

The Wide Awake Bulletin



The Lincoln Group of New York FEBRUARY 2017
DEDICATED TO THE STUDY OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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President's Letter



Dear Members,

As I sit here about to put pen to paper (actually of course it's fingers to plastic keyboard but that simply doesn't sound as good), I'm amazed by the fact that I still can't get past the 2016 presidential election campaign cycle—the heightened rancor, offensive rhetoric, and let's just say "unique" candidates of both major parties. Regardless of whether you're happy, unhappy, or even indifferent to the outcome (is anyone?), as historians and history enthusiasts, it's been a most unique process and period (with the requisite "surprise" outcome) that perhaps has never been witnessed before, certainly in our lifetimes. Current politics is something that is best left not discussed here within the pages of *The Wide Awake*, and I won't, but again regardless of which side you come down on (in this or any other election), I like to point to what Lincoln stated in his first inaugural address: "While the people retain their virtue and vigilance, no administration, by any extreme of wickedness or folly, can very seriously injure the government in the short space of four years."

With respect to politics and political campaigns again, but in this case strictly of the past, Tom Horrocks, author, editor, and co-editor of seven books, has contributed an outstanding article in this issue (beginning on page 5) on Lincoln's campaign biographies, how his image was ultimately shaped for the 1860 election campaign in what too was certainly a very divisive campaign season, albeit with very different ramifications.

I also would like to remind you that we are very much a membership-based organization. We are only as strong as our membership is (and what our members contribute), and if you haven't already done so, please do renew your membership for 2017 with the form included with this mailing of *The Wide Awake*. Also, please think about friends and colleagues that would enjoy being a member and/or attending a meeting as your guest. One of our great strengths is not only the high quality of our programs but the great camaraderie that our meetings offer. There is nothing quite like being in a room full of people who have an interest and enjoy the same thing that you do, regardless of where they come from or what they do (or how they voted!).

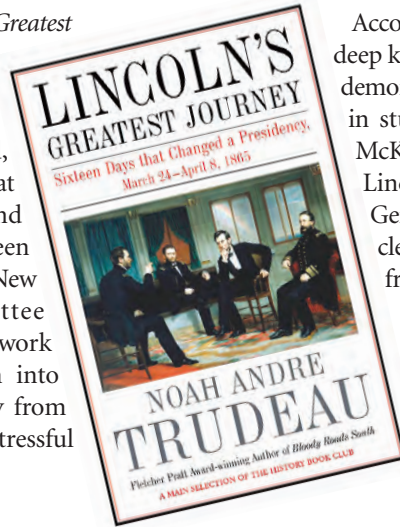
In closing, I would like to thank the hard working and extremely dedicated Award of Achievement committee, chaired this year by Frank McKenna, with Paula Hopewell and Joe Truglio. This trio has spent a great deal of their time in reviewing the multitude of Lincoln works this year and they are in fact, the personification of what I wrote about above with respect to the strength of our membership.

I look forward to seeing you at our future meetings and please do feel free to reach out at any time to discuss anything relating to Lincoln and The Lincoln Group of New York!

Sincerely,
Steven R. Koppelman
President

Noah Andre Trudeau Wins Award of Achievement for 2016

Noah Andre Trudeau's work *Lincoln's Greatest Journey: Sixteen Days that Changed a Presidency, March 24 – April 8, 1865* (Savas Beatie) has been selected as the recipient for the 2016 Award of Achievement. The award, presented to the individual or organization that has done the most to encourage the study and appreciation of Abraham Lincoln, has been conferred annually by The Lincoln Group of New York since 1988. The award committee unanimously concluded that "Trudeau's work provides ground-breaking primary research into Lincoln's little-known and longest stay away from Washington, DC during his extremely stressful presidency."



According to committee Chair Frank McKenna, "Trudeau's deep knowledge is evident throughout this original work and demonstrates that there is indeed new knowledge to be gained in studying America's greatest president and statesman." McKenna further stated, "The little-known sixteen days of Lincoln's stay at the war-front in City Point, Virginia, at General Grant's invitation, provided Lincoln with a much clearer idea of the war effort and a much-needed respite from the enervating atmosphere of Washington, DC."

In addition to Mr. McKenna, the award committee for 2016 was comprised of Paula Hopewell and Joseph Truglio. The award will be presented to Mr. Trudeau at our February 2017 dinner meeting where he will also speak on his book. ~

2016 Meetings Review

2016 was no exception when it came to evocative and original interpretations of the life and times of Abraham Lincoln...

February 10, 2016: A special joint-meeting with the Civil War Round Table of New York was held on this night. Why? Because *Lincoln and the Jews* by Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell (the book and the exhibition) were the recipients not only of The Lincoln Group of New York's Award of Achievement but also the round table's Baroness Lincoln Award.

But before the ceremonies took place, there was business to attend to. The Executive Committee, having met earlier in the day, recommended a new slate of officers for the membership to approve as is required every two years. In this case, the new slate was the same as the already existing slate as Steven R. Koppelman as president, Paul Ellis-Graham as vice-president, Robert G. Langford as treasurer, and Fran Berman as secretary were all recommended to continue in their positions and approved unanimously by the membership. In addition, John Bodnar was appointed as a new member of the Executive Committee (replacing Diana Garrera who decided to step down after many faithful years of service as treasurer and then Executive Committee member). Lastly, the new Award of Achievement committee was selected as Frank McKenna moves up to the position of chair, and Paula Hopewell and Joseph A. Truglio were added as new members.



John Bodnar

With that completed, a very special presentation took place in the form of a "public conversation" as co-author, Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna was interviewed about *Lincoln and the Jews* by Harold Holzer. This proved to be a most substantive conversation indeed. With discussions about Abraham Jonas, Lincoln's "Jewish friend" during his pre-presidential years who he would later appoint as deputy postmaster of Quincy, Illinois in the early stages of his presidency, and the story of how Lincoln came to appoint the first Jewish

Chaplain in the military, Sarna's depth of knowledge and ability to tell a story call to mind a Lincoln who few realize had such a sense of fairness when it came to religious tolerance.

Sarna was also probed by Holzer about the incident where General Ulysses S. Grant had expelled the Jews from his military department. Here too, Sarna explained not only how Grant came to realize that he had made a mistake and apologized for it (unlike, as Dr. Sarna pointed out, Ferdinand and Isabella, Tsar Nicholas, etc.), but how Lincoln reacted in revoking Grant's order.



Jonathan D. Sarna & Harold Holzer

In closing out the conversation, Holzer brought up the subject of the "exotic, mysterious, and fascinating" Dr. Zacharie, Lincoln's "foot doctor" or chiropodist. Dr. Sarna, who referred to Zacharie as quite a "character" spoke of his desire for the creation of a chiropody corps in the army amongst many other interesting aspects of his character that are all captured in this wonderful work, *Lincoln and the Jews*.



Frank McKenna, Jonathan D. Sarna, John Bodnar, Benjamin Shapell & Richard Sloan

Now it was time to present the Award of Achievement to Dr. Sarna and his co-author Benjamin Shapell. President Steve Koppelman introduced the Chair of the award committee, John Bodnar, who after publicly thanking his co-members on the committee, Frank McKenna and Richard Sloan, **continued on page 3**

2016 Meetings Review, continued

gave an eloquent and emotional depiction of exactly why *Lincoln and the Jews* was a co-winner of the 2015 award (along with Ford's Theatre). Bodnar referenced the beauty and depth of quality of the book, the unique and "never seen before" primary document sources that appeared as well as the exhibition which was hosted by the New-York Historical Society (their vice-president and library director Dr. Michael Ryan was introduced earlier in the evening to recognize the role that the N-YHS played as part of the overall award winning *Lincoln and the Jews* project) in making his overall point of this work doing the "most to encourage the study and appreciation of Abraham Lincoln."



Paul Weiss, Judith Lee Hallock, Jonathan D. Sarna & Benjamin Shapell

After the award was presented to Dr. Sarna and Mr. Shapell and their most gracious acceptance comments and appreciation, the Civil War Round Table of New York followed up with their own

award presentation, doubling-down if you will on what was a wonderful evening with a most stimulating discussion, and enjoyable ceremony! ~

April 12, 2016: The day dawned rainy, but beautiful afternoon sunshine spread over New York City, providing an idyllic view of St. Patrick's Cathedral from the Solarium room of our meeting venue as Ford's Theatre was presented with our Award of Achievement for their *Ford's 150: Remembering the Lincoln Assassination*. On hand to accept the award on behalf of Ford's was Director of Artistic Programming, Patrick Pearson.

Mr. Pearson first presented the background of the creation and implementation of the historical commemorative programming that was being honored on this night. Programs, exhibits, and events that included: *Silent Witnesses: Artifacts of the Lincoln Assassination*, *Now He Belongs to the Ages: A Lincoln Commemoration*, and *The Lincoln Tribute* (around the clock events, vigils, etc.).



Patrick Pearson

Pearson stressed that Ford's wanted to respectfully commemorate the events. For example, during the planning stages he was continuously asked if they were going to reenact the assassination or put on the play, *Our American Cousin*. The answer to both was...no! The former would certainly not be appropriate and the latter simply would not work because what would they do once getting to the infamous scene that took place at the time of the assassination?

Mr. Pearson felt that the most meaningful of the programming was the *Now He Belongs to the Ages* commemoration that took place inside Ford's Theatre on the evening of April 14, as it showcased Lincoln's politics, humor, and his favorite art and music—essentially who he was as a human being. It was then

followed-up with a candlelight vigil and solemn wreath-laying ceremony on the morning of April 15th.

At the conclusion of his remarks, a 15-minute video highlighting the Ford's special commemorative programming was shown to the attendees. This truly conveyed the talents of the performers and the great emotions that were aroused during the commemoration.

One of the featured performers during the events was actor David Selby (*Dark Shadows* and *Falcon Crest* to name but two of his lengthy list of credits) who portrayed Abraham Lincoln, showing the many aspects of his character. Mr. Selby provided Lincoln Group of New York President Steve Koppelman with a congratulatory letter to be read on his behalf. In the letter, Selby stressed the importance of the great work that Ford's Theatre does in keeping "history very much alive and relevant to our lives today." He wrote further, "It was a once in a lifetime experience for me to have the privilege to witness and take part in those emotional events in April 2015 at Ford's Theatre."



Frank McKenna, Richard Sloan, Patrick Pearson, John Bodnar & Steven R. Koppelman

David Selby's words were certainly a tough act to follow but that's exactly what award committee member, Richard Sloan then did in making the formal presentation of the Award of Achievement to Ford's Theatre, accepted by Mr. Pearson. Sloan, after first commending his fellow committee members, John Bodnar and Frank McKenna, for their hard work and effort, focused on the emotional impact of the *Ford's 150* events. In speaking specifically about the conclusion of the *Now He Belongs to the Ages* program on the evening of April 14, Mr. Sloan stated, "When the show ended with the singing of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and Lincoln's favorite hymn, *Old One Hundred*, the audience was asked to stand for two minutes of silence. It was exactly 10:15—the moment Lincoln had been shot. I was already getting goose bumps. As the cast left the stage in silence and headed to the lobby, each of them was handed a lit candle. The six hundred and fifty or so members of the audience silently and reverently followed them, and they, too, were given lit candles, at the door. Our seats (Mr. Koppelman attended the event with Mr. Sloan—ed.) were upstairs, so we were among the last to exit. As our line reached the top of the winding staircase, I parted the curtains of one of the windows out of curiosity, to look for any activity outside. There below me was a site I shall never forget—a 'vigil' of two thousand people, each one standing motionless, with a lit candle, facing the theatre. Tears welled up in my eyes. I still get emotional just talking about it. Stepping outside to become a part of this scene was an equally moving experience for both of us. The crowd seemed to be made up of people from all over the world, young and old alike, gathered together to silently show their love and admiration for our greatest President."

continued on page 4

2016 Meetings Review, continued

With that, the Award was presented to Mr. Pearson; photos were taken, and all ultimately left the meeting with perhaps a little more understanding of the “emotions of April 1865.” ~

November 10, 2016: What do the White House and the Roosevelt House in New York City have in common? Well, on this date, the two historic locations merged (symbolically) as James B. Conroy presented a lecture on his new book, *Lincoln’s White House: The People’s House in Wartime* at a new meeting venue for The Lincoln Group of New York, the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College.

As members arrived at this historic and inspiring double townhouse (Sara Delano Roosevelt lived on one side while Franklin and Eleanor lived on the other from 1908 through 1932), informal tours were given of all the historic rooms where Franklin Roosevelt not only lived but, after his election to the presidency in 1932, was where he assembled his original administration and held multiple meetings essentially setting the tone and content of the First Hundred Days and the early New Deal.



Stuart Schneider

Prior to the dinner and Mr. Conroy’s presentation, as is the tradition at each year’s November meeting, a recitation of the *Gettysburg Address* was given. Stuart Schneider was called upon to do the honors giving his interpretation of this most famous speech in American history.

Dinner was held in the historic dual dining room (again one half of which was on Sara’s side, the other on Franklin & Eleanor’s) and Harold Holzer, the Jonathan F. Fanton director at the Roosevelt House gave a short welcoming presentation on the history of the room and the artifacts and objects of art within.



Harold Holzer

After moving downstairs to the auditorium, President Steve Koppelman introduced James B. Conroy who then proceeded to take us “right through the doors” of Lincoln’s White House. Conroy focused primarily on events that took place within the White House walls and detailed how Lincoln came to use the White House as a tool of his presidency—promoting the winning of the war, and as a platform for democracy, social, and racial progress.

Using stories and anecdotes in conjunction with a plethora of period photography and engravings, Conroy provided a vivid illustration of White House life during the Civil War. We saw and learned about all manner of people, famous and unknown, family and staff, as we gained a better understanding of how Lincoln managed the war and the country.

Conroy’s favorite character within his book was one of Lincoln’s secretaries, John Hay, and he related as evidence as to

why, the following story, “Hay once turned away a rather deluded potential visitor of Lincoln’s who told Hay that he was the son of God. Hay replied that Lincoln would be glad to meet him if he came back with a letter of introduction from his father!”

Another little known event that Conroy described was the gas leak that occurred in Lincoln’s office (now of course, known as the Lincoln Bedroom) that could have had disastrous results had Lincoln not been found just after nodding off.

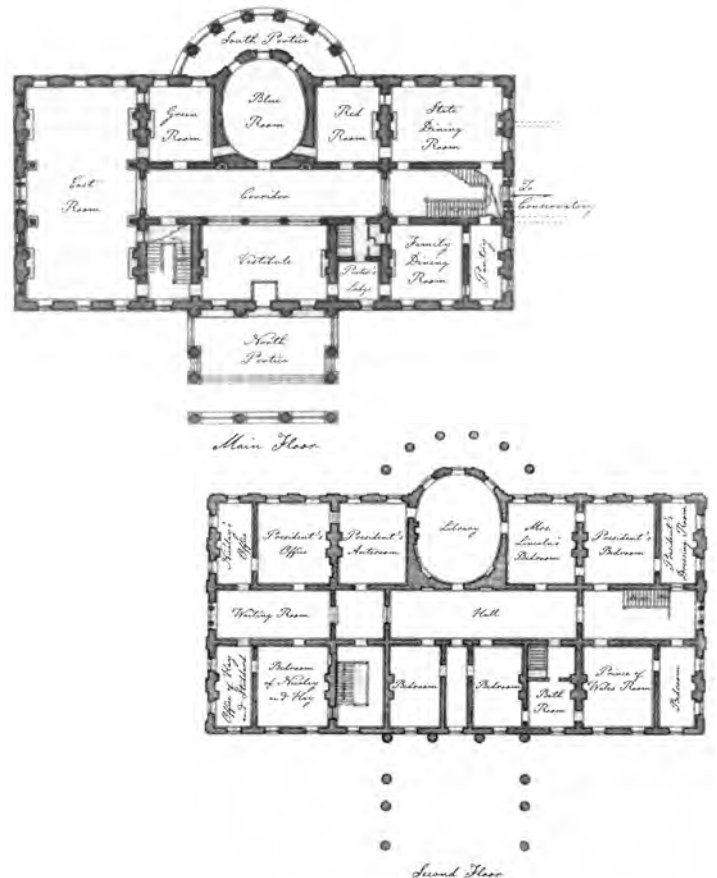
Much was also detailed about Mary Lincoln, her extravagancies as well as the various “issues” she had, her “vulnerability to con artists” as but one example. All in all, Conroy’s presentation provided a different look at Lincoln’s presidential life and how he lived it, as the White House essentially became a “character” within the Lincoln story.



James B. Conroy

The main floor of the White House then was similar to the main floor today. The second floor housed the family living quarters as it does today but it was the executive floor as well—there was no “West Wing.”

Below find the layout of the main floor and second floor of Lincoln’s White House (from Mr. Conroy’s book, original drawings by Fred D. Owen, Library of Congress, modified by Jo-Ann Parks): ~



Promoting Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter: Lincoln's Campaign Biographies and the Shaping of an Image in 1860

by Thomas A. Horrocks

The Illinois Republican party assembled on May 9, 1860, in Decatur to choose its nominee for president of the United States. When Abraham Lincoln, promoted by many of the delegates as the state's choice, arrived at the convention, he was greeted enthusiastically. After order was restored, Governor Richard Oglesby, announced that a Macon County Democrat requested to be allowed to make a presentation. In walked John Hanks, Lincoln's second cousin, carrying a banner on two fence rails that Hanks claimed were made by Lincoln. The banner read "Abraham Lincoln, the Rail Candidate for President in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830 by Thomas Hanks and Abe Lincoln." The crowd went wild, recognizing the political advantage of linking their candidate to such a powerful image. "Honest Abe" now became "Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter." A week later in Chicago, Lincoln was nominated by the Republican Party for the presidency.

The Republicans may have had a potent symbol for the upcoming campaign, but they also nominated a candidate who was little known outside of Illinois. A symbol, no matter how compelling, would not be enough to elect Lincoln president; "Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter" would need to be promoted.

We have just completed a presidential election cycle in which social media played a significant role, as it had in the past several presidential campaigns. In Lincoln's time, long before radio, film, TV, and the digital age, print was the medium a candidate and his party was required to master to achieve success. In an age when presidential candidates did not engage in public campaigning, parties relied on surrogates hitting the campaign trail on behalf of the candidate. The impact of speeches and rallies were limited, however, by the numbers people who witnessed them. It was the print media – newspapers, prints and photographs, pamphlets, broadsides, cartoons, sheet music, and campaign biographies – that circulated speeches, disseminated images, and propagated the life story of the candidate. This article will concentrate on the biographies of Lincoln published for the 1860 election.

The campaign biography as a genre emerged during the 1824 presidential campaign waged between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams. John Eaton's 1824 *Life of Andrew Jackson*, a reissue of his 1817 work, is considered the first presidential campaign biography. Every American presidential campaign since that contentious contest, including those of recent memory in which TV, film, the autobiography, and the internet have played an increasingly influential role, has had its share of candidate biographies.

The purpose of these biographies was—and still is—promotional: to sell or market a candidate. Promoting presidential candidates through published biographies – as well as through other genres of print, as well as parades and speeches – was especially critical in Lincoln's time because of the accepted tradition that candidates did not openly seek office. It was considered unseemly for a candidate to campaign for himself or ask for votes; the office had to seek the man rather than the man seeking the office. That tradition, of course, was

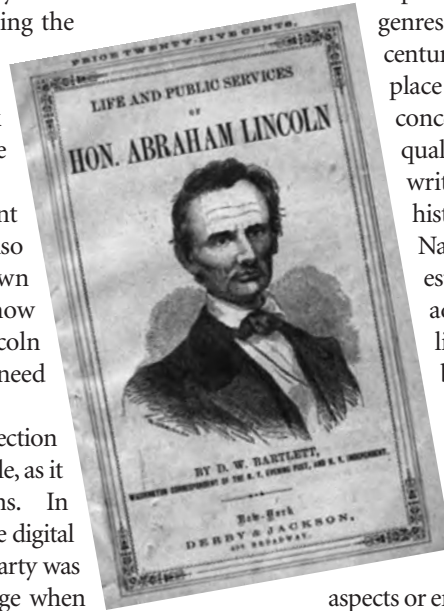
abandoned in the twentieth century. But in Lincoln's time, promotion of a candidate was left to the party, partisan newspapers and their editors, to surrogates, and to commercial publishing houses seeking to profit by the public's interest in the candidates. The candidate could be – and often was – busy working for his election behind the scenes, sometimes assisting authors of campaign biographies.

Despite the fact that it was considered inappropriate for candidates themselves to publicly campaign for votes, this did not stop the competing political parties from vigorously courting potential voters. In order to make an informed choice, American voters had at their disposal various sources of information, including several genres of print, about various candidates. Nineteenth-century campaign biographies, however, provided in one place the most extensive amount of information concerning the candidates' life, character, and qualifications for the presidency. These biographies, written by experienced journalists, well-known historians, anonymous party hacks, or, in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Dean Howells, established or budding literary figures, generally adhered to a formula when presenting candidates' lives. Of course, all authors asserted that their biographical treatment of a particular candidate was objective and free of partisanship. One must keep in mind, however, that these works were essentially propaganda pieces intended to present a candidate in the best possible light. This does not mean that biographical information was invented or inaccurate, though oftentimes unflattering

aspects or embarrassing episodes were downplayed or omitted. Rather, the purpose of these biographies was to create a positive image, one that would resonate with the American people, particularly voters.

Campaign biographies, with the exception of those that were revisions of previously published works (Eaton's biography of Jackson, for example), were written in haste—in a matter of weeks – in order to be published, distributed, and, hopefully, influence a significant group of voters in a limited amount of time. A biography of a candidate could not be written until the party caucuses or nominating conventions chose a candidate for president. Moreover, the period between a convention and the election was just a matter of months. In Lincoln's case, for example, he was nominated for president on May 18, 1860, approximately six months before the election. Obviously, a publisher of a campaign biography wanted it available as soon as possible before the election. Thus the author was expected to research his subject and write the biography in a matter of weeks, a much harder task if the candidate was, as was the case with Lincoln, relatively unknown. This meant that the first campaign biography of a candidate to appear was used as the chief source (parts thereof oftentimes plagiarized) for subsequent biographies.

The formula of campaign biographies, which ran in length from eight to three hundred pages at a cost of 25 cents for a paper version to one dollar for a hardbound edition, remained fairly consistent throughout the nineteenth century. In addition to the biography and selected speeches of the presidential candidate, a short biographical sketch of the vice-presidential candidate was **continued on page 6**



Promoting Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter: Lincoln's Campaign Biographies and the Shaping of an Image in 1860, continued

usually offered. The recurrent message conveyed by these biographies was simple: their subjects' lives, which served as models of inspiration and emulation, prepared them to lead the United States. The authors crafted this message by presenting a series of episodes (key periods in one's life; key influences that shaped a potential leader; examples of leadership) that told the story of a candidate. Regardless of length, all nineteenth-century campaign biographies address their subjects' ancestry, parents, youth, education, early adulthood, military career, farming or business career, political career, domestic or private life, religious beliefs, and virtues.

There were 16 campaign biographies issued for Abraham Lincoln in 1860, ranging from two-page articles to books of more than 300 pages in length. Most began by discussing or attempting to discuss the candidate's ancestry. One of the earliest of Lincoln's campaign biographies declared that the candidate "has revolutionary blood in his veins," being descended from the New England Lincolns of Plymouth Colony, the most famous of whom was General Benjamin Lincoln, who served under Washington at Yorktown. While few other biographers were bold enough to make this claim (and Lincoln himself would not), some raised the probability that the candidate was related to the Massachusetts Lincolns and, by implication, to the famous general. All biographers confidently traced (as Lincoln did) the candidate's ancestral line back to Pennsylvania Quakers who settled in Berks County and later migrated to Virginia and, in the case of Lincoln's grandfather, to Kentucky. Two biographers, unsure of Lincoln's relationship to the Plymouth Colony Lincolns and General Benjamin Lincoln, asserted that he was descended from "good old stock by whom the State of Pennsylvania was founded" and from people "distinguished...for honesty and industry."

In general, Lincoln's parents received little attention in the 1860 campaign biographies. Since Lincoln, embarrassed about his humble beginnings, revealed little about his father, mother, and stepmother, biographers had little to go on except the memories of Lincoln's few relatives as well as neighbors and friends of the Lincoln family. Both of Lincoln's parents, Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, were born in Virginia, in the words of one of the earliest biographers, under "very moderate circumstances." This understatement was matched by the earliest campaign biography, which stated that Lincoln's parents were certainly not among Virginia's "first families." Another biographer, on the other hand, was quite blunt and more to the point when he wrote that Lincoln's parents "were poor and uneducated."

Since little was known about Lincoln's mother, who died when he was eight years of age, little was said of her. As for Lincoln's father, he was presented as a victim of circumstance. Having lost his father Abraham to an Indian attack a year or two after moving to Kentucky from Virginia, Thomas Lincoln became, in the words of William Dean Howells, a "wandering, homeless boy" who grew up "without education." After losing his wife in 1818, Thomas Lincoln remarried a year later. Sarah Bush Johnston of Kentucky, a widow with three children, became Lincoln's stepmother.

Lincoln may have been self-conscious when it came to the lowly status of his parents, especially his father, but campaign biographers were not. In fact, his parents' lack of education and humble circumstances were part of a larger story that biographers were more than happy to relate: Lincoln's youth in a primitive frontier environment was a time of struggle, heartbreak, and meager subsistence. Every biographer presented Lincoln's youth against the backdrop of the rude, harsh, and wild backwoods life of Kentucky and Indiana, where he spent most of pre-adult years. Barely making ends meet, the Lincoln family moved from one rustic log cabin to another, sometimes with seven to eight living in one room with a loft. Not only was life hard but, for Lincoln, it was accompanied by emotional loss, as he endured the deaths of his mother, younger brother, and older sister.

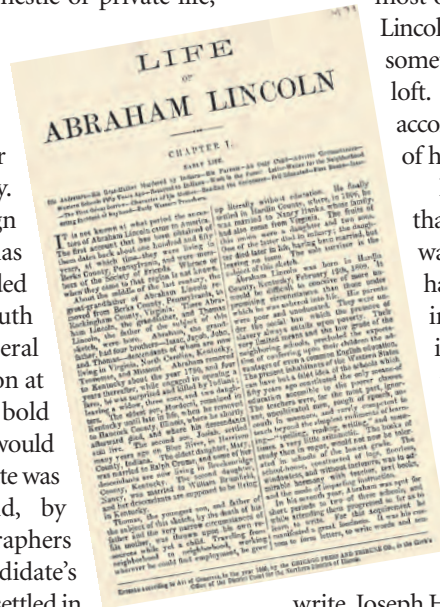
Lincoln's campaign biographers readily admitted that his frontier experience was not unusual. What was uncommon, however, was how Lincoln, through hard work, ambition, discipline, persistence, and an innate intelligence, overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to achieve a level of success that few could claim. Most biographers emphasized Lincoln's severe lack of formal education (Lincoln himself referred to his education as "defective"), which comprised less than a year. Yet Lincoln, making good use of his limited schooling, and following a personal regimen of self-education, learned to read and

write. Joseph H. Barrett, echoing several other biographers, wrote that the young Lincoln "read with avidity such instructive works as he could obtain, and in winter evenings, by the mere light of the blazing fireplace, when no better resource was at hand." His regimen of self-improvement, primarily through reading, continued into his twenties, when he mastered grammar, mathematics, law, and surveying.

As Lincoln strove mightily to cultivate his mind, he was, at the same time, developing a strong character and a deep appreciation of ordinary Americans, "rejoicing in their simple joys and pleasures...and united with them all by that band of brotherhood among the honest poor—a common heritage of labor." Lincoln as a representative of the workingman is a theme encountered often in campaign biographies. His ardent belief in the "dignity of labor" was formed "amid the roughest hardships and the most trying experiences of a frontier life." After all, Lincoln was, according to John Locke Scripps:

[C]onstantly engaged in the various kinds of labor incident to the country and the times—felling the forest, clearing the ground of the undergrowth and of logs, splitting rails, pulling the cross-cut and the whip-saw, driving the frower, plowing, harrowing, planting, hoeing, harvesting, assisting at house-raising, log-rolling and corn huskings; [and] mingling cordially with the simple-minded, honest people with whom his lot was cast.

Because Lincoln was brought up "to the habits of sobriety, and accustomed to steady labor," wrote another biographer, "no one of all the working-men with whom he came in contact with was a better sample of his class than he." **continued on page 7**



Promoting Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter: Lincoln's Campaign Biographies and the Shaping of an Image in 1860, continued

Two aspects of Lincoln's young adulthood that all biographers highlighted were his prowess with an axe and his popularity. The former, of course, was tied into the "Rail Splitter" theme of the campaign. As William Dean Howells wrote, "until he was twenty-three, the ax was seldom out" of Lincoln's hand, "except in the interval of labor, or when it was exchanged for the plow, the hoe, or the sickle." Several writers noted the fact that when Lincoln moved with his family to Illinois in 1830, he and a fellow laborer split three thousand rails. In terms of Lincoln's popularity with his peers, many biographers cited the legendary wrestling match between Lincoln and Jack Armstrong, the leader of the so-called Clary Grove Boys, and his election as captain of his volunteer company in the Black Hawk War of 1832.

Unlike many presidential candidates – such as Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and Winfield Scott – that preceded him, Lincoln had scant military experience to promote. All biographers emphasized Lincoln's patriotic response to the call for volunteers for the Black Hawk War and the fact that when the men of his company chose a man to serve as captain, they overwhelmingly chose Lincoln. In addition, when Lincoln's company was disbanded, he re-volunteered and served as a private. Despite the fact that Lincoln did not engage in any combat, he was applauded for his service. As one biographer stated, Lincoln served "gallantly." Another opined that Lincoln "proved himself 'every inch a soldier'...he observed the daily routine which approved himself a man, and endeared him to his comrades."

Lincoln's relationship to the soil was confined to his youth and young adulthood. In fact, Lincoln disliked farm work and had no intention of pursuing an agricultural career. Thus unable to tie Lincoln to the noble pursuit of farming, his biographers instead concentrated on his various jobs as a flat boatman, store clerk and storeowner, a surveyor, a postmaster, and lawyer. Readers learned that his flatboat experiences consisted "of exposure, of hard labor, and of constant peril," which proved Lincoln's strength and courage. The debts Lincoln incurred as the co-owner of a failed store were repaid, reinforcing his reputation for honesty. And his mastery of and success at surveying and the law were the result of a disciplined regimen of self-education. In short, Lincoln was a self-made man.

Despite Lincoln's success as a lawyer and the integral role it played in his life, his legal career receives minimal coverage. This is perhaps due to Americans' distrust of the legal profession. Nevertheless, Lincoln's rapid rise in the profession was noted, with one biographer stating that Lincoln "obtained a reputation at the bar which placed him in the front rank of the many able and profound jurists" in Illinois. Another wrote that when practicing the law, Lincoln "was never known to undertake a cause which he believed founded in wrong and injustice." By the testimony of all and in the memory of everyone who had known him, he continued, Lincoln "is a pure, candid, and upright man, unblemished by the vices which so often disfigure greatness, utterly incapable of falsehood, and without one

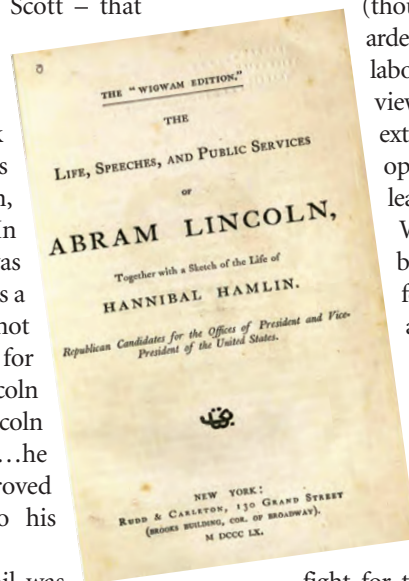
base or sordid trait." Several biographers cited the famous almanac case as an example of Lincoln's integrity, kindness, and willingness to fight for the good cause and the poor client as opposed to other lawyers who are more concerned about lining their pockets.

Lincoln, of course, spent much of his time away from the courtroom in the political arena and, by far, this aspect of his life received the most attention in his campaign biographies. All of them covered in detail Lincoln's four terms as a state legislator, his one term in Congress, and his famous debates with Stephen Douglas during the 1858 U.S. Senate race in Illinois. When discussing Lincoln's state assembly and congressional career, all biographers described Lincoln as a Henry Clay Whig, a strong advocate of the "American System" of internal improvements and a protective tariff, an opponent of the Mexican War (though all biographers stressed his support of the troops), an ardent supporter of the Wilmot Proviso, a zealous advocate of free labor in the territories, and as a man of moderate to conservative views on slavery (morally opposed to the institution and its extension into the territories and the District of Columbia but opposed to abolitionism). Lincoln was touted as one of the leading Whigs in the West.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, Lincoln became a leader of the anti-Nebraska forces and one of the founders of the Illinois Republican Party that grew out of the anti-Nebraska movement. He is portrayed in the biographies as Douglas' equal in debating and superior in cause. All pointed out that the majority of people in Illinois agreed; Lincoln won the popular vote but lost the election in the legislature due to "fraudulent districting" by the Democrats. It is Lincoln's performance in the debates, his eloquence on the stump, his reputation for "honesty and integrity," his long-standing support of workingmen, and his courage to fight for the right no matter the political costs that explained his nomination as the Republican candidate for president.

Very little space was devoted to a candidate's private or domestic life in campaign biographies prior to the Civil War. This was certainly the case with Lincoln's biographies. The candidate was portrayed as honest, moral, temperate, and as a loving family man with plain and simple tastes. Lincoln, according to one biographer, "is a strictly moral and temperate man." Another hailed Lincoln's "abstemious habits" and his "modest means and simple tastes." According to John Quay Howard, Lincoln's habits "are the most abstemious. His food is plain, and his drink is usually cold water. He is a man of purest morals. He never drank a drop of liquor; never used tobacco, and was never guilty of a licentious act. He never uses profane language [conveniently omitting Lincoln's well-known reputation for telling smutty stories and jokes], and never gambles....He never wronged any man out of a cent."

Little was said about Mary Todd Lincoln, but what was conveyed was very favorable, especially in light of the searing criticism she endured during the White House years. In campaign biographies she was presented as a woman of "charming presence, of superior intelligence, of accomplished manners, and in every respect well fitted to advance the position" of First Lady. The Lincoln children were given a mere passing reference. Mention was made of the death of the Lincoln's second son, Eddy, in 1842. As for the surviving **continued on page 8**



Promoting Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter: Lincoln's Campaign Biographies and the Shaping of an Image in 1860, continued

three sons, they, according to one biographer, "have been well trained, and their education very particularly cared for." Several referred to the fact that the oldest son, Robert, was about to enter Harvard. Finally, the Lincolns' Springfield, Illinois, residence, "a comfortable two-story frame house," was applauded for its "simple and quiet style." After all, a plain and unassuming house was an appropriate abode for a man of the people.

Fortunately for Lincoln, nineteenth-century campaign biographies paid scant attention to candidates' religion. Several Lincoln biographies ignored completely the candidate's religion, an area in which he was open to criticism, while others offered a brief, albeit positive, assessment. John Locke Scripps, for example, claimed "there are few men in public life so familiar with the Scripture as Mr. Lincoln." Another biography asserted that Lincoln has, "by his means and influence always been a supporter of Christianity." Finally, Joseph Hartwell Barrett declared that Mrs. Lincoln is a Presbyterian...and...her husband, though not a member, is a liberal supporter of the church to which she belongs."

The image of Lincoln that emerges from these campaign biographies is that of a man who overcame the humble, primitive environment into which he was born and, who, despite being raised by illiterate parents and suffering the emotional traumas associated with frontier life, became an honest, moral, pious, popular leader of men as the result of hard, rugged work, clean living, strength of will, a vibrant intellect, and a tenacious regimen of self-improvement. Lincoln was the ideal self-made man. But he was also something more: He was "Honest Abe," the "Rail Splitter." To Lincoln's biographers, these nicknames symbolized something much deeper than honesty and the ability to wield an axe and a maul, however. Many biographers advanced the argument that this "backwoods-man" embodied all of the virtuous components that made up the American character. This good citizen and honest patriot not only "sprung directly from the people," wrote one biographer, but "still belongs to the people, who is one of them, and among them." In his history and in his character, Lincoln "is the true offspring of democracy."

Another biographer asserted that Lincoln "stands to-day not only a representative of the early Western stock, the hunter, farmer, and pioneer, but an admirable example of what energy and ability can

do for a man honestly using them in honorable pursuits." Lincoln, wrote John Locke Scripps, "presents in his own person the best living illustration of the true dignity of labor, and of the genius of our free American institutions." Barrett also linked Lincoln's destiny with the common laborer, stating that the unassuming and self-taught Illinois lawyer is "a man of sterling integrity and incorruptible honesty...a suitable agent for rescuing the federal government from its present degradations." Rueben Vose argued that Lincoln was the right man for the times. After all, Vose claimed, our first and principal task as a nation "has been to subdue the vast wilderness which has been given us as a heritage...This has been our destiny" and "the pioneers of the West have been the instruments of this success." Thus, in Lincoln, Americans "behold one of the most hardy and adventurous of these backwoodsmen." His life, declared Vose, has "typified one grand and characteristic mission of our people, and become a representative man in the truest sense of the word." This honest rail splitter's life, William Dean Howells noted, represented all that is admirable about the American nation and offered Americans a model worth emulating:

The purity of his reputation, the greatness and dignity of his ambition, enable every incident of his career, and give significance to all the events of his past. It is true that simply to have mauled rails, and commanded a flat-boat, is not to have performed splendid actions. But the fact that Lincoln has done these things, and has risen above them by his own force, confers a dignity upon them; and the rustic boy, who is to be President in 1900, may well be consoled and encouraged by his labors.

*Parts of this essay are excerpted from the author's *Lincoln's Campaign Biographies* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2014).

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