



# Lincoln Lore

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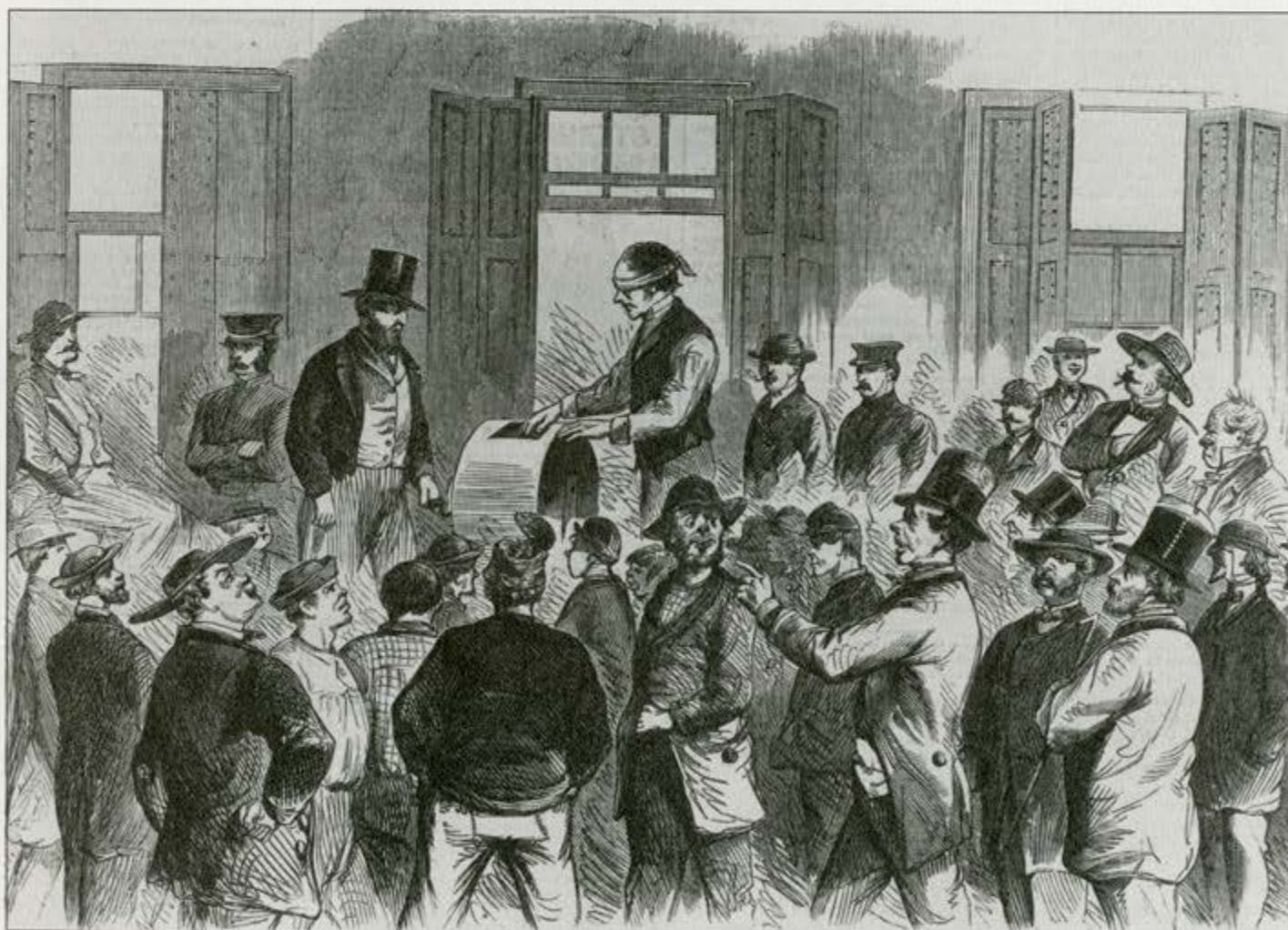
## IVER BERNSTEIN ON THE NEW YORK CITY DRAFT RIOT OF 1863

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

In the third and fourth weeks of July 1863, people all over the country opened their newspapers to stories about the draft riot in New York City. In March Congress had passed the Conscription Act, making all men between 20 and 35 years old (and all unmarried men between 35 and 45) eligible to be drafted. Workers had objected to the commutation clause which exempted men who could provide an acceptable substitute or pay three hundred dollars. They complained that rich men bought their way out, while poor men could not escape. (The Republicans insisted that the commutation clause protected poor men by fixing the cost of a substitute; without that clause, the free-market value of hiring a substitute might have been much higher.) The Con-

scription Act was one of several Republican measures expanding the power of the federal government, and Democrats who controlled state and local governments resented those federal incursions.

Informed readers might have expected some kind of protest that summer from New York City, a Democratic stronghold with a large working class population. Still, many people expected the courts to declare such an unprecedented expansion of federal power to be unconstitutional before any serious unrest could break out. In New York, Democratic leaders had thought they could prevent the draft's enforcement there or that they could fill New York's quotas with volunteers. Apparently the workers



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 1. *Harper's Weekly*, September 5, 1863. The draft lotteries in New York on July 11 would have looked like this.

had also assumed that the draft would not be enforced because in June they had offered no major resistance to registration. On Saturday, July 11, though, the names of the first New York City draftees had actually been drawn. Faced with the reality of the draft, workers began planning a protest and strike for Monday (July 13). By Monday afternoon their angry protest boiled over into a riot that intensified the next day and continued until Friday when federal troops called back from the Gettysburg battlefield finally restored order.

The newspapers which carried stories of the draft were wholeheartedly and unabashedly partisan. Choosing a paper in the nineteenth century involved more than simply determining which paper had the best sports coverage: newspapers were closely tied to political parties, and subscribing to a paper was like making a political statement. Thus readers depended on their newspaper's editor to provide the party line on any issue and to reprint stories from equally partisan newspapers in other cities. That July, readers expected to read reprints of articles from New York papers, as well as their local editor's explanation of the cause and significance of the violence there. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, for example, Democrats who subscribed to *Dawson's Weekly Times and Union* could read almost 3500 words of summary from the New York papers. They learned that

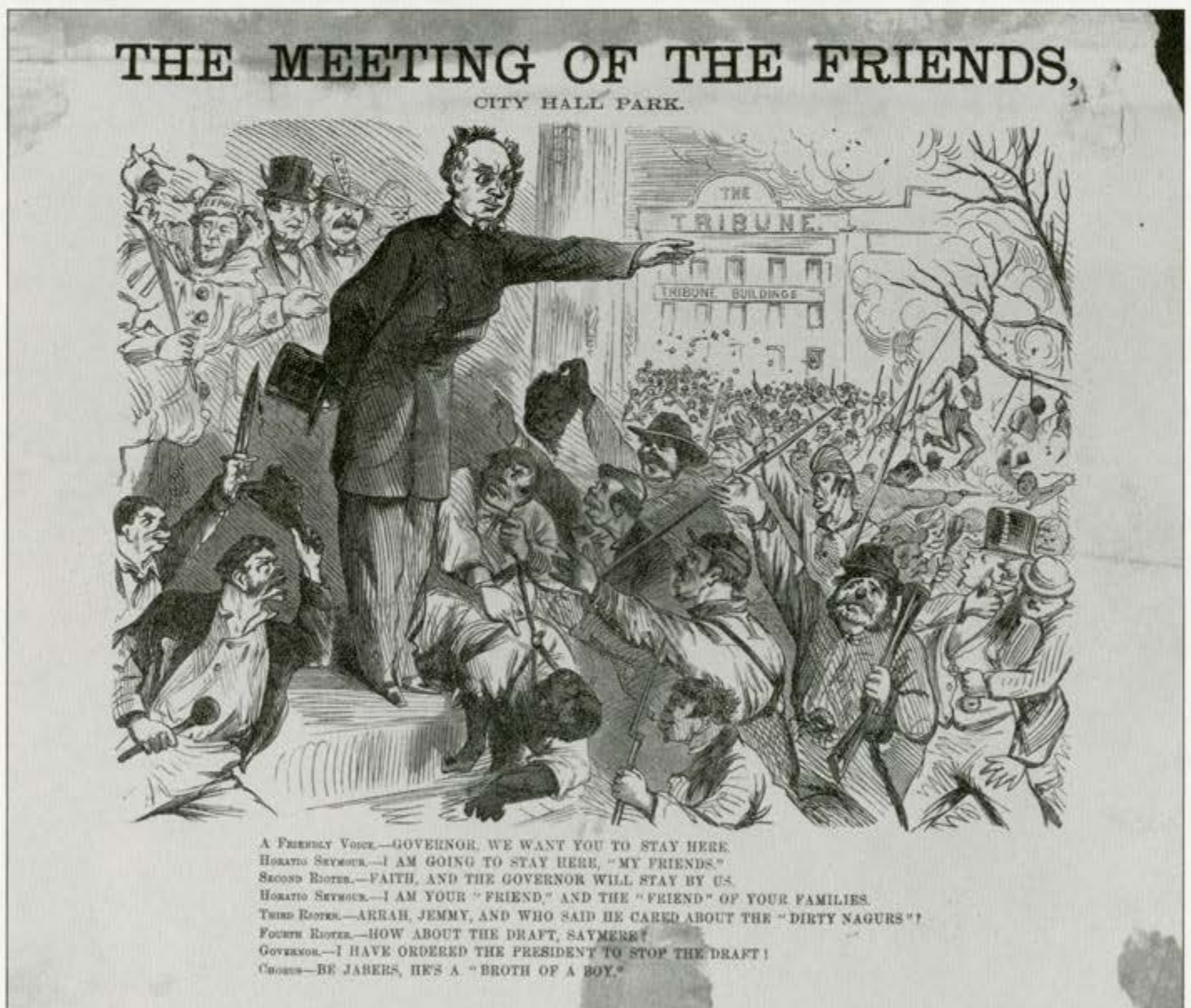
[on Tuesday, July 14,] the anti-draft riot in New

York...assumed very formidable proportions. A large number of buildings were burned or sacked including the residence of [Republican] Mayor Opdyke. The publication office of the *Tribune* was gutted and last night the printing establishment of that paper and the *Times* were barricaded and guarded. The rioters, who are in several bodies, were fired upon a number of times during the day, and a considerable number of them killed and wounded. Col. O'Brien, commander of a detachment of troops, was captured by the mob and after being terribly beaten, was hung to a lamp post.... Three regiments from the seat of war were sent for, one of which (the 7th) was expected to arrive last night....

Bodies of rioters to day visited large manufacturing establishments, urging the laborers to join them, forbidding the loading of ships, &c.... Conflagrations are occurring momentarily, and the mob, which seems to be divided into separate crowds are bent on plunder, pillage, and robbery of persons....

The mob is quite dense in the City Hall Park, where Gov. Seymour addressed it, stating that he had sent his Adj. Gen. to Washington to request the draft to be stopped, and implored the crowd to respect property and persons, and the State would see that all would be made satisfactory....

[On July 15,] the riot still raging...



*From the Lincoln Museum*

**FIGURE 2.** This cartoon represents the "Union Leaguer" perspective: it makes Seymour a friend to the mob, blames the Irish for the riot, and condemns atrocities against blacks.

Quite a serious riot occurred on Staten Island last night, hunting negroes, but really bent on plunder. Several houses of negroes were burnt, their occupants fleeing to the woods. Six negroes were killed. Various persons were notified that their houses would be burned....

The negroes were horribly maltreated.

It was reported this A.M. that both grape and canister [cannon fire] were freely used last night up town against the rioters.

(*Dawson's Weekly*, July 22, 1863, p. 1)

In addition to this summary of events, Fort Wayne Democrats also read John W. Dawson's editorial, which gave a Democratic interpretation of the events — Dawson identified abolitionism as the root cause of the riot. Abolitionists and Republicans, he insisted, had encouraged mob violence earlier in the war and now their behavior was being turned against them. "Our readers will remember," Dawson was sure,

the arresting of men who, in the...prerogatives of American freemen, refused to debase themselves by singing psalms of praise to "Abraham, the high priest of the sables," [the dragging of those men] from their houses in the dead hour of night, and giving them a choice of alternatives between taking a prescribed oath or hanging on the nearest tree.... The party in power, wielding with unremitting vigor the sceptre of tyranny, have been blindly borne along upon the billows of the popular excitement toward their own destruction.... The storm upon which they have so furiously ridden, has well nigh spent its fury. But there can be heard the distant mutterings of another, more terrible — it is the vengeance of an outraged, an insulted people. That reactionary storm of popular indignation that always succeeds the too tyrannical exercise of *illegal* powers by governmental authorities has commenced here. It may be slow — may be kept suppressed for a while — but when it does come, the greater will be its fury, and the more terrible destruction will mark its course. We have warned the Abolitionists before, and we tell them now, that it will surely come. We cannot stop it, as much as we deprecate all mob violence, as much as we have counselled against it. They might have prevented it, by listening to reason, and the calm councils of calmer men, but they refused, and it is now too late...

The uprising in the City of New York, and the threatening aspect in other places, however we may regret them, are the sequences of [abolitionists' and Republicans'] own action. They are but the beginning of what will be to Abolitionism a terrible end....

(*Dawson's Weekly*, July 22, 1863, p. 1)

Perhaps Fort Wayne Democrats sitting in saloons arguing with their Republican neighbors used Dawson's editorial as ammunition. If so, the Fort Wayne Republicans would have had plenty of their own ammunition. Republican editors provided their readers with interpretations of the meaning of the draft riot too, usually accusing the rioters (and Democrats generally) of treason. After the war, though, people in Fort Wayne turned their attention to other controversies. Even in New York most people seemed to try to put the riot out of their minds — at least the written record does not show much further discussion.

Until now, the riot has received little attention, in part because no group has wanted to memorialize it as part of their heritage. Opponents of a powerful federal government might be proud of New Yorkers' resistance to federal tyranny, but not when resistance could be equated with treason. Similarly, the labor movement might point to the riot as an example of workers' collective power, but not when workers used that power against what turned out to be a popular cause, and not when they expressed that power in vicious attacks on blacks. The Republican elite was proud of their actions during the riot, but discussing the riot reminded them of an intense class conflict they preferred to forget.

Iver Bernstein studies the riot because, as he explains in his preface to *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War*, it "was one of those unusual events important in its own right — it mattered in the war and in the life of the city — and important for its illumination, like a flash of lightning, of a darkened

historical landscape" (p. vii). This comment is more than a rhetorical flourish: Bernstein uses the events in New York City from July 13 to July 17, 1863 to illuminate twenty years of class conflict there, and his illumination is brilliant.

For Bernstein, the ultimate significance of the draft riots is "their situation at the center of a contentious era, an era of politicized social conflict" (p. 7). Since the 1850s, different groups of New Yorkers had disagreed over how to impose order on society in the context of rapid economic growth and industrialization. The riot crystallized disagreements over social organization and gave workers a forum for their ideas about popular control of government. In the aftermath of the riot, "Boss" (William M.) Tweed's Tammany Hall assumed power because it was able to appease key groups within the conflict highlighted by the riot. The conflict was not actually resolved, though, until 1872 when the upper and middle classes finally united against the workers (in reaction to widespread strikes for the eight-hour day).

Dawson's treatment of the riot makes it seem a chaos of violence and anarchy, but Bernstein brings order to that chaos, showing how the actions Dawson summarized reflect a history of class conflict in New York City between 1850 and 1872. To do so, Bernstein creates a catalogue of groups in conflict. He divides the upper class into four groups: wealthy Democratic businessmen led by politicians like August Belmont; less wealthy Democrats tied to Tammany Hall; ultranationalist Republicans belonging to the Union League Club; and industrialists connected to the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. He also describes three groups within the working class: the skilled artisans; the industrial workers (metal workers and machinists); and the common laborers (longshoremen, especially). With the help of Bernstein's categories, we can read between the lines of Dawson's report to see why the violence took the form it did.

Before the riot, the Belmont Democrats were dominant among the seven groups Bernstein discusses. In politics, they advocated "a decentralized polity of small, independent communities that would set the moral and political tone for the cities and the nation" (p. 135). Before the war, they supported slavery and the Southern "slaveocracy" both because they connected Northern profits to Southern slavery and because they believed the federal government should not interfere in local or regional affairs. Another significant aspect of their political philosophy was their belief that a free-trade economy would allow all social problems to work themselves out. This optimism about free trade made them tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity. Further, having learned the lessons of Jacksonian Democracy, they recognized the power of working-class voters, and they knew they had to be tolerant to win working-class votes.

Thus, when the Belmont circle was confronted with the draft and the riot, their attitudes reflected the political philosophy they had developed in the 1850s. Valuing local autonomy and laissez-faire economics, they saw the draft as a flagrant example of a larger Republican agenda to interfere with local Democratic politics, with the economy, and with the very social fabric of the nation. Solicitous of working class voters and attuned to Southern racial attitudes, they sympathized with the white working-class rioters, and ignored the black victims.

Horatio Seymour was a much-commented upon example of this philosophy. As Fort Wayne Democrats learned from *Dawson's Weekly Times and Union*, Seymour addressed the mob, sent a request to Washington to stop the draft, and assured the crowd that "the State would see that all would be made satisfactory." Republicans all over the country fulminated against Seymour's pandering to the rioters, alleging that he had addressed the mob as "my friends." (As Seymour's audience was peaceable, it is not entirely accurate to refer to them as "the mob," but everyone assumed that they were the same men who had been rioting earlier — see Bernstein, p. 50.)

A New York group Bernstein refers to as the Union Leaguers were especially angry with his solicitousness. The Union League Club of New York was not formed until early 1863, but its members had already begun developing a shared philosophy in the 1850s. They were united then by their connections to the older patrician families of New York. Also, they shared a pessimistic attitude toward the rapid economic expansion and mass politics of the antebellum period. They did not believe (as

the Belmont circle did) that laissez-faire economics could solve all social ills; in fact, they feared it would destroy morality and virtuous citizenship. To counteract that threat, they developed and supported new urban institutions which would educate the masses to proper behavior. These institutions would also provide the elite with opportunities to influence and mingle with the working classes, thereby helping to restore properly deferential social relations.

One such institution was Peter Cooper's Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (founded in the mid 1850s). Lincoln had reason to be grateful to Peter Cooper and to what Bernstein identifies as the Union Leaguer philosophy, which supported the Cooper Union. The speech he made there in 1860 introduced him to Eastern Republicans and contributed to his winning the 1860 election. As Bernstein describes it, the Cooper Union was intended

to instruct working-class sons and daughters in self-help and the acquisition of "useful knowledge." The original plan for Cooper Union included an art gallery, a debating society, free readings in "polite literature," a School of Design for women, a night school of science and art, and a public reading room.... The school sought to provide New York City with a new kind of institution binding together the class-torn community (p. 153).

The Union Leaguers were intolerant of religions and cultures other than their own and were more willing to interfere with workers' private lives than the Belmont circle was. The patrician Union Leaguers were particularly hostile to immigrants, whom they perceived to be alien and treasonous. As Bernstein notes, "If the Belmont circle was the most publicly racist upper-class group in the city, the patrician fraternity was the most openly nativistic" (p. 157). Hating the immigrants' Catholic religion, and trying to cultivate a working class that would respect their social authority, the Union Leaguers identified blacks as a properly deferential and Protestant working class group, and they publicly supported emancipation and black enlistment.

Thus, in July of 1863 the Union Leaguers "excoriated Irish rioters, lavished their charitable attentions on the black poor, and demanded that conscription be enforced at all costs" (p. 44). If a Union Leaguer had strayed into northern Indiana in July 1863 he probably would have been pleased with Dawson's report that "both grape and canister [cannon fire] were freely used last night up town against the rioters." He might even have let slip a comment like George Templeton Strong's: "For myself, personally, I would like to see war made on the Irish scum as in 1688" (p. 157).

The New York Republicans associated with the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) held a political philosophy similar to the Union Leaguers, but with some significant differences. Whereas the Union Leaguers were mostly merchants and intellectuals who had little contact with workers, the AICP members were mostly industrialists, who employed the working class and had contact with them every day. The in-

dustrialists valued competitive individualism, and tried to find or create ambitious workers who were willing to show up their co-workers to earn more money for themselves. Unfortunately, working class values clashed with this competitive individualism; working class communalism called for workers to regulate their labor so as to allow their colleagues to earn a living wage too. Much more than other elites, the industrialists wanted to stamp out this communal working class culture, and they were willing to use force or government power to do so.

During the riot, the AICP members (like the Union Leaguers) condemned the rioters as unworthy and unredeemable poor, and they advocated turning the military against them. Still, they were not entirely unsympathetic to the workers' position. Compared to the merchants, they more often personally associated with the rioters. Also, on a pragmatic level, although they might support the draft generally, they did not want to lose any of their own employees to the draft. Thus, many industrialists responded to the draft and the riot by establishing draft insurance funds, to which the workers contributed but which their employers controlled. (The fund was used to pay the three-hundred-dollar commutation fee of any of the employees who were drafted.) These factory-based insurance funds were representative of the industrialists' philosophy because the industrialists, themselves, retained control of the money just as they tried to control other aspects of their employees' lives.

Much to the AICP's frustration, the Tammany Hall Democrats had different ideas about paying commutation fees for workers. They proposed, and eventually passed, an ordinance to use county money to pay the fees of poor New Yorkers who did not want to be drafted. Significantly, they did not try to use the money to control specific groups.

Like the Belmont Democrats, Tammany Hall Democrats were sympathetic to the white working class rioters and unsympathetic to their black victims. Unlike the Belmont Democrats, though, they did not object to the draft itself — only the way it was implemented. After the war they benefitted from their patriotic support of the war effort, wresting control from the discredited Belmont circle.

Workers' behavior during the riot reflected philosophies they had developed in the 1850s just as elite behavior did. The artisans had been trying for years to preserve a philosophy of craftsmanship and cooperation in the workplace, and they vigorously opposed the grasping individualism of the AICP. Artisans believed that they were the only people who could be trusted to maintain standards of quality and cooperation on the job. Further, beginning in the early 1850s, they came to believe they were best qualified to resolve the larger political problems of a competitive urban economy. Before the war, some had even proposed that a coalition of workers could end the sectional conflict — insisting that the issue of slavery was essentially only an argument among capitalists (p. 99).



From the Lincoln Museum  
 FIGURE 3. Peter Cooper, founder of the Cooper Union where Lincoln spoke in 1860.

(To be continued)