

Thomas Jefferson and the Polygraph

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *INVISIBLE Hand*, by Stephen Koschal and Andreas Wiemer, is a great bargain at \$10. Readers may recall that in 1995 Koschal and Lynne E. Keyes published *The History of Collecting Executive Mansion, White House and The White House Cards Signed by the Presidents and Their First Ladies*—a nifty slim study reviewed favorably in this column.

It has always surprised this reviewer that few in the autograph world have taken a close look at Thomas Jefferson's remarkable polygraph machine, a handwriting duplication device—a kind of 19th century Autopen machine. It's deeply disturbing that undetected polygraph letters created by Jefferson might be changing hands at handsome sums under the guise of being original holograph letters—a subject that I broached briefly in an installment of my "Autographica Curiosa" column in *Autograph* (then *Autograph Collector*) several years ago.

Primary author Andreas Wiemer—a well-known German autograph collector and researcher—and coauthor/editor Stephen Koschal have performed valuable research in *Thomas Jefferson's Invisible Hand*. The authors address Jefferson's genius for inventing and for improving existing inventions, his attachment to letters and penchant for preservation, and his acquisition of a John Hawkins polygraph machine and subsequent experiments with and attempts to improve the machine. The book also includes a mini-history of early copying systems.

Most intriguing and troubling from the autograph collector's perspective is that, from 1804 on, Jefferson made and (usually) kept polygraph copies of most of his correspondence. "Copies of letters that Jefferson made using the polygraph are usually fresh and legible," note the authors. "Occasionally, as Jefferson sometimes complained, the copying pen became stuck in the fibers of the paper or encountered a raised or rough portion of writing surface and left interruptions in the writing or a blot. Remarkably the polygraph resumed operation after such accidents."

And here's the rub: "In most instances, the

only means of distinguishing the polygraph original from the filed copy is the stamping or other evidence of handling on the address leaf of the mailed copy or Jefferson's customary endorsement of the filed copy... It is extremely important for the autograph community to understand that a copy of most of Jefferson's letters from 1804 until his death exists." The authors give a full-page, side-by-side illustration

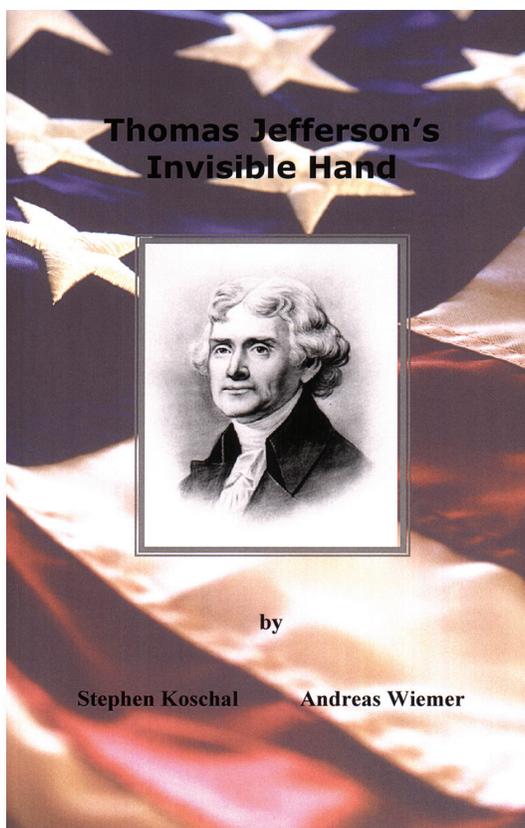
Monticello, Wiemer and Koschal address this issue: "Can a collector/dealer in autographs tell the difference from an original handwritten letter by Jefferson verses [sic] a copy that was written by the polygraph?" Chew replies that, "It's quite easy to determine an original from the copy. On the original the writing would be quite clear. On the copy, the quality of the line (the handwritten line) is not the same. The writing would appear to look 'scratchy' or just bad handwriting."

Wiemer and Koschal also ask Chew, "Could an original handwritten Jefferson letter be confused with a copy when the original may have been exposed to humidity over the years? In this case the writing could appear 'scratchy' or blurry." Chew answers, "It's possible." However, she says that differentiating between an original and a polygraph copy is "quite easy to the trained eye. The originals are quite clear..."

The *real* lesson, then—and this only applies to those with the pockets to acquire Jefferson letters—is the potential risk in chasing after such material from anyone other than serious full-time professional dealers. In other words, if you pursue high-end Jefferson material from nontraditional venues (eBay and antique shops prime among them) be aware of this risk and govern yourselves accordingly.

Anyone interested in Jefferson, the presidents, facsimiles or any of the issues that *Thomas Jefferson's Invisible Hand* raises should pounce on Koschal and Wiemer's effort. At only 100 copies, it's sure to sell out quickly. Though it's not a visually sophisticated book, and uses occasional stilted language, it tells a great story that should be better known. The illustrations are for the most part quite good, and most importantly, it uncovers a potential hazard that collectors need to know about. ⚠️

WILLIAM L. BUTTS owns *Main Street Fine Books & Manuscripts, Ltd. (ABAA, PADA)* in Galena, Ill. Contact him at 815-777-3749 or william.butts@autographmagazine.com.



KOSCHAL, Stephen, and WIEMER, Andreas. *Thomas Jefferson's Invisible Hand*. Miami, FL 33231: Published by Stephen Koschal and Andreas Wiemer (P.O. Box 311061), 2007. 8vo. Softbound. 69pp. Illustrations. Edition limited to 100 numbered copies signed by both authors. Email skoschal@aol.com. \$10.

tion of a September 7, 1806 Jefferson letter, both the original and the polygraph copy. While the illustration size and quality are unfortunately not adequate for detailed analysis of the telltale signs of a polygraph copy, they are adequate to demonstrate the surprising sophistication of the polygraph.

Heady, provocative stuff. In an interview with Elizabeth Chew, associate curator of