

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN JUMPS OUT OF A WINDOW

During the financial panic of 1837 the New York banks on May 12 suspended specie payment and were followed by the banks at Philadelphia. The State Bank at Springfield had also taken the same attitude which caused Governor Duncan to call a special session of the legislature which convened on July 10, 1837 at Vandalia. Aside from the discussion about the bank an agitation arose over the repealing of an act recently passed to change the location of the state capitol. Through Abraham Lincoln's leadership the proposal was defeated and the act naming Springfield as the new seat of government was sustained.

Two years later another special session was called by Governor Carlin to assemble in December 1839 at Springfield for further action on the bank's suspended specie payment. Abraham Lincoln at this time was floor leader of the Whigs, who were supporting the cause of the banks. Lincoln was brought into prominence at this time by leading a movement to prevent a quorum of the House when a motion for adjournment was made. The similarity of the two special sessions caused the subject matter of banks, capitols and quorums to become confused until an interesting piece of folklore developed at Vandalia which has been accepted generally by visitors to the city as well as by the casual historians.

Dr. W. E. Barton as early as 1925 clearly implies in his *Life of Abraham Lincoln* that the window jumping incident occurred at Vandalia during the special session of 1837. He states, "At this session of the legislature Lincoln appears in an undignified light" and then relates the story of the incident. However, the Vandalia folk story had already taken a well defined pattern and picture post cards of the old state house were issued with the identical window marked, out of which Lincoln is said to have jumped. On the card is this notation: "In connection with the struggle over the removal of the capitol it is recorded that Lincoln jumped out of the window at the southwest corner of the Legislature Chamber in order to defeat a quorum, and thus prevented the continuation of the Capitol of Illinois in Vandalia for another twenty years."

Lincoln did not jump out of a window in 1837, but two years later in 1839. The assembly was not meeting in Vandalia at the time, but in Springfield. The window in question was not on the second story of the state house, but on the first floor of a church where the assembly had convened. The location of a state capitol was not the controversial question which led up to the occurrence, but a discussion over the suspended specie payments of the State Bank. A quorum was finally gathered so it may be observed that every facet of the Vandalia tradition is in error.

The fact that in 1839-1840 four different churches in Springfield were used by agencies of the state while the capitol building was being completed, has caused some confusion as to the identical church occupied by the body of which Lincoln was a member. *The Laws of the State of Illinois passed by the Eleventh General Assembly* establishes without question that the assembly for the special session met in the Second Presbyterian Church at 217 South Fourth St. The act making available appropriations for the session reads as follows:

"To the trustees of the second Presbyterian church, the sum of two hundred dollars, for the use of their church as a Hall for the House of Representatives."

It is also of interest to observe how many companions Lincoln is said to have had in the window jumping adventure. The Vandalia story features Lincoln alone. Joseph Gillespie once stated that "Lincoln and I" made the hasty exit, and another version includes "Mr. Gridley of McLean" in the emergency flight. Nicolay and Hay in their ten volume history observe, "The doors of the house being locked, a number of them (Whigs) among whom Lincoln's tall form was prominent jumped from the windows."

An act passed at the previous session in 1837 legalized the suspension of specie payment on the part of the State Bank "until the close of the next session" of the legislature which normally would be in February 1840. Now the governor had called a special session to close on Saturday, December 21, 1839, just before the regular session would open on Monday, December 23. If these two weeks were made an entirely separate session, it would cause the bank to resume specie payments several weeks earlier than the original act had anticipated. If it did not resume specie payment at this earlier date, it would forfeit its charter.

The Whigs thought that such a shifting of dates to be very unjust to the bank and determined if possible to protect the institution. Being the minority party, however, the Whigs determined to prevent a *sine die* adjournment on Saturday, the twenty-third by absenting themselves and making a quorum impossible. This would make the special and regular sessions all one assembly ending at the time originally set forth.

Gillespie leaves the impression that Lincoln and he carried out their assignment and prevented a quorum at the first calling of the roll. However, other Democrats arrived and some Whigs allowed themselves to be brought back by the sergeant-at-arms until finally a quorum was established. The general assumption is that a quorum was obtained when Lincoln and Gillespie were present and the door being locked they bounced out of the window in disgust, but this conclusion is traditional. It is an established fact that their effort to prevent the adjournment of the assembly on December 21, 1839, the last day of the session, eventually failed.

This ludicrous observation was made at the time by *The Illinois State Register*, the Democratic organ: "Why not raise the State House one story higher in order to have the house sit in the third story! so as to prevent members from jumping out of the windows." The news correspondent then concluded his satire by suggesting that if this were done "Mr. Lincoln will in the future have to climb down the spout." In fact the state house was raised one story higher and now the city fathers wish it were again back in its original structural form.

Of these facts we are sure that Lincoln and one or more members of the Whig party jumped out of the window of the Second Presbyterian Church at Springfield, Illinois on December 21, 1839 while the Legislature was in session or just after it adjourned.