



Lincoln Lore

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“That Love Affair”: Did William Makepeace Thayer Nearly Uncover the Mary Owens Romance?

Early in the summer of 1862, a Boston publishing firm, Walker, Wise, and Company, asked William Makepeace Thayer to write a book for boys on Abraham Lincoln's early life. Thayer, a Congregationalist minister from Massachusetts, was already locally famous for his boys' biography of Nathaniel P. Banks called *The Bobbin Boy*. Walker, Wise, and Company gave Thayer some letters and documents by John Locke Scripps, the Chicago author of one of the earliest campaign biographies of Lincoln, to prepare him for the task. Thayer planned to use the successful *Bobbin Boy* as a model. He would tell "the actual early life" of Lincoln as "a story, the imagination doing nothing more than to connect facts in the most natural way." This style was "more taking with the young" and allowed Thayer to follow a tested formula, inserting only the facts of another man's life. Thayer's object was "to show that 'the boy is father of the man,' showing the young that pluck and not luck makes the man, when it is accompanied with patience, perseverance, application sobriety, honesty &c."

After about a month of work on the book, Thayer read a letter written from Lincoln's old Illinois friend, Orville Hickman Browning, to his publisher, Mr. Wise. It emboldened him to write Browning on July 18th, to inquire about more details of the President's early life. Thayer's letter, now in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, reveals in detail the origins of his fabulously popular work on Lincoln.

The didactic author asked first about Lincoln's schooling:

The President went to school some in Kentucky before he moved to Indiana[.] There is where I want to begin the story of his life. Is it possible for me to learn any thing about his father's employment then, in what kind of a house he lived, how poor they were,

whether he went to school in a house built for a school, was his father's house & was the school house of logs? What is the name of the town where he was born?

Like Scripps, Thayer was a sturdy Republican, and he naturally seized on the story of the Lincolns' departure from Kentucky. "His life by Mr. Scripps," Thayer continued, "says that his father left Kentucky because slavery oppressed the poor whites — could I learn any facts about that?" Lincoln had actually told Scripps that his father left Kentucky "partly on account of slavery; but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in K[entucky]." Thayer would continue to stress the antislavery theme which appealed to Republicans.

As an Easterner, Thayer was anxious for the details of life on the frontier. He wanted to know about Lincoln's rolling logs and "going to huskings." He also sought information about those things which made frontier life more civilized. He asked for the names and addresses of "any of his pastors or teachers." He made a special point of asking for "Any facts relating to his temperance principles, & resisting temptations to drink." Descriptions of the baneful effects of heavy drinking before the rise of the temperance movement and admonitions against drinking would form a principal theme in Thayer's Lincoln biography.

Thayer wanted the names and addresses of the Lincolns' neighbors in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. He especially desired the address of Lincoln's stepmother, for he would place heavy emphasis on the role of the mother and stepmother in Lincoln's home. Thayer had already written to Mary Todd Lincoln but received no reply. He told Browning that he would like to correspond with her or, at least, with the Lincolns' eldest son, Robert.

One of Thayer's questions was extraordinary:

That love affair — I



THE PIONEER BOY.

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FIGURE 1. This illustration from Thayer's book showed the pioneer boy cutting down a tree with his father in the Indiana wilderness.



FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL.

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FIGURE 2. The frontispiece of Thayer's book featured young Lincoln on his way to his first day in school.

should really like to learn the leading features of it, inasmuch as there is a matter of honor in it — a prominent part of my object is to show that his strict integrity has given him his *power of character*, which had as much to do with giving him the Presidency as anything.

What love affair? Scripps mentioned no romantic interests in Lincoln's life except his wife. Lincoln's romance with Mary Owens was unknown to the public until the appearance of Ward Hill Lamon's *Life of Lincoln* in 1872. How did Thayer know anything about any "love affair" before Mary Todd?

The answer must lie in Browning's letter to Wise, but the location of that letter is unknown. Browning did know about the Mary Owens affair. Lincoln's famous April Fools' Day letter about it was written to Browning's wife in 1838. That letter made a particular point of Lincoln's desire to do the honorable thing. Having promised to marry Mary Owens, he would live up to the promise even though he did not particularly want to marry her. Why Browning would have written Wise about the matter is unclear. Browning's diary shows that he was acquainted with a Mr. Wise from Boston before the war, but it is not clear whether this was the man associated with Thayer's publishing firm. Lincoln's letter about Mary Owens was old and entirely private, and it was hardly a proper subject for idle conversation, even with a close friend. In the wrong hands, it could have been fuel for ridicule of the President. Even if Browning mentioned it to Wise, it seems strange that Wise would have shown Browning's letter to Thayer without Browning's permission.

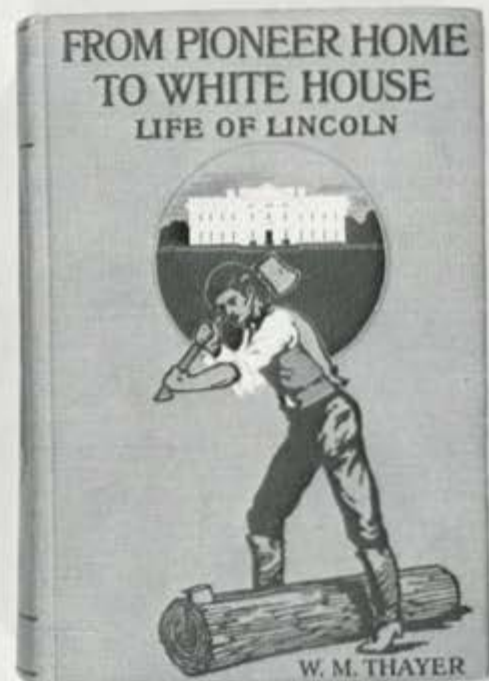
Years later, William Henry Herndon uncovered most of the details of the Mary Owens affair. It was a piece of detective work of which he was proud. Herndon had heard a story — he did not know whether it was true — "that during his term as President the lady to whom it was written — Mrs. O. H. Browning, wife of a fellow-member of the legislature — before giving a copy of it to a biographer, wrote to Lincoln asking his consent to the publication, but that he answered warning her against it because it was too full of truth." Thayer's letter makes Herndon's story somewhat plausible.



THE FIRST LETTER.

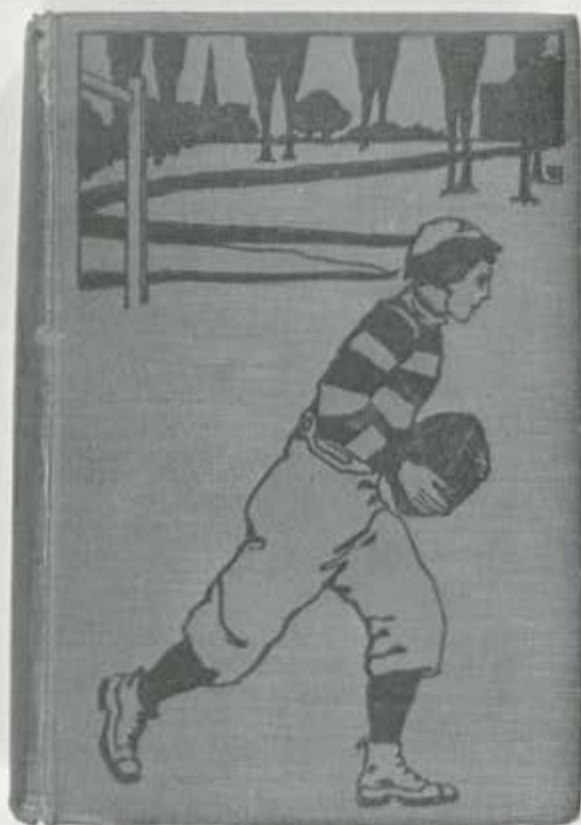
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FIGURE 3. Lincoln wrote his first letter, Thayer said, to obtain a preacher for Nancy Hanks Lincoln's funeral.



From the Louis A. Warren
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FIGURE 4. Still popular in the 1920s, Thayer's expanded book featured more sophisticated art work on the cover.



From the Louis A. Warren,
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FIGURE 5. The 1882 edition of Thayer's expanded book featured on the cover, of all things, a football player.

We may never know. In the end, Thayer did not mention any romance in his book. On July 26, 1862, Browning saw President Lincoln at the White House and "read him a portion of the letter." Lincoln asked him to leave the letter with him. Browning did so, and thus the letter now appears in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. As far as is known, Lincoln never replied to Thayer's letter. *The Pioneer Boy, and How He Became President* appeared in 1863 and was a great success. Seven thousand copies had been printed by the end of 1863, and eighteen thousand were in print in 1864. An 1865 edition noted that twenty-eight thousand copies had been printed. He expanded the book in 1882 and sold about sixty thousand copies by the end of the century. Though no longer read, Thayer's book was, for a time, the most complete biography of Lincoln, and its rags-to- riches theme was clearly a formula for successful writing in Lincoln's century.

Some New Light on the Matson Slave Case

Of the handful of Abraham Lincoln's legal cases which are widely known, the Matson slave case is by far the most controversial. The anomaly of the Great Emancipator's involvement on the side of a slaveholder in this fugitive slave case has vexed and puzzled historians for decades. Early biographies tended to ignore it altogether. Later, some writers tried to explain it away by suggesting that Lincoln had so little taste for this species of litigation that he performed poorly in court, lost the argument, and thus allowed the fugitives to go free. Historians in recent years have been content to admit that Lincoln was a complex man, not always consistent, and to emphasize the rapid growth of his anti-slavery feelings in the later years of his life. All of this literature, however, has been consistent in focusing on the lawyer's personal moral dilemma. The legal issues involved

in the case have been substantially ignored.

The Matson slave case was a hearing for a writ of *habeas corpus* in behalf of Jane Bryant and her four children. They were the slaves of Robert Matson, a Kentucky planter who owned land in Coles County, Illinois. Matson brought slaves to Illinois to farm the land every year but always returned them after harvest, thus avoiding any claim that his slaves were permanent residents on Illinois's free soil and, therefore, entitled to freedom. Matson employed Jane's husband, Anthony, as a permanent overseer on the Illinois farm. This was strictly legal, for Anthony was a free man.

In 1847 Jane Bryant had a serious falling-out with Matson's white housekeeper, who may have been the master's mistress. Anthony began to fear that the housekeeper might persuade Matson to sell Jane and the children South. The housekeeper had threatened to do so, and she appeared to be in a position to make her threat stick. Anthony sought the help of Gideon M. Ashmore and Hiram Rutherford, local antislavery men. They kept Jane and the children at Ashmore's inn in Oakland, Illinois. Matson sought the remedy of law to gain the return of his property. He employed attorney Usher F. Linder, who managed to have the slaves confined to the jail in Charleston, the county seat of Coles County. Ashmore and Rutherford obtained a writ of *habeas corpus*, demanding Illinois's reasons for confining the fugitives, and a hearing was held before Judges Samuel H. Treat and William Wilson on October 16, 1847.

Lincoln came to Coles County and was also engaged on Matson's side. The opposing attorneys, Orlando B. Ficklin and Charles H. Constable, argued that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Illinois Constitution made the slaves free by virtue of their residence on the soil of a state where slavery was illegal. Lincoln apparently argued that Jane Bryant was a seasonal worker following a long-accepted custom and was in no way a legal resident of the state. The judges ruled in favor of the slaves and declared them free.

The aforementioned facts in the case are common knowledge. New light comes from Don E. Fehrenbacher's *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Professor Fehrenbacher explains that the legal difference between "domicile" and "sojourn" in a free state was a commonplace distinction in American jurisprudence in Lincoln's day. In Pennsylvania, for example, a master could remain in the state with his slaves for six months without affecting the legal status of the slaves. New York allowed a nine-month sojourn with slaves. In 1843 the Illinois Supreme Court had affirmed a master's right of sojourn in the state with his slaves, saying that to deny it would "tend greatly to weaken, if not to destroy the common bond of union amongst us." In the 1840s, however, New York and Pennsylvania revoked their laws allowing sojourn with slaves, and courts in other Northern states began to rule that slaves were freed merely by touching free soil. In the Matson case, some of Illinois's judges followed the new trend.

John J. Duff argued in *A. Lincoln: Prairie Lawyer* (New York: Rinehart, 1960) that Lincoln performed well in the case and that Ficklin and Constable performed poorly. All they had to do to assure her freedom, Duff claimed, was to cite as precedent the decision in *Bailey vs. Cromwell* — in which Lincoln himself had gained freedom for a Negro girl named Nance by arguing that the Illinois Constitution and the Northwest Ordinance prevented her being a slave in the state! Duff's argument betrays his lack of understanding of the issues in the Matson case. The issues in *Bailey vs. Cromwell* were altogether different. Nance was a resident of Illinois, an indentured servant rather than a slave. The Supreme Court ruled that Illinois law presumed a person free without any proof to the contrary, and Nance's "owner" could not produce that proof. The important point is that she lived in Illinois. *Bailey vs. Cromwell* had nothing to do with "domicile" and "sojourn."

The real marvel in the case is the reasoning of Treat and Wilson. Both men had been members of the Illinois Supreme Court in 1843, when it affirmed the right of sojourn with slaves in the state!

In the Matson slave case, Lincoln and Linder had the law on their side but not the judges.

CUMULATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY 1979

by Mary Jane Hubler

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, 50 Chatham Road, Harwich Center, Mass.; Arnold Gates, 289 New Hyde Park Rd., Garden City, N.Y.; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louise Avenue, Northridge, California; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois; E.B. (Pete) Long, 607 S. 15th St., Laramie, Wyoming; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C.; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons, or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

1979
ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION 1979-12

Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association/Volume 1 1979/Foreword/By Floyd S. Barringer, President, Abraham Lincoln Association/Introduction/By William K. Alderfer, Secretary, Abraham Lincoln Association/The Lincoln Theme Since Randall's Call: The/Promises And Perils Of Professionalism/By Mark E. Neely, Jr., Fort Wayne, Indiana/Lincoln: Democracy's Touchstone/By David R. Wrono, Stevens Point, Wisconsin/Abraham Lincoln Association/1979/Editors/Mary Ellen McElligott Janice Pettechak/[Copyright 1979 by the Abraham Lincoln Association.]

Book, paper, 8 15/16" x 6", 91 (1) pp., illus. Yearly membership dues include a subscription to this publication. Request for information should be directed to William K. Alderfer, Secretary, Abraham Lincoln Association, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois 62706.

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The / Cosgrove / Report: / Being the Private Inquiry/ of a Pinkerton Detective into/ the Death of President Lincoln/(Device)/by Nicholas Cosgrove/(Device)/Edited And Verified By/ Michael Croft/Col., U.S. Army (Ret.)/(Device)/An Annotated Novel/ Presented By/ G. J. A. O'Toole/(Device)/ Rawson, Wade. New York/[Copyright 1979 by George O'Toole. All rights reserved.]

Book, cloth, 9 3/16" x 6 1/8", viii p., 424 pp., illus., price, \$12.95.

**DAVIS, CULLOM,
CHARLES B. STROZIER,
REBECCA MONROE
VEACH AND GEOFFREY
C. WARD 1979-14**

The Public and the Private/ Lincoln/Contemporary Perspectives/Edited by/ Cullom Davis/Charles B. Strozier/ Rebecca Monroe Veach/and Geoffrey C. Ward/ Southern Illinois University Press/Carbondale and Edwardsville/ Feffer & Simons, Inc. London and Amsterdam/(Double title page)/[Copyright 1979 by Sangamon State University. All rights reserved.]

Book, cloth, 9 1/4" x 6 1/8", x p., 182 pp., price, \$18.95.

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The/Minor/Affair/An Adventure/in Forgery/and Detection/ Don E./Fehrenbacher/William Robertson Coe/ Professor of History and/American Studies/Stanford University/Louis A. Warren/Lincoln Library and Museum/ Fort Wayne, Indiana/[Copyright 1979 by the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Permission to abstract is granted provided proper credit is allowed.]

Pamphlet, paper, 9" x 5 15/16", fr., 40 pp., illus. The second annual R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture delivered on May 10, 1979, in the Board Room at the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

FINDLEY, PAUL 1979-16

A. Lincoln:/The/ Crucible of/ Congress/by/ Paul Findley/ Crown Publishers, Inc., New York/[Copyright 1979 by Paul Findley. All rights reserved.]

Book, cloth, 10 1/4" x 7 1/4", xvii p., 270 (1) pp., illus., price, \$14.95.

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Patricide/In The/House Divided/A Psychological Interpretation/of Lincoln and His Age/George B. Forgie/(Device)/W.W. Norton & Company. New York/[Copyright 1979 by W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved. First edition.]

Book, cloth, 8 1/4" x 5 1/4", x p., 308 (2) pp., price, \$14.95.

HAMILTON, LEE DAVID 1979-18 a

Lee David Hamilton/The Lincoln Bookcalendar/1980/ (Illustration of two Lincoln busts facing each other; bust on left by Leo Cherne, sculptor, is bearded and bust on right by

Leonard Wells Volk, sculptor, is beardless)/(Cover title)/ [Copyright 1979 by Lee David Hamilton. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, in whole or in part, is prohibited. Bookcalendar copyright and Calendarbook copyright in 1979. Published by The Prairie River Press, Post Office Box 8, Greenville, Wisconsin 54942.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 8 1/2" x 7", 60 pp., illus. Bookcalendar on Lincoln contains text, plain and colored illustrations, and a 1980 calendar.

HAMILTON, LEE DAVID**1979-18 b**

Same as above with additional feature on cover title following 1980 of: (Lincoln Profile)/ Lincoln/National/Life/. This Bookcalendar edition was printed specifically for and contains (2) pp. additional text on the Lincoln National Life.

HOLZER, HAROLD**1979-19**

How the Printmakers Saw Lincoln/Not-So-Honest Portraits of "Honest Abe"/Harold Holzer/(Caption title)/[Offprint from *Winterthur Portfolio*. Copyright 1979 by The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.]

Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 143-170 pp., illus., price, \$2.35.

**ILLINOIS STATE
HISTORICAL LIBRARY****1979-20**

Illinois/History/Volume 32/
Number 5/February 1979/

Abraham Lincoln/Family Pets—Lincoln's Visit/ to Macomb—Diligence Breeds/Success—Railroaders and/Rivermen—An Affectionate/Farewell—Give No Offense—/By All These Hands—A Week/ of Waiting—On January First/(Portrait of Lincoln facing right)/Abraham Lincoln/(Cover title)/ [Copyright 1979 by the Illinois State Historical Society. Published by the Illinois State Historical Library in cooperation with the Illinois State Historical Society, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois 62706.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 9 15/16" x 7 1/4", 99-119 pp., illus., price, 25¢.

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Lincoln Memorial University Press/(Device)/Summer, 1979/Vol. 81, No. 2/Lincoln Herald/A Magazine devoted to historical/research in the field of Lincolniana and/the Civil War, and to the promotion/of Lincoln Ideals in American/ Education./[Harrogate, Tenn.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 10 1/8" x 7 1/8", 61-139 (1) pp., illus., price per single issue, \$3.00.

