



For immediate release

Contact: Patrick Keeffe

631-854-5562

patrick@vanderbiltmuseum.org

Presidents' Day: Come See Abraham Lincoln Letter, George Washington Oil Portrait

Vanderbilt Collection Artifact Has Mysterious Provenance

CENTERPORT, N.Y. (February 15, 2017) – Just after the start of the Civil War in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to Fernando Wood, then mayor of New York City, that is part of William K. Vanderbilt II's extensive archives.

Visitors can see a facsimile of the letter on display in the Memorial Wing, outside the Sudan Trophy Room. On February 18-26, including on Presidents' Day, Monday, February 20, they can also view an oil portrait of George Washington, originally thought to have been created by the renowned American portraitist Gilbert Stuart. It will be displayed in the Portuguese Sitting Room.

President Lincoln wrote the letter to Mayor Wood on May 4, 1861—two months to the day following his inauguration as President and less than one month after the start of the Civil War, which began on April 12 with the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

Wood (1812-1881), who built a successful shipping enterprise in New York City, served several terms in Congress and was mayor of New York for two terms, 1854-58 and 1860-62. (Woods' brother, Benjamin Wood, publisher and editor of the *New York Daily News*, also served three terms in Congress.)

Fernando Wood wrote the letter to Lincoln shortly after the Fort Sumter attack, offering whatever military services he could provide, as mayor, to the President. Lincoln's reply to Wood was in gratitude for his offer of assistance.

Excerpt:

In the midst of my various and numerous other duties I shall consider in what way I can make your services at once available to the country, and agreeable to you –

Your Obt. [Obedient] Servant



**Portrait of George Washington,
believed to have been painted by
Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828)**

A. Lincoln

Stephanie Gress, the Vanderbilt Museum's director of curatorial affairs, said, "We do not know how this letter came to be in Mr. Vanderbilt's possession. Perhaps it was originally the property of his great-grandfather, Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was an acquaintance of Mayor Wood, and it was passed down through the Vanderbilt family." The value of the letter is unknown, Gress said.

In 2008, a representative of The Papers of Abraham Lincoln, a grant-funded project of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, visited the Vanderbilt archives to scan the letter for inclusion in its database. At the time, the representative noted that few letters have the original envelope in Lincoln's hand, which makes the Vanderbilt's document an exceptional Lincoln artifact. The Vanderbilt Museum is listed as a repository on the project's website, www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org.

The Vanderbilt's George Washington portrait

The Vanderbilt's framed oil portrait of George Washington was believed to have been painted by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), widely considered to be one of America's foremost portrait artists. He produced portraits of more than 1,000 people, including the first six Presidents of the United States. Stuart painted a number of Washington portraits. The most celebrated is known as the "Lansdowne" portrait (1796), and one large-scale version of it hangs in the East Room of the White House.

Stuart's best-known work is an unfinished portrait of Washington begun in 1796 and sometimes called "The Athenaeum." This image of Washington's head and shoulders is a familiar one to Americans—it has appeared for more than a century on the U.S. one-dollar bill.

The Vanderbilt's Washington portrait, found in the basement of the Suffolk County Welfare Department Home in Yaphank, was restored and presented to the Vanderbilt Museum in 1951. While the artist did not sign the work, a specialist reported that year that the painting was an authentic Gilbert Stuart. In 1981, however, two curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art studied the portrait and advised the Board of Trustees that the work was not created by Stuart. As a result, the portrait, oil on panel and measuring 21.25 by 33.5 inches, is described in the archival records as "After Gilbert Stuart."

###