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William T. Coggeshall State Librarian and Lincoln Bodyguard

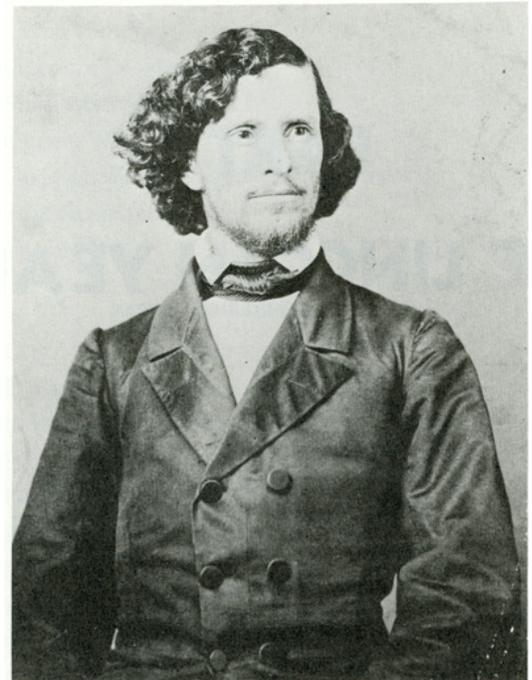
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At age 32, William T. Coggeshall was an established journalist, editor and publisher when he became part-time secretary to Governor Salmon P. Chase in 1856 and was appointed state librarian. His duties as official librarian of Ohio were to keep the official records for the State of Ohio and acquire writings by Ohioans to add to the collection. The State Library was located on the second floor of the Statehouse in Columbus. In 1860, Coggeshall became private secretary to Ohio Governor William Dennison and continued his duties as state librarian.

During his tenure as state librarian, Coggeshall compiled noteworthy publications. ***Index to Ohio laws, general and local, and to the resolutions of the General Assembly, from 1845-6 to 1857, inclusive : with an appendix, containing an index to the documents in the Journals of the House and Senate from 1802 to 1836*** was published in 1858. ***The poets and poetry of the West: with biographical and critical notices***, published in 1860, included poems from 1789 to 1860. This volume highlighted western (to us Midwestern) poets at a time when writers from the east coast dominated the literary world.

On February 13, 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln's train stopped in Columbus on its inaugural route to Washington D.C. As the governor's secretary, Coggeshall met Lincoln at the train station and helped escort him to the statehouse. Lincoln was greeted at the west front steps of the statehouse by Governor Dennison and taken inside to the House of Representatives chamber. As an unofficial, self-appointed bodyguard, Coggeshall stayed close to Lincoln. Following his speech at the crowded reception in the rotunda, Lincoln met Coggeshall's wife Mary and daughter Jessie. Years later in a letter to her daughter Prockie written in 1908, Mary stated that Lincoln turned to Mr. Coggeshall and said, "Come with me to Washington and I shall go safely." Coggeshall wrote an account of Lincoln's stop in Columbus for the Ohio State Journal but did not mention the invitation to accompany him to Washington.

Coggeshall did accompany Lincoln on the remainder of the journey to Washington D.C. as a bodyguard and as a reporter for the Ohio State Journal. He did not report an incident that, according to Mary's letter, he asked Lincoln not to reveal. Mary Coggeshall is the sole source for this account of how her husband saved Lincoln from assassination. Near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the presidential party was to change railroad cars and the train would be switched off to proceed to Baltimore. Lincoln and Coggeshall were the last to go out to the other car. "As they neared the door, they heard a hissing sound and discovered a Hand Grenade just ready to explode. As Mr. Lincoln reached the door, Mr. Coggeshall grasped the shell and hurled it through the open window where it [had] been dropped into the car. As it struck beyond the tracks and exploded, no one was hurt. He sprang into the car where the president awaited him. They took a seat together and with a bound the car leaped forward. Neither spoke for some minutes. Then the President leaned forward and said 'Did I not tell you I should go safely if you went with me.'"



William T. Coggeshall at age 36
Bodyguard to Lincoln, 1861

Mary Coggeshall's letter explains why the incident had remained a secret. "Mr. Coggeshall asked him [Lincoln] not to mention it [the assassination attempt] to anyone for he felt that God's hand had been laid upon them in a miraculous manner, and they had been close to the Gate leading to the upper world and it was too solemn for the world to discuss."

Coggeshall served as a bodyguard to Lincoln off and on during his presidency. This was before the Secret Service was established. He was present on the dais at the dedication of Gettysburg as a National Cemetery as a reporter for the Ohio State Journal.

Coggeshall had a private meeting with Lincoln on Good Friday, April 14, 1865. Coggeshall boarded a train to return to Columbus as the Lincolns were preparing to attend a play at Ford's Theater. Coggeshall returned to Washington and accompanied the funeral train to Springfield, Illinois.

In 1865 for the benefit of the Ohio Soldier's Monument Fund, Coggeshall wrote ***Lincoln memorial: the journeys of Abraham Lincoln from Springfield to Washington, 1861, as president elect, and from Washington to Springfield, 1865, as president martyred; comprising an account of public ceremonies on the entire route, and full details of both journeys.***

By 1865, Coggeshall had tuberculosis resulting from a respiratory system weakened by pneumonia. Several prominent Ohioans lobbied for his appointment as Ambassador to Ecuador. President Andrew Johnson formally made the appointment in May 1866. Coggeshall was hopeful that the mountain air would improve his lungs. Coggeshall planned to take his 14 year old daughter Jessie with him to serve as hostess and secretary. His wife Mary would remain in Columbus with their other children. For Mary's 40th birthday present, he purchased a brick house for her at the corner of Broad and 7th Streets.

His health seemed at first to improve in the Ecuadoran climate. However, stress and disappointment soon took their toll and his health deteriorated. Coggeshall died on August 2, 1867, one year after arriving in Ecuador. A family friend traveled to Ecuador to accompany Jessie home, but the government detained her. She put all of her father's diplomatic documents in order and was finally given permission to leave in late November. She traveled from the capital Quito over the Andes Mountains to the seaport to sail home on January 3, 1868. She awoke ill on that day. She had contracted yellow fever and died at the age of 16 on January 10, 1868.

Mary appealed to Congressman James A. Garfield to have the bodies of her husband and daughter returned to Columbus. Three years after Coggeshall's death, Congress paid to have the bodies disinterred and returned to Ohio. They are buried with other family members in Green Lawn Cemetery in Columbus.

The source for this article is *Colonel Coggeshall the man who saved Lincoln* written by Freda Postle Koch in 1985. Mrs. Koch is a distant cousin of William T. Coggeshall.

To learn more about State Librarian Coggeshall and Abraham Lincoln, plan to attend Ohio Supreme Court Librarian Diana Mercer's presentation on March 22 at 7:00 at the State Library of Ohio.

<http://library.ohio.gov/marketing/Newsletters/TheNews/2011/February/CoggeshallLibrarianBodyguard>