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# Lincoln LORE

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# Lincoln LORE

LINCOLN LORE IS THE BULLETIN OF THE ALLEN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE FRIENDS OF THE LINCOLN COLLECTION OF INDIANA

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# Lincoln in the News

William Galston in *The Wall Street Journal* (November 23, 2016) states: "America is not an ethno-state. As our greatest president, Abraham Lincoln, reminded us, it is a nation 'conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.' It is a sign of our degraded times that it is necessary to restate what should be obvious to all."



Second Inaugural (LN-1588)

On the Opinion Page of *The Wall Street Journal* (November 10, 2016) there is a call to reflect upon Lincoln's Second Inaugural in which he "appealed to his fellow-countrymen to work toward reconciliation and domestic peace "with malice toward none, with charity for all."

NewsWorks (October 11, 2016) carried a commentary by Richard Koenig which compared the debates of the 2016 election to the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates. The title of the piece is "Trump vs. Clinton is no Lincoln vs. Douglas."

## ON THE COVER

This untitled oil painting by Fletcher C. Ransom (1870-1943) depicts a young Abraham Lincoln driving a team of oxen as he and his father plow a field on their Indiana farm. The



painting is one of a series of Lincoln paintings that Ransom created for the Chicago and Illinois Midland Railroad Company beginning in 1930. The paintings were reproduced on the company's annual calendars. 71.2009.081.0703



# What Indiana Civic Life Likely Taught Young Mr. Lincoln

## Editor's Note:

*At the 2016 Rolland Lecture, Randall Shepard was asked to describe Indiana during the Lincoln family's residence.*

The year 1816 represented a seminal moment in Indiana, most widely known as the year Congress admitted us to the Union. Less widely known but surely important was the event that made tonight possible. Thomas Lincoln and his family moved here from Kentucky late in the year, about the time fall usually begins to turn to winter.

Newly arriving settlers always had a lot of work to do to establish the basics of their new lives on the western frontier, but the Lincolns would have found these challenges more difficult than expected, especially since there had hardly been a warm season that year. Indeed, 1816 was often called the "year there was no summer."

Still, even as people wrestled with what was also labeled "1800-and-froze-to-death," the public life of the state was very active, as the whole nation worked to move on from the War of 1812, the recent conflict with Great Britain often referred to as the Second War for American Independence. And while it is certainly clear to anyone familiar with the life of our sixteenth president that he achieved a monumental place in the American history, what has not been quite so clear is how these years in Indiana might

have influenced his political philosophy and his approach to civic life.

Governor Otis Bowen was fond of saying, "Indiana made Lincoln, and Lincoln made Illinois." My objective here is to explore just what it was about Indiana public life that might have influenced the future career of a young man who lived here from 1816 to 1830.

To set the stage, recall a few fairly obvious facts about the state and the family. At the time of statehood, almost all of Indiana's population lived within an easy horse ride of the Ohio River, then the nation's superhighway for both commerce and migration. Most of Indiana's institutions were based somewhere in population centers close to the river—the seat of government was at Vincennes, then at Corydon. The first newspapers were published in places like Vincennes and Brookville. And like most other new residents during the teens and twenties, the Lincoln family put down stakes in the southern part of the state. They settled in what soon became the northwest part of Spencer County. It was not an easy trip from their homestead to anywhere, but it was within the range of these centers of culture, education, and politics.

There were multiple themes in Indiana life that might have made an impression on a young person interested in the world beyond the family farm. Three of those are/seem most important. One was a shared aspiration to build the bones necessary for a vigorous economy and to use government as an instrument towards that end, extending the American system across the continent.



*Abraham Lincoln, the Hoosier Youth by Paul Manship*





Indiana, Young & Delleker (1821) 71200908520774

The second was a determination to create an educational system that would provide young people with the foundation needed to thrive in that economy. The third was the struggle against slavery.

### The Campaign for Internal Improvements

One of the signature events of nineteenth-century Indiana was the Internal Improvements Plan of 1836. It launched a massive campaign to create roads, bridges, and canals, financed by private money and state revenue—and debt that ultimately drove the state government to insolvency. This story is well known to students of Indiana history, and it was an experience that still influences our public life, even in the twenty-first century.

Of course, the ambitious act of 1836 did not simply pop six years after the Lincolns left for Illinois. The debate about building infrastructure in the wilderness was well under way when they arrived.

Indiana's experience with canals, for example, began long before digging

the Wabash and Erie Canal got under way at Fort Wayne, and in a neighborhood much closer to the site of the Lincoln family home. To take full advantage of the usually navigable Ohio, upon which so much commerce depended, the very first session of the General Assembly authorized creation of the Jeffersonville Ohio Canal Company, whose mission would be to build a canal on the Indiana side of the river facing Louisville. The idea was to make the Ohio more reliably navigable by building a way to bypass the Falls of the Ohio when water was low and passage was perilous. Creating an arrangement we now call public-private partnerships, the legislature contemplated that the state would buy one-fourth of the company's stock. This project launched amid great public celebration in May 1819, but it ultimately failed, and the state's money went with it, partly because Kentucky was simply faster on the uptake, building a canal on the Kentucky side of the river that had the same objective.

Still, this venture was but one story in a larger effort to take advantage of

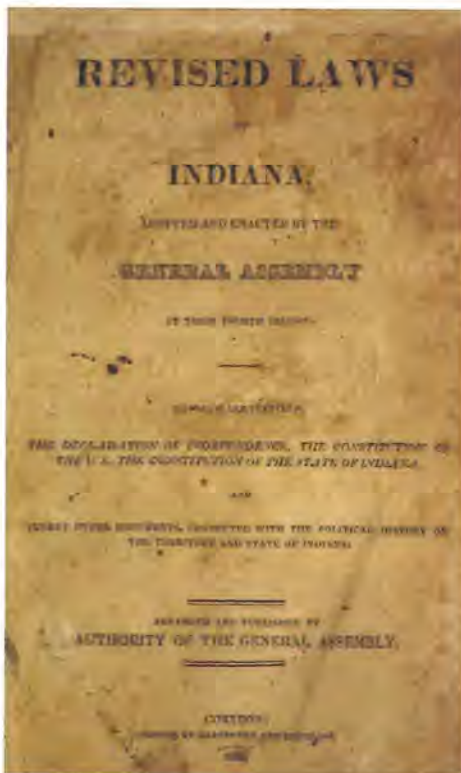
waterways in promoting commerce. The legislature of 1820 designated hundreds of miles along fifteen rivers and streams as navigable water, and it obliged those who operated mills on these waterways to provide locks so as not to block the passage of commerce.

Of course, a longer-range strategy had to do with travel over land, across various navigable waters. As early as 1818, the legislature authorized various ferries and bridges. During the 1820s, it passed laws "encouraging ferry-keepers" and it offered multiple inducements to make this work more attractive.

The real action was in creating roads. Appropriations for building state roads began as early as 1821, and they covered all parts of the state, including a special act for a road from Terre Haute to Fort Wayne passed in 1823. Some of this effort was financed by what people called the Three Percent Fund. It represented proceeds from certain lands the federal government gave the state for future development. That source was not nearly sufficient, so the legislature decreed that every able-bodied man age twenty-one to fifty must work on building roads and highways "or pay an equivalent therefor" in cash. This command for labor was structured like a progressive tax. Persons who owned no real estate at all owed three days labor each year, people who owned less than eighty acres owed four days, and so on up to a maximum of ten days.

The commitment to build new roads advanced vigorously through the 1820s as Lincoln moved through his teenage years. Beyond mandated labor, the legislature continued to appropriate funds and expand the number of official roads. In 1822, there were just twenty-two of them; by 1831, there were fifty. The federal government located the route for extending the National Road across Indiana in 1827, and in 1828 the state government launched its most ambitious road project, the Michigan Road from Hanover to Michigan City. As Governor James B. Ray left office in 1829,





*Revised Laws of Indiana (1824) 71200908400645*

he propounded a vision of turnpikes radiating outward from the state capital to major population centers.

These projects, and others like planned railroads and toll roads, also reflected the philosophical differences between what evolved as the two political parties with which young Lincoln would have been familiar. The supporters of President John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay formed into what became known as the National-Republicans. It was a party strongly committed to ambitious public projects by which the government sought to foster economic prosperity.

Their opponents, followers of Andrew Jackson, were suspicious of growing government, and indeed were sometimes called advocates of "negative government." They opposed many of the devices created to promote development, like the Bank of the United States. This political assemblage became the Democratic-Republicans. Aside from its posture on use of government, this party and Jackson were thought to be

all too tolerant of slavery.

These divisions would have been plain to the eyes of a teenage Lincoln interested in public affairs. The 1828 convention for Indiana's Democratic-Republicans roundly supported Jackson for President, and went out of its way to argue that he was "consistent friend of Internal Improvements and Domestic Manufactures." The National-Republican platform in Indiana insisted that no one who favored energetic economic development could support Jackson and taunted Jackson supporters that there had not been an "explicit and public declaration on his part" of his support for active government and the American system.

Young Lincoln did not simply occupy the family cabin through all this

activity. We know that as a young man interested in law and government he was well informed about these debates. Lincoln was an avid reader of newspapers like the *Western Sun*, published at Vincennes, and scholars agree that the first law book he ever read was the *Revised Laws of Indiana*, printed at Corydon in 1824. Moreover, his experience in flatboating to New Orleans would have provided insight into the importance of improving transportation and the accessibility of markets.

And of course, Lincoln ultimately joined up with the Clay supporters and eventually won his first public office running as a Whig for the Illinois House of Representatives. One can certainly expect that Lincoln's decision to line up with the doers, the builders, was hardly an accident. He grew up



*The Railsplitter by Lloyd Ostendorf (1960) 71.2009.081.1178*



in a state optimistic about the future, one with a widespread commitment to collective effort at making progress.

One of the two most common images of Lincoln was that of him chopping wood as a young man. To be sure, this image was helpful in political campaigns to portray him as a common man. I suggest it also portrayed him as a builder, someone creating farmland where there had been forest and stacking the wood for construction of the physical improvements that could lead to greater prosperity.

#### A Society Committed to Education

The other historic image of Lincoln has been that of a young man reading books by the light of the fire. In choosing a new place to live, the Lincolns could hardly have migrated to a state more committed to education than Indiana.

The constitution written in Corydon contained a clause wholly unknown to the Constitution of the United States.

Indiana's new organic document declared that it was the duty of the General Assembly to create a system of education extending from township schools to a state university, open to all and tuition-free.

The legislature proceeded to provide for township schools and took advantage of congressional land donations to finance them. It created a manual labor obligation for building schools, just as it had for roads, and even authorized local tax levies for education. The momentum towards expanding educational opportunities accelerated while the Lincolns were here. The legislature authorized what were called county seminaries, often conceived as secondary institutions, and over the decades from the 1820s onward, seminaries opened in half of Indiana's counties. Following on from a decision in 1806 by the territorial government to sponsor what has become Vincennes University, the legislature created what is now Indiana University, and it opened in 1825.

Schools opened not far from the Lincoln homestead while young Lincoln was living there. Warrick County launched a seminary in 1826 and Clay Township in Spencer County, where the Lincolns lived, offered a school as early as 1820. Indeed, scholars agree that Lincoln likely attended not one but two schools while living in Spencer County.

Those who were running the state in which Lincoln grew up also believed in libraries. The legislature of 1824 authorized county libraries and committed funds from the sale of public lands to support them. When

Indianapolis was about to open, the legislature specifically committed money for a library in the new capital. It also created a state library, which opened in 1826.

The commitment to public education grew more solid as the decades passed, and when the new constitution was written in 1850-51, the people adopted an even sterner constitutional command that continues to be the foundation for general education in the state in the twenty-first century.

To be sure, the desire for education that led to the image of Lincoln reading by the fire must have arisen from his family and from within his own bosom, but I suggest that the atmosphere of the state and community in which Lincoln lived would have lent solid encouragement to his own aspiration for an education.

#### The Fight Against Slavery

Other than his leadership in saving the American union itself, President Lincoln's role in the abolition of slavery is likely his most famous achievement. As a youth, he would have had knowledge of the struggle in Indiana over slavery because significant events in this drama occurred within a short distance of his residence.

From its earliest days, Indiana had been declared a place free from slavery. Indeed, the Northwest Ordinance provided that Indiana should be free even as a territory. The constitution of 1816 seemed to make this plain enough, saying: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in this state, otherwise than for the punishment of crimes...."

Notwithstanding the directness of these declarations, the executive and legislative branches of state government periodically blew hot and cold on issues such as immigration and repatriation. By contrast, the



*Boyhood of Lincoln by Eastman Johnson (1868)*  
71.2009.081.1767





First Indiana Supreme Court Chamber, Corydon, Indiana

Indiana Supreme Court was almost always a place where the state's antislavery forces prevailed.

Perhaps still the most famous case in the court's history was litigated just two years after the Lincolns arrived. General Hyacinthe Lasselle of Vincennes, who had commanded Fort Harrison during the War of 1812, asserted in the trial court at Knox County that he was entitled to own a young girl named Polly Strong by virtue of his having purchased Polly's mother, legally, while Indiana was still a part of Virginia. The trial court agreed with Lasselle, saying: "As far as it regards the situation of the mother of the present applicant, this is now a slave state."

Polly Strong appealed to the Indiana Supreme Court, then still sitting at Corydon. It reversed the trial judge's decision, declaring: "The framers of our constitution intended a total and entire prohibition of slavery in this State; and we can conceive of no form of words in which that intention could have been more clearly expressed."

Of course, slavery was a resilient institution, both in law and in practice. When legal prohibitions against slavery held firm, as in the *Lasselle* case, indentured servitude was a common tool by which slave owners

attempted to retain their servants. In a case brought soon after *Lasselle*, one G.W. Johnson had executed just such an indenture with Mary Clark, a few weeks before the 1816 constitution took effect. Johnson advanced a passable argument about the language of the constitution as applied to his particular case, but the Supreme Court was not amused: "Such a performance, if enforced by laws, would produce a state of servitude as degrading and demoralizing in its consequences as a state of absolute slavery; and if enforced under a government like ours, which acknowledges personal equality, it would be productive of a state of feelings more discordant and irritating than slavery itself." Justice Jesse Lynch Holman wrote these words for the Supreme Court in 1821, as the Lincolns finished their fifth year in Indiana.

Thus, at the very moment that the nation's premier moral debate focused on the expansion of slavery and on the Missouri Compromise of 1820, young Lincoln would have had a close look at what Indiana stood for. More than that, he would have received an energizing lesson about what good lawyers could do to vindicate the rights of persons who deserved to be free.

When he moved to Illinois, Lincoln would have observed that Indiana's judicial position on slavery was hardly the universal approach. To use a technical legal term, one might say that the Illinois Supreme Court dragged its feet. It didn't end slavery in Illinois until 1845.

### Conclusion

I suggest to you that a young man of character and ambition would have learned many encouraging lessons growing up in the political and moral environment that Indiana represented in the 1820s. This state's determination to build a healthy economy, educate the young, and end slavery represented ambitions that have stood the test of time. The judgment of history on these points has been favorable. Indiana can take pride in what it demonstrated to Lincoln about living a useful life as a servant leader, committed to building a safe, prosperous, and decent society.

*Randall T. Shepard is a native of Lafayette, Indiana, and spent his formative years in Evansville. He graduated from Princeton University in 1969 and from the Yale Law School in 1972. He earned a Master of Laws degree from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1995. He was appointed the 99th justice of the Indiana Supreme Court by Gov. Robert Orr in 1985 and became the Chief Justice of Indiana in March 1987, a position he held until retiring from the court in 2012. He has written and lectured extensively on Indiana legal history.*



# Abraham Lincoln: Indianan and the West

BY HON. FRANK J. WILLIAMS



*Lincoln the Rail Splitter* by J. L. G. Ferris (1909) 71.2009.081.1764

John Locke Scripps, President Abraham Lincoln's 1860 campaign biographer, asked Abraham Lincoln about his early life.<sup>1</sup> Lincoln responded "Why Scripps it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence ... you will find in Gray's Elegy: 'The short and simple annals of the poor.'"<sup>2</sup>

However, Lincoln's comments to Scripps may not tell the whole story.

Lincoln was molded by the Westward movement from his birth – from his time in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. As a product of the Westward movement, he was influenced by these experiences when contemplating and completing his initiatives and policies as the President of the United States.

Lincoln had firsthand knowledge of a life of moving often. In December 1816, at the age of seven, the Lincolns moved to Indiana from Kentucky,<sup>3</sup>

## Editor's Note:

2016 marked the bicentennial of both statehood for Indiana and the Lincoln family's move from Kentucky to Southern Indiana. Frank Williams was asked to give the annual McMurtry Lecture in Fort Wayne on the topic of both the Westward movement of thousands of families such as the Lincolns and the experiences that Abraham Lincoln encountered and how they eventually affected his presidency.

because of issues with land titles.<sup>4</sup> The family's departure was also based on the issue of slavery – Thomas Lincoln was part of a Baptist sect that deplored slavery.<sup>5</sup> Abraham inherited his father's distaste for slavery early in life.<sup>6</sup> Indiana, as part of the Northwest Territory, specifically forbade slavery<sup>7</sup> – which the Lincoln family valued as they looked to create a home.<sup>8</sup>

Lincoln wrote a poem, much later in 1846, inspired by the wild he traveled through with his family during that time. It read:

*When first my father settled here,  
'Twas then the frontier line;  
The panther's scream, filled night with  
fear  
And bears preyed on the swine.  
But wo for Bruin's short lived fun,  
When rose the squealing cry;  
Now man and horse, with dog and gun,  
For vengeance, at him fly...<sup>9</sup>*

Lincoln lived a childhood as a true frontiersman. His father, Thomas, acquired property in Indiana, where



he built a cabin and traveled ninety miles away to make a quarter payment on the land, as he intended that to be the family home.<sup>10</sup>

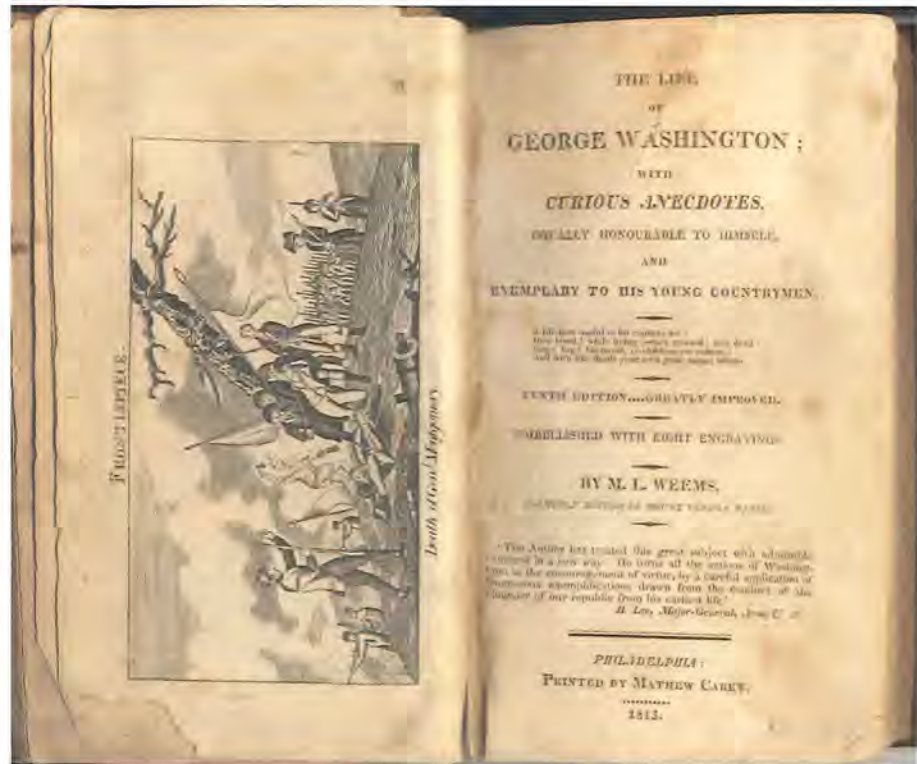
Carl Sandburg wrote that “[t]hey were part of the American Frontier.”<sup>11</sup> They had moved to Indiana just as it had become a state in 1816.<sup>12</sup> They, like many, moved to the state to find land, live on it and work it as farmers.

From the ages of seven to twenty-one, Lincoln lived in the state of Indiana.<sup>13</sup> Throughout his childhood, he faced much adversity: the death of his mother and sister, cramped quarters in a small log cabin, and the hard life of manual labor.<sup>14</sup>

It was in Indiana that Abraham Lincoln learned the value of education and reading. After the age of twelve, Lincoln was rarely seen without a book in hand.<sup>15</sup> Lincoln’s step mother, Sarah Bush Johnston, who had married his father soon after the death of his mother, encouraged Lincoln’s reading.<sup>16</sup> Not only did she encourage his reading, but also his education at blab schools – amounting to one year, which is equivalent to a sixth grade education.<sup>17</sup>

How did his experiences in Indiana shape the way that he viewed policy making as President? There are many things to point to, but there are a few points that clearly show a direct link between the genesis of the policy and the reason for its implementation. During his presidency, Lincoln signed into law the land grant college system,<sup>18</sup> legislation for the transcontinental railroad<sup>19</sup> and the famous Homestead Act.<sup>20</sup> These legislative accomplishments can find the genesis of the President’s support for them in the fourteen years he grew up in the state of Indiana.

Lincoln’s childhood can be seen as the foundation on which his political opinions and priorities were built, but this is not the whole story. President Lincoln was a product of the



*The Life of George Washington by M.L. Weems (1813) 71200908400748*

Westward movement, as expressed by Senator Henry Clay, and the spirit of those who were challenged by this new world.<sup>21</sup> Senator Clay believed that the principles of representative democracy should unite the continent and even if not unified, “the North American continent should have one homogeneous population provided by the United States.”<sup>22</sup>

President Lincoln was the product of the challenges created and imposed by the new world. The challenges faced on the frontier were challenges that can shape the mind and destiny of any man. President Lincoln commented to a biographer that his youth was filled with poverty – and President Lincoln was not wrong in this assessment.<sup>23</sup> His family was poor as he grew up.<sup>24</sup> They fed themselves by growing and trading what they could. They slept nearly on top of one another in the log cabin they called “home.”<sup>25</sup>

There were other lessons and attributes, gained on the frontier, which served Lincoln well while he was in office. Not the least of which

was a simple story of perseverance, something that the sixteenth president displayed in abundance.<sup>26</sup> When Lincoln was ten years old, he was trying to drive a horse at the mill. He kept yelling for the horse to “Git up, you old hussy.”<sup>27</sup> He continued to yell at the horse for some time as the horse stood obstinately.<sup>28</sup> Lincoln yelled “Git up” one too many times and the horse kicked him in his head knocking Lincoln to the ground, unconscious and bleeding.<sup>29</sup> He was cleaned up and laid in bed. Most thought that he would not make it through the night.<sup>30</sup> However, in the morning he came to, and amazingly finished his command, saying “you old hussy.”<sup>31</sup>

The frontier taught a man perseverance, but also respect and discipline. Lincoln had once borrowed Parson Weems’ *The Life of Washington*, from a neighbor.<sup>32</sup> Lincoln cited this book when he addressed the New Jersey Senate on his way to Washington, D.C. to be inaugurated in 1861.<sup>33</sup> He noted the noble deeds of the Revolutionary War soldiers.<sup>34</sup> He said to the New Jersey Senate:



I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made...<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln not only developed a great appreciation for President Washington and the work of the Revolutionary War veterans through Parson Weems' book, he learned another lesson as well.<sup>36</sup> After he had read the book, *The Life of Washington*, it rained so heavily, the book was soaked and ruined.<sup>37</sup> Instead of shirking responsibility, Lincoln worked off the price, which his neighbor set much higher than the book's actual value, by "pulling fodder" or picking corn for three days until the field was completely clean.<sup>38</sup> The debt was paid.

Life on the frontier was not easy for Lincoln. But the life truly developed him into the man he became. Through both perseverance and respect, he acquired character for the rest of his life, and these attributes served him well as the chief magistrate and commander in chief of the United States military.

I think it is safe to assume that many, if not all, know how gifted an orator President Lincoln was.<sup>39</sup> Storytelling, it turns out, was a skill that truly unified all of his talents into one.<sup>40</sup> His gift showed to the world his keen intellect, his empathy and his passion for individual rights.<sup>41</sup> Storytelling helped Lincoln galvanize friends and foes to his side.<sup>42</sup> His anecdotes united fierce political rivals into political allies who would work together to ensure the

Union's very existence.<sup>43</sup>

How did Lincoln become such a good storyteller? His father,<sup>44</sup> Thomas Lincoln, would stay up late with his neighbors telling tales, and young Lincoln would listen to these stories and contemplate their meanings.<sup>45</sup> He would travel to Boonville, Indiana, whenever he could, to listen to political speeches and observe court sessions.<sup>46</sup> In fact, many think that the experience watching court proceedings was one reason that he turned to the law as a profession. Listening to political speeches was the genesis of his political career – which was by all accounts his first love.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, this began what can only be called a love affair with learning – and through that – education.

Abraham Lincoln started to develop the skills that he would use to hold the Union together in the future. It was the fourteen years that he lived in Indiana – the frontier that it was at the time of his youth – where he learned the skills and gained the attributes that would truly shape him as a world-changing leader: character, discipline, the value of education, the importance of agriculture, the development of the west, and forging a life for family on the frontier. Indiana had just become a state, and there were many things unknown about it. And these lessons informed what eventually coincided with several key Congressional agenda items that he signed into law.

It is important to note that not everything that President Lincoln did involved war management. There were several important laws that, when passed, are considered, by some historians, an early "New Deal."<sup>48</sup> During 1862, President Lincoln signed four important laws: the Department of Agriculture Act,<sup>49</sup> the Homestead Act,<sup>50</sup> the Pacific Railway Act<sup>51</sup> and the Morrill Act.<sup>52</sup>

The Morrill Act established land-grant universities across the North, and eventually was expanded to the

former states of the Confederacy after the war.<sup>53</sup> The original bill was vetoed by President Buchanan, but was again brought to Congress in 1862.<sup>54</sup> Because those who had been opposed had mostly relocated to the Confederacy, the bill passed Congress and Lincoln signed it into law.<sup>55</sup>

There is not much in terms of historical record with regards to President Lincoln's position on the bill.<sup>56</sup> Without that, it is hard to say what he thought particularly about each provision. He signed it – and that can only demonstrate that he thought well of the bill.<sup>57</sup> And by delving into his background we can tell that he valued education from a young age.<sup>58</sup>

Lincoln valued education without having the traditional education that most acquire today.<sup>59</sup> Or, for that matter, most of his contemporaries while he was President of the United States.<sup>60</sup> During his youth, most schools in Kentucky and Indiana were subscription schools which required tuition to attend<sup>61</sup>. As a frontiersman with his father, Lincoln was not able to afford those schools.<sup>62</sup> Instead, he educated himself through the power of books.<sup>63</sup> He read everything he could from *Pilgrim's Progress* to *Lessons in Elocution*.<sup>64</sup> What is so impressive is that this young man had taught himself almost all that he knew – he was an autodidact.<sup>65</sup>

The Morrill Act allowed for learning in each state on colleges built for agricultural education.<sup>66</sup> Lincoln once wrote about his feelings on education in March 1832 to the people of Sangamo County, where he was running for a seat in the Illinois General Assembly<sup>67</sup>. His words are a powerful view into his feelings on the importance of education.<sup>68</sup> He wrote:

Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least,

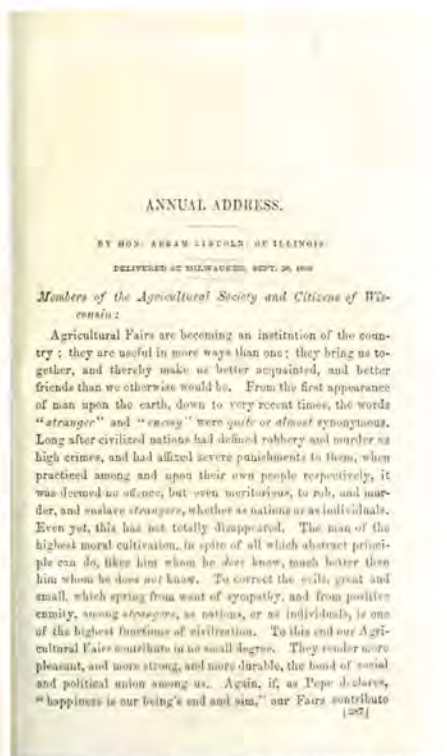
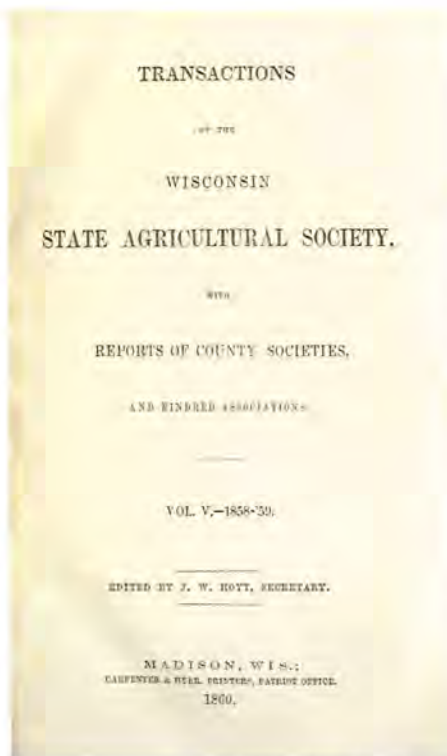


a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance, even on this account alone, to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the scriptures and other works, both of a religious and moral nature, for themselves. For my part, I desire to see the time when education, and by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, shall become much more general than at present, and should be gratified to have it in my power to contribute something to the advancement of any measure which might have a tendency to accelerate the happy period.<sup>69</sup>

While he lost his first run for public office, he went on to serve four terms in the Illinois legislature.<sup>70</sup> There is no question that the passage of the Morrill Act, despite a lack of direct evidence, can find its roots in the soil in Indiana. Without Lincoln's self-made education on the frontier of Indiana, land grant colleges from Purdue University to the University of Rhode Island would be much different than they are today.<sup>71</sup>

Lincoln also signed the Department of Agriculture Act in 1862.<sup>72</sup> Three years earlier, in 1859, Abraham Lincoln made a speech in Milwaukee before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society where he praised agriculture and its benefits.<sup>73</sup> Lincoln said, "the chief use of agricultural fairs is to aid in improving the great calling of agriculture, in all it's [sic] departments, [and to] exchange . . . agricultural discovery, information, and knowledge."<sup>74</sup>

While in Indiana, Lincoln's father used to loan his services to other farmers as a hired hand and collect the income that he earned.<sup>75</sup> Physical labor was difficult for Lincoln.<sup>76</sup> He was good at it, but he did not love it.<sup>77</sup> He was of an early inclination to turn to some other



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occupation rather than laborer.<sup>78</sup> This is what Gabor Boritt attributes to Lincoln as the "right to rise."<sup>79</sup> Lincoln spoke about the relationship between labor and capital in that same speech in Milwaukee, saying "That labor can exist without capital, but that capital could never have existed without labor. Hence they hold that labor is the superior---greatly the superior---of capital."<sup>80</sup>

On December 3, 1861, President Lincoln asked Congress to form a Department of Agriculture.<sup>81</sup> He wrote that it was "fortunate" that agriculture had not yet needed to be regulated by the government, but he asked Congress at that time to do so.<sup>82</sup> Lincoln added that annual reports about agriculture would allow for "great practical value to the country."<sup>83</sup> He pulled back on giving details, believing that it was not the job of the President to prescribe Congressional details.

President Lincoln had experience with agriculture.<sup>84</sup> He worked the fields in Indiana,<sup>85</sup> toiling for many years to help provide for his family alongside his

father.<sup>86</sup> The importance of agriculture cannot be understated in Lincoln's early life. In fact, this importance is analogous with our nation as a whole. Agriculture was the economic engine of our country.<sup>87</sup> Lincoln needed successful agriculture not only for the economy, but eventually for the war effort.<sup>88</sup> To this day, there is an Agriculture Department, the USDA.<sup>89</sup> Upon creation of the Agriculture Department, there was only a commissioner as head, but today, there is a cabinet secretary.<sup>90</sup>

Lincoln needed shared knowledge to continue agricultural production for the nation, and the department was a way to get this done.<sup>91</sup>

Another important bill, passed in 1862, that shaped the nation was signed into law by a man shaped by Indiana - the Homestead Act.<sup>92</sup> The Homestead Act provided 160 acres of land to men who were willing to farm it for little or no cost.<sup>93</sup> And the roots of Abraham Lincoln's support are quite clear - his father had staked out a claim on three separate lands in Kentucky, but was forced to move



because of the poor record keeping and disputes with the status of land titles – so much so that Thomas Lincoln had to sell several properties for less than he had originally paid for them.<sup>94</sup>

In fact, Lincoln's lineage shows a group of men who were frontiersmen.<sup>95</sup> This branch of Lincoln's family started in the Shenandoah mountains with Shenandoah John and moved west with Abraham Lincoln in the 1780s to Kentucky.<sup>96</sup> There, Abraham Lincoln, the future president's grandfather, was a wealthy land holder, but after he was killed in an Indian raid, the first born brother Mordecai took possession of the property and Thomas Lincoln had to stake his own claim.<sup>97</sup>

These events exemplify Henry Clay's idea of westward expansion.<sup>98</sup> Lincoln viewed Henry Clay with high esteem.<sup>99</sup> He praised him during a debate with Stephen Douglas, saying "Henry Clay, my beau ideal of a statesman, the man for whom I fought all my humble life."<sup>100</sup> Henry Clay believed in what he called the American System, a platform of which one plank was westward expansion.<sup>101</sup> Clay and Lincoln were not in complete agreement about how to expand. Clay believed that public land out west should be sold and not given away so that the country could use that funding for education and other internal improvements.<sup>102</sup> He believed that by moving west, agricultural production and other production would expand so that imports would not be as necessary as they had been, thus allowing for some protection of the American economy.<sup>103</sup> He also supported high tariffs, which would encourage expansion to provide American-made products.<sup>104</sup>

The Homestead Act was a law that provided what President Lincoln thought was a step up.<sup>105</sup> He said in a speech in Cincinnati, Ohio that "In regards to the Homestead Law,

I have to say that in so far as the Government lands can be disposed of, I am in favor of cutting up the wild lands into parcels, so that every poor man may have a home."<sup>106</sup>

Abraham Lincoln saw the Homestead Act as a law to provide opportunities for all people to obtain a place to live.<sup>107</sup> He wanted people to have the opportunity that his father had been afforded, if not a greater one.<sup>108</sup> These homesteads were open to women, immigrants, and by 1868 African Americans.<sup>109</sup> Eventually the Homestead Act provided 270 million acres to settlers.<sup>110</sup>

Opportunity was an important ideal for Abraham Lincoln, one that he thought was provided for all those who lived in America by the Declaration of Independence.<sup>111</sup> He often cited the declaration and its wording that said that all men have the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>112</sup> Homesteads provided an opportunity for Americans to live their lives to the fullest. A progressive ideal if ever there was one.

Lincoln also realized the importance of travel from one end of the United States to the other.<sup>113</sup> For years there had been debate about a trans American railway, but what often became a sticking point was whether the railway would go through the South or the North.<sup>114</sup> After the outbreak of the Civil War, the Republicans in Congress – no longer burdened by the southern states in their quest to build a southern railroad route – passed the Pacific Railroad Act, which laid the ground work for the northern route.<sup>115</sup>

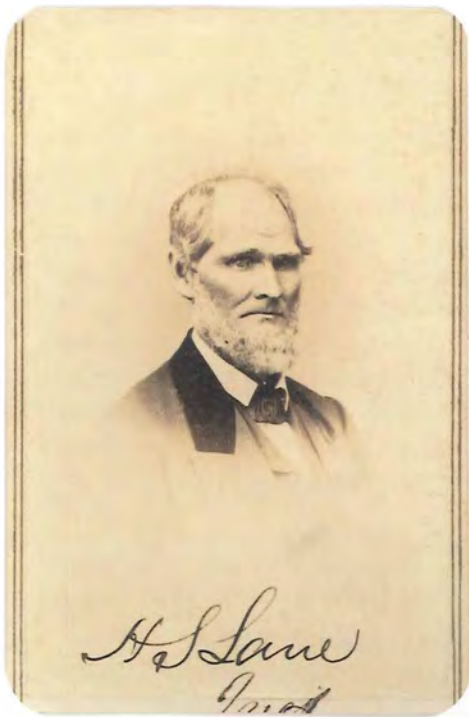
It is said, but cannot be confirmed, that while a lawyer, Abraham Lincoln had been offered the general counsel's job for the New York Central Railroad.<sup>116</sup> He was elected President as a member of the party which had as an important plank the creation of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>117</sup> As a lawyer and a politician, Lincoln

supported the expansion of railroads to the other side of the country. Why? Henry Clay and Lincoln agreed that westward expansion meant more economic independence for both individual Americans, and for the economy of the United States as a whole.<sup>118</sup> He believed that a transcontinental railroad would help to support and supply not only military bases on the frontier, but also communities of Americans that developed beyond the Mississippi.<sup>119</sup> According to Union Pacific, there were 7,000 western communities created alongside the rails heading west to the Pacific.<sup>120</sup>

As we know, Abraham Lincoln was shaped by his years on the Indiana frontier. One thing that may have made the idea of railroads so appealing to him was not only their ability to transport goods like food, clothing and building materials, but also their ability to transport of ideas, books and newspapers.<sup>121</sup> Before use of the railroads, these services would be sporadic.<sup>122</sup> After, with the help of the telegraph, new ideas and the news of the day would be easier to report and read.<sup>123</sup> Reading and learning had kept Lincoln going as a frontiersman and had allowed him to educate himself.<sup>124</sup> He knew that by connecting the eastern states with the western states of California and Oregon the coasts would be bound together. This connection would, pragmatically, connect the free state of California with the other free northern states to create a stronger and united anti-slavery block.

Lincoln was a man shaped by the frontier. He was shaped by the hard work of agriculture and labor, by the books he borrowed and carried with him every day, by the struggle of life on the frontier and the little joy that the lifestyle could also bring.<sup>125</sup> His experiences there created a knowledge that his life was not destined to be like his father, that he





Henry Smith Lane OC-1639



Caleb Blood Smith LFA-0326



Schuyler Colfax OC-1806



John P. Usher LN-1334



Oliver P. Morton LN-0880



George W. Julian LN-2248



was not destined to be a farmer.<sup>126</sup> That instead, his experience created in him a deep knowledge of what he loved and wanted for his life – a life in both the law and politics.<sup>127</sup> It is amazing that the bills that President Lincoln signed in 1862 paralleled his life in Indiana. This legislation would impact a world that Lincoln would have known far better than most of the men arguing about it down Pennsylvania Avenue in the Capitol building.

He would have known that the power of education is incredibly important. And that this power had carried a frontier lawyer to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. He would have known the importance of the Homestead Act, how the provision of property would have created fiscal security both for individual Americans and for the fiscal security of the country as a whole. He would have known the value of the Department of Agriculture – known that a centralized governmental agency would support farmers across the country so that the nation could feed itself. And he would have known that a railroad was a necessity to ensure that our country would survive as one, by uniting the east and west as he hoped to reunite the North and South.

Indiana was never quite absent from Lincoln's life. Lincoln's accomplishments demonstrated the important role that Indiana played in the development of his political thought.<sup>128</sup> Somehow, Indiana was as influential on his future political career, how he attained the presidency and how he held onto it.

When beginning his run for the presidency, while trying to obtain support from Republican Party members from neighboring states, Lincoln got in touch with Congressman Schuyler Colfax of Indiana.<sup>129</sup> Lincoln was afraid that if unchecked, state Republican conventions and platforms could lead to division within

the party.<sup>130</sup> He asked Congressman Colfax for his advice on how to attend to these matters.<sup>131</sup> Colfax responded in agreement and the two began to work together towards that goal.

Lincoln made a speech two months later that spoke of both his fondness for Indiana and the politics of the day – most importantly his support of the exclusion of slavery in the territories.<sup>132</sup> His future Treasury Secretary, Hugh McCulloch, an Indianan, spoke glowingly of the speech.<sup>133</sup> The visit is credited as having started an association between Illinois and Indiana's Republican Parties. Illinois, at that time, had far fewer delegates, and even when they were completely unified for Lincoln, they needed Indiana's block of 26 votes, for Lincoln to be nominated as the Republican candidate for president. On the first, second and third ballot, Lincoln received 26 of the 26 votes from Indiana.<sup>134</sup>

The lead supporters of Lincoln in the Indiana delegation to the convention in Chicago in May 1860 were Henry S. Lane and Caleb Smith.<sup>135</sup> Henry S. Lane, who was running for Governor of Indiana, said that he would quit the race if William H. Seward was nominated for the Presidency, and this affected the votes of many delegates.<sup>136</sup> In fact, the Pennsylvania Republican Party believed fervently that had it not been for Henry S. Lane, Lincoln would never have received the nomination.<sup>137</sup>

Lincoln had made clear to his surrogates that there were to be no promises of patronage in return for votes, but there is evidence that this was not the case.<sup>138</sup> Caleb Smith, of Indiana, was promised the post of Secretary of the Interior. He was not the only person promised cabinet level appointments by Lincoln's men. Simon Cameron was guaranteed a cabinet position when Pennsylvania promised to switch their votes to Lincoln on the second ballot.<sup>139</sup>

Lincoln's men had a plan for Lincoln to be the anti-Seward candidate, and as these states lined up behind Lincoln, other state delegations came to the fold to promote Lincoln as the true anti-Seward candidate.<sup>140</sup>

By the end of the convention, Lincoln knew that he was indebted to Indiana. When he was elected, he returned the favor by making the first appointment of an Indianan as a presidential cabinet member.<sup>141</sup> Despite the promise to Smith, there were two names most often mentioned, the first being Caleb Smith and the other Congressman Schuyler Colfax.<sup>142</sup> In the end, Lincoln settled on Caleb Smith.<sup>143</sup>

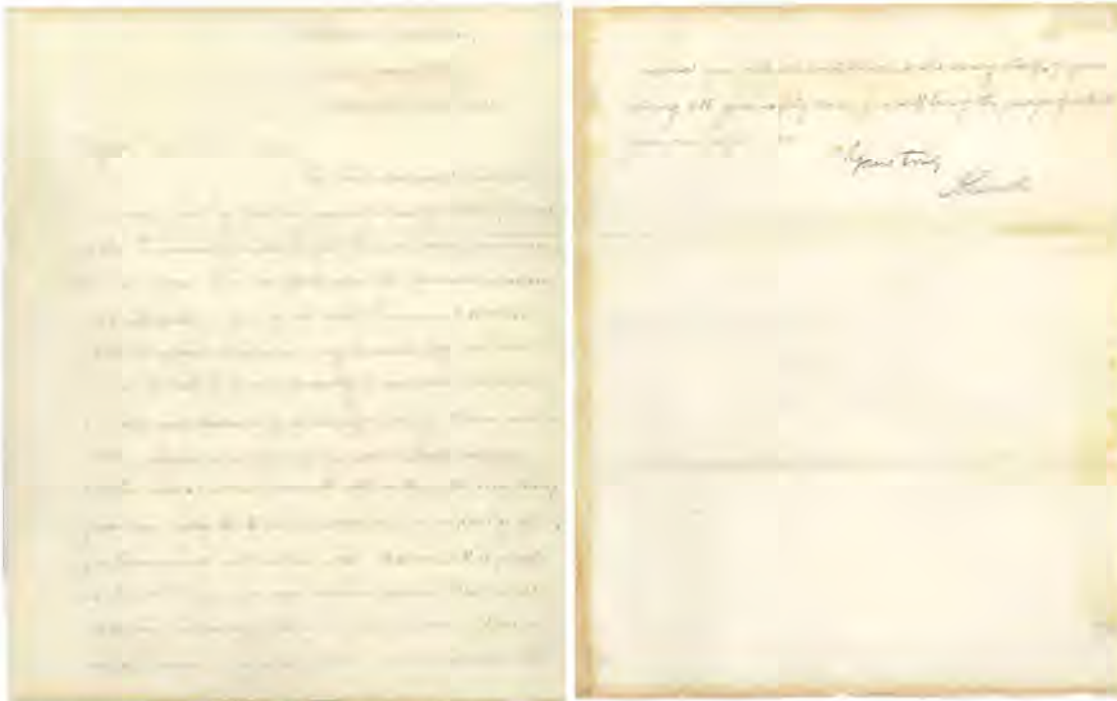
Caleb Smith served as Secretary of the Interior until January 1, 1863 when he was made a United States District Judge for the District of Indiana.<sup>144</sup> Lincoln eventually chose John P. Usher, another Indianan, who would serve for two years.<sup>145</sup> Usher would accompany President Lincoln to Gettysburg when that most iconic speech was made.

As for Congressman Schuyler Colfax, he did not have to wait long to achieve a prestigious title that had eluded him previously. In 1862, the Speaker of the House lost his reelection bid and Congressman Colfax ran for the position and won.<sup>146</sup>

Another Indianan in Congress with whom Lincoln would interact frequently was Congressman George W. Julian, who headed the Committee on the Conduct of the War.<sup>147</sup> He was initially quite cautious in his criticism of President Lincoln. However, he lambasted the administration in February 1865 – so much so that Carl Sandburg believes that he "set the frame and laid the scene for a possible impeachment of Lincoln."<sup>148</sup> This obviously never came to fruition.

Indiana's Governor Oliver Morton was a strong supporter of Lincoln during the civil war.<sup>149</sup> He sent as much as he could to the national government to support the war. After





Abraham Lincoln to William T. Sherman, September 19, 1864 71200908300100

Lincoln's emancipation proclamation, Democrats were elected to Indiana's legislature, and Governor Morton responded.<sup>150</sup> The Republicans in the legislature withdrew so that there was no quorum.<sup>151</sup> Governor Morton financed state government through private support and the federal government, and was reelected with a Republican legislature during the next round of elections.<sup>152</sup>

Other Indianans affected Lincoln throughout his life. The case of *Ex parte Milligan* came from Indiana.<sup>153</sup> Milligan, an Indianan who denounced President Lincoln, was arrested and charged in a military court for "1. conspiracy against the government of the United States, 2. affording aid and comfort to rebels against the authority of the United States, 3. inciting insurrection, 4. disloyal practices, and 5. violation of the laws of war."<sup>154</sup> That case is still cited today in enemy combatant cases arising from the War on Terror.

In 1864, Lincoln was locked in a tough reelection campaign against General George B. McClellan.<sup>155</sup> And, knowing that he needed to gain the votes of Indianans, and hoping the military

men were for him, he asked General William T. Sherman if he could permit Indiana's soldiers to go home to vote - if it would not endanger his army.<sup>156</sup>

These are just some of the Indianans who helped President Lincoln become the Sixteenth and most admired President of the United States. We see through these examples that Indiana was always involved in Lincoln's life. Lincoln was a frontiersman, something that affected his life's trajectory in an important way. His poem called "My Childhood Home I See Again," which quite literally means to Lincoln "Indiana I see again."<sup>157</sup> Lincoln was an Indianan, and on this special occasion, the bicentennial of its statehood, everyone should take comfort in the fact that the state of Indiana played such an important role in Abraham Lincoln's evolution from boy to man and from politician to statesman.

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Interview by SARA GABBARD

# Lincoln through the Lens of History,

## An Interview with Douglas L. Wilson

**SG:** Why does the life of Abraham Lincoln continue to enthrall us?

**DLW:** I think it begins with his unprecedented familiarity in American life. His name is everywhere — on schools, places, and institutions — and his image is possibly the most recognized in our country. In an age when American citizens are taught and know less and less about their own history, Lincoln's story is a notable exception. The story that is known is mostly a legend, and unfortunately some recurring elements thereof are conspicuously wrong, as in the case of the aberrant notion that Lincoln owned slaves. But most versions of the legend are reasonably historical. Lincoln was born in a backwater to poor and humble parents; he did grow up with very little formal schooling; he did work hard at educating himself; he did acquire quite early in his life a reputation for honesty and fairness; he did succeed in making a name for himself as a lawyer and in rising to great heights as a

politician and statesman; he did write some of the most recognized and consequential words in American letters; and he did preside over the ordeal that resulted in the preservation of the United States of America and the abolition of slavery within its borders.

I would argue that over the years Americans have not only tended to embrace this story, but that as a consequence, Lincoln's example has helped shape the nation's sense of its own identity. The country and its culture came to be perceived as the environment that produced Abraham Lincoln, a process that was fed by an international fascination with the man and his words. But we do well to remember that there have always been anti-Lincoln factions or points of view in our midst that see him in a very different and unflattering light, for these, too, are instructive. Always of a minority and dissenting persuasion, they generally appear to be part

of a larger critique of the direction of American history, politics, or values. For insisting on a president's "war powers," and using them unapologetically, Lincoln has been depicted as a ruthless dictator. For his most recognized and most lauded achievement — presiding over the destruction of the institution of slavery in America — he was hated for destroying the economic system and traditional way of life of a large segment of the nation. For prosecuting the war between the states in a cautious and conciliatory manner, refusing to demonize the rebels, and offering generous peace terms, he was and is still derided as an ineffective leader whose ineptitude prolonged the war and unnecessarily sacrificed tens of thousands of lives. Seen by his contemporaries as a champion of the rights of black people, he has been portrayed by later generations as no more than a white supremacist. And so it goes. No good deed has gone unpunished, but this tells us volumes about the kind of





Abraham Lincoln and George Washington LN-1109

country we inhabit.

**SG:** What lessons, if any, have political leaders learned from Lincoln's life? What lessons *should* they have learned?

**DLW:** It is easier to point out the things that political leaders haven't learned, but even those who presumably have learned something from Lincoln's example tend to experience great difficulty in putting it into practice. While Lincoln had been an active political partisan most of his life, his success as president is what put him on a pedestal — this and his martyrdom — and this is something that is hard to separate from the unique set of conditions that Lincoln faced. It is by no means clear that in different circumstances he would have met with the same measure of success, much less emerged as a great national hero.

Nonetheless, a case can be made for Lincoln's exceptional success in dealing with certain very difficult problems that confront all political leaders.

For instance, Lincoln's chances for success depended on somehow gaining substantial support from adherents of the opposing party, which was no mean feat for a minority president from a minority party, whose election had occurred because the majority party became hopelessly divided. But by the beginning of 1864, after three grueling years of effort, Lincoln had effectively accomplished this seemingly impossible task, as a very doubtful and recalcitrant Northern public was by this time showing broad approval of his policies. Efforts by various party

leaders to head off his renomination and replace him with a more militant candidate were going nowhere. Observers at the time, such as the well-connected Wall Street lawyer, George Templeton Strong, asked themselves how this transformation had come about. Strong wrote in his diary: "I think this great and blessed revolution is due, in no small degree, to A. Lincoln's sagacious policy." This spoke to a result that was attributable, not only to Lincoln's cautious and deliberate measures (his "sagacious policy"), but ultimately to his belief that to be successful, any important government policy or direction must be accepted (or at least not opposed) by the people at large. This differs radically from the belief of other political leaders, especially prominent in the ranks of his own party's leadership, that it was sufficient only that important actions needed doing and were "right."

To convince the skeptical Northern public that the Civil War was not a partisan Republican war, Lincoln appointed Democrats to federal judge-ships, he made them generals in the army, he got their progeny into West Point and Annapolis, he conferred every favor within his power to win the confidence and support of his political opponents. In so doing, he had to pay the price of dissension and backbiting resentment from members of his own party, who failed to see the wisdom of sharing the spoils of political victory with their enemies. Few presidents have followed his example, and it throws light on the protests of successors like Bill Clinton, who claimed he could have been more successful if he could only have had the benefit of a war.

**SG:** Which of our Founding Fathers does Lincoln most resemble in views regarding the proper role of the Federal Government? On the same subject, which Founder's viewpoint does he reject?

**DLW:** It is hard to see Lincoln as resembling any of the founding fathers very closely, virtually all of whom were men of wealth, cultivation, and property. An important part of Lincoln's continuing significance for Americans has always been his humble origins and his rising from poverty by virtue of his own efforts. Granted that this is true of Benjamin Franklin, who is remembered for a similar feat, but he became a wealthy business man and leading citizen by middle age and thus cut a very different figure. That said about Lincoln and the founders generally, the question as stated relates more specifically to Lincoln's "views regarding the proper role of the Federal Government." While he frequently refers to the founders, as was commonplace in the politics of his generation, he rarely speaks of any of them in particular, except Washington, who was not associated with a distinctive political view in this



regard. Lincoln himself was perhaps oversimplifying things when he said at Independence Hall that he had “never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” It was also a way of putting things in such a way as to avoid associating himself with Jefferson, which, in his own time, was an association fraught with partisan meanings. Because of this, and because Herndon’s letters tell us that Lincoln became disenchanted with Jefferson’s moral character, I would be leery of naming Jefferson as the founder whose view of the role of the Federal government was closest to him. It is, however, quite noteworthy that Lincoln always seems to cite “equality” as the primary and most enduring element of the founding philosophy.

I don’t see Lincoln as rejecting any particular founder’s viewpoint. Even the slaveholding founders, at least the most prominent, were known to be antislavery at heart. I think it is fair to say that Lincoln and his political generation didn’t tend to sort the founders according to their differences so much as lump them together. It was convenient for all sides to use the founders as symbols of the unity or purity of the nation’s initial formulation, which could then be used as a kind of legal fiction that showed the supposed errancy of the opposition. It is important, of course, to keep in mind that the founders had a relevance and an immediacy for Lincoln’s era that has long been absent for succeeding generations.

**SG: If one subscribes to the concept that there are “historical eras,” Abraham Lincoln was born on the cusp between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Is there any evidence in his writing/speaking/ thought that would support the concept that he reflected both “Ages”...or was his mind one that cannot be categorized?**

**DLW:** The short answer, at least from my prospective, is that his thinking and example did reflect both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Like Jefferson before him, he liked the eighteenth-century so-called “pre-Romantic” poets, of which Robert Burns is the most noted example, and he was probably influenced by such eighteenth-century writers as Volney and Thomas Paine. But he also embraced such Romantic writers as Lord Byron and Edgar Allan Poe with enthusiasm. He had a strong rationalistic side, which is shown by his keen interest in mathematics, but he struggled as a young man with surging emotions that threatened, for a time, to overcome him. In the realm of expression, he lived in an age of orators, but he consciously rebelled against the flowery and ornamental language that was endemic to fashionable oratory and worked, instead, at developing a rhetoric of clarity and plain language. In this he seemed to follow the ideas of Wordsworth and Coleridge, two revolutionary Romantic writers he never mentions. In truth, his mature style is such that he never seems to be following any particular models of expression but rather blazing his own trail. It is probably no accident that the most notable writers of his own era — Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson — were all following something of the same impulse.

**SG: Did the American public have different expectations for the presidency in the 1860s than today?**

**DLW:** My sense of the American public in Lincoln’s day is that it was so widely diverse that it is hard to answer such a question. Tocqueville is fascinating to read precisely because he had an amazing ability to canvass the entire country, interviewing scores of differing types of people, but was then able to see their diversity as aspects of a distinctive whole. And Tocqueville was gathering his data in the midst



*Abraham Lincoln OC-0230*

of the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a very strong-minded, domineering, willful leader, which is not what the country was used to. Nor does it seem, at least on the surface, to reflect the kind of individualism that Tocqueville recognized as one of its leading characteristics. The lesson here is perhaps that the American public tended to respond to strong leadership, both pro and con, and things happened. The same proved true with James K. Polk, and in both cases Abraham Lincoln was moved to work against the forceful pressure exerted by the presidency, because he belonged to the loyal opposition.

In his own remarkable presidency, Lincoln gradually found ways to exert his own leadership and make it effective under extreme conditions. In his case, he had to find ways to shape public opinion and bring a reluctant public to accept conditions and ends that they had actively resisted. This was also true, at least to some extent, as regards members of Congress, but less so with the leadership of his own



party.

**SG:** Are we indulging in unfair judgments if we criticize Lincoln for such war-time measures as the suspension of habeas corpus? Or are we correct to be cognizant of possible legal precedents for future presidents?

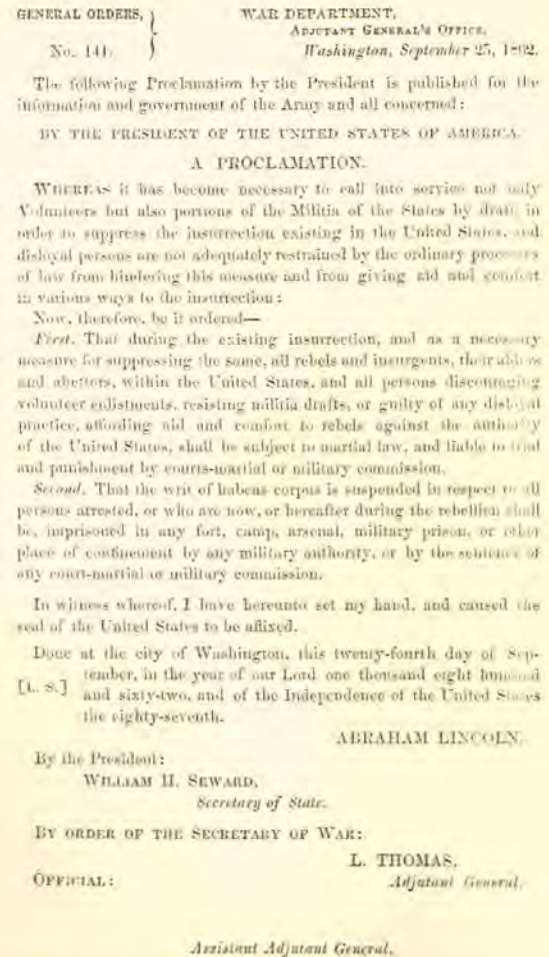
**DLW:** In one sense, Lincoln makes it easy for us to judge according to our own lights by forthrightly laying out the arguments for suspending the writ at critical times. For his early resort to the writ in Maryland, he made the argument in his memorable July 4th message to Congress in 1861, not long after the clash with Chief Justice Taney (who was sitting as a Circuit Judge). He gave his reasons in language that was direct and summarized in the form of a rhetorical question that was hard to dispute: "Are all the laws, but one, to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated?" He made a point of admitting that the Constitution did not expressly assign the exercise of the writ to the Executive, but rather "is silent as to which, or who, is to exercise the power," and he left Congress with the choice of dealing with the matter as it saw fit. In all such cases, they went along.

In the Vallandigham case of 1863, we know that Lincoln had been gathering ammunition with which to respond to the rising public dissatisfaction with the government's harsh dealings with political protests. In watching for an advantageous occasion for making a defense of his administration's policies, he deliberately chose the petition of a protest meeting that was not only Democratic but was located in the most populous loyal state, New York. Lincoln told a Congressman several months later that, when it came time to make his reply, he had already filled a drawer in his desk with slips of paper containing notes of arguments, language, and examples that he then used to construct his famous Corning

letter. In this letter, he frankly admitted that he had done things as war measures that would not have been permissible in a time of peace, but he argued convincingly that he had Constitutional warrant for those actions. In ordinary times, one might advocate freely, but he makes the case for dealing harshly with those advocating things that could destroy the government in a time of rebellion. In another rhetorical question and the most memorable line of the piece, he asked: "Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert?" This "What would you do?" strategy, which pervades the Corning letter, proved enormously effective with the public.

**SG:** How were presidential options/decisions as a result of the firing on Fort Sumter and the bombing of Pearl Harbor similar? different?

**DLW:** They were remarkably similar in that the US government, in both cases, had plenty of warning that an attack was imminent. The big difference was that the Japanese attack was secretly staged, which made it seem, from the US point of view, especially perfidious and the sign of a treacherous and unworthy adversary. In a sense, this points to a way in which the two attacks were similar: they both had the effect of producing public outrage in such a way as to present a united front for an energetic retaliation. This similarity has made for endless speculation about the ex-



General Orders, No. 141, September 25, 1862 71200908408873

tent to which Presidents Lincoln and Roosevelt may have quietly and subtly helped to bring about these two actions in order to insure this most advantageous public reaction. Certainly the forces for non-engagement with the Confederacy, in the first case, and Japan, in the other, were very strong - another similarity. Large elements of the Northern public were either sympathetic with the Confederacy or unwilling to go to war against it. But in firing on the American flag without provocation, this Northern sympathy collapsed, at least temporarily, and made it possible for Lincoln to characterize the Southern action at Fort Sumter as rebellion and instigate a military response. The effective result of Pearl Harbor did much the same for President Roosevelt. The egregious measure of interning Japanese



Americans, so widely condemned after the war, is a gauge of how alarming and disruptive the Japanese attack had been, even though it was not unexpected. The difficulties Lincoln encountered in sustaining the strong public response to Fort Sumter go far to demonstrate the differences in the two cases, for the strong hand that Roosevelt was given after Pearl Harbor was virtually undiminished throughout the ensuing war. One value of the comparison is that it brings out how hard Lincoln and his administration had to work to keep the Northern public on board; by the same token, it brings out how strong the anti-war sentiment remained in the North. And in all of this — and this is important — Lincoln resolutely refused to demonize the South. By comparison, to the American public that energetically mobilized and lent their whole-hearted support to the

war effort in the 1940s, it was the wickedness of the Axis leaders that constantly motivated and justified their commitment.

**SG:** As we have passed the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's death, what advice do you have for those who hope to keep his legacy strong?

**DLW:** From the point of view of scholars and historians, the answer has to be — continue to pursue serious inquiry and research. The public view of a much-studied subject like Abraham Lincoln is, and will probably always be, that we already know what there is to know about Lincoln, which the serious scholar knows is not the case. It is true that there is a continual stream of new books about Lincoln, almost all of which have little to offer that is factually new or, as it is often put, that break no new ground. But as the world changes

— and it keeps changing faster and faster — important historical figures and episodes take on a different appearance and suggest new meanings in the light of changing conditions. Another way to think of this is to say that every generation has to work out its own way of understanding the past. But in addition to this, the ongoing research of Lincoln scholars continues to find new information, to refine and correct old information, and to propose new insights into Lincoln's life, his career, or his era.

Here are a few examples of new developments from the last twenty years of Lincoln scholarship.

Much of what is known about Lincoln's early life comes from the investigations of his last law partner, William H. Herndon, who compiled an extensive archive of letters and interviews

with people who had known Lincoln as a small boy in Kentucky, a growing adolescent in Indiana, and a resident of the village of New Salem in Illinois. Although this archive had been in the Library of Congress since 1941 and available on microfilm a few years later, its invaluable testimony about Lincoln's pre-presidential life and career had never been systematically edited and published in a scholarly edition until the turn of the present century, less than twenty years ago. As a result, many biographical incidents, episodes, and details that had had little or no exposure in Lincoln biography came rapidly into play. Events such as Lincoln's love affair with Ann Rutledge, which had been downgraded by scholars to the status of a little more than a myth, took on new life when so much of the pertinent evidence became readily available and could be taken into account. That Lincoln had experienced two serious mental breakdowns by the age of thirty had scarcely penetrated Lincoln biography before the testimony of those who witnessed these incidents became widely available for examination. The details of the young Lincoln's difficulties with women constitute another important aspect of Lincoln's development that has come to the fore as a result of the publication of the testimony that Herndon collected and preserved. These are only examples, but the flurry of important new books on Lincoln in the recent past amply illustrates the proposition that the Lincoln theme is far from exhausted.

*Douglas Wilson is co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College. He is the author of Lincoln's Sword, Honor's Voice, and Lincoln Before Washington and co-editor of Herndon's Informants, Herndon's Lincoln, and The Lincoln-Douglas Debates.*

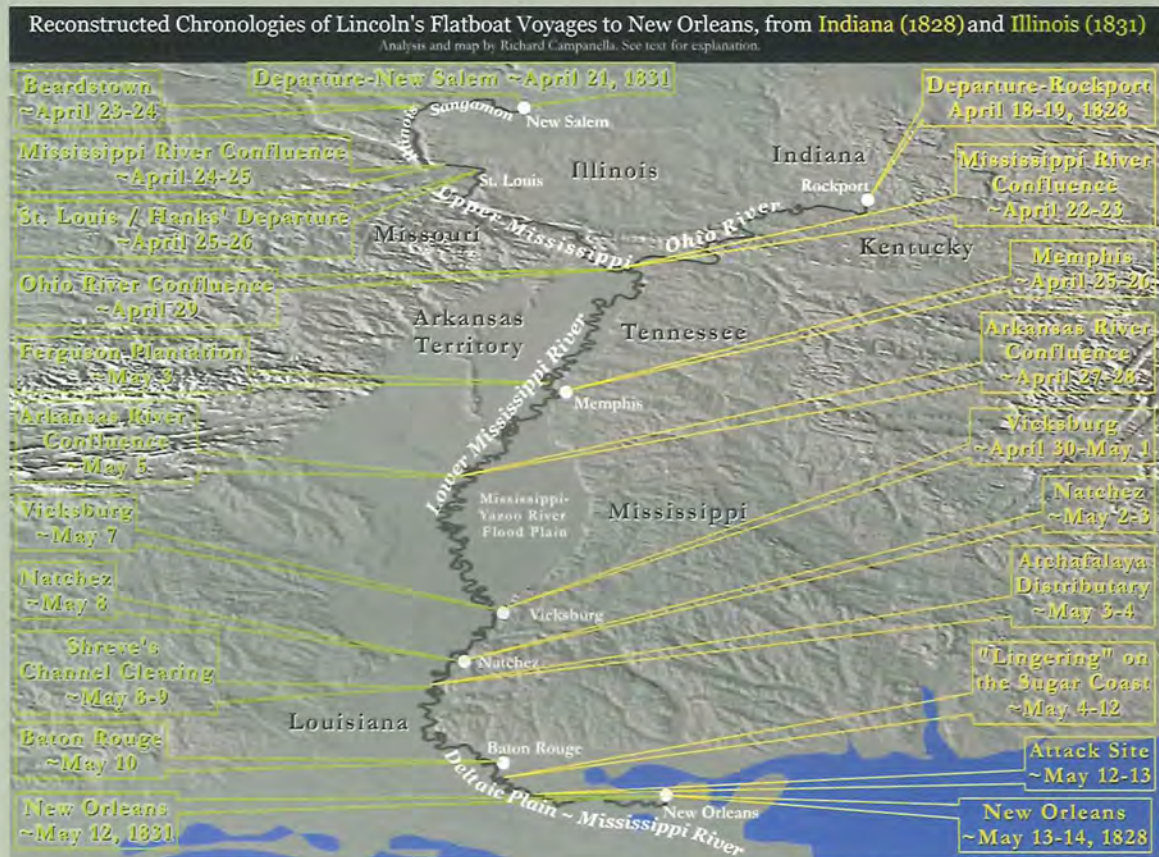


Abraham Lincoln LN-1012



# Lincoln's First Flatboat Trip to New Orleans: Resolving an Indiana Mystery

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA



Reconstructed chronologies of Lincoln's flatboat trips to New Orleans, from Indiana (1828) and Illinois (1831). Analysis and map by Richard Campanella

Most *Lincoln Lore* readers know the basic outlines of the story: that Thomas Lincoln guided his family into Indiana "in the autumn of 1816," as his son Abraham would later recall, "on account of slavery [and] the difficulty in land titles in K[entucky];" that the family would establish a homestead at Pigeon Creek in Spencer County; and that young Abe would come of age among these Indiana forests and fields near the Ohio River. On its banks at Rockport Landing began a key moment in the teenager's maturation, when nineteen-year-old Abe gained employment from local merchant James Gentry to help his son Allen Gentry build and guide a flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans.

That trip, and a second one in 1831, would form the two longest journeys of Lincoln's life, his only visits to the

Lower South, and the closest he ever came to immersing himself in a foreign culture. They also exposed the youth, for the first and only time in his life, to large-scale plantation slavery and urban slave-trading, far more than he had ever seen in Kentucky, and gave him first-hand experiences in everything from river navigation to an early railroad (not to mention a violent attack in Louisiana). The two flatboat voyages represent transformational episodes in the least-known era of Lincoln's otherwise thoroughly examined adult life, and they would influence the man, and the president, he would become.

Since my childhood I have been intrigued by those voyages. Decades later, as a historical geographer at Tulane University specializing in New Orleans and the Mississippi River, I decided to delve deeply into them,

hoping to shed light on the nature and impact of those experiences. The three years of research I put into *Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828-1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History* (University of Louisiana Press, 2010) were among the most rewarding of my career, and readers interested in my larger findings may consult the book for more detail. My purpose in this article is to settle a simple but key question of particular interest to Hoosier Lincoln buffs: when exactly did Lincoln depart Indiana for Louisiana?

Figuring out when boat captain Allen Gentry and his hired hand Abe launched their flatboat from Rockport was critical to my project because it would direct me to the proper time window in which Lincoln would have arrived in New Orleans, and thus enable me to reconstruct the daily life in



the city to which he might have been exposed. It was a mystery I simply had to resolve, and it took the form of a binary: all evidence pointed to either (1) an early springtime (March or April) 1828 launch, or (2) a late-autumn/early-winter (December) launch later in the year 1828, with an arrival in New Orleans in 1829. Neither alternative can be proven by primary historical documentation: there are no surviving port registries, no manifests or receipts, no contracts, and certainly no journals nailing down the date. But other clues abound, and in this article, I triangulate among them, weigh them, and make my best judgment. In the process, I hope *Lincoln Lore* readers gain insights into everyday life in southern Indiana 180 years ago, while sharing in the challenge of historical detective work. The findings, I hope, may also aid other researchers seeking to hammer out the chronology of Lincoln's Indiana life, a period of fourteen years (1816-1830) within which a lengthy and risky journey to a far-away metropolis would have formed an unforgettable rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.

So when did Gentry and Lincoln launch, spring or winter 1828? Contextual evidence accommodates the springtime hypothesis well. Warming temperatures, high swift-flowing rivers, lengthening daylight, and economic bustle in New Orleans all support the rationale of a springtime launch. Exceptionally warm and wet weather in early 1828 caused extremely high waters in the Ohio and Mississippi, which might have prompted the river-savvy James Gentry to organize a voyage to exploit the swift current. ("The river is rising very fast and appears to be pretty well lined with flatboats," observed one navigator in 1835, indicating how rivermen "read" the river and deployed accordingly.) Lincoln himself would set out from Illinois in the month of April for his 1831 voyage to New Orleans, while his own father Thomas had departed in March back in 1806, when he set sail for the same destination. Port records show that flatboat arrivals generally peaked at New Orleans between late March and early May, when eight to nine flatboats registered daily. Given that the journey usually took three to four weeks, this implies that upcountry departures peaked proportionately in March and April.<sup>2</sup>

Secondary evidence adds further cre-

dence to a springtime launch, the strongest coming from the research of William H. Herndon. As Lincoln's longtime Springfield law partner and close friend, Herndon looms large in the literature of Lincoln's early life, so some background on his work is in order.

A few months after the president's assassination in 1865, Herndon set out for Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois to interview people who knew Lincoln in his early years. The resulting 250-plus transcripts and letters have been described as "one of the first extensive oral history projects in American history."<sup>3</sup> Herndon and collaborator Jesse W. Weik wove the information into narrative form and published it in 1889 as *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*.

The effort earned criticism from both general and scholarly readers. Some rebuked Herndon for his occasionally discomfiting portrayal of the immortalized president: his plebeian roots, his apparent secularity, his bouts with depression. Historians, for their part, faulted Herndon for sloppy interviewing methods and questioned the reliability of decades-old reminiscences. Nevertheless, Herndon's body of material constitutes an unmatched treasure trove of first-person perspectives on Lincoln's youth. His dogged fieldwork and well-preserved notes form the source of hundreds of subsequent histories and biographies underlie much of what we think we know about Lincoln before he stepped onto the national stage. Indeed, many of Herndon's critics are also Herndon citers. Scholars have recently begun to reassess Herndon's unfavorable reputation, and rightfully so.<sup>4</sup> In 1998, historians Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis published Herndon's interview notes and correspondences, providing researchers convenient access to the words of Lincoln's aging contemporaries. Through these and other way-points, gathered from shipping data, river reports, fellow rivermen's journals, and other innovative sources, we can reconstruct the basic chronology of Lincoln's voyage to New Orleans—starting, of course, with the all-important launch date.

Among Herndon's September 1865 inquiries was a valuable interview with 57-year-old Anna Caroline ("Katie") Gentry, whose now-deceased husband accompanied

Lincoln to New Orleans decades earlier.<sup>5</sup> "My name is Mrs. Gentry—wife of Allen Gentry," she declared, "with whom Mr Lincoln went to NO for Ja[me]s Gentry Sen[jor] in April 1828...."<sup>6</sup> Born around the same time as Lincoln and schooled with him, the widow Gentry continued:

Speaking about the boat & the trip let me say to you that I saw the boat—was on it—saw it start and L[incoln] with it.... They went down the Ohio & Mississippi...they Came back in June 1828.<sup>7</sup>

Anna Gentry's clear personal memory is compelling evidence for a springtime launch, particularly in light of her relationship to the two men involved: friend of Abe, wife of Allen. A dangerous meteorological anomaly made April 1828 particularly memorable: after months of spring-like weather, daytime temperatures suddenly plunged from 60° to 22° F and lower at night. The hard freeze and light snow killed seedling crops and turned the balmy winter of 1828 into a long-rued "False Spring."<sup>8</sup> Anna's 83-year-old father Absolom Roby, who farmed that year, backed up his daughter's testimony when Herndon interviewed him on the same day in September 1865. Roby affirmed, "[Lincoln] and Gentry did go to N.O. in April 1828. as Said by my daughter... I was often at the landing from which Gentry & Abe started to N.O...." But the elderly man later admitted, "my memory is gone & I myself am fast going."<sup>9</sup>

Further substantiation of a spring launch comes from Herndon's interview with neighbors Nathaniel Grigsby, Silas Richardson, Nancy Richardson, and John Romine on September 14, 1865. Romine stated that "Lincoln went to N.O. about '28 or '29.... Boat Started out of the Ohio in the Spring—Abe about 20 years of age.... Gone about two months."<sup>10</sup> Thus we have corroboration of Anna Gentry's recollection that the trip began in spring, and that it lasted around two months. Romine, son-in-law of the man (James Gentry) who hired Lincoln to go to New Orleans, makes three Gentry family members (along with Anna and Absolom) who knew Lincoln personally, all concurring on a spring launch.

Armed with this evidence, Herndon reported spring 1828 as the season of the flatboat launch in his 1889 biography: "In March, 1828," he wrote, "James Gentry...fitted out a boat with



a stock of grain and meat" for Allen and Abe to guide downriver. (It's unclear why Herndon wrote March when his informant said April, but the important thing for our purposes is that Herndon felt it was a spring launch.) Widely cited, Herndon's March 1828 judgment has since permeated much subsequent literature.<sup>11</sup>

The second hypothesis holds that Gentry and Lincoln launched in late December 1828, and a fair amount of Lincoln literature cites this date—including at least one roadside historical marker in Spencer County. Setting out in a raft during the cold short days around the winter solstice, when the river runs low and slow, might seem needlessly risky. Incessant wind, frost, rain, fog, hail, and snow, for example, slowed one wintertime Indiana-to-New-Orleans flatboat voyage to nearly twice the length of a typical spring trip. The inclement conditions also made the navigator "very unwell... with a bad cold [and] Ague [fever].... The weather is fine for that disease."<sup>12</sup>

But wintertime flatboating was not complete madness. An end-of-year launch delivered recently harvested crops to market before they might spoil. It aligned particularly well with tobacco cultivation, as leaves are cut in August or September, staked to dry, then braided in November and shipped in December. It also coincided with the ideal season for exporting hog meat, as the autumn chill staved off decay between slaughter and curing.<sup>13</sup> Year-end launches supplied foodstuffs to the New Orleans market just as demand rose vis-à-vis the city's enlarged wintertime population. They also gave farmers something productive to do in the off-season, and freed up the subsequent spring for planting. While temperatures might indeed be frigid, they gradually warmed with each southbound mile. Low water levels surely slowed progress, but they also reduced the risk of the flatboat spiraling out of control, something that often happened to greenhorn pilots in strong currents.

The December launch hypothesis stems from Gentry family oral history as recorded and interpreted by two amateur historians working independently in the 1930s. Their names were Bess V. Ehrmann and Francis Marion Van Natter.

An enthusiastic and multi-talented curator of the Spencer County Historical

Society, Bess Ehrmann interviewed numerous Gentry descendants as part of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society's effort to write the "missing chapter" of Lincoln's life. "Many flatboat men along the Ohio did make their trips in April," Ehrmann acknowledged, but the Gentry family was always known to go in the late fall or early winter. There were other men who made their trips in winter, Mr. Louis Gentry[,] the grandson of Allen Gentry[,] told me.

I have known intimately many of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of both James Gentry and Allen Gentry. All members of both families know that their ancestors, three generations of them, made their flatboat trips to New Orleans in the fall or winter, after the hogs were butchered and the summer crops gathered and stored ready for marketing in New Orleans. Ice did not come in the rivers until late in the winter, and as Mr. Louis Gentry told me, "You must remember we were traveling south away from the cold."<sup>14</sup>

Francis Marion Van Natter interviewed Gentry family members around the same time (1936) and wove his findings into his book *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years*, published posthumously in 1963. Van Natter's work is unusual in that it invents dialogue and imbues color into boyhood vignettes, yet also contains scholarly apparatus such as footnotes and affidavit-backed interviews with local informants. Van Natter worked tirelessly and traveled extensively to understand and reconstruct the flatboat trip, taking scrupulous notes and donating his research materials to the Lewis Library at Vincennes University, where I examined them.

Among Van Natter's archives is an affidavit signed by 72-year-old E. Grant Gentry and notarized on September 5, 1936. Regarding the flatboat trip, the affidavit states that Allen and Abe left "some time between Christmas day 1828 and New Year's Day 1829," having "delayed leaving on the trip until after the birth of his expected child... born on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of December, 1828...." Revealingly, E. Grant Gentry also stated in the affidavit that his information had been "related to him by his grandmother, Anna Caroline Roby Gentry, more than fifty years ago."<sup>15</sup> What he did not know, or perhaps misremembered, was that, when interviewed by Herndon in 1865, his

grandmother pegged the departure date to April 1828, not December. Based on E. Grant Gentry's testimony, Van Natter, concurring with Bess Ehrmann, judged the launch as taking place "[m]idway between Christmas Day [1828] and New Year [1829]," and proceeded to reconstruct the trip based on that chronology.<sup>16</sup>

Additional clues exist. On the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1828, Allen Gentry wed Anna Caroline Roby, thus confirming at the very least that Gentry and Lincoln were in Indiana on that date.<sup>17</sup> Anna became pregnant within a few days. This information leaves only a week for Herndon's March launch estimate to prove true, although it does no harm to Anna Gentry's April estimate. Nine months later, on December 18, 1828, Anna gave birth to James Junior.<sup>18</sup> The delivery, according to Ehrmann, "had delayed the southern trip as Allen had refused to go until he knew all was well at home. Many years later when Lincoln became famous, the Gentrys were always to remember the date of this particular flatboat trip from the birthdate of the eldest son."<sup>19</sup> At least one modern-day Gentry family descendant—Mrs. Barbara Dillon, whom I interviewed in 2008—concurred with Ehrmann, sensing that Allen Gentry (her great-great-great-grandfather) would not have parted with his bride once he learned of her pregnancy.<sup>20</sup> If Anna became pregnant around March 21, Anna would have realized it no later than around three weeks hence, based on menstrual cycles. Presuming she told her husband promptly, Allen (and therefore Abraham) would have, under this theory, stayed home until the late-December birth. After a couple of days of assuring the health of both mother and baby, the theory goes, the duo would finally have departed.<sup>21</sup> Van Natter also acknowledged the significance of the birth, although he erroneously dated it to December 28.

But would Anna *really* have been better off with her husband disappearing into the wintry wilds as she nursed her newborn? One may reason that the relatively low-risk early months of a pregnancy—balmy April, May, and June, in this case—offered the *ideal* time for a husband and father-to-be to take care of out-of-town business. This would enable him to be home during the more perilous months of the late term, birth, and first weeks of infancy, when an Indiana winter



would only make matters worse. Both mother and child run far greater risks in the weeks after birth than in the weeks after conception. Contrary to Ehrmann's reasoning, the Gentry baby issue seems to buttress the April launch hypothesis, and weaken the case for a December launch.

As for Van Natter, he dramatically describes "a blizzard threaten[ing]...a strong northwest gale...the December wind [growing] colder and growl[ing] louder" within hours of the baby's birth.<sup>22</sup> If all this were true meteorologically, such conditions would seem to weigh against the likelihood of Allen flatboating into the blizzard while leaving his vulnerable charges to fend for themselves. Perhaps wintry conditions did strike as fiercely as Van Natter described. But Western explorer and scientist William Clark, stationed only two hundred miles away in St. Louis, personally recorded very different weather for the last five days of 1828: clear skies, generally calm, and temperatures ranging between 56° and 64° F, with December 27 described as a "Beautiful Spring morning [and a] Fine Warm Evening."<sup>23</sup> Van Natter's blizzard diminishes his overall credibility.

Another weakness in the December hypothesis is the fact that the Ohio and Mississippi rivers ran exceptionally low around that time, quite the opposite of the floodwaters earlier that year. "The river began to fall in June [1828]," wrote scientist John W. Monette in the 1850s, and "remained low from August until the last of December"—precisely the time Gentry and Lincoln allegedly departed.<sup>24</sup> William Clark, stationed at St. Louis, recorded the Mississippi "falling" consistently throughout the last ten days of December.<sup>25</sup> The trend continued into the new year: "The Mississippi has fallen eighteen inches," reported the *New Orleans Price Current* on January 11, settling at "10½ feet below high water mark, being 7½ feet lower than this time last year." Two weeks later, it had "fallen [another] six inches, [to] 11 feet below high water mark, being 8½ feet lower than at this time last year."<sup>26</sup> Equating to perhaps 3 to 5 feet above mean sea level at New Orleans, the current would have flowed around 1.5 to 2.2 miles per hour, roughly half the speed during springtime high water.<sup>27</sup> Low water in winter could be dangerous as well as tedious, because it was prone to freezing over, particularly along

When in 1828 Did Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln Depart by Flatboat for New Orleans?											
Evidence for Springtime Departure		Nature and Strength of Evidence (0-1 scale)			Evidence for Autumn/Winter Departure		Nature and Strength of Evidence (0-1 scale)				
Evidence		Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Contextual	Evidence		Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Contextual
		Maritime reports confirming very high number of flatboat arrivals to N.O. during time we expect Lincoln to land according to spring departure hypothesis, and very low number for corresponding autumn/winter hypothesis	1.0							Gentry family associate William Jones contracts for flatboat to be delivered in December 1833	0.2
Lincoln's statement, "When [I] was nineteen...[I] made [my] first trip upon a flat-boat to New-Orleans..."	0.2					Bess Ehrmann's circa-1920s interviews with numerous Gentry descendants, followed by Francis Marion Van Natter's affidavits in the 1960s.				1.0	
Lincoln's hand-editing of Howell biography, in which he corrected spring-1830 departure date for Illinois as being two years after New Orleans trip	0.5					Fairly busy flatboat season in general					0.25
Anna Gentry's personal recollection of an April-to-June trip			0.9			Convenient alignment with harvest and planting schedules					0.3
Alasorum Rolly's concurrence of Anna Gentry's recollection			0.2								
Grigsby's, Richardson's, and Romme's recollection of spring departure			0.5								
High, swift rivers in spring 1828 versus low, slow waters in December					0.4						
Warmer temperatures, safer climate					0.3						
Busiest flatboat season in general					0.5						
Gentry family habe situation					0.5						
Weight factor (importance)	3.0	2.0	1.0	1.0		Weight factor (importance)	3.0	2.0	1.0	1.0	
Sum of evidence strength multiplied by weight	5.1	3.2	0.0	1.7		Sum of evidence strength multiplied by weight	0.8	0.0	1.0	0.55	
Total strength of springtime hypothesis					10.0	Total strength of autumn/winter hypothesis					2.15

Evidence presented in this article, and weighed numerically in this chart, leans decisively to an April 1828 launch date. Analysis and graphic by Richard Campanella.

slack-water banks where flatboatmen could get ice-locked overnight. It also brought obstacles closer to the surface: so weakly flowed both the Ohio and Mississippi in November that a snag rose treacherously to the surface, puncturing the hull of the steamboat *Columbus* and sinking it.<sup>28</sup> If an experienced riverman like James Gentry witnessed these unfavorable conditions in late December, he might well have cancelled plans for a trip to New Orleans—unless, of course, his hires had already completed that trip the previous spring.

Nevertheless, documents show that some flatboats did indeed depart Spencer County in December of other years. A January 22, 1821 letter written by resident C. William Morgan, for example, speaks of late December launches. More significant is William Jones' flatboat contract of 1833: Jones once worked in Gentry's store and may have owned it by 1833. If Jones' annual business schedule resembled Gentry's, then Jones' delivery date for the flatboat may shed light on our mystery. That date: December 1. Assuming a couple of weeks to load and prepare for the trip, this equates to a mid- or late-December launch. Another example comes from one of the best-documented flatboat voyages of the era, that of the *Davy Crockett*. It launched from Posey County, Indiana, for New Orleans on December 20, 1834—the same week, six years hence, that Gentry and

Lincoln supposedly departed under the wintertime hypothesis.<sup>29</sup> None of these cases bears any direct relation to the Lincoln trip; they only show that December launches were not uncommon.

Lincoln himself fell just a few words short of clarifying the departure question. "When [I] was nineteen, still residing in Indiana," he recollected in 1860, "[I] made [my] first trip upon a flat-boat to New-Orleans..."<sup>30</sup> His words rule out departures predating his February 12, 1828 birthday and postdating the 1829 birthday, but shed no further light. (Had he departed in December, might he have mentioned reaching his milestone twentieth birthday while on voyage?)

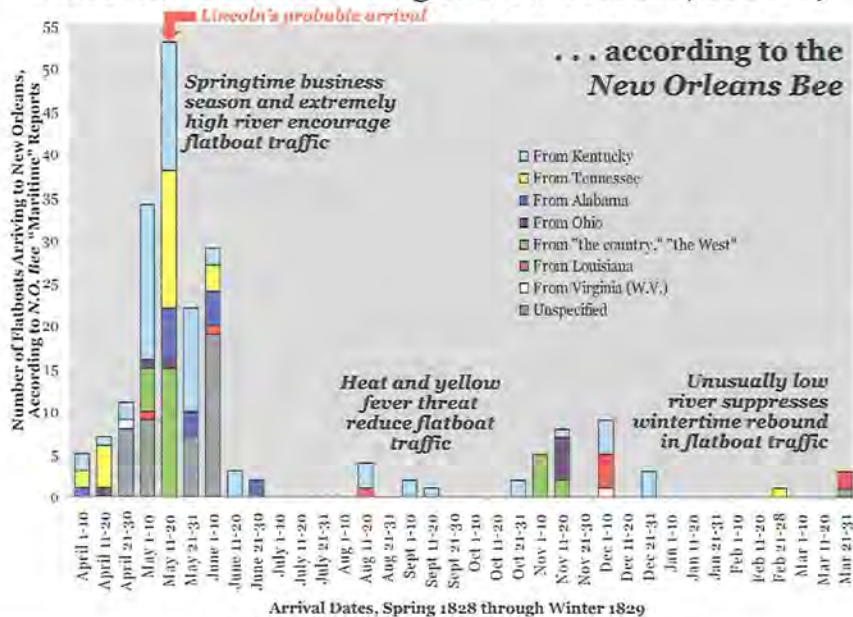
Lincoln did, however, serendipitously imply a spring 1828 launch when he hand-edited a short biography titled *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, written by William Dean Howells during the 1860 presidential campaign. Howells introduced his readers to Lincoln's Indiana boyhood and brought them to the flatboat story:

The Lincolns continued to live in Spencer county, until 1830, nothing interrupting the even tenor of Abraham's life, except in his nineteenth year, a flat-boat trip to New Orleans.

Howells wrapped up the flatboat story with a few vignettes and placed Lincoln back in Indiana. He started



## Flatboat Traffic Arriving to New Orleans, 1828-29



Analysis by Richard Campanella based on "Maritime" reports in *New Orleans Bee*

When did Lincoln first set foot in New Orleans? Documents from the Collector of Levee Dues and the Wharfinger, which recorded flatboat arrivals, do not survive for 1828. However, a local newspaper reported this information in its *Maritime News* columns. When plotted from April 1, 1828, through March 31, 1829, we see that large numbers of flatboats arrived in spring 1828, but very few in early 1829. This, together with other evidence, strongly suggests that Lincoln first set foot in New Orleans in mid-May 1828, and not in winter 1829.

the next paragraph with the words, "Four years afterward, on the first of March, 1830, his father determined to emigrate once more...for Illinois..." When Lincoln hand-edited the draft, the presidential candidate crossed out the word "Four" and wrote in "Two," meaning that the March 1, 1830 emigration date to Illinois postdated the flatboat trip to New Orleans by two years.<sup>31</sup> This corrected chronology aligns neatly with the spring 1828 departure hypothesis, and undermines the late-autumn 1828 hypothesis, which Lincoln presumably would have rounded off to "One year afterward..." Importantly, this piece of evidence positions Lincoln personally in the role of clarifying the timing of his flatboat trip as spring 1828.

It is greatly disappointing that both Thomas Lincoln's flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1806 and Abraham Lincoln's two trips in 1828 and 1831 all fail to appear in any primary documentary evidence surviving in New Orleans today. I searched local archives rigorously, and what I found was that the city's flatboat records—specifically those of the Collector of Levee Dues and the Wharfinger, stored on microfilm and in the New Orleans Public Library's City Archives—survive only for parts of 1806, 1818-1823, and for certain wharves from 1845 through

1852.<sup>32</sup> When we plot out those existing records, we see that late-January and early-February arrivals (boats that would have left Indiana one month earlier) made mid-winter the second-busiest flatboat season of those years. However, the *busiest* flatboat season in New Orleans was springtime, when arrival rates roughly doubled. This evidence, albeit contextual and nowhere near the year 1828, adds some additional support to the springtime hypothesis.

Despite the loss of the original flatboat records, we still have newspaper reports of that information. Perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence supporting the springtime hypothesis may be found in the daily *Ship News* (Marine) columns of the bilingual newspapers *New Orleans Bee* and *New Orleans Argus*. They listed activity at the Port of New Orleans by vessel type, origin or destination, and load. Flatboats (*châlans* in French) were listed by their origin, load, and local client. A survey of the *Bee's* columns from April through June 1828—the arrival window for the spring hypothesis—uncovered more than 130 flatboats landing at New Orleans. The *Argus*, meanwhile, recorded around 140. An identical survey of arrivals in the *Bee* for January-February 1829—the equivalent time window for the December hypothesis—found not a single flatboat

arriving at New Orleans. The extremely low water in the river at that time, coupled with freezing temperatures, probably explains why the typically second-busiest flatboat season of the year instead saw zero flatboat traffic. ("Water low in Ohio—and ice making," warned the *Bee* in mid-February; "Mississippi [is] closed at the mouth of Ohio; Tennessee and Cumberland [rivers] low."<sup>33</sup>) These data prove that not only was spring 1828 far busier than winter 1829 in terms of flatboat arrivals, but that mid-May 1828, as we shall see shortly, ranked by far as the busiest flatboat period of the entire year, while January-February 1829 was among the slowest.<sup>34</sup> This is key information.

Taking stock of the above discussion, we have ample evidence in support of the spring hypothesis. Anna Gentry said so clearly, and Absolom Roby and John Romine concurred. Lincoln himself left behind clues that buttress the springtime launch, and said or phrased or implied nothing to contradict it. Numerous strands of contextual evidence lend additional support to a spring departure, as do the invitingly high river stages of spring 1828 and the extremely large number of *Bee* and *Argus* flatboat listings. Even Allen and Anna Gentry's baby situation renders a spring voyage more rational than a risky winter trip.

What supports the December hypothesis, on the other hand, is mostly a limited amount of tertiary evidence, reported by Bess V. Ehrmann and Francis Marion Van Natter working a full century after the launch. All other strands of December-hypothesis support are contextual and less convincing compared to their spring counterparts. Most troubling is the utter absence of flatboat arrivals documented in the *Bee Ship News* listings during the January-February 1829 time window in which Gentry and Lincoln should have arrived, compared to the boom we saw in spring. Nearly all footnoted Lincoln books and articles reporting a December launch cite it to Ehrmann and Van Natter, who, with all due respect to their dedication and contributions, may have methodologically leaned too heavily on passed-down family memories. Van Natter's use of affidavits may have ensured honesty on the part of his informants, but guaranteed nothing in terms of accuracy. There is such a thing as being honestly wrong.



Balancing all of the above, I judge that the springtime 1828 departure hypothesis enjoys a convincing preponderance of evidence. Assigning numerical values and weights to the various levels of evidence—a subjective but nonetheless worthwhile exercise—suggests that the springtime hypothesis is, conservatively speaking, at least four to five times stronger than the wintertime scenario (see graphic).

We must now attempt to refine exactly *when* in spring 1828 Gentry and Lincoln departed, and here again I evaluate and weigh the evidence. March seems too early: despite Herndon's support, this month has, as previously explained, a demonstrably small time window in which to prove correct. Importantly, it gives Allen Gentry a limited time window during which he could have impregnated his wife Anna Gentry in time for her December 18 childbirth. May or June, on the other hand, are too late. This leaves April as the likeliest launch month.

When in April? A killer frost on April 5-7 suddenly ended the "False Spring" of 1828, plunging temperatures into the teens (F) "accompanied with a light Snow." Presumably the duo would have had the sense to wait out that wintry blast. By April 12, afternoon temperatures, incredibly, hit 80° F.<sup>35</sup> Did they leave then? Anna Gentry drops a charming clue in her interview with Herndon:

One Evening Abe & myself were Sitting on the banks of the Ohio or on the [flat]boat Spoken of. I Said to Abe that the Moon was going down. He said, "Thats not so—it don't really go down: it Seems So. The Earth turns from west to East and the revolution of the Earth Carries us under, as it were: we do the sinking...The moons sinking is only an appearance."<sup>36</sup>

Only a young crescent moon sets in the evening sky, one to three days after the new moon. In April 1828, the new moon occurred on April 14, thus young crescents would have set in the early evenings of April 15-17 and a full moon would have occurred on April 30, at the midpoint of the long float to New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> A waxing moon would have maximized the lunar illumination of the darkened river and enabled nocturnal sailing, an opportunity flatboatmen often seized. In light of the above evidence and in the absence of any additional clues, I

posit that Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln poled out of Rockport, Indiana, a few days after Anna and Abe discussed the setting moon: around Friday or Saturday, April 18 or 19, 1828.

And that's when the adventure really began.

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