be "much improved in appearance, provided you would cultivate whiskers."

Young Grace further promised to convince her brothers to vote for Lincoln if he grew a beard. "You would look a great deal better as your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be president," she explained.

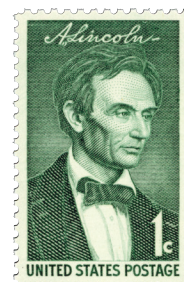
When he received the letter, Lincoln was sitting for a portrait with artist George Peter Alexander Healy. Healy had traveled from his home in Chicago to Springfield, Illinois to spend three days painting the presidential nominee. Visitors noted that Lincoln looked, "Grim as fate, sanguinity his expression, occasionally breaking into a broad grin... He chatted, told stories, laughed at his own wit – and the humor of others – and in one way and another made a couple of hours pass merrily and never once lost his dignity or committed himself to an opinion."

During one of Healy's visits, Lincoln began laughing uncontrollably when he opened Grace's letter. Lincoln recounted the letter to Healy, "As a painter... you should be a judge between this unknown correspondent and me. She complains of my ugliness. It is allowed to be ugly in the world, but not as ugly as I am. She wishes me to put on false whiskers, to hide my horrible lantern jaws. Will you paint me with false whiskers?" But Healy refused, and painted one of the few beardless portraits of the future president Lincoln (as pictured on US #1113).

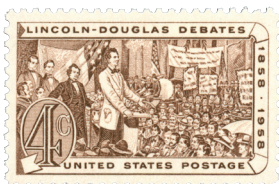
Lincoln was so amused by the letter that he wrote back to her four days later. "As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affectation if I were to begin now?" Despite Lincoln's comment, that he thought it might be odd to change his appearance, he had a full beard by the time he caught the train for the capital for his inauguration.

Grace's letter may not have been the only reason for Lincoln's decision to grow a beard. Another reason for Lincoln's new fashion may have included concerns about his youth. At age 51, Lincoln was the youngest person elected president at the time, and he may have added the beard to suggest maturity.

Along the way to the capital, Lincoln stopped in Bedell's hometown of Westfield, New York, told the crowd of her letter and asked to meet her. In later years, Grace recalled their meeting: "He climbed down and sat down with me on the edge of the station platform. 'Gracie,' he said, 'look at my whiskers. I have been growing them for you.' Then he kissed me. I never saw him again."



Lincoln received Grace's letter while sitting for this portrait.



Stamp shows a beardless Lincoln at the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debates.



This stamp image is based on a sculpture that sits in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building.



This was America's first mourning stamp.



Lincoln was the first US president to have a beard, though some before him did have side burns.

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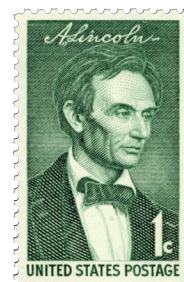
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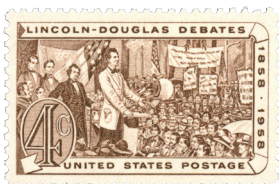
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