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## *Lincoln's America* 1809-1865



Edited by  
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## Lincoln Lore®

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THE LINCOLN MUSEUM

The mission of The Lincoln Museum is to interpret and preserve the history and legacy of Abraham Lincoln through research, conservation, exhibit, and education.

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# Keeping Your Promises?

## African Americans, Contingency, and Lincoln's America

by John David Smith

President Abraham Lincoln perhaps said it best, when in April 1864 he remarked to a fellow Kentuckian, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."<sup>1</sup> Three years earlier, Lincoln described himself as "an accidental instrument . . . of a great cause."<sup>2</sup> On another occasion, he mentioned that slavery's future in the border states depended on "mere friction and abrasion—by the mere incidents of the war."<sup>3</sup> Had Lincoln read Karl von Clausewitz's 1832 *Vom Kriege*? In this work, the Prussian general argued that "difficulties accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen War."<sup>4</sup> Had Lincoln read Karl Marx, who in 1852 proclaimed: "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited."<sup>5</sup>

Civil War historiography includes many words on the role of contingency, chance, irrationality, transformative events, turning points, uncertainty, unmanageability—what historian Charles P. Roland terms the "intangibles" that shape the outcome of war.<sup>6</sup> In his recent *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004), John M. Hobson has defined "contingency" as a force in historical causation as "fortuitous accident."<sup>7</sup> Two titles—James A. Rawley's classic *Turning Points of the Civil War* (1966) and the more recent *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (2003) by Edward L. Ayres—underscore what Ayres terms "the deep contingency of history. To emphasize deep contingency is not to emphasize mere chance," he explains, "but rather the dense and intricate connections in which lives and events are embedded."<sup>8</sup>

Historians often interpret Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and his subsequent policy of enlisting and arming 179,000 African American soldiers, as the president's response to events. For example, in his *The Confederate States of America* (2005), Roger L. Ransom notes that though disappointed by Major General George B. McClellan's failure to destroy General Robert E. Lee's army at Antietam, Lincoln used the battle's outcome to issue his famous document announcing his attention to free the South's slaves in 1863 if the Rebels did not lay down their arms.<sup>9</sup> Though contemporary critics denounced Lincoln's proclamation as radical and revolutionary (they charged that it would unleash race war, large-scale miscegenation, disaffection in the North and heightened resistance in the South), I interpret the president's emancipation dictum and the employment of black troops not as a mere response to events, but rather as part of his longstanding devotion to maintain the Union at any price and his vision of a modern America.

Emancipation and the mobilization of African American troops signaled not only Lincoln's unwavering commitment to the Union, but also his vision of a "new" America—an America

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based on free labor and a vibrant, expanding economy. To be sure, before and after the 1860 presidential election Lincoln tried unsuccessfully to calm slaveholders who feared that the so-called "black Republicans" would liberate their chattel property and ruin their proverbial "southern way of life" and the Union itself. Writing in 1856, for example, a Richmond, Virginia, editor credited slavery with keeping the country intact by forcing the sections to be economically interdependent. "Without slavery," he declared, "there would be no mutuality of interest, no dependence between North and South." All would be well, the editor predicted, unless the North "should come under the rule of the mad, senseless and desperate mob."<sup>10</sup>

Though he opposed slavery on humanitarian and economic grounds, Lincoln was no abolitionist.<sup>11</sup> A lawyer and a close student of history and the U.S. Constitution, upon taking office Lincoln promised not "to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists."<sup>12</sup> White southerners, reacting in what historian Steven A. Channing termed an irrational "crisis of fear," refused to listen; they concluded erroneously that the "the mad, senseless and desperate mob" had triumphed.<sup>13</sup>

My argument is that once southerners engaged in armed rebellion, Lincoln quickly reneged on his promise; he began a series of *deliberate* steps that culminated in his emancipating and arming African Americans. Lincoln was not merely reacting to events; he was shaping them. The president used the idea of contingency as a rhetorical device to make his radical emancipation project more palatable to white northerners. As historian Allen C. Guelzo and Judge Frank J. Williams have reminded us, Lincoln was dead serious about emancipation.<sup>14</sup> Legal scholar Daniel Farber notes correctly that "[i]n one sense, slavery had always been a target of the war."<sup>15</sup> And historian Mark E. Neely, Jr. is correct when he writes that attention by scholars (myself included) to "self-emancipation"—to "agency" by African Americans in the emancipation process—should not divert our attention from Lincoln's legitimate record in freeing and arming the slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Lincoln launched this project very early in the war. In August 1861, congress passed the First Confiscation Act authorizing the government to seize all property, including slaves, used by the Confederacy "to work or to be employed in or upon any fort, navy yard, dock, armory, ship, entrenchment, or in any military or naval service whatsoever, against the Government and lawful authority of the United States..." Military commanders soon took advantage of this legislation. Over the course of the war, according to one estimate, as many as 200,000 contrabands worked for the U.S. Army as cattle drivers, stevedores, pioneer laborers, and in other support roles. This figure probably is too conservative. Historian James M. McPherson maintains that while the First Confiscation Act sidestepped the question of manumission, it nevertheless introduced "the thin edge of the wedge of emancipation" into federal military policy.<sup>17</sup>

Lincoln's experimentation picked up momentum and direction in March 1862 when congress enacted an additional Article of War that seriously undermined the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850. It prohibited military and naval personnel from "returning fugitives from service or labor, who may have escaped from any

persons to whom such service or labor is claimed to be due..." In a special message to congress Lincoln also asked legislators to fund gradual emancipation in the loyal slave states. Such a policy, the president argued, would discourage Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri from joining the Confederacy, and thereby undermine the insurrection in the Rebel states. A month later, congress not only agreed to Lincoln's request, but also legislated a compensated emancipation bill for the District of Columbia that allocated \$100,000 to assist blacks who wished to settle in either Haiti or Liberia. In May the president urged border state slaveholders to accept compensated emancipation and not "be blind to the signs of the times." Gradual, compensated emancipation, he assured them, "would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything. Will you not embrace it?" In June 1862, congress went further, emancipating slaves (but without compensating their masters) in the federal territories. And in July, after the border state representatives rejected Lincoln's compensated emancipation offer, congress passed two little-known and little-understood bills—the Second Confiscation Act and the Militia Act—that directly linked emancipation to military enlistment.<sup>18</sup>

The Second Confiscation Act authorized federal courts to free the slaves of persons "engaged in rebellion" and permitted the president "to employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion, and for this purpose he may organize and use them in such manner as he may judge best for the public welfare." It offered blacks no guarantee of civil rights but provided the president with the authority to transport, colonize, and settle, "in some tropical country...such persons of the African race, made free by the provisions of this act, as may be willing to emigrate, having first obtained the consent of the government of said country..." Reflecting on the meaning of this bill, historians James G. Randall and James M. McPherson have emphasized its serious limitations as an instrument of emancipation. In practice it liberated only those slaves who belonged to "traitors" as determined on a case-by-case basis by the federal courts. As a result, Randall concluded that "it is hard to see by what process any particular slaves could have legally established that freedom which the second Confiscation Act 'declared.'" The act was, however, as historians Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman put it, "a cautious way for [Secretary of War Edwin M.] Stanton and radical congressmen to empower Lincoln to enroll Negroes as soldiers and push him toward a willingness to use the power." Though the act "gave Lincoln legal authorization to use Negroes in any capacity he saw fit," the president believed that the time was not yet right to arm the blacks. As a result, they continued to wield shovels and picks, not muskets and swords. Lincoln believed that placing "arms in the hands of former slaves—to use black men to kill white men—had more explosive potentialities than emancipation itself." "The significant point," Thomas and Hyman insist, "is that Lincoln thought the *moment*, not the *idea*, unpropitious."<sup>19</sup>

The Militia Act, which according to historian Mary Frances Berry "marked an extraordinary change in traditional military policy," emancipated Confederate bondsmen (as well as their mothers, wives, and children) who performed military service for the U.S. Army, and authorized the president "to receive into the service of



the United States, for the purpose of constructing intrenchments, or performing camp service, or any other labor, or any military or naval service for which they may be found competent, persons of African descent..." The bill also specified that African Americans employed by the military were to be paid "ten dollars per month and one ration, three dollars of which monthly pay may be in clothing." Five days following their passage, Lincoln issued an executive order instructing his field commanders to execute the Second Confiscation and Militia Acts. They were to "seize and use any property, real or personal, which may be necessary or convenient for...military purposes" and "employ as laborers...so many persons of African descent as can be advantageously used for military and naval purposes, giving them reasonable wages for their labor."<sup>20</sup>

On July 22, the same day as Lincoln's executive order, his cabinet discussed arming the slaves, a policy Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase "warmly" endorsed. "The President was unwilling to adopt this measure," Chase recorded in his diary, "but proposed to issue a Proclamation, on the basis of the Confiscation Bill, calling upon the States to return to their allegiance...and proclaiming the emancipation of all slaves within States remaining in insurrection on the first of January, 1863."<sup>21</sup>

In 1862 Lincoln thus had moved consistently, though circuitously, toward emancipation and black enlistment. Lincoln had progressed so far that Neely insists that by mid-July—contemporaneous with passage of the Second Confiscation Act—the president had already decided to free the slaves if the Confederates did not surrender. Writing to a Louisiana Unionist soon after enactment of the Second Confiscation Act, Lincoln explained "that what is done, and omitted, about slaves, is done and omitted on...military necessity." Black leader Frederick Douglass, however, was not impressed with what he considered to be Lincoln's inaction. In a July 4, 1862, speech he charged that Lincoln's policies had "been calculated...to shield and protect slavery" and that the president had "scornfully rejected the policy of arming the slaves, a policy naturally suggested and enforced by the nature and necessities of the war." Two months later, in a blistering editorial in *Douglass' Monthly*, the black leader branded Lincoln as little more than "an itinerant Colonization lecturer, showing all his inconsistencies, his pride of race and blood, his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy." Despite Lincoln's professed antislavery views, Douglass blasted him as "quite a genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred and far more concerned for the preservation of slavery, and the favor of the Border Slave States, than for any sentiment of magnanimity or principle of justice and humanity." Specifically, Douglass complained that Lincoln, lacking "courage and honesty," had failed to enforce the Second Confiscation Act. He had "evaded his obvious duty, and instead of calling the blacks to arms and to liberty he merely authorized the military commanders to use them as laborers, without even promising them their freedom at the end of their term of service...and thus destroyed virtually the very object of the measure."<sup>22</sup>

Like Douglass, many historians have concluded that the president was far less committed to emancipation and employing blacks as soldiers than the historical record in fact suggests. They have based this interpretation on Lincoln's public statements prior to his announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

For example, in an August 1862 public letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, Lincoln emphasized that his only goal was to restore the Union. Greeley had criticized Lincoln for falling under the influence of border state slaveholders and for failing to implement the emancipation provisions of the Second Confiscation Act. Responding to Greeley, Lincoln explained:

If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object...is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because it helps to save the Union...

Having said this, Lincoln in fact left the door open for a change in policy, adding that he remained willing "to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views." Here was Lincoln at his pragmatic best, what Neely has termed his ability "to balance short-term practicality and long-term ideals." Lincoln also differentiated between his "official duty"—which was to restore the Union—and his "personal wish that all men everywhere could be free." Ever the astute politician, Lincoln wanted to have it both ways. As late as December 1862, in his annual message to congress, the president proposed three constitutional amendments for voluntary and compensated emancipation by 1900 with voluntary colonization. In doing so, Neely explains, Lincoln gave the border states and the Rebel states "one last chance."<sup>23</sup>

Lincoln did indeed seek the right moment—a military victory—to unveil his true sentiments regarding emancipation. "While he waited," Neely maintains, "Lincoln chose, without actually lying, to give the American public the impression that he was not likely to free the slaves." Though Lincoln's reasons for adapting this disingenuous strategy are unknown, he no doubt purposely gave "mixed signals" in order to keep his options open—not to commit to emancipation prematurely—should the Confederacy surrender or seek a negotiated peace settlement. He also kept a close eye on public opinion in the border states and in the Confederacy. Determined to save the Union by any means, Lincoln gradually concluded that freeing and subsequently arming the slaves were necessary steps in suppressing the rebellion. "The way these measures were to help the cause," he later wrote, "was not to be by magic, or miracles, but by inducing the colored people to come bodily over from the rebel side to ours." The promise of freedom became a prerequisite before full-scale black recruitment could become reality.<sup>24</sup>

The Union Army actually had little "inducing" to do because just as soon as the war began, slaves flooded federal lines in the border South and continued to inundate army camps as U.S. troops penetrated the Confederacy. Underestimating the slaves' desire to be free and to contribute to their own emancipation, and ever mindful



of losing border state and northern conservative support, from fall 1861 to spring 1862 Lincoln instructed his commanders to exclude runaway slaves from federal lines. But the bondsmen kept coming, gradually convincing soldiers, their officers, politicians, northern public opinion, and finally Lincoln, of their importance as a strategic weapon against the Rebels. The army generally put them to work as military laborers. "It is a military necessity," he explained in July 1862, "to have men and money; and we can get neither, in sufficient numbers, or amounts, if we keep from, or drive from, our lines, slaves coming to them."<sup>25</sup>

As historian Ira Berlin and his colleagues at the Freedmen and Southern Society Project have so effectively documented, "the strongest advocates of emancipation were the slaves themselves." "In time," Berlin explains, "it became evident even to the most obtuse Federal commanders that every slave who crossed into Union lines was a double gain: one subtracted from the Confederacy and one added to the Union." As "contrabands," hundreds of thousands of fugitive slaves performed all manner of skilled and semi-skilled labor for the Union forces. They worked as teamsters, blacksmiths, coopers, carpenters, bakers, butchers, cooks, laundresses, servants, and they performed many other duties. "With their loyalty, their labor, and their lives," Berlin adds, "slaves provided crucial muscle and blood in support of the Federal war effort." While the slaves may have "forced the issue" of emancipation on the president, as McPherson reminds us, they ultimately depended on Lincoln to free and arm them.<sup>26</sup>

Lincoln also was less-than-forthcoming on his plans to arm the blacks. In early August 1862, for example, he informed a delegation from Indiana that he could not accept their offer to recruit two regiments of African American troops. Though he would continue to employ blacks as laborers, Lincoln was unprepared at that time to enlist them as armed soldiers. As his justification the president asserted that "the nation could not afford to lose Kentucky at this crisis, and...that to arm the negroes would turn 50,000 bayonets from the loyal Border States against us that were for us." He used almost the identical language in responding to a delegation of Chicago Christians on September 13, nine days before issuing his preliminary proclamation, but added: "...I am not so sure we could do much with the blacks. If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels; and indeed thus far we have not had arms enough to equip our white troops." Responding to Lincoln's obsession with keeping Kentucky in the Union, James Russell Lowell allegedly asked, "How many times are we to save Kentucky and lose our self-respect?"<sup>27</sup>

Thus when Lincoln's preliminary emancipation edict finally appeared on September 22, most considered it to be a dramatic about-face, one that altered not only the direction of the war but redefined the meaning of "freedom" in American life. But, and here is my point, the shift in the president's policy was more apparent than real. Addressing congress a month before the Emancipation Proclamation was scheduled to take effect, Lincoln explained: "In giving freedom to the *slave*, we assure freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve."<sup>28</sup>

Though white northerners and border state Unionists defined blacks as their social, cultural, and intellectual inferiors, by late

1862 the exigencies of war forced Lincoln to reverse his emancipation policy. He was ready to make the move. McClellan's tactical draw against Lee at Antietam on September 17 provided the breakthrough Lincoln desperately needed. The timing not only had become right, but circumstances rendered such action crucial. The war had become a military stalemate and morale was low in the North. England threatened to recognize President Jefferson Davis's new government. Lincoln needed more men to fill depleted Union regiments. To a significant degree the Confederacy's military successes had depended on slavery. Bondsmen provided the agricultural and industrial labor that equipped, fed, and supplied the Confederacy's armies. Slaves constructed fortifications, repaired railroads, and freed up white men to serve in the ranks. "Slavery has been, and is yet the shield and helmet of this accursed rebellion," Douglass remarked in January 1862. A year later he congratulated Lincoln on the "amazing change" in his emancipation policy—"this amazing approximation toward the sacred truth of human liberty." "We are all liberated," by the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass said. "The white man is liberated, the black man is liberated, the brave men now fighting the battles of their country against rebels and traitors are now liberated, and may strike...the Rebels, at their most sensitive point." The destruction of slavery had become a military necessity and a major Union war aim. So, too, was the enlistment of black troops.<sup>29</sup>

Though Lincoln's government had grudgingly authorized recruitment of black soldiers in South Carolina (May 1862), in Kansas (August 1862), and in Louisiana (September 1862), this mobilization occurred piecemeal to relieve temporary manpower shortages. The success of these early units, however, inspired the president to recognize the vital connection between redirecting the war, emancipation, and military recruitment. Explaining the evolution of his policy, Lincoln recalled:

When in March, and May, and July 1862 I made earnest, and successive appeals to the border states to favor compensated emancipation, I believed the indispensable necessity for military emancipation, and arming the blacks would come, unless averted by that measure. They declined the proposition; and I was, in my best judgment, driven to the alternative of either surrendering the Union, and with it, the Constitution, or of laying strong hand upon the colored element. I chose the latter. In choosing it, I hoped for greater gain than loss; but of this, I was not entirely confident...

Military necessity, the need to fill depleted units, the need to employ the 500,000 to 700,000 fugitive slaves who had entered federal lines, and the need to deprive vital manpower from the Confederates convinced Lincoln in late 1862 that the time was "right" to free the Confederacy's slaves and to arm blacks, north and south.<sup>30</sup>

In 1863 black enlistment became the focal point of Lincoln's emancipation program, and his subordinates worked to systematize and integrate black recruitment into national policy. In a widely-circulated pamphlet, Henry Carey Baird urged politicians to enlist blacks with all dispatch. "By utilizing this element the Government can secure the services of 700,000 able-bodied men, acclimated to



and familiar with the seat of war, and at the same time strike the Rebels a vital blow," he averred. Douglass concurred, arguing in February 1863, "Whoever sees fifty thousand well drilled colored soldiers in the United States, will see slavery abolished and the union of these States secured from rebel violence." A month later, Lincoln confided to Major General Nathaniel P. Banks that he considered the raising of black troops "very important, if not indispensable." "The colored population is the great *available* and yet *unavailed* of, force for restoring the Union," the president informed Military Governor Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. "The bare sight of fifty thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi, would end the rebellion at once."<sup>31</sup>

Lincoln restated these arguments in his widely-printed August 1863 letter to James C. Conkling, also reiterating a point he had made and would make many times—that no matter what happened during and after the war, emancipation would stand. Military and political events would not undo the Union's commitment to emancipation. Blacks, he explained, "like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do anything for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept."<sup>32</sup> The character and context of the war had indeed changed, but not Lincoln's commitment to freedom and to a new America.

"Lincoln's America," Michael Lind reminds us, "took shape between 1860 and 1877" and, as he notes correctly, it "was not a color-blind society, but a segregated society with a racist immigration policy."<sup>33</sup> At first, of course, the South's four million slaves tested their freedom, determined to reunite their families, to obtain homesteads, to cultivate their own crops, in short, to become freed men and women in deed as well as in word. On paper at least, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution smoothed the way for the freed people, freeing them, including them in American citizenship, and enfranchising their adult males.

To be sure, the Reconstruction amendments and the Congressional Reconstruction Acts of 1867 enabled African Americans to score many triumphs during and after Reconstruction. They organized strong and resilient families, sent their children to school, formed their own churches, voted and organized politically, and labored mightily with hopes of owning family farms. Despite many accomplishments and moments of genuine biracial cooperation, from 1865 to 1900 and beyond, black southerners consistently encountered hostility from whites who sought to block their rise from slavery.

Through manipulative paternalism, political chicanery, economic exploitation, physical intimidation and, when necessary to retain racial control, torture and mob murder, white southerners worked to circumscribe black advancement. Over the course of the postwar decades, white southerners, committed to and obsessed with maintaining their supremacy, used every means at their disposal—first to define a special, unequal sphere for African Americans—and then to keep blacks in their "place."<sup>34</sup>

For example, in 1866 Bayley Wyatt, an ex-slave who remained in his native Virginia following emancipation, complained that federal officials had reneged on their promises to guard the

freedpeople and to provide them homesteads. "We now feels unprotected against de rebels, and we feels unprotected wid dem," Wyatt explained. He added: "we feels disappointed dat dey has not kept deir promise."<sup>35</sup> Four years later Frederick Douglass denounced the "vulgar and senseless prejudice against my long abused and proscribed people."<sup>36</sup> In 1892 Douglass reminded Americans that during the Civil War, Lincoln had "called upon the Negro to reach forth with his iron arm and catch with his steel fingers your faltering flag, and he came, a full two hundred thousand strong." Yet black veterans found themselves "stripped of their constitutional right to vote."<sup>37</sup> And finally, in 1935, reflecting on Reconstruction's lost opportunities, W.E.B. Du Bois declared: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."<sup>38</sup>

Lincoln's America not only bore the stigma of neo-slavery, but also the indelible blood stains of murder. According to historian Leon F. Litwack, in the period 1882 to 1968, whites lynched an estimated 4,742 blacks. "The cheapness of black life," Litwack explains, "reflected in turn the degree to which so many whites by the early twentieth century had come to think of black men and women as inherently and permanently inferior, as less than human, as little more than animals."<sup>39</sup> Historian Edna Greene Medford reminds us that though Lincoln had played his part in emancipating the South's slaves, true freedom "could not be realized without the nation's cooperation. Over the years, the legacy of slavery—racism, discrimination, and violence—often intervened to thwart sustained progress, and it continues to block certain segments of the African-American community from equal access to America's bounty."<sup>40</sup>

Though what Du Bois termed the "Veil of Color" hovered over Lincoln's America, the president's conscious decision "to interfere with the institution of slavery" changed the course of American history and altered the history of freedom.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps he had this in mind when, on April 11, 1865, in his last public address, Lincoln quipped, "*bad promises are better broken than kept.*"<sup>42</sup>

*John David Smith, Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, presented this paper at The Lincoln Symposium, "Now He Belongs to the Ages: Lincoln's America," Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee, on October 21, 2006.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, hereinafter referred to as *CW* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), VII: 282.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln, reply to Oliver P. Morton, February 11, 1861, *CW* IV: 193.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Appeal to Border State Representatives to Favor Compensated Emancipation, June 12, 1862, *CW* V: 318.

<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Colonel J.J. Graham, new and revised edition, 3 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), I:77.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Charles P. Roland, *An American Illud: The Story of the Civil War*, second edition (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 45.

<sup>7</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 313.



- <sup>8</sup> Edward L. Ayres, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), xix. "To understand why the South lost," James M. McPherson writes, "we must turn from large generalizations that imply inevitability and study instead the contingency that hung over each military campaign, each battle, each election, each decision during the war." See "American Victory, American Defeat," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42. On "contingency" versus "character," see Richard Ford, "How was it to be dead?" *New Yorker*, August 28, 2006, pages 58-69.
- <sup>9</sup> Roger L. Ransom, *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 88.
- <sup>10</sup> "Slavery the Strongest Bond of Union," *Richmond Enquirer*, quoted in *Raleigh Semi-Weekly Standard*, October 25, 1856, page 2.
- <sup>11</sup> For the argument that by emancipating the slaves Lincoln actually liberated himself, see Stephen B. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), 112.
- <sup>12</sup> See Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," March 4, 1861, *CW* IV: 263. Here Lincoln quoted one of his earlier speeches.
- <sup>13</sup> Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).
- <sup>14</sup> See Allen C. Guelzo, "Defending Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln and the Conkling Letter, 1863," *Civil War History* 48 (December 2002): 313-37; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Frank J. Williams, "'Doing Less' and 'Doing More': The President and the Proclamation—Legally, Morally, and Politically," in Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 48-82.
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- <sup>40</sup> Edna Greene Medford, "Imagined Promises, Bitter Realities: African Americans and the Meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation," in Holzer, Medford, and Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views*, 47.
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# An Interview with Jason Emerson

**Q:** Given the fact that Robert Todd Lincoln destroyed so many family papers and records, why do you think that he preserved the "insanity file"? [Editor's note: The letters and papers, now in the collection of The Lincoln Museum, were labeled by Robert Todd Lincoln "MTL Insanity File." The papers were purchased by The Lincoln Museum.]

**A:** I think Robert preserved the "insanity file" because he believed that committing his mother was the necessary and proper course, and the documents would eventually not only vindicate him but also show that his mother was truly ill. Robert knew full well the place in history his family occupied, and he knew that reporters and historians (whom he intensely distrusted and disliked) would write about his mother's mental issues whether he liked it or not. The reason for keeping the file hidden and not coming forward with it while he lived was probably similar to the reason he had his father's papers sealed at the Library of Congress for twenty-one years after his own death, namely, he did not want the contents to harm or embarrass anyone still living.

Some people have asked me whether it was proper to publish and write about the Mary Lincoln-Myra Bradwell correspondence I found in 2005, knowing as we do that Robert at one time tried to burn all the letters his mother wrote during her "mental derangement," as he called it. My answer has always been that Robert kept his file for a reason, and since it has been



Mary Todd Lincoln Daguerrotype, 1846. Reproduction from original in LOC. (TLM # 108)

published, the new letters I found and center my book around add illumination to the story.

**Q:** I know that you are a leading authority on the life of Robert Lincoln. In his later life, did he ever appear to question the actions he took regarding his mother's health?

**A:** No and yes. Robert always was convinced that his mother was mentally ill, and he never questioned the need for her treatment, or that it was his duty, as the last surviving and oldest son, to care for and protect her, "even, if necessary, against her will," as he once wrote. However, in hindsight, seeing what a public mess the

entire episode became due to the meddling of Myra and James Bradwell, Robert did write to his aunt in 1879, "If I could have foreseen my own experience in the matter, no consideration would have induced me to go through with it, the ordinary troubles and distresses of life are enough without such as that." I don't know if he really meant that, but historic documents show that Robert considered his mother insane and in need of treatment as early as 1867, but he thought inaction on his part was the best way to handle it. It was only eight years later, after consulting with seven medical experts as well as three of Abraham Lincoln's closest friends and advisors, that Robert did act. For a man as intensely private as Robert Lincoln to take the very public act of having his mother, the former First Lady, declared insane in a public trial, the need for his action must have been very dire indeed.



One of the most compelling arguments I read in the files concerning Robert's motivations for the trial was for his mother's personal safety. Ever since the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871, one of Mary Lincoln's persistent delusions was that buildings and even entire cities were, or would be, on fire. The medical experts Robert consulted prior to the trial all told him that persons with such a delusion could at any time throw themselves out of a window, thinking the building they were in was on fire. This alone, to me, justifies Robert's actions, and is, perhaps, a possible reason he did not regret his rush to treatment.

**Q: What was the standard for care for mental illness in the mid-19th century?**

A: The history of psychiatry is fascinating, and I had to do a lot of studying to understand this issue. I recommend people interested in the details of this question read *The Mentally Ill in America: A History of Their Care and Treatment from Colonial Times*, by Albert Deutsch. Succinctly, the treatment of the "insane" varied from state to state. Before reformers set their sights on the treatment of the mentally ill, most people were cared for at home (whether they received loving care or were shut in the basement), or sent to prison. Most mental health facilities began as terrible places (as portrayed in Ken Kesey's great novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) meant for mere supervision of disturbed people rather than any sort of treatment.

By 1875, the time of Mary's commitment, Illinois had the most advanced mental health laws in the country, requiring a jury trial, with at least one juror being a certified physician. Mary's treatment at Bellevue Place Sanitarium consisted of the latest in "moral" therapy, including "rest, diet, baths, fresh air, occupation, diversion, change of scene, no more medicine than...absolutely necessary, and the least restraint possible." Some doctors treated mentally ill patients with drugs such as chloral hydrate, bromide of potassium, opium and cannabis, or various combinations of these.

Little is known about what specific medications Mary Lincoln took, either with or without a prescription. It is known that

Mary did use chloral hydrate and laudanum. However, the known facts strongly suggest Mary had no physical addiction to chloral hydrate or any other drug, despite what some historians claim. Mary's pre-sanitarium physician, Dr. Willis Danforth, being a homeopathic physician, would not have used medications at full strength, since the basic principle of homeopathy was extreme dilution of medication, which was believed to increase therapeutic potency. Investigation into the historical uses and effects of chloral hydrate also proves it was not an addictive drug.

**Q: Was there a difference between treatment for men and for women?**

A: Unfortunately, for a long time, there was. To understand this, one must understand and accept the social mores of Antebellum and Gilded Age America. It was a time when men ruled the world and especially the family. Women were considered the weaker sex. If a person were a borderline case of mental illness who proclaimed sanity, men probably would be left alone; whereas women were more likely to be committed. Of course, before legal and medical reforms took hold concerning treatment of the mentally ill, women and children could be committed for no reason at all, merely on the whim of the husband, father, brother, uncle, etc. The most famous case was that of Elizabeth Packard, whose husband had her committed because she disagreed with his religious beliefs. He wanted her locked up, called a doctor, who took her pulse and declared her insane. When she was released from the asylum, Mrs. Packard went on a crusade to change the mental health laws to make them fair for women, and she succeeded. In fact, it was because of her that Mary Lincoln received the jury trial she did in 1875.

**Q: Were institutions such as the one to which Mary was sent designed primarily for treatment, or were they simply to serve in a custodial capacity?**

A: There were examples of each in



Robert Todd Lincoln (TLM # 115)

existence, although typically private institutions generally leaned toward the treatment side, while state-run institutions were more custodial. Bellevue Place Sanitarium, where Mary lived, was designed for treatment and the "curing" of patients. Dr. Richard Patterson boasted high cure rates throughout his entire career. The fact that Robert spent much time and money to place his mother under Dr. Patterson's care shows that he was a concerned and loving son. Illinois law automatically placed those declared insane by a jury in a state mental hospital, although it allowed private placement if the family arranged it.

**Q: As a scholar who has done extensive research on both Mary and Robert Lincoln, please describe their relationship to our readers. Did this relationship change through the years?**

A: Mary and Robert's relationship has long been misunderstood and grossly mischaracterized. Up until the 1875 trial, mother and son were extremely close and great companions. Mary's letters were effusive in their praise for her oldest son, especially after Abraham Lincoln's death, when she gave Robert the highest compliment



of all, stating that he grew more like his father every day. In some ways, Mary and Robert may have been closer than Mary and Abraham, as Robert was home with Mary every day for sixteen years, until he left for school, whereas Abraham was on the road more than half of every year. Robert visited with his mother during every college vacation.

Of course, their relationship was more carefree before the assassination. After April 1865, Mary was distraught and Robert had become the head of the Lincoln family. He had to change his immediate life plans in order to care for his mother and younger brother, which I think caused some resentment. He also had to assume the role of healer that his father had been with Mary. Unfortunately, Robert's patience was not the same as his father's (and a son's attitudes are different than a husband's), and he could neither be nor do everything his mother needed. Once Robert became a husband and father with a full-time legal practice, his priorities also shifted.

It was not until after the 1875 commitment that Mary became angry with Robert. One of her delusions was that Robert was trying to steal her money, which was, of course, not true. But her antipathy toward him led her to cut him out of her life for five years. This was painful and hurtful to Robert, who wrote in 1879 that he didn't blame his mother for her actions and would gladly speak with her again and hold nothing against her. Unfortunately, they did not speak from 1876 until 1881.

**Q: In your opinion, what diagnosis would be made regarding Mary's condition by a mental health professional today?**

A: After doing exhaustive research on mental illness and consulting with psychiatric experts, I believe Mary Lincoln suffered from Bipolar Disorder and would require serious and sustained medical treatment were she alive today.

Looking at Mary's early life, one can discern early manifestations of Manic-Depressive Illness (now called Bipolar Disorder), with symptoms of depression,

delusions (of persecution, poverty, and various somatic ailments), hallucinations, inflated self-esteem, decreased or interrupted sleep, mood swings, and extravagant spending (monomania). These early manifestations later developed into full-blown Manic-Depressive episodes, with the above symptoms, usually magnified, as well as threats of physical violence against others and attempts at suicide. This multiplicity of psychotic episodes shows that she did not suffer simply from one "insanity episode" that led to her commitment in 1875—which is the general understanding—but rather she suffered numerous episodes throughout her life that led to the inevitable denouement.

While searching the historiography, I actually found a case study of Mary Lincoln in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 1966 in which psychiatrist John M. Suarez wrote, "There is little doubt that she would be committed by any court today. She was clearly a danger to herself and others." In 2006, Dr. James S. Brust, M.D., chair of the Department of Psychiatry and medical director of the psychiatric unit at San Pedro Peninsula Hospital, San Pedro, Calif., and the main consulting psychiatric expert for my book, wrote, "Mary Lincoln would still require psychiatric hospitalization in the face of the symptoms she suffered in 1875, and her family would confront the same dilemma if she declined it."

**Q: I know that many historians through the years, starting with William Herndon, have been extremely critical of Mary Todd Lincoln. I have a question which might not have an answer. Do you believe that Abraham Lincoln would have become the man and the president that he was without his wife Mary at his side?**

A: That's a difficult question to answer, and extremely subjective. Herndon famously characterized Abraham Lincoln's

ambition as "a little engine that knew no rest;" and that was true long before he met Mary Todd. Before their marriage, Lincoln had taught himself surveying, mastered Euclid's geometry on his own, learned the law and become a practicing attorney. He was deeply involved in politics, and had been elected to the state legislature. So to say he had no ambition for greatness until Mary entered his life is pure fallacy, or fantasy. However, Mary's social standing certainly opened doors for Lincoln, and a wife's encouragement cannot be underestimated in helping a husband achieve great things. I think there is a tincture of possible merit in Herndon's statement that Lincoln achieved as much as he did because he often did not want to go home to his shrewish wife. There are many recollections by neighbors stating that when Mary was in a fit Lincoln would pick up one of the boys and go to his law office and work until his wife's temper subsided. That said, I think the Lincoln marriage was a true partnership — not a political partnership like that of Bill and Hillary Clinton (which some people compare them to) — but a partnership of love and respect. Mary wanted her husband to succeed to fulfill his own dreams, which were also hers for him, as well as to fulfill her dreams of marrying a president. She had no political ambitions of her own and even opposed female suffrage.

**Q: How is your book different from past books about Mary Lincoln and her mental illness, and what, if any, new conclusions do you draw?**

A: My book is the first new book-length examination of Mary Lincoln's insanity case in more than twenty years, the last one being *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln*, by Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry in 1986. So I immediately had twenty years' worth of new research, materials, and interpretations to utilize. Of course, I also had Mary's "lost" letters that I found, as well as other letters recently donated to the Lincoln Presidential Library. I also found many unknown and unpublished documents, letters, and magazine and newspaper articles relating to this event.



One of the major new contributions my book makes to understanding this event is my examination of Robert Lincoln's motivations for his mother's commitment. In the entire historiography of the case, no one has ever tried to understand exactly why and how Robert did what he did. They either ignore it, or judge him from a moral standpoint, regardless of all the facts. It is impossible to truly comprehend the case without understating the attitudes of one of the two main protagonists of the story. I also look at Mary's case from a more medical/psychiatric attitude, trying to objectively understand her and her issues and sufferings.

My diagnosis of Mary is something new to the historiography, as is my belief that Robert Lincoln was an honorable man who truly loved his mother and tried to protect her. Of course, the new materials I

found and used open up all sorts of new avenues for discussions and conclusions about the case, such as how Mary got herself released from the asylum, whether or not she truly tried to commit suicide, how she and Robert reconciled after five years of estrangement, and exactly what her relationship was with Robert. I also found some primary sources documenting Abraham Lincoln's beliefs about his wife's mental illness.

**Q: What is your current research/book project?**

A: I am writing a biography of Robert Todd Lincoln, scheduled for publication in 2009. I was, in fact, working on Robert's life when I discovered Mary Lincoln's "missing" letters to Myra Bradwell, and had to put that on hiatus while I wrote about Mary's insan-

ity case. The owners of the letters, when I found them, had only just themselves found the steamer trunk containing the letters in their attic. They were at that time trying to decide whether to keep, destroy, sell, or donate the letters somewhere. Once they decided on donating the papers to a Lincoln-related museum, I knew I had to write the book I envisioned immediately, before the letters became public domain and some other Lincoln scholar scooped them up and bigfooted me.

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## Johnson's Island: The Archaeological Investigation of a Civil War Prisoner of War Depot

By Allison Cosby

The work of archaeologists is often misunderstood, thanks to the romanticized portrayals of archaeologists like Indiana Jones. Real archaeologists rarely find themselves chased by Nazis or escaping from booby-trapped tombs, nor do we search for evidence of dinosaurs or saber-toothed cats. Archaeology attempts to reconstruct patterns of human behavior based on the material signatures these behaviors leave behind. Historical archaeology examines sites from the more recent world, often comparing the archaeological record to historical accounts of the area. Diaries, maps, documents and other pieces of the historical record are often taken at face-value in terms of their veracity and accuracy. It is important to remember, however, that our records are often full of inaccuracies, from the smallest typographical error to outright lies and deception. Like detectives, historical archaeologists attempt to support or refute eyewitness testimony with hard evidence of what really happened. By careful analysis of even the smallest fragments, we can create timelines of events and reconstruct what objects and behaviors were present. As scientists, we are inclined to trust physical proof.

Many of the excavations in the United States could be classified as historical archaeology. Sites like Jamestown in Virginia have been extensively excavated and studied to help us understand how the first settlements in the Colonies grew and developed. Since the development of this country by European settlers occurred not so long ago, sites pertaining to the creation and growth of what we call "America" could be classified as historical archaeology. Some even more recent sites that have garnered much popular interest are those associated with the Civil War. This violent and formative chapter of American history has been examined, studied and celebrated by academics and hobbyists alike, and it has become possibly the most documented event in our history. Still, there is much more that can be learned from the evidence underground at battlefields and military prisons. For over twenty years, Dr. David R. Bush and a cadre of students and volunteers have been excavating and studying the prison for Confederate officers on Johnson's Island, Ohio.

The Johnson's Island prisoner of war depot is perhaps one of the less well-known military prisons from the Civil War era. Located in Lake Erie, near Sandusky, Johnson's Island housed Confederate officers as prisoners of war from 1862 to 1865. In the first six months of the war, things were not going well for the North. Lieutenant Colonel William Hoffman, the Commissary-General of Prisons, was instructed on October 3, 1861, to locate an island in Lake Erie that would be suitable for a Federal prison.

Hoffman toured the American islands on the lake, finding most unsuitable for a variety of reasons. North and Middle Bass Islands were ruled out, as their close proximity to the Canadian border would allow easy escape for Confederate prisoners. The frozen lake surface would prohibit the movement of patrol boats, but would facilitate an escape on foot from the island.<sup>1</sup> Hoffman also



visited Kelley's Island, but was afraid the extensive vineyard culture and wine and brandy distilleries on the island were, "too great a temptation to the guard to be overcome by any sense of right or fear of punishment." Soon, the Commissary-General arrived on Johnson's Island. He saw the close proximity of Sandusky as a huge benefit. It would allow for the easy passage of supplies, even in winter, and the neighborhood could be alerted of escapees by the sound of a cannon.<sup>2</sup> Colonel Hoffman was certain that Johnson's Island was the ideal location for a prison in Lake Erie. His recommendation was accepted, and on November 15, 1861, the lease to the land on Johnson's Island went to the Federal government. Construction of the prison buildings began almost immediately, as much of the necessary timber was located on the island.<sup>3</sup>

The Governor of Ohio in 1861, William Dennison, was asked by the Secretary of War to gather a company of Union men to act as guards on Johnson's Island. Governor Dennison named this company of men the "Hoffman Battalion" in honor of the Commissary-General. A notice in the *Sandusky Register* on January 1, 1862, asked for one hundred men to staff the prison. They would be given the same pay and benefits as Union enlisted men. William Seward Pierson, a former mayor of Sandusky, was made commandant of the prison. By March of 1862, the prison was ready to house 3,000 to 5,000 Confederate officers, and the first prisoners arrived about a month later. The citizens of Sandusky were naturally curious about these new arrivals. The *Register* described the arrival of the Confederates, saying, "some of them had the 'don't care a dime' swagger of bloods, some were sullen in appearance, while others seemed to forget themselves in their curiosity to see the sights." It is important to remember that these men were officers; many had come from wealthy or powerful backgrounds, some were of high rank, and all thought of themselves as Southern gentlemen.<sup>4</sup> For the citizens of Sandusky, the prison was a source of much curiosity; frequently, and much to the pleasure of the prisoners, the young women of Sandusky would gather by the gates for a glimpse at these mysterious rebel soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

For the Confederates confined on Johnson's Island, life was anything but easy. The officers received limited daily or weekly rations of beef, pork, bread, beans, rice, coffee, sugar and vinegar. For brief periods, the Rebel prisoners were truly starved in retaliation for the atrocious conditions at Confederate prisons like Andersonville. At most times, however, the rations met or even exceeded what the soldiers had been given on the battlefield.<sup>6</sup> Accounts of prisoners on Johnson's Island eating rats were received with horror by citizens in the North and South; however, when prisoner Captain W. L. McLean was asked if the Confederates were compelled to eat rats, he replied, "No, but we did, largely out of a spirit of adventure."<sup>7</sup> The men who did try the vermin said they were not bad and tasted of squirrel.

The sutler's stand on the island was the source of all other supplies for the prisoners. It was here that prisoners could purchase extra food, clothing, overcoats and paper. The sutler's stand was also the source for supplies and tools used for craft production.<sup>8</sup> Many prisoners passed the time with hobbies and craftwork. Some industrious prisoners crafted full sets of furniture out of refuse timber and boot leather, using only their pocket knives. Others

fashioned jewelry and trinkets to send to wives and girlfriends back home. Some enterprising officers worked as bakers, tailors, launderers and artists, selling their services to their fellow prisoners. A group of prisoners, hoping to insert a bit of Old Dixie in the North, formed a minstrel show troupe called the "Rebellionians." The actors performed for packed crowds who paid 25 cents for standing room and 50 for reserved seats.<sup>9</sup> The prisoners had many creative and resourceful ways to entertain themselves while captives on Johnson's Island.

Still, the conditions on Johnson's Island were bad enough to encourage much talk of escape. Many tried tunneling out of latrines, hiding in outgoing vehicles, sawing through the fence or impersonating Union guards. The goal of the escapees was to make it across the water to Canadian soil, and a few captives succeeded in this goal. The commandants of the prison believed the prisoners reserved the right to try to escape, and it was the duty of the guards to stop them. The Confederate officers were fired upon when they stepped over the perimeter line of the camp, called the "dead line."<sup>10</sup> The officers were often asked to perform menial labor, such as digging sinks or picking up trash. These privileged Southerners saw such work as unfit for men such as themselves, and such work orders garnered increased hostility among the prisoners. The officers who took the oath of allegiance to the Union lived in much better conditions and were housed in Block 1. However, they were subjected to brutal treatment by the loyal Rebels.<sup>11</sup>

Life in the prison continued thusly for the duration of the war. The news of Lee's surrender reached Sandusky around midnight on April 9, 1865. On Johnson's Island, the soldiers could hear the patriotic songs, fireworks and jubilation on the mainland as citizens in Sandusky celebrated the end of the war. The officers on Johnson's Island had received no official notice of the surrender, but no doubt could guess what the commotion was about. With news of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, the commandants of the prison expected they would have to discipline many men for cheering over the death of the president; however, the Rebels seemed as sullen and disappointed as many Union men, and agreed that Lincoln's death was a great tragedy. After these events, many of the Confederates on Johnson's Island came to terms with the South's surrender. By early May, 2,800 soldiers asked to take the oath of allegiance, and were subsequently released. The remaining 35 prisoners were transferred to Fort Lafayette in New York. The *Sandusky Register* noted that, "with this squad passes away all that is left to Johnson's Island as a military prison." The buildings, timber and other supplies were auctioned off. The enlisted men were sent to Columbus, and the arms and munitions were transported to Detroit and Fort Wayne. As the *Register* remarked, "Thus closes the military history of this famous Lincoln Bastile [*sic*], which has secured a national, and even trans-Atlantic fame, and has endeared itself to many sprigs of chivalry who shared its hospitalities for the wearing of the Grey."<sup>12</sup> After the military presence left Johnson's Island, life continued as it had before the prison was erected. The island was farmed for several decades until developers saw the potential for housing and vacation development. To see the island today, it is hard to believe a prison ever stood there; but a wealth of evidence lay just a few inches underground.



I joined the excavations on Johnson's Island as a student in Heidelberg College's Archaeological Field School. The program was designed to provide undergraduate students with the necessary instruction and field experience to pursue further excavations or a career in archaeology. Traditional classroom archeology curricula must be coupled with the hands-on knowledge of how to uncover, handle, record and preserve artifacts. We were under the direction of Dr. David Bush, an archaeology professor at Heidelberg College, the site director on the Island and the chairman of the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island. Dr. Bush has headed the excavations at Johnson's Island for almost twenty years, a nearly unprecedented span of time for one archaeologist to remain at one site. We are all fortunate that Dr. Bush has worked hard to secure ownership and excavation rights to much of the former prison grounds in order to protect it from the rapid development in the area.

The conditions at the site were rather favorable compared to those at other archaeological excavations. The larger excavation area, the hospital plot, was covered by a moveable canvas enclosure called a Weatherport. The Weatherport shielded us from the sun, but not from the 90°+ temperatures we experienced most days. Some of our animal neighbors on the island enjoyed the benefits of the Weatherport as well; we had to rustle snakes out of the excavation area on a daily basis. I feel as if we shared a small part of the prisoners' experiences on the island. This feeling of connection was furthered by our daily readings of diaries. Every day, at lunch, we would read a prisoner's diary entry from that day. As we all became enthralled by the prisoners' serial narratives, we felt a deeper connection with the men we were trying to learn about. Dr. Bush encouraged this feeling of connection and shared experience through letter writing. We were required to write weekly letters to our friends and family, which were then opened and inspected by "Commandant" Bush. Letters that did not meet his specifications or contained "Rebellious talk" were confiscated and burned. Just like the Confederate officers, we resented the invasion of our privacy. Though these small assignments helped strengthen the feeling of connection between ourselves and the prisoners, the bulk of our work on the island revolved around the ongoing archaeological excavations at the site.

Excavation requires both raw physical endurance and a careful hand and eye. Many people think archaeologists "dig holes" to unearth artifacts, when "digging squares" may be a more accurate description. The area to be excavated is mapped out on a system of two meter squares. These squares are called units. Each unit is recognized by a set of coordinates that measures the distance north and east of a set reference point. With the help of modern laser measuring and surveying equipment, we can map out hundreds of meters accurately to the centimeter. Once a unit is mapped, every square centimeter of dirt must be screened for artifacts. As objects spend hundreds of years underground, they can become hard to distinguish from the surrounding dirt. We work the dirt through mesh screens to help us see small fragments. Often, the top layers of dirt in the square reveal many artifacts of our modern culture like machine-tooled nails, pop tabs and contemporary ammunition. On Johnson's Island, we encountered a problem common to historical archaeology; the area we were excavating had been plowed and planted many times since Confederate officers wandered its grounds. Archaeologists most often determine the age of

artifacts by analyzing the stratigraphy, or vertical orientation, of related objects. An artifact that is deeper in the ground was most likely deposited earlier than one closer to the surface. When the ground has been plowed, however, stratigraphic analysis is useless because the soil layers have been mixed together. While experts can generally tell modern materials from those of 150 years ago, we cannot draw too many interpretations from the artifacts in this "plow zone" because we cannot be sure they are even close to their original positions.

When we hit the clay-like subsoil, we began the exacting process of excavating each two-meter square. Using trowels, we shaved off a fine layer of soil at a time. The trowel could be considered an extension of the archaeologist's hand. The iconic tool more closely resembles those used by builders, rather than a garden trowel; it is flat and diamond-shaped with a sharp point on the end. The flat blade helps archaeologists maintain an even, perfectly flat excavated surface. This is essential to accurately record the vertical locations of artifacts in the ground. When the first Civil War artifacts appeared, it was an exciting feeling indeed; however, we had to overcome the desire to yank the button or bottle out of the ground right away. Whenever possible, we used the same laser measuring equipment we used to map the squares to record the exact coordinates of artifacts in the ground and created an electronic map of the site using Computer-Aided Drafting, or CAD, technology. As we uncover more artifacts deeper in the ground and map their coordinates, the CAD program provided us with a three-dimensional view of what was previously under our feet.

Like other scientific disciplines, archaeology requires a certain exactness and precision of measurements and methods. If we mix dirt or artifacts from different squares or levels, we run the risk of confusing older artifacts with newer ones or drawing erroneous conclusions. Likewise, overlooking small artifacts can lead to holes in our data sets. We meticulously gather all excavated dirt so it can be screened for small pieces of glass, metal or brick. These artifacts are counted and bagged en masse for further analysis at the lab. Archaeologists working at the lab will clean and examine all the artifacts, and attempt to re-fit pieces of ceramic or glass.

The majority of artifacts we uncovered were small and fragmentary. From just one day of excavation, a two-meter square was likely to turn up over a hundred shards of glass and a handful of nails and pieces of ceramic. Larger and more significant finds are given a much more careful treatment. The tops and bottoms of glass bottles are particularly important to study individually; experts like Dr. Bush can often tell exactly what a bottle or vessel contained just from the shape of the base or opening. For example, a medicine bottle is likely to have a rectangular base, while a round base is more indicative of a whiskey or beer bottle. These significant finds are called field specimens. Each field specimen is given its own cataloguing number, which encodes information on where the artifact was found on the site. These artifacts are individually bagged and sent to the lab for further study. Any artifact that is unusual or particularly informative will be catalogued this way.

Our excavations in the 2007 season focused on the plot where the prison hospital had been, Block 6. When the prison was in operation, only the very sick were housed in the hospital. The sanitary



conditions were less than desirable. On October 10, 1863, the Surgeon and Acting Medical Inspector for prisoners of war, A.M. Clark, inspected the hospital grounds on Johnson's Island and found them unsatisfactory. He complained mostly about the lack of cleaning or "police" on the part of the prisoners. Surgeon Clark noticed that several of the prisoners' beds were in desperate need of cleaning, with filthy linens and bedpans not attended to. There was insufficient ventilation and use of disinfectants.<sup>13</sup> One prisoner, Colonel I. G. W. Steedman, 1st Regiment, Alabama Volunteers, was a physician who assisted in the hospital and kept meticulous records of the medical operations on the island. He described the prison as having insufficient fresh water. The large stoves used in each ward for warmth were insufficient for the brutally cold winters on Lake Erie.<sup>14</sup> Though these conditions sound terrible, the hospital at Johnson's Island was significantly better than at many larger prisons. As for the medical care the prisoners received, they were treated to all the most modern medical knowledge and technology of the time. The camp medical officer, Surgeon Timothy Woodbridge, was a skilled medical practitioner who directed a competent group of nurses and an assisting physician, Major Henry Eversman. In addition to their prisoner rations, the sick were furnished with additional potatoes, eggs, chicken and tea.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the prison was in comparably good health. Common diseases and ailments were dysentery, chronic diarrhea, scurvy and fever. The doctors reported only three cases of smallpox being brought into the prison, and with the infected individuals being properly quarantined the disease did not spread to other prisoners. The low prevalence of hospital gangrene on Johnson's Island meant the cleanliness of the medical wards was not too deplorable. Dr. Steedman attributed the relatively low mortality in the prison to the fact that this prison was for officers and the best classes of Southern people.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps more likely is the conscientious care and attention the sick received at the hands of Union and Confederate doctors and nurses.

The artifacts we found on the hospital plot gave us a glimpse into some of the techniques and technologies Civil War surgeons had at their disposal. By the nature of the building materials, the floorboards of the hospital had some significant spaces between them.<sup>17</sup> The artifacts we found would have slipped between those floorboards almost 150 years ago. We unearthed hundreds of shards of patent medicine bottles. Patent medicines were common cure-all treatments at the time, though many were mostly alcohol and did more harm than good. The Union provided these medicines to army physicians in bottles embossed with "USA HOSP. DEPT." The green glass and machine-blown finish of these bottles made the pieces easy to recognize. Other types of patent medicines were also used. Hostetter's Bitters was a favorite, and many recognizable shards of these bottles were excavated. Another popular cure-all of the time, whiskey, was also apparently present in large amounts in the hospital.

Other artifacts gave us insight into how the ill prisoners passed their time while in the hospital. Craftwork was very popular among the prisoners. The prisoners used hard rubber rulers, sold at the sutler's stand, to fashion jewelry, tintype cases and other keepsakes. These objects were often sent home to families or sold to other prisoners. We found fragments of that type of rubber, called gutta-percha, in Block 6.<sup>18</sup> One prisoner had fashioned

the rubber into a dainty ring, perhaps to use as a link in a chain or bracelet. He was no doubt upset to lose such a fine piece of work as it was swept between the floorboards. Often, prisoners would use bits of shell or gold foil to embellish these creations. We found many small pieces of shell, most likely the refuse bits that resulted from shaping the shell to be fitted. Additionally, we uncovered a small strip of gold foil. While this was probably used for craft production, it is possible, given its location in Block 6, that the gold was used to fill cavities. Though this medical technology was very new at the time, previous excavations in the hospital block unearthed a human tooth, complete with a gold filling.<sup>19</sup> Prisoners would also use Minie balls and other ammunition for carving. The relatively soft lead of Civil War-era munitions made them easy to carve and shape; some prisoners made chess sets out of carved Minie balls. In Block 6, I found an interesting slice of a hollow lead bullet. Perhaps the artist had begun carving the bullet, but when he discovered it was hollow and useless he discarded it, where it ended up on the ground under the hospital building.

The officers housed on Johnson's Island no doubt regarded themselves as Southern gentlemen. Many had come from wealth and wanted to have all the comforts of their lives back in Dixie. In Block 6, along with the many fragments of hospital bottles and bedpans, we found evidence of the soldiers' attempts to inject a bit of class into their surroundings. We found handles and rims of dainty china teacups; one fragment even had a partial maker's mark. We also found a small piece of the stem of a crystal wine glass. Other pieces of crystal glass we found probably belonged to tumblers and finely-made bottles. These men, longing for any facet of their previously privileged lives, most likely used these objects to remind them of less austere surroundings. Beneath where the prison hospital stood, we excavated several ceramic Prosser buttons. These molded porcelain buttons were common on some of the more expensive clothing of the time.<sup>20</sup> We also found a small, thin piece of metal that appears to have been a tooth pick. Even as they were lying ill in bed, these Southern gentlemen wanted to look their best.

We were also fortunate to be able to excavate part of the hospital latrine. Latrines are particularly useful and informative features of the archaeological site. Since they were only used for a brief period of time, usually a few months, they are useful for determining how life in the prison changed over time. This is particularly true on Johnson's Island.<sup>21</sup> The pits could only be dug to the bedrock, which was quite high. As a result, the sinks filled up quickly and had to be moved often.<sup>22</sup> The archaeological record of a latrine looks quite different from areas like the hospital building. Refuse was thrown into the latrine whole, so naturally we expected to find more complete artifacts and fewer fragments. The area of the latrine was easy to determine; where the pit had existed, the soil was rich, soft and very dark in contrast to the surrounding clay. For the most part, we traded in our trowels for bamboo skewers, dental picks and brushes. The latrine contained many very fragile and complete artifacts that required gentle and careful excavation to avoid damaging them.

Almost as soon as we reached the latrine level, we could see the exposed handle of what would turn out to be a complete ceramic



chamber pot. The large piece was probably dropped down the latrine as it was being emptied. As we uncovered more levels, we found numerous bottles of a variety of shapes and sizes. Various alcoholic beverages were considered contraband on prison grounds, and prisoners would often dispose of these bottles in the latrine to avoid punishment.<sup>23</sup> One very exciting find from this season was a complete bone toothbrush. The toothbrush was very finely crafted and had a long head with numerous holes for boar's-hair bristles. Such a fine piece was probably expensive, and some unlucky prisoner probably dropped it accidentally into the sink. We also found a few lead Minie balls. While these may seem unusual finds in a hospital latrine, it is possible a prisoner had found the bullet to use for craftwork, but it tumbled out of his pocket when he used the latrine.

Since this latrine was associated with the hospital, Dr. Bush was particularly interested in examining how the diets of the ill differed from those of the prison as a whole. In the latrine, we found evidence of the eggs and chicken given to the sick. We found a nearly complete chicken skeleton among the other refuse in the latrine. Amazingly, the eggshells that were tossed down the sink are still preserved and visible in the soil; some even remain carefully nested together as they had been over one hundred years ago! Similarly, the scales and tiny bones of fish remain where they were discarded. We found many large and heavily oxidized pieces of metal that had possibly been part of the cans in which some rations were served. Some smaller pieces appeared to be from table knives or other cutlery.

In the latrine, we found many buttons of a variety of types. The shell and Prosser buttons were probably from shirts and pants, while more rugged wooden buttons probably belonged to pajamas and other less formal wear. We also found a few buckles and other fasteners. Dysentery was a common ailment on Johnson's Island, and it is possible a sick prisoner would have had to disrobe quickly, maybe popping off a button or breaking a buckle in the process. In one area of the latrine, we found large amounts of ash and what appeared to be a layer of burned fabric. Within this matrix of ash were a few wooden buttons which also showed evidence of fire damage. Burning clothing was a common practice whenever smallpox or another highly communicable disease was suspected. Since there were only three recorded cases of smallpox in the history of the prison, it was likely this precaution was taken early—in case an ill prisoner later turned out to be infected with the disease. The excavations of the latrine uncovered many interesting and highly informative artifacts that shed light on the lives of the ill prisoners on Johnson's Island.

Dr. Bush is now preparing for the 2008 season of excavations. There are still a handful of sinks and other areas of the prison which have yet to be studied extensively. As long as Dr. Bush and the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island retain property rights to the prison grounds, excavation will continue indefinitely. In 1990, the prison grounds on Johnson's Island were designated a National Historical Landmark, which affords the site more protection under the law; still, this archaeological site and others around the country are threatened. Vandalism, theft and "treasure hunters" can destroy painstaking hours of careful excavating and remove important artifacts from the archeological record, preventing any further study by experts. Rapid development and urban

sprawl destroy archeological sites at a frightening pace. If we hope to learn more about our cultural heritage, we must recognize the importance of these sites and work to protect them so they might be properly studied by archaeologists. The best way to truly appreciate the value of archaeological excavations is to participate in one. Johnson's Island welcomes even untrained volunteers for help in excavation and lab analysis. If you think Dr. Bush's work at Johnson's Island is valuable and worthwhile, I encourage you to learn more about the site and ongoing research at the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island's website at the link below. Whether you decide to donate your time or money, or just want to learn a little more about historical archaeology, I hope you will come away with an appreciation for the work of historical archaeologists like Dr. David Bush. There are more untold stories under our feet that deserve a chance to be heard.

*Allison Cosby is a student at Kenyon College.*

### Further Reading:

The Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island Civil War Prison, Online at [www2.heidelberg.edu/johnsonsisland/index.html](http://www2.heidelberg.edu/johnsonsisland/index.html)

Rebels on Lake Erie by Charles E. Frohman

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Frohman, Charles E. *Rebels on Lake Erie*. 1965. The Ohio Historical Society Press. Pg. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 68-71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 36.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Shriver, Phillip R. and Donald J. Breen. *Ohio's Military Prisons In The Civil War*. 1964. Columbus: Ohio State University Press for the Ohio Historical Society.

<sup>19</sup> Glenner, Richard A. and P. Willey. "Dental Filling Materials in the Confederacy" 1998. *Journal of the History of Dentistry* 46(2): 71-75.

<sup>20</sup> Sprague, Roderick "China or Prosser Button Identification and Dating." 2002. *Historical Archaeology*, 36(2): 111-127.

<sup>21</sup> Bush, David R. "Interpreting the Latrines of the Johnson's Island Civil War Military Prison." 2000. *Historical Archaeology*, 34(1): p. 62-78.

<sup>22</sup> Frohman, Charles E. *Rebels on Lake Erie*. Pg. 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 23.



# An Interview with Robert May

## Q: What is the genesis of the term "Manifest Destiny"?

A: Manifest Destiny was a phrase for American expansion coined at a time—the mid-1840s—when a craze for territorial growth was sweeping the country, so much so that it became a major campaign issue in the presidential election of 1844. In 1845, the U.S. annexed Texas, then an independent republic. The next year, 1846, the U.S. not only acquired what are today the states of Oregon and Washington in a treaty with Great Britain but also declared war on Mexico. The U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-1848 would gain the country California, New Mexico, and Utah as well as parts of today's Arizona, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and Colorado. But this was hardly enough for some American expansionists, who were eyeing other possible potential military conquests or territorial purchases, such as Spain's colony of Cuba, just off the coastline.

In terms of square miles, these additions represented a huge addition to the nation's size. The Mexican Cession alone, acquired in the treaty ending the Mexican-American War, amounted to about a half million square miles! In addition, white Americans had cleared Indians out of most of the eastern United States and were beginning the process of confining Native American tribes to reservations in the West.

No wonder that right in the middle of all this ferment, some American expansionists felt the need both to justify the empire that the nation had already acquired and rationalize what it might add over the coming years. The phrase that they invented for this purpose was Manifest Destiny, which appeared for the first time in two

New York City publications in 1845—the *Democratic Review* and the *Morning News*. It implied that America had grown so much because God was on its side. That is, God specially favored the United States because of its democratic political system. White Americans, therefore, had an obvious (or "manifest") mission (or "destiny") from Providence to spread their system of government over the entire North American continent, or even further, perhaps the whole hemisphere!

## Q: You have said that "filibustering" was another term constantly in the news before the Civil War and that it had something to do with Manifest Destiny. What was the connection?

A: This term was coined around 1850, just a few years after people started talking about Manifest Destiny. Surprisingly, it had nothing to do with long speeches when it was first used. Instead, it had to do with America's territorial expansion and military aggressiveness.

The "filibusters" were U.S. citizens and immigrants who mounted private military expeditions from U.S. soil against foreign countries with which the United States was not then at war. The 1850s were the heyday of the filibusters—Americans invaded Cuba, Central America, and Mexico on such expeditions, and were rumored to be considering attacks on other places such as Hawaii, which was then an independent kingdom. We had, during these years, what might be called an epidemic of filibustering, though they occurred at other times too. In the 1830s, several private American armies had invaded British Canada.

The most famous of all the filibusters was William Walker, the so-called "Gray-eyed man of destiny," who commanded a number of private armies that invaded Mexico and Central America between 1853 and 1860. Walker even conquered Nicaragua for a while, becoming its president. A Honduran firing squad put an end to his filibustering in 1860. But there were many other filibusters, some of them rather prominent. John A. Quitman,

a onetime governor of Mississippi and a former Mexican War general, was involved for several years in a plot to invade Cuba. The Knights of the Golden Circle, usually remembered as a subversive Copperhead group operating in the Midwest during the Civil War, began earlier as a filibuster group intending to invade Mexico.

Filibustering's illegality must be emphasized. Few governments want their citizens committing random acts of aggression against foreign countries that might provoke unwanted wars. The U.S. had passed a law against such expeditions in 1818.

## Q: What was Abraham Lincoln's position on Manifest Destiny and filibustering?

A: During his early political career, Abraham Lincoln was a Whig, the less expansionist of the two major U.S. political parties at the time, though it would be inaccurate to say that the Whigs entirely opposed America's territorial growth. Stephen Douglas's Democratic Party, on the other hand, generally was identified with the territorial expansion movement and often demanded more territory in its platforms. It was no coincidence that John L. O'Sullivan, whose publications coined the term Manifest Destiny, was an outspoken Democrat. Whigs like Lincoln tended to prioritize federal and state policies designed to help the U.S. economy, like tariffs to protect industries and canals to promote trade, more than they did additions to the nation's domain.

Lincoln opposed the Mexican War during his one term in the U.S. Congress, repudiating President James K. Polk's contention that Mexico was at fault for the conflict because it had first attacked U.S. soil prior to the U.S. declaring war. And Lincoln had little to say about either the U.S. acquisition of Texas or America's gaining the Oregon country on the Pacific coast from Britain. He certainly disapproved of filibustering. After the Spanish authorities in Cuba in 1851 executed Americans involved in a filibuster landing on the Cuban coast, Lincoln took the position that the adventurers had not deserved the protection of the U.S. government.



**Q: Did Manifest Destiny and filibustering have anything to do with the issue of slavery? Perhaps Lincoln's lack of enthusiasm for U.S. territorial expansion related to fears that slavery would expand.**

A: You raise an important point. Lincoln hated slavery, but he was no abolitionist, at least until the need to win the Civil War made him one. Lincoln knew that the U.S. Constitution, though it did not use the actual word "slavery," had certain provisions implicitly guaranteeing slavery in those states where it already existed. Article IV, for instance, had a clause saying that anyone "held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another" must be returned. This amounted to a fugitive slave clause to protect the property of slaveholders. Many Americans today confuse the Declaration of Independence with the Constitution. It was the former that stated that all men are created equal, not the latter. It was in the spirit of the Constitution, which was adopted years after the Declaration, that Lincoln in his inaugural address promised the South that if it stayed in the Union he would not "interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists."

But Lincoln also knew that the Constitution gave the U.S. Congress considerably more power over the District of Columbia and federal territories than it did over state governments. So while he was in the U.S. Congress in 1849, he announced an intention to introduce a proposal for the gradual end of slavery in the District of Columbia. Most especially, Lincoln's speeches argued, over and over again, that the country's Founding Fathers intended slavery's eventual disappearance and that the way they hoped to promote this process was by giving Congress the right to prevent its spread into federal territories. The country's early leaders, Lincoln felt, gave evidence of this when in 1787 they banned slavery from the Northwest Territory (today's Midwest). Lincoln, in other words, became what they called in those days a "freesoiler." He believed that all the soil in the West should be free of the curse of slavery.

That's why Lincoln found Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed slavery where it had been previously prohibited, so appalling. Instead of constricting slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska Act seemed to be growing it! He felt that slavery was something like a cancer. If you could contain it, it might eventually die. But if you let it spread, it would dominate. No wonder he subsequently joined the Republican Party. The policy that united most Republicans in the party's early going was the prevention of slavery's expansion. It was the most important plank in the national party's platform.

So what does this have to do with Manifest Destiny and filibustering? Had American expansion turned northward to Canada, the issue of slavery would have been irrelevant. With its very short growing seasons, Canada offered no prospects for the spread of plantation labor, even had the people there believed in slavery. But Britain was the most antislavery government in the western world, and it still owned Canada at the time. Besides, Britain was a very strong military power. It was unlikely that the U.S. would ever acquire Canada; and it was certain that slavery would never go there if it did.

But the tropical areas to the south of America's slave states, including much of Mexico and Central America, offered many prospects for plantation slavery, though slavery was not legal there at the time. Slavery was legal in Cuba, however, which was one of the reasons that southerners especially wished their country to acquire that island. Not only did many of the filibusters hope to add Cuba to the Union as one or more slave states, but three U.S. presidents between the U.S.-Mexican War and the Civil War, especially because of southern pressure, tried to buy it from Spain. Most important, in 1856 the filibuster William Walker legalized slavery in Nicaragua during his presidency there. Many antislavery northerners by the end of the 1850s naturally came to associate filibustering with slavery's expansion, even though many of the actual filibusters hailed from northern or western cities like New York and San Francisco.

Lincoln did not say much about the connection between slavery's expansion, Manifest

Destiny, and filibustering during the 1850s. But he would say quite a bit about it after his election as president in 1860.

**Q: Let's switch our focus for a moment to Lincoln's arch rival for the presidency, Stephen Douglas, the U.S. Senator from Illinois. I read a comment that Douglas was "morally indifferent" to the spread of slavery. Do you agree or disagree?**

A: That was Lincoln's assessment. He made this very charge against Douglas on many occasions. Lincoln was basically accurate in stigmatizing Douglas as indifferent about the immorality of slavery, though Douglas, no more than any politician, was completely consistent in his positions. There were even reports that he had private feelings that slavery was an evil institution. In fact, when Douglas, getting married for the first time, was given by his father-in-law as a gift the deed to a Mississippi plantation with slaves, he declined ownership. Nonetheless, Douglas did agree to manage the Mississippi place when his wife inherited it, and served in that capacity for years.

More important, Douglas took the stand that it was the very principle of democratic self-government that each territory and state should have the right to decide on slavery's legality for itself, and that he did not care very much whether slavery was voted up or voted down. It is notable that, in his debate in 1858 with Lincoln at Galesburg, Illinois, when Douglas alluded to Illinois's decision not to have slavery, he did not proceed to praise his state's prohibition of human bondage. Rather, Douglas's concern was that each state should respect the decisions of the other states on this important question. Similarly, he felt that if people living in a federal territory such as Kansas wanted slavery, they should be allowed to have it. He called this principle "popular sovereignty." In fact, he felt that the very survival of the nation depended upon this principle being generally agreed upon.



**Q: I would expect, given what you say, that Douglas's position on Manifest Destiny and U.S. territorial expansion, and perhaps filibustering, would be different than Lincoln's. Was this the case?**

A: Not only was Douglas's position about U.S. acquisitions of new land different than Lincoln's, but he was far more vested in the issue than his rival. He was among the most strident, expansionist leaders of the Democratic Party, which itself was more expansionist than the Whigs and more expansionist than the Republican Party which Lincoln joined as the Whig party disappeared. During the controversies over Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican-American War of the mid-1840s, Douglas consistently took extreme expansionist positions.

Much more than Lincoln, Douglas championed the philosophy of Manifest Destiny, including projects for U.S. expansion abroad. And he frequently connected Manifest Destiny to possible U.S. expansion into the tropics. History books dwell so much on Douglas's positions regarding slavery in the American West that they inadvertently slight his fascination with Cuba, Central America, and other tropical areas. In a remarkable speech in 1858, reported in the *Memphis Daily Appeal* on November 30, Douglas used the word destiny repeatedly in connection with southward expansion. In his remarks, Douglas portrayed America, as a "young nation" with a "destiny" to fulfill; and he insisted that the time would come when America's "interests, safety and destiny" would require acquisition of Central America. Regarding Cuba, he added, "I believe that it is our destiny to have it. We will be compelled to take it, and can't help ourselves."

Significantly, Douglas never objected to southern plans to extend slavery into those areas any more than he complained about southern hopes of spreading slavery into places like Kansas. Instead, he took the same position about slavery in the tropics (and also Canada if the U.S. ever got it) that he took about slavery in western territories like Kansas: politicians in

Washington should let the people living in newly annexed areas decide slavery for themselves. In his debate with Lincoln at Jonesboro, Illinois, in September 1858, Douglas said that if Americans would simply respect the rights of each state to decide the slavery question for itself, the United States would "extend and expand until it covers the whole continent," and that the time had come "when our interests would be advanced by the acquisition of Cuba." Tellingly, he added that when the U.S. acquired Cuba, "we must take it as we find it, leaving the people to decide the question of slavery for themselves.... So, when it becomes necessary to acquire any portion of Mexico or Canada... we must take them as we find them, leaving the people free to do as they please." Should we be surprised, given such attitudes, that Douglas in 1856 not only championed William Walker's filibuster government in Nicaragua but also pressured the incumbent president, Franklin Pierce, to extend official U.S. recognition to it? Around the same time, Douglas even sent Walker a letter of recommendation on behalf of the son of a political acquaintance of his! Though Douglas eventually distanced himself somewhat from the filibusters, he was so identified with them in the mid-1850s that Britain's minister to the U.S. once called him an "arch-Filibustero."

**Q: Your speech at the Lincoln Museum in March 2008 suggested that it was Abraham Lincoln's position on a legislative proposal known as the "Crittenden Compromise" that ensured that there would be no last-minute compromise between North and South to save the Union in the winter of 1860-61, and that this had something to do with filibustering. Would you restate your argument, here, for the record?**

A: Sure. My comments at the Museum were drawn from research for my recent book *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*, as

well as my first book, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire*.

To understand what happened, it is necessary to understand the nature of the Crittenden Compromise. During the period December 1860-February 1861, as the states of the Deep South were in the process of leaving the Union and forming the Confederacy, many moderate politicians in both the North and the South desperately tried to draft compromise legislation that might at the last moment preserve the nation, much in the spirit of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850. One of these moderates was John J. Crittenden, U.S. Senator from Kentucky, a border slave state that naturally would suffer horribly if a civil war broke out. Crittenden's predecessor as Kentucky U.S. Senator, Henry Clay, had played a very important role in earlier compromises between the sections. Crittenden was trying to perpetuate Clay's tradition.

What Crittenden came up with was a comprehensive package of proposed legislation—six constitutional amendments and four congressional resolutions—that addressed a number of the longstanding issues dividing the North and the South, such as the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and its enforcement. One of Crittenden's proposed constitutional amendments, the most important of them, concerned the decades-long sectional feud over whether slavery ought to be permitted in U.S. territories. What Crittenden proposed to do was take the old Missouri Compromise line of 36°30' (which only went westward through the Louisiana Purchase to the Rocky Mountains) and extend it all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Just as previously, slavery would be prohibited in any U.S. territory north of the line. Just as previously, slavery would be allowed in any territory south of 36°30' that the United States owned already. The catch was, slavery would also be permitted in any territory the nation "hereafter acquired."

Members of Lincoln's Republican Party, especially congressmen and prominent newspapermen like Thurlow Weed of Albany, New York, naturally looked to their



president-elect for guidance on whether or not to support and/or vote for the Crittenden package. Lincoln had no qualms about some of the provisions of the legislation. But his whole political identity for years had been premised upon opposing slavery's expansion. In letter after letter to Republican politicians, Lincoln insisted that his party offer no concessions on slavery's expansion. When the issue came up for a key Senate committee vote in late December 1860, the Republicans, urged on by Lincoln, rallied against the Crittenden proposals and they went down to defeat.

What I have argued in my books is that Lincoln's objections derived especially from what he anticipated if Crittenden's "hereafter clause" became law. In the 1850s, Lincoln had watched southern politicians try to get the United States to acquire Cuba from Spain for slavery's expansion; and he had seen one filibuster expedition after another invade the tropics, several of them clearly intended to benefit the interests of U.S. slaveowners. He certainly knew about these expeditions. Newspapers and illustrated weeklies closely covered filibuster campaigns; in fact, a few news sheets had reporters embedded in the expeditions. Sometimes newspaper headlines featured filibuster stories for several days in a row. In the fall of 1859, some papers for a few days devoted as much newsprint to William Walker's latest plot against Nicaragua as they did to John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.

The filibusters made for great press, given the foolishness, bravery and illegality of their attacks, not to mention the pathos of their defeats. A shockingly high proportion of filibusters died on their expeditions, wound up being captured and imprisoned abroad, or returned to the U.S. with horrible diseases and still-festering wounds. No politician who followed the news, certainly not one like Lincoln who was deeply concerned with slavery's expansion, could ignore the filibusters. As international criminals, they were in the public eye much like terrorists are today.

Lincoln was hardly prepared to give southerners, through the hereafter clause, free license to acquire new lands for slavery's growth in the future. And he genuinely expected filibusters to make such

attempts as soon as Crittenden's proposals became law. Lincoln mentioned the danger of filibustering in at least three of the letters that he sent at this time advising Republicans against compromises. Lincoln's feelings on this could not be more transparent. Consider, for instance, his advice in a letter to Weed on December 17: "...the Missouri line extended...would lose us every thing we gained by the election...filibustering for all South of us, and making slave states of it, would follow."

Lincoln's position on Crittenden's scheme, as we might expect, was just the opposite of Douglas's. Douglas served on the Senate committee that considered Crittenden's package and supported it. Why not? He had no strong moral objection to slavery's expansion. But fortunately, Douglas no longer controlled enough votes to facilitate slavery's expansion in the way that he had in 1854 when he managed the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. One can only muse on how much longer slavery might have survived had Crittenden's proposal passed and salvaged the Union.

**Q: But Lincoln was not done with Caribbean questions, was he, when he turned down Crittenden's proposals? Didn't he also back the idea of solving America's slavery problem by colonizing the country's slaves in the tropics? And hasn't this been criticized as a racist policy? Is the criticism of Lincoln valid?**

A: It is true that one of Lincoln's two plans for ending slavery gradually, which well into the Civil War was his preferred way of solving America's moral dilemma about the institution, was to make the freeing of slaves acceptable to racist whites by removing them following emancipation to colonies back in Africa or in the tropics of the Western Hemisphere (the other policy that he experimented with was getting slaveholders to free their slaves voluntarily by offering them federal compensation if they did so).

Well before the Civil War, Lincoln championed colonization. In 1853, for instance, he gave a speech about colonization at a Presbyterian church in Springfield. During his presidency, Lincoln tried to rally Americans behind colonization strategies on a number of occasions, such as in his annual message to Congress in December 1862. And he did not merely envision slaves leaving the country. In August 1862, when meeting with a delegation of free blacks at the White House, Lincoln made it clear that he believed that even African Americans who had been living as free people before the war should embrace colonization for themselves.

Lincoln did not just talk about colonization. During the war, he tried to actually initiate federally-backed, private colonization projects. A scheme involving Chiriqui on the coast of Panama fell through; but the government did send several hundred blacks to an island possession of Haiti, Ile-à-Vache, an experiment that failed miserably and eventuated in the Union Navy's conducting a rescue mission to bring back to the United States those who had not already died there.

Obviously, from today's perspective, Lincoln capitulated to the racist prejudices and fears of his generation of American whites when he promoted colonization. After all, when justifying removal to the delegation of free blacks that met with him in 1862, he basically argued that white prejudices were so strong that blacks might as well give up on seeking the good life in America! "You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other [white] race enjoy," he observed. "The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best ...."

But we need always to keep in mind the context of the times and the scale of Lincoln's projects. I would emphasize that Lincoln's advocacy of such programs before the war are best seen in the context of his desire to reconcile his own hatred of slavery with his desire to preserve the Union, rather than as evidence of his racism. That is, he was struggling to resolve the North-South dispute over slavery in a



way that would please enough whites in both sections to preserve the Union and avert civil war. We also must remember that his Civil War colonization projects involved very few people, considering that millions of slaves and free blacks lived in the country. Further, his schemes depended upon voluntary rather than compulsory migration. It is hard to believe that Lincoln truly envisioned that many millions of black Americans would decide to emigrate abroad either during the war or afterwards. In fact, Lincoln talked out of two sides of his mouth in his second annual message in December 1862. Immediately after insisting that he could not "make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization," he neutralized the

urgency of his remark by reassuring Congress (and thus all Americans) that the "objection urged against free persons remaining in the country...is largely imaginary, if not sometimes malicious." Lincoln was implying that the racist paranoia that many whites had about coexisting with blacks once they were freed was absurd.

Lincoln's colonization projects testify to his prioritizing the Union's survival over everything rather than to his racism. Lincoln was no egalitarian. Some of the racist remarks that he made during the Lincoln-Douglas debates would be judged horribly offensive and "politically incorrect" today. Some of his contemporaries, such as Northern antislavery leaders William Lloyd

Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Thaddeus Stevens, far more than Lincoln approximated modern progressive standards about racial equality. But Lincoln deserves to be judged ultimately by the Emancipation Proclamation and his support for the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution freeing all slaves—not by fleeting, ill-advised schemes that would have settled a handful of African Americans in the tropics. And we certainly should remember the important role that Lincoln played in ensuring that U.S. slavery would not get fresh life, when he brought his influence to bear against the Crittenden Compromise.

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## **“Hurrah For Jeff Davis and...God Damn Lincoln to Hell”: Abraham Lincoln’s Death Threats**

By Thomas F. Schwartz, Illinois State Historian, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois

It is a truism that Abraham Lincoln is the most written about American. In 1939, almost 4,000 entries were enumerated in Jay Monaghan's *Abraham Lincoln Bibliography, 1839-1939*. Today it is estimated that the total writings on Lincoln range from 10,000 to 16,000 titles—a great number of books telling a familiar story. Because the story is so familiar and the ending so dramatic, it is difficult to think about the broad outlines of his life differently from the accepted canon of Lincoln scholarship.

This is especially true when discussing Lincoln's assassination. The standard treatment of Lincoln's death usually begins with Lincoln receiving portents of danger. These threats take on a reality with reports from independent sources that individuals were plotting in the city of Baltimore to kill the President-elect when he transferred trains on his way to Washington, D.C., for his 1861 inauguration. Lincoln accepts the advice to transfer to a different train, thus generating public ridicule for taking such cowardly action and sneaking in to Washington. Lincoln's fatalism and his indifference to warnings would eventually result in his death at the hands of a determined assassin. There is almost an implicit

assumption in many of the recent writings on Lincoln that had he been more careful, he would not have been assassinated.

Mark E. Neely, Jr. in a chapter entitled "Fate" begins with the portentous Baltimore Plot followed by a discussion on why Lincoln and his cabinet did not believe assassination threats were to be taken seriously. Neely quotes Secretary of State William Henry Seward's 1862 letter to John Bigelow, United States Minister to Paris:

"Assassination is not an American practice or habit, and one so vicious and so desperate cannot be engrafted into our political system...This conviction of mine has steadily gained strength since the Civil War began. Every day's experience confirms it. The President, during the heated season, occupies a country house near the Soldiers' Home, two or three miles from the city. He goes to and from that place on horseback, night and morning, unguarded. I go there unattended at all hours, by daylight and moonlight, by starlight and without any light."

Based upon Seward's letter and recollections of Lincoln's contemporaries expressing his disdain for security, Neely concludes, "Lincoln was easy to kill."<sup>1</sup>

Harold Holzer, in *Dear Mr. President* his selection of letters to the President, found very few threats among Lincoln's papers at the Library of Congress. He concluded that "unfortunately, from history's point of view, most of the threats that arrived in Lincoln's mailbag were systematically destroyed, if we can believe William O. Stoddard, who insisted that the President absolutely 'refused to be informed of letters which threatened personal violence.'"<sup>2</sup> Stoddard offers a colorful story to reinforce the view that threats to the president were destroyed:

"One day a well-dressed gentleman—a judge, or something of the kind, at home—sat in my room looking on at the performance of my morning job of destruction, twisting uneasily in his chair, and changing



from red to pale with indignation, until he could contain his gathered wrath no longer. He had evidently indulged in letter-writing himself.

Was that the way in which I dared to serve the President's correspondence? Was this the manner in which the people were prevented from reaching Mr. Lincoln? He would complain of me to my master at once! Teach me a thing or two about my duties! See if this was to be allowed! A mere boy in such an important place as that! And so on for some moments, while I read him a few of the precious documents I was destroying.

Of course, I made judicious selections to suit the occasion, for he was evidently intensely respectable and patriotic. I began with an epistle full of vulgar abuse that 'riled' the old gentleman fearfully. Next I put in a proclamation 'written in blood,' and 'signed by the Angel Gabriel;' and wound up with a horrible thing from an obscene, idiotic lunatic—a regular correspondent. The last was too much for him, and he begged me to stop. It was, indeed, sickening enough. I told him that if he insisted on the President's giving his time to such things he must take them in himself, as really I was forbidden to do so. The old gentleman, however, thought better of me by that time, and leaned back in his chair to moralize on the total depravity of human nature.<sup>73</sup> Based upon Stoddard's claims, Holzer concludes "in retrospect, the White House staff might have better served Lincoln by retaining and investigating such letters rather than destroying them."<sup>4</sup>

Given these scenarios, it is easy to conclude that Lincoln's assassination was almost a fait accompli. In fact, what seems to be at issue is why Lincoln lived so long if he was at such high risk? Why did earlier attempts on Lincoln's life fail? Did his staff refrain from forwarding the many death threats to the President? Were Lincoln and his staff indifferent after a time, to threats made against the President? Finally, was Lincoln so determined not to show cowardice that he placed himself at risk by refusing to accept adequate protection?

The earliest attempts on Lincoln's life came in the form of gifts. According to Joshua Allen, editor of the pro-Republican newspaper the *Lacon Journal*, Lincoln "has got stacks of preserved fruit and all sorts of such trash which he is daily receiving from various parts of the South sent to him as presents. He had several packages opened and examined by medical men who found them to be all poisoned."<sup>5</sup> This revelation was contained in a letter from Allen to his mother dated January 26, 1861. By this time, Lincoln was receiving many angry letters threatening all sorts of violence against his person. It was not unusual for Southern correspondents to "Hurrah for Jeff Davis and... God Damn Lincoln to Hell."<sup>6</sup> But words penned in the heat of passion were not necessarily anything more than an individual venting his or her anger. It was doubtful that angry words would translate into hurtful action. Indeed, most of the early threatening correspondence lacked sufficient information to identify the writers or where they lived. But sending poisoned food to the President-elect with hopes that he would consume it was a giant step beyond mere bluster; it was attempted murder. That Lincoln's appetite for food was about as great as his craving for tobacco or liquor, saved him.

Lincoln was well aware of the threatening letters sent to him as President-elect. Grace Bedell, the eleven-year-old girl who wrote

to Lincoln urging him to grow a beard, offered in her later years the reason why Abraham Lincoln bothered to answer her letter out of the thousands he was sent. Bedell referenced a conversation with G.W. Patterson, a prominent Republican in Westfield, New York, Bedell's hometown, and also an associate of Abraham Lincoln. Patterson told her that Lincoln indicated that the character of the letter was "unique and so different from the many self seeking and threatening ones I was daily receiving, that it came to me as a relief and a pleasure." If Lincoln received so many threatening letters, where are they today?

Many of them were thrown into the fire before he left Springfield. A small cache was given to an associate who sought some token to commemorate Lincoln's election. These letters are transcribed and reproduced in Carl Sandburg's tribute to Oliver Barrett's great Lincoln collection.<sup>7</sup> The Illinois lawyer alluded to these threats in his "Farewell Speech" declaring "I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested with Washington."<sup>8</sup>

Because of the number of Lincoln's friends and associates accompanying him on the train to Washington, there appeared to be safety in numbers. But something happened to change his travel plans when he reached Philadelphia. The Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad secured the services of Allan Pinkerton and his detectives to investigate rumors that the President-elect's train route might be sabotaged. Pinkerton discovered evidence of a plot to kill Lincoln in Baltimore as he walked from the Calvert Street station to the Camden Street station, transferring to the Baltimore and Ohio lines going to Washington, D.C. The news of the plot was presented to Norman Buel Judd, one of Lincoln's trusted campaign managers, who outlined the danger to Lincoln. The President-elect listened carefully as Judd described the dangers awaiting him in Baltimore. He concluded by imploring Lincoln to bypass the flag raising at Independence Hall the following morning, as well as his address before the Pennsylvania legislature in Harrisburg, and leave immediately for Washington.

Lincoln refused to alter his schedule. He again alluded to the dangers facing him at the flag-raising ceremony at Philadelphia, declaring if the country could not be saved upon the principle of liberty for all, "it will be truly awful. I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it."<sup>9</sup> After his speech in Harrisburg, Frederick Seward, son of William Henry Seward, the candidate for Secretary of State, met Lincoln. Information had been received in Washington concerning plans to assassinate Lincoln in Baltimore. Both General Winfield Scott and Seward considered the reports credible and serious enough for Lincoln to alter his travel schedule.<sup>10</sup> Lincoln concluded, "unless there are some other reasons besides fear of ridicule, I am disposed to carry out Judd's plan." It was Allan Pinkerton who devised the plan for Lincoln to occupy a berth in a sleeper car to Baltimore. Foregoing his emblematic stovepipe hat, Lincoln wore a pliable felt hat made popular by the famous Polish nationalist, Louis Kossuth. A well-wisher had presented the hat to Lincoln earlier in the trip. Draping his overcoat on his shoulders, Lincoln used his newfound anonymity to make the transfer of trains in Baltimore from the Calvert Street Station to



the Camden Station. Accompanied only by Ward Hill Lamon and Allan Pinkerton, the men made it safely to Washington.

The newspapers were unsparing in their criticism of Lincoln. Soon the soft hat was transformed by reporters into a Scotch plaid cap and the overcoat became kilts. George Templeton Strong, the New York aristocrat, wrote "this surreptitious nocturnal dodging or sneaking of the President-elect into his capital city...will be used to damage his moral position and throw ridicule on his Administration."<sup>11</sup> This acerbic remark might be dismissed as merely a reflection of Strong's personality. There was, however, a genuine public sense of presidential cowardice that seemed widespread.

Although there are conflicting recollections from Lincoln's associates on his own feelings about the aftermath of the Baltimore Plot, clearly he felt some embarrassment. The recollection of Isaac N. Arnold appears to express Lincoln's true feelings, "I did not then, nor do I now believe I should have been assassinated had I gone through Baltimore as first contemplated, but I thought it wise to run no risk where no risk was necessary."<sup>12</sup> The greater risk for Lincoln awaited him in Washington, where his inaugural address would decide whether the upper South would secede or remain in the Union. A number of federal forts, including Fort Sumter located in Charleston harbor, required supplies. But to resupply the forts would risk war with Southern states claiming sovereignty over them. Lincoln's decision to play it safe in Baltimore allowed him to deal with more significant issues, rather than call the bluff of would-be assassins. He would have to forever live with the question of whether he acted out of cowardice or logic.

General Winfield Scott would take no chances with the inaugural parade route. Soldiers lined the streets of Washington, D.C., nervous and anxious because of assassination rumors. A sharp crack, for a brief moment thought to be a rifle shot, was actually a branch breaking under the weight of an onlooker seeking a better view. Thomas Church visited the President following his inauguration and recorded this exchange: "Mr. Lincoln was asked whether he felt at all scared while delivering his inaugural address, the threats of assassination having been so numerous. He replied 'that he had no such sensation, and that he had often experienced a much greater fear in addressing a dozen Western men on the subject of temperance.'"<sup>13</sup>

An attempt on Lincoln's life took a strange twist and almost led to Mrs. Lincoln's death. The Lincolns had been staying at the Soldiers' Home, outside of Washington, since late June in 1863. The president was called back to Washington and went with a bodyguard of twenty-five Union cavalry. Mrs. Lincoln followed shortly in the carriage. Someone had tampered with the screws holding the driver's seat in place. When the carriage made the steep descent toward Washington, the seat gave way, throwing the driver and footman to the ground. The horses became frightened and began to run wildly with Mrs. Lincoln trying to jump to safety. In the rough and wild movements of the carriage, Mrs. Lincoln was thrown to the ground, striking her head with great force against a sharp rock.<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln immediately solicited the services of Rebecca R. Pomroy, a nurse who had stayed by the bedside of Willie Lincoln throughout

his fatal illness. Abraham and Mary Lincoln were impressed by Mrs. Pomroy's skill as a nurse and her pleasant bedside manner. Mrs. Pomroy spent weeks overseeing Mrs. Lincoln's recovery. Lincoln certainly understood the risks to his own life, but one wonders if he ever understood the threats that were posed to his family. His wife almost died because of her proximity to him. Could he continue to endanger them? It is interesting to note that the following year Mrs. Lincoln and Tad spent much of the summer traveling rather than at the Soldiers' Home.

One other known attempt to assassinate Lincoln occurred en route to the Soldiers' Home. Private John Nichols of the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers, Company K, nicknamed the Bucktail regiment, recalled an incident while on guard duty at the entrance to the Soldiers' Home. It was in the middle of August 1864 around eleven o'clock at night, when Nichols heard a rifle shot from the direction of Washington. Several minutes later, he saw a horse fast approaching from the distance. The rider was none other than the President. Lincoln indicated that someone fired a shot at the foot of the hill scaring the horse. When Nichols asked the President where his hat was, Lincoln shrugged the question off and stated that it must have fallen off during the gallop. With that, the President turned the reins of the horse over to Nichols and went inside.

Curious as to who might have fired the rifle, Nichols and a corporal went to the foot of the hill to search the area. They found the President's hat with a bullet hole having pierced the crown. The rifleman must have crouched alongside the road for the bullet to travel up and through the crown. The soldiers brought the hat to Lincoln and pointed out the strange location of the bullet. Lincoln dismissed it as a stray shot by some foolish gunner, not an assassination attempt. He did, however, instruct both men to keep silent about the matter. Nichols did not relate the story until interviewed by the Cincinnati *Enquirer* in 1885.<sup>15</sup> The one positive outcome was that Lincoln never again traveled alone in the evenings en route between Washington and the Soldiers' Home.

We are so accustomed to the Secret Service phalanx around modern presidents that less security strikes us as reckless and foolish. The measures enacted to protect Lincoln came in fits and starts, usually when an event precipitated action. Although Lincoln received many death threats, they were not casually dismissed or discarded as claimed by Stoddard. John Nicolay, upon reading Stoddard's assertion, wrote a memorandum stating "Correct the statement made by Stoddard on page 198 of his book where he says 'the private secretary in charge of the President's mail was instructed to destroy all such missives [threatening letters] at once and never show them to Mr. Lincoln or to mention to others the fact of their reception.'

The exact opposite was true. Mr. Lincoln was shown every letter containing any threat or intimation of such against his life. And on one occasion at least, where a definite name and address of a person was given, who professed to have knowledge of some such design the writer of the letter was summoned to Washington, and was personally examined and cross questioned both by the private Secretary and by Secretary Stanton and the result communicated



to the president. The result indeed proved nothing; the replies of the witness were only such vague and shadowy allusions to things he professes to have heard as furnished no possible clue to any person or place which could be pursued further, and which showed only a mind in such agitation or disorder as to be incapable of receiving or conveying trustworthy evidence."<sup>16</sup>

Credible letters were kept together in Lincoln's work desk and marked "Assassination." Francis Bicknell Carpenter claimed President Lincoln showed him the file, which as of 1864 comprised over 80 letters. Two of them were later submitted as evidence in the trial of John Surratt. General John A. Dix of the Department of the East had received letters that were left on a train declaring "Abe must die, and now. You can choose your weapons—the cup, the knife, the bullet." The letters, which also mention Booth in passing, were shown to Lincoln and Stanton. Nothing was done at the time. But Stanton remembered the letters well enough to immediately go to the White House upon Lincoln's passing and retrieve them.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, Lincoln's approach to threats was a mixture of fatalism and practicality. As Nicolay stated: "Mr. Lincoln's uniform summing up of the matter was, that since both friends and stranger did and must have personal access to him daily and in all manner of places, his life was within the reach of any man sane or mad who might be ready to commit murder. That he could not possibly guard himself against all danger unless he were to shut himself perpetually in an iron box in which condition he would scarcely be able to perform the necessary duties of a President of the United States."<sup>18</sup>

Many of the security proposals advanced by military and political advisors were viewed as extreme or offering unintended consequences. Lincoln liked to joke that Southerners would never assassinate him because Hannibal Hamlin, his vice president, was more outspoken in his views on slavery's abolition than the President. "In that one alternative," Lincoln allegedly quipped, "I have an insurance on my life worth half the prairie land of Illinois." In a similar jocular vein, Lincoln supposedly complained that a cavalry detachment sent to guard him was not necessary. Previously, when he and Mrs. Lincoln were riding in a carriage with an escort of cavalry guards, he is recorded as stating they "couldn't hear themselves talk, for the clatter of their sabers and spurs; and that, as many of them appeared new hands and very awkward, he [Lincoln] was more afraid of being shot by the accidental discharge of one of their carbines or revolvers, than of any attempt upon his life or for his capture by roving squads of Jeb Stuart's cavalry, then hovering all round the exterior works of the city."<sup>19</sup>

Just as Lincoln was leery of visible legions of armed men protecting him, individual bodyguards were also a comical sight. Ward Hill Lamon, Marshall of the District of Columbia and a legal crony from Danville, Illinois, professed to be Lincoln's bodyguard. Despite his notable absence at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, Lamon often armed himself and accompanied the President to events. John Hay provides one such description about election night on November 8, 1864. After Lincoln retired for the evening, Lamon "took a glass of whiskey and then, refusing my offer of a bed, went out &, rolling



Ward H. Lamon. (TLM # 1599)

himself up in his cloak, lay down at the President's door; passing the night in that attitude of touching and dumb fidelity, with a small arsenal of pistols & bowie knives around him. In the morning he went away leaving my blankets at my door, before I or the President were awake."<sup>20</sup>

Lincoln's aversion to guards, military or personal, differs little from the attitudes of current presidents. There is a natural tension between presidents, who seek the interplay with the public, and security officials, who seek to limit the president's activities with large crowds that cannot be easily monitored. In spite of these differences, Lincoln got along famously with the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers, Company K that was assigned to guard the Soldiers' Home. Captain David V. Derickson forged a friendship with the President. Derickson is pictured at Antietam battlefield in the series of Alexander Gardner photographs showing Lincoln meeting with McClellan. The president personally intervened to keep Company K as his guard when it was revealed that the War Department was going to order it to the front with the rest of regiment. Lincoln's brief note of November 1, 1862, stated "Captain Derickson, with his company, has been for some time keeping guard at my residence, now at the Soldiers' Retreat. He and his Company are very agreeable to me, and while it is deemed proper for any guard to remain, none would be more satisfactory to me than Captain D. and his Company."<sup>21</sup> Lincoln later rewarded Derickson with the appointment of provost marshal of the Nineteenth Pennsylvania District, headquartered in Meadville. Even Lincoln's youngest son Tad was partial to the 150th. A carte-



de-visite album showing all the men in company K was given to Tad as a keepsake by the men of the company.

At times, Lincoln even provided for his own security. Criticized by Edwin Stanton for not taking precautions to thwart would-be attackers, Lincoln carried a "thick oaken stick fashioned from timber salvaged from a sunken man-of-war at Hampton Roads. This version of the Lincoln 'peacemaker' contained pieces of metal from both the ironclad *Monitor* and *Merrimac*."<sup>22</sup>

These improvised measures worked reasonably well. Attempts at assassination through poisoned food, shooting, and planned accident were unsuccessful until the fateful night of April 14, 1865. But wait, isn't this analysis similar to the doctor saying the surgery was a success but the patient died anyway? And the answer to this is, yes. It is true that Lincoln was assassinated in spite of efforts to prevent it. The claims, however, that Lincoln's behavior was an open invitation to his demise are not an accurate reading of the evidence.

What is also missing from the equation are those everyday dangers that are always present but hidden from sight. Benjamin Brown French, the Commissioner of Public Buildings, recorded in a matter-of-fact manner on Friday September 9, 1864 "...I have been on my feet nearly all day. At the President's all the morning with gasfitters, trying to find a leak of gas, which almost suffocated the President in his own office!"<sup>23</sup> French was not eager for such news to be made public, given his responsibility for the proper maintenance of the Executive Mansion. Had the leak been larger, perhaps B.B. French would have replaced John Wilkes Booth in the hall of infamy.

Ultimately, Lincoln's greatest fear, according to Francis Bicknell Carpenter, was providing his enemies cause to believe that he feared for his life. Carpenter recalled Lincoln telling him that: "To betray fear of this, by placing guards or so forth, would only be to put the idea into their heads, and perhaps lead to the very result it was intended to prevent." The president also understood that many of his potential enemies were mentally unbalanced. He thought that for these "crazy folks...why I must only take my chances,—the worst crazy people at present, I fear being some of my danger as you and many others have suggested to me, is quite possible; but I guess it wouldn't improve things any to publish that we were afraid of them in advance."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it was this fear of showing fear that reinforced Lincoln's predestinarian fatalism that permeates so much of his writing.

The word death appears far more frequently in Lincoln's writings than assassination. The specific uses in Springfield and Philadelphia resulted from very tangible death threats to the President-elect. Throughout his pronouncements, Lincoln balanced the personal threats against the larger goals of Union and freedom. Had he acted with cautious timidity, he would have fallen victim to the fears that threatened him daily. Lincoln's knowledge of the threats did not prevent him from mingling with people and making his frequent late evening visits to the War Department's telegraph office. After all, martyrdom, while not desired, was preferable to the alternative of being timid and paralyzed by fear.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Mark E. Neely, Jr. *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 190.
- <sup>2</sup> Harold Holzer, *Dear Mr. Lincoln: Letters to the President* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1993), 337.
- <sup>3</sup> William O. Stoddard, Michael Burlingame, ed., *Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 158-59.
- <sup>4</sup> Holzer, 338.
- <sup>5</sup> The letter of Allen to his mother dated January 26, 1861, is transcribed in Thomas F. Schwartz, "Bad Dates" *For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 1 (Summer 1999), 4.
- <sup>6</sup> "Dissension, Civil War Style," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, 2 (December, 1942), 184.
- <sup>7</sup> Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector: The Story of Oliver R. Barrett's Great Private Collection* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 65-71.
- <sup>8</sup> Farewell Address, February 11, 1861, Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, eight volumes plus index (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 4:190.
- <sup>9</sup> Speech at Independence Hall, February 22, 1861, CW 4: 240-41.
- <sup>10</sup> The most comprehensive treatment of the Baltimore Plot is Norma B. Cuthbert, *Lincoln and the Baltimore Plot 1861: From Pinkerton Records and Related Papers* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1949).
- <sup>11</sup> As cited in David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 229.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Journal entry 15 March 1861, Thomas Church Papers, SC 289, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.
- <sup>14</sup> Anna L. Boyden, *Echoes From Hospital and White House: A Record of Mrs. Rebecca R. Pomroy's Experience in War-Times* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1884), 142-45.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Enquirer*, Saturday August 15, 1885, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Memorandum, Nicolay and Hay MSS, Notes X:14, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.
- <sup>17</sup> *Trial of John H. Surratt in the Criminal Court for the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1867), 2:1304-1309.
- <sup>18</sup> Memorandum, *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> E. B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House: The Story of A Picture* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), 67. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher give this recollection a "C" grade in their *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 193.
- <sup>20</sup> Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Etlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 246.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas Chamberlin, *History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1895), 43.
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas F. Schwartz, "Beware the Ides of March," *For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 1 (Summer 1999), 1-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough, *Benjamin Brown French, Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 456.
- <sup>24</sup> Carpenter, 67.



# **An Honest Calling: The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln**

Mark E. Steiner  
Northern Illinois University Press, 2006

## **Lincoln the Lawyer**

Brian Dirck  
University of Illinois Press, 2007

Reviewed by Myron A. Marty  
(Professor of History emeritus at Drake University)

Had a search committee identified Abraham Lincoln as a prospective candidate for the presidency of the United States in 1860 and asked him to submit an application, his response, had he given one, might have looked like this: *Family connections?* None. *Formal schooling?* Defective. *Informal schooling?* Self-taught—by litters. *Employment experience:* farmer, flatboatman, miller, store clerk, militia captain, merchant, postmaster, surveyor, state legislator, lawyer, and congressman. *Mentors in the study of law?* None. *Clerkships?* None. *Admitted to the bar?* September 1836. *Results on the bar exam?* No exam required. Certified as “a man of good moral character.” *Enrolled by a clerk of the Supreme Court:* March 1837. *Reference:* John T. Stuart.

Profiles of Lincoln along these lines are standard fare in writings about him. His career as a lawyer typically receives favorable but superficial attention, creating the impression that he was a shining light in the bar of his day. Now come two scholars with different, well-informed assessments. Without diminishing Lincoln’s reputation or casting him in an unfavorable light, Mark Steiner, a lawyer himself, asserts that Lincoln had “a relatively ordinary law practice,” his extraordinary life notwithstanding. (55) Historian Brian Dirck concludes that “Lincoln the great American was in reality a pretty ordinary lawyer.” (142) But both authors also find evidence that what Lincoln learned in the practice of law served him well as a politician and contributed to his success as president.

The essential source for the study of Lincoln’s law practice is a product of the Lincoln Legal Papers project, launched in 1985. Cullom Davis, a professor of history at the University of Illinois at Springfield, led this project from 1988 to 1999; Daniel W. Stowell has been the director since 2000. The project sought to collect all the existing documents relating to Lincoln’s work as a lawyer. In 2000, it released *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*,<sup>1</sup> and in March 2008 it published *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln: Legal Documents and Cases*.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Steiner, author of *An Honest Calling*, served as an associate editor of the Legal Papers and therefore had access to them

before they were published. That he is intimately familiar with the documents in the collection is evident throughout his book. Also evident in his analysis of legal issues and in his writing style is his primary vocation as a lawyer. He holds J.D. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Houston and teaches at the South Texas College of Law.

Steiner focuses on Lincoln’s “distinctive Whiggish attitude toward law and the role of law in American society.” Whigs, he says, were “modernizing conservatives who favored internal improvements such as railroads to foster economic growth” and “believed that the rule of law provided a neutral means to resolve disputes.” (3) This perspective influences his choice of cases to be examined and provides the general theme of the book—a theme that, in my judgment, he sometimes stretches too far.

*An Honest Calling* begins with a critical analysis of Lincoln’s legal career as recounted in memoirs by lawyers who practiced law with Lincoln; in works by biographers, who have paid little attention to his practice but have not dismissed it entirely; and by lawyers “who generally claim too much for lawyer Lincoln” in their desire to cast the legal profession in a favorable light. (5) He illustrates these three perspectives on Lincoln’s practice by citing specific examples in various writers’ works, which have tended to be anecdotal and concentrated on the same four or five cases.

Lincoln chose a legal career, Steiner asserts, after he had entered politics, for he was aware that a law practice kept an aspiring politician in the public eye and that it would ensure a steady income. He then reviews Lincoln’s self-education for a career in the law, citing mainly the influence of Blackstone’s *Commentaries*. Blackstone’s orderly approach to the law, he explains, persuaded Lincoln that he could succeed as a lawyer despite his lack of formal education. Standards for admission to the Illinois bar were minimal, and Lincoln had no difficulty in satisfying them. He began his legal career in March 1837 at age twenty-eight. Although Lincoln, according to Steiner, did not have “any intellectual curiosity about the law” and read law only when he had to, he “was a very quick study, a trait he would show frequently in his political career.” (52) Whether Lincoln’s citation of fourteen American legal treatises, twenty-three English legal treatises, and eight legal digests in cases he handled was close to the norm during his years in practice is impossible to determine. (44-47, 51)

Lincoln the lawyer dealt with cases involving financial, industrial, property, political, and domestic issues. Throughout his career, he represented both defendants and plaintiffs, and sometimes points scored in a case as a defense lawyer came back to haunt him when he represented plaintiffs. Much of the litigation Steiner selects for analysis concerns railroads. Here, as in other areas of his practice, he finds that Lincoln’s policy was to have no policy. That was a policy he claimed to espouse later as president.

Steiner treats most extensively a case that brought Lincoln more criticism and condemnation, then and since, than any other: He chose to represent Robert Matson, a slave owner from Kentucky who sought to return to servitude a slave he had brought to Illinois, a free state. Lincoln was able to do this, Steiner contends,



“because he was able to suspend moral judgment.” His involvement in the case, he continues, “shows the corrupting influence of a legal ethic that minimized moral responsibility.” (136) It also shows a point of vulnerability in Lincoln’s reputation as a steadfast opponent of slavery.

Steiner is an astute analyst of legal issues, and he leaves no doubt that he is familiar with every angle of Lincoln’s career as a lawyer. However, with more than 160 cases given at least passing mention, I wondered whether he knew too much and whether the vast resources of the Lincoln Legal Papers project provided too much grist for his analysis mill. Even astute analyses can become tedious.

Nonetheless, *An Honest Calling* provides valuable insights into the ways that the practice of law equipped Lincoln for the presidency. During his years as a lawyer, he had to adapt to a changing legal landscape, and that compelled him to gain a broad grasp of the issues he faced and to assimilate them into every aspect of his work. Steiner concludes his book by recalling the observation of journalist Henry Villard that during the winter of 1860, Lincoln “was indefatigable in his efforts to arrive at the fullest comprehension of the present situation of public affairs and the most proper conclusions as to its probable consequences,” and that he never contented himself “with a superficial opinion based on newspaper accounts and arguments, but always fortifies his position by faithful researches for precedents, analogies, authorities, etc.” Lincoln’s “faithful researches,” notes lawyer Steiner, “reflected his training as a lawyer.” (177)

Brian Dirck’s *Lincoln the Lawyer* covers much of the same territory, but with a less substantial perspective and a lighter touch. In choosing what to include and what to exclude in his narrative, his guiding question was: “What would Lincoln have seen when he practiced law?” (ix) To answer this question, he gives more attention than Steiner to Lincoln’s conduct as a lawyer, particularly “on the circuit,” where he spent as much as six months of each year, than to specific cases, of which he mentions only sixteen.

As does Steiner, Dirck sees Lincoln as an honest lawyer with a keen sense of ethical responsibility. His honesty was evident in his clear-cut, no-frills, frank, unapologetic, and practical approach to the law and in his handling of such things as debt-collection and foreclosure cases, as well as those involving life and well-being issues. To maintain his standing as an honest lawyer, Lincoln kept his distance “from his clients, his colleagues, witnesses and other courtroom participants, and often from the social and economic consequences of the cases he litigated.” This was partly a function, Dirck continues, of “his own unique personality,” but it was also dictated by the “circumstances surrounding his large and varied practice and . . . the professional standards for lawyers of his time—such as they were.” (7)

Dirck, a professor of history at Anderson University in Indiana, takes his readers methodically through aspects of Lincoln’s life as a lawyer, much as he might lead his students through classroom discussions. He deals with such matters as how Lincoln became a lawyer; his relations with other lawyers; his life on the circuit;

how he dealt with cases, small and large; his courtroom strategies; his handling of clients; and the place of lawyering in his daily life. Near the end of the book Dirck raises an inelegantly worded question to make his final point: “What qualities did the law give [Lincoln] that came primarily from the law, more so plausibly than from any other source?” (153)

He answers this question with a one-word, inelegant metaphor: “grease.” Lincoln’s law practice “taught him the value of grease—that unglamorous, often overlooked but vital substance that lubricates and reduces friction to acceptable levels, that slips between the cogs and devices of machines and allows continuous movement without malfunction.” Lincoln, he says, “became the grease lubricating the machinery created by the economy and the statehouse.” (155, 156) It is the enemy of friction. While the term “grease,” crude though it is, works for Dirck, he uses it too freely and extensively. I would prefer to have had him say that in his practice as a lawyer Lincoln applied his instinctive patience and magnanimity while learning the art of mediation, and that art served him well in countless ways as president and commander-in-chief.

In these books, Mark Steiner and Brian Dirck contribute much to our understanding of Lincoln and his law practice, and thereby to our understanding of Lincoln the president. The significance of their work lies also in their path-breaking use of resources that future students of Lincoln’s career as a lawyer will not be able to ignore, nor will they want to.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Published in three DVD-ROMs, with a user’s manual; edited by Martha L. Benner, Cullom Davis, Daniel W. Stowell, and others (Urbana: University of Illinois Press). The DVD-ROMs include nearly 100,000 court documents from more than 120 repositories and private collections. They deal with more than 5,600 cases. [www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org](http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org).

<sup>2</sup> Four volumes, approximately 2,328 pages, not including the extensive index. Edited by Daniel W. Stowell and others, and published by the University of Virginia Press.



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# Johnson's Island: The Archaeological Investigation of a Civil War Prisoner of War Depot

*See story inside on Page 11...*

*Photographs by Dr. David Bush.*

