



Lincoln Lore

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A NEW LETTER FROM THE SECOND SUPPLEMENT TO THE COLLECTED WORKS

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

Those who already own and use Roy P. Basler's *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* will want to complete their set with the second supplement he edited with his son, Christian O. Basler, but people who will buy it to find hidden gems of Lincoln's prose will be disappointed by this slim and expensive volume (forty dollars for 115 pages of text). Most of the letters it contains are like this one to Edwin M. Stanton (for which no further information is available):

Will the Sec. of War please see & hear the bearer?

Oct. 4, 1864

A. Lincoln

Still, there are a few letters from the 1840s and 50s that are more revealing. The supplement includes 6 letters dealing with Lincoln's 1849 application for the position of Commissioner of the General Land Office, and also his letter from later that year declining an appointment as Governor of Oregon. Perhaps the most interesting letter published here is one to Jesse Olds Norton written on February 16, 1855. Norton had worked on Lincoln's campaign for U.S. Senator, and Lincoln wrote him to explain why he had lost the election.

It would have been the 1854 election, but the Illinois legislature had postponed the senatorial election until it was finally held on February 8, 1855. Postponing the election was not difficult because only 100 men voted. (In the 19th century the state legislatures chose senators; the 17th Amendment allowing for direct election of senators by the people was not passed until 1912.) Like other 1854 elections, the Illinois senatorial campaign of 1854/55 turned on the issue of the Kansas-Nebraska act. Having the bill's author, Stephen A. Douglas, serving as Illinois' Senator invested the conflict with even more significance there.

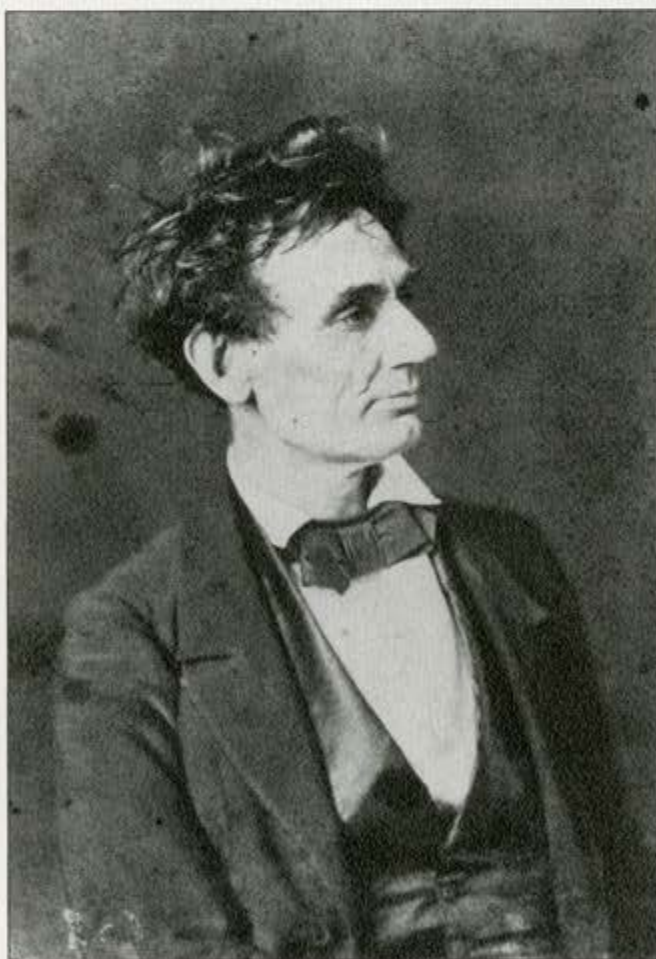
Douglas wanted to bring democratic government to the people living in the unorganized territory west of Missouri and to pave the way for further Westward expansion. Also, he knew his constituents would benefit if a proposed transcontinental railroad had a terminus in Chicago, and developing the Western lands would give the railroad planners incentive to route the train through Illinois rather than through the Southern states. Unfortunately, the

Southerners were thwarting all his plans. On a practical level, they did not want to support anything that would put them at a disadvantage in the competition for the transcontinental railroad. More importantly, though, they had political reasons to oppose the organization of Western territories. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 excluded slavery from the remaining unorganized portion of the Louisiana purchase. Thus, not only did it prevent them from taking their slaves there, but it meant that once the land was organized into territories, they would eventually become free states and swing the balance of power in the Senate to the North.

To gain support for turning the unorganized land into territories, and (Douglas said) to remove the conflict over slavery from national politics, he proposed replacing the principle of the Missouri Compromise with the principle of popular sovereignty — the people of the territories would decide for themselves whether they would allow slavery in their territory or not.

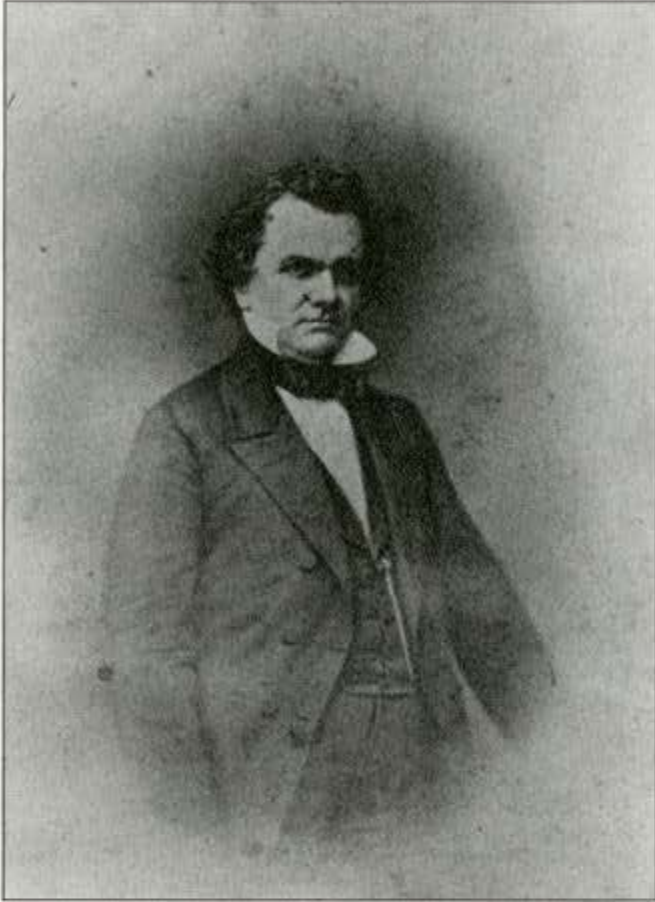
The Kansas-Nebraska act did not remove the slavery debate from national politics by declaring the Missouri Compromise "inoperative." In fact it did quite the reverse; people all over the North reacted in vehement opposition. Lincoln recalled in a third-person autobiography in 1860 that, "in 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before" (to John L. Scripps, c. June, 1860).

As Lincoln described it later, his only goal in returning to politics was to re-elect Richard Yates, the Illinois Congressman from Lincoln's district. Still, he must have been thinking of his own political ambitions too. He made speeches outside Yates' district and ran for office himself, although only as a state legislator. When the November 7 election was over, he found that the "Anti-Nebraska men" controlled the state legislature. Only a few days later he began a campaign for the U.S. senate seat, soliciting his friends to "make a mark for him" among the state legislators. (He won his seat in the legislature but had to resign it to run for the Senate.) As he explained to a potential supporter, "It has come round that a Whig may, by possibility, be



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 1. Abraham Lincoln in 1857.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 2. Stephen A. Douglas.

elected to the U.S. Senate; and I want the chance of being the man. You are a member of the legislature, and have a vote to give. Think it over, and see whether you can do better than to go for me" (to Thomas J. Henderson, November 27, 1854).

Predicting Lincoln's chance of success was a little more complicated than usual in 1854. The 1854/55 election marked the turning point in American political history between the second party system (of Whigs and Democrats) and the third party system (of Democrats and Republicans). The issue of slavery had become so divisive that the old parties could no longer hold the opposing groups together, and many people were beginning reluctantly to renounce their old party loyalties.

A letter Lincoln wrote to John M. Palmer during the regular campaign in 1854 illustrates how painful breaking with one's party could be. Palmer was a Democratic state senator who found himself siding with the Whigs in their opposition to the Democratic Kansas-Nebraska act. Unfortunately for him, the Democrats were using the Kansas-Nebraska act as a test of party loyalty, and so he was not renominated. Lincoln suggested that Palmer justify his apparent disloyalty to the Democrats and help the anti-Nebraska cause generally by making some public speeches explaining his position. Lincoln made the suggestion carefully though:

You know how anxious I am that this Nebraska measure shall be rebuked and condemned everywhere...yet I do not expect you to do anything which may be wrong in your own judgement; nor would I have you do anything personally injurious to yourself. You are, and always have been, *honestly*, and *sincerely* a democrat; and I know how painful it must be to an honest sincere man, to be urged by his party to the support of a measure, which on his conscience he believes to be wrong. You have had a severe struggle with yourself, and you have determined *not* to swallow the *wrong*.

The conclusion of Lincoln's letter illustrates how limited was the support honorable men were willing to give the opposing

party. Lincoln noted that Palmer (as a Democrat) was one "to whom I have ever been opposed in politics." Nevertheless, if Palmer had been nominated as an anti-Nebraska Democrat, Lincoln told him,

I should have been quite happy that Nebraska was to be rebuked at all events. I still should have voted for the Whig candidate; but I should have made no speeches, written no letters; and you would have been elected by at least a thousand majority.

(September 7, 1854)

Because the Kansas-Nebraska act had made such strange bedfellows, when Lincoln surveyed the Illinois legislature in January of 1855 he needed to know more than how many Democrats and Whigs there were; he also needed to know the positions those men held on the Kansas-Nebraska act. About this time he prepared for his supporters small notebooks listing every legislator followed by "D.," "W.," "A.N.D.," "N.W.," or "Abn." to represent regular Democrat (supporting the act), regular Whig (against it), anti-Nebraska Democrat, Whig supporting the act, or abolitionist. Although Lincoln's figures showed the anti-Nebraska men outnumbered their opponents by at least 57 to 43, the legislature nearly elected a regular Democrat, and Lincoln's letter to Norton explains why.

He begins, "I have now been beaten one day over a week; and I am very happy to find myself quite convalescent." Then he goes on to explain how things stood before the first ballot.

Through the untiring efforts of friends, among whom yourself and [Elihu B.] Washburne were chief, I finally surmounted the difficulty with the extreme Anti-Slavery men, and got all their votes, Lovejoy's included.

Unfortunately, party loyalty was still strong as the old party system was breaking up, and even men who agreed in wanting to elect an anti-Nebraska man disagreed over whether that man ought to be a Democrat or a Whig. Four anti-Nebraska Democrats (Burton C. Cook, Norman B. Judd, John M. Palmer, and Henry S. Baker) were

men who *never could* vote for a Whig; and without the votes of two of whom I *never could* reach the requisite number to make an election. I do not mean that I actually got within two votes of the required number; but I easily enough could have done so, provided I could have assured my friends that two of the above named four would go for me.

On the first ballot Lincoln received the plurality with 44 votes out of 100. James Shields, the incumbent and a regular Democrat, received 41 votes; and Lyman Trumbull, an anti-



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 3. Richard Yates.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 4. John M. Palmer.

Nebraska Democrat, received 5. On the seventh vote the regular Democrats revealed their secret plan. They had assumed that Shields could not get enough votes for reelection, and so they secretly agreed to vote for Governor Joel A. Matteson when it became clear that Shields could not win. Although Matteson was the regular Democrats' candidate, he had personal friends among the anti-Nebraska Democrats, and as Lincoln explained to Elihu B. Washburne, Matteson's

plan was to privately impress them with the belief that he was as good Anti-Nebraska as any one else — at least could be secured to be so by instructions, which could be easily passed. In this way he got from four to six of that sort of men to really prefer his election to that of any other man — all "sub rosa" of course" (February 9, 1855).

In retrospect Lincoln could tell Norton that "it was Govr Matteson's manoeuvring that forced upon me and my friends the necessity of surrendering to Trumbull."

Norton learned that Matteson "made his first successful hit by tampering with Old man Strunk." The defection of John Strunk, who was a Whig, particularly rankled Lincoln. As he told Washburne,

At the beginning of the session [Strunk] came a volunteer to tell me he was for me & would walk a hundred miles to elect me; but lo, it was not long before he leaked it out that he was going for me the first few ballots & then for Govr. Matteson (February 9, 1855).

A month before the senatorial election, Lincoln had thanked Norton (through Washburne) for his work because Strunk had "come out plump for me" (January 6, 1855). It must have stung Norton to read in Lincoln's February 16 letter how he had been turned against Lincoln.

Strunk was pledged to me, which Matteson knew, but he succeeded in persuading him that I stood no chance of an election, and in getting a pledge from him to go for him as second choice.

Matteson used the same tactics on four other men "at least," Lincoln told Norton, "we saw strong signs that he had, and they being old democrats, and I an old whig, I could get no sufficient access to them to sound them to the bottom."

Once Matteson had the support of some of the disaffected Democrats, he had no trouble convincing the regular Democrats that they ought to leave Shields for him. Lincoln explained the plot to Norton:

That Matteson assured the Nebraska democrats, he could get their men after they should have made a respectable show by voting a few ballots for other men, I think there is no doubt; and by holding up to their greedy eyes this amount of capital in our ranks, it was, that he induced the Nebraska men to drop Shields and take him *en masse*.

As evidence of the Democrat's secret plot, Lincoln pointed out that

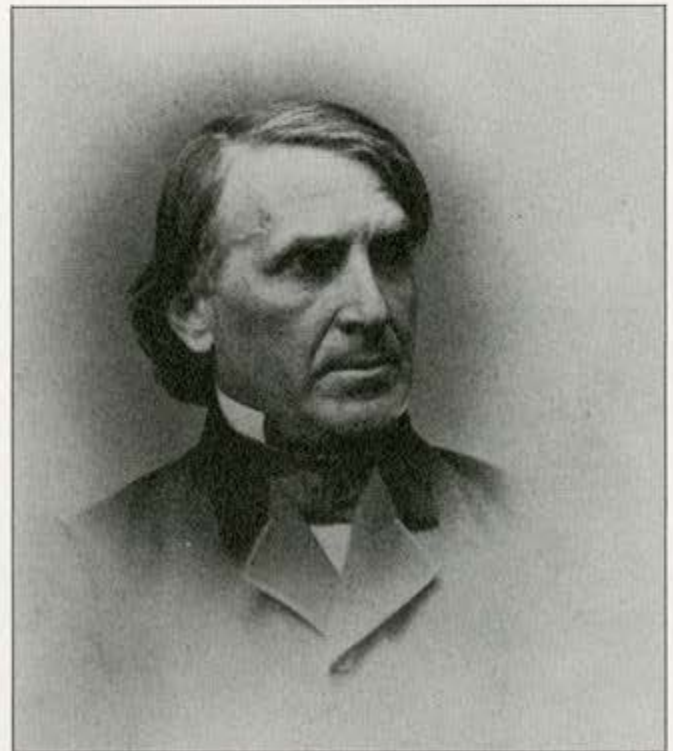
The Nebraska men...had control of the Senate; and they refused to pass the resolution for going into the election till three hours before the joint session was to, and did in fact, commence. One of the Nebraska senators has since told me that they only passed the resolution when they did, upon being privately assured by the Governor that he had it all safe.

The turning point of the election came on the ninth ballot, which Lincoln described for Norton in detail.

On the ninth, Matteson had 47 — having every Nebraska man, and the Old man Strunk besides, and wanting but three of an election; and when the looser sort of my friends had gone over to Trumbull, and raised him to 35 and reduced me to 15 it struck me that [E.O.] Hills, [G.D.A.] Parks, [David] Strawn, [Frederick S.] Day, and [Henry S.] Baker, or at least some three of them would go over from Trumbull to Matteson & elect him on the tenth ballot, unless they should be kept on T. by seeing my remaining men coming on to him. I accordingly gave the intimation which my friends acted upon, electing T. that ballot. All were taken by surprise, Trumbull quite as much as any one else.

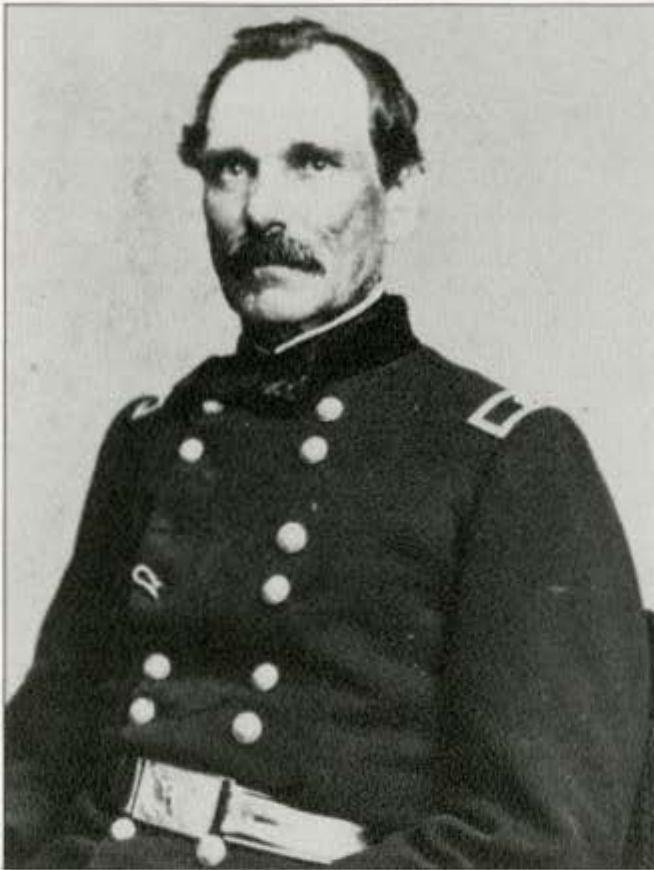
There was no pre-concert about it — in fact I think a pre-concert to that effect could not have been made. The *heat* of the battle, and *imminent* danger of Matteson's election were indispensably necessary to the result. I know that few, if any, of my remaining 15 men would have gone over from me without my direction; and I gave the direction, simultaneously with forming the resolution to do it.

It is not true, as might appear by the first ballot, that Trumbull had only five friends who preferred him to me. I know the business of all the men tolerably well, and my opinion is, that if the 51 who elected him, were compelled to a naked expression of preference between him and me, he would at the outside, have 16 and I would have the re-



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 5. Elihu B. Washburne.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 6. James Shields.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 7. The Illinois State Capitol.

mainder. And this again would depend substantially upon the fact that his 16 came from the old democratic ranks & the remainder from the whigs. Such as preferred him, yet voted for me on the first ballotings and so on the idea that a minority among friends, ought not to stand out against a majority. Lest you might receive a different impression, I wish to say I hold Judge Parks in very high estimation; believing him to be neither knave or fool, but decidedly the reverse of both. Now, as I have called names so freely, you will of course consider this confidential.

Yours much obliged, &c.

A. Lincoln

Nothing in this letter is earth-shatteringly new. Lincoln wrote a similar letter to Washburne only a day after the election. Still it reinforces some of the impressions we can draw from the Washburne letter. Both letters reveal Lincoln's irritation with John Strunk, for example. Certainly Lincoln was sorry he lost the election, but both letters suggest that, on paper at least, he was resigned to it because an anti-Nebraska man had won. He told Washburne,

I regret my defeat moderately, but I am not nervous about it....[Matteson's] defeat now gives me more pleasure than my own gives me pain... The Neb. men confess that they hate [Trumbull's election as an anti-Nebraska Democrat] worse than any thing that could have happened. It is a great consolation to see them worse whipped than I am.

A week later he could make light of the defeat, telling Norton he was "quite convalescent."



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 8. Lyman Trumbull.