

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S FIRST POLITICAL VICTORY

The centennial of Abraham Lincoln's first political victory is of sufficient importance to recall the events leading up to his early success at the polls. On the fourth day of August, 1834, he was one of the four successful representatives of Sangamon County elected to the Ninth General Assembly of Illinois.

The first announcement of Lincoln's decision to run for the legislature appeared in the *Sangamon Journal* for April 25, 1834, as follows:

"We are authorized to state that A. Lincoln of New Salem is a candidate for representative for this county."

Nearly two months before this announcement, Lincoln participated in a meeting at New Salem which was called to discuss state politics. The *Sangamon Journal* for March 15, 1834, gave a report of the proceedings from which this paragraph is presented:

"Resolved that we will use every effort to promote the election of General Henry to the first office of this state at the next August election and we recommend him to our fellow citizens as a suitable person for the office . . ." The resolutions were ordered forwarded to the *Sangamon Journal* and signed by Bowling Green, the chairman, and A. Lincoln, the secretary.

By the time of the election in August, thirteen candidates had signified their intention of running for the general assembly, four of which were to be elected. They were John Dawson, Abraham Lincoln, William Carpenter, John T. Stuart, Richard Quinton, Andrew McCormick, William Alvey, Thos. M. Neal, Shadrack J. Campbell, James Shepherd, James Baker, John Durley, and William Kendall. The first four were successful and the others who also ran followed in the order named, William Kendall being low man.

The election returns as first reported in the *Sangamon Journal* gave Abraham Lincoln 1,373 votes and John Dawson 1,370 votes. The following week, however, the *Journal* announced that "an error occurred in stating the number of votes received by John Dawson in last week's paper. He received 1,390 votes for representative being the highest number given for any one individual for that office." Lincoln's official count was 1,376. Many of the early Lincoln histories give the vote as first printed in the *Journal* which is responsible for the claim that Lincoln polled the largest number of

votes. In the autobiographical sketch which Lincoln prepared for Scripps he states that he received "the highest vote cast for any candidate." This same statement is made in the campaign biography prepared for Scripps and also in Howell's biography of Lincoln.

The large complimentary vote cast for Lincoln in 1834 was foreshadowed in 1832 when he ran for the office of representative. Although defeated in the county, he received all but seven of the 277 votes cast in his own precinct.

Howell's biography, as corrected by Abraham Lincoln, which has become one of our most valuable sources, submits positive evidence about Lincoln's early political affiliations in Illinois. It stated that "Parties, at this time (1832), were distinguished as Adams parties and Jackson parties, and in Lincoln's county the Jackson men were vastly in the ascendant. He was a staunch Adams man, and, being comparatively unknown in the remoter parts of the county, was defeated." Lincoln corrected this statement about his party allegiance. He crossed out the reference to "Adams parties" and wrote in the text "Anti-Jackson." Where he was called a "staunch Adams man" he changed it to "Anti-Jackson or Clay."

We have Lincoln's own statement that he voted for Henry Clay for president in 1832, but just when he became an avowed follower of Clay it is difficult to determine. Whom he favored in 1830 for Illinois state officers is not known. Tradition has always placed him in a Jackson environment in Indiana; and Lamon, Lincoln biographer, infers that his change to the Clay ranks occurred in Illinois as shown in the following paragraph:

"The Democrats were divided into 'whole-hog men' and 'nominal Jackson men'; the former being thoroughly devoted to the fortunes and principles of their leader, while the latter were willing to trim a little for the sake of popular support. It is probable that Mr. Lincoln might be fairly classed as a 'nominal Jackson man,' although the precise character of some of the views he then held, or is supposed to have held, on national questions, is involved in considerable doubt."

It is accepted generally that Abraham Lincoln's father was a Jacksonian Democrat as was also Ratcliff Boone, the most prominent politician in southern Indiana during the period the Lincolns lived there. It is very likely that

in his earlier days Abraham was brought up in a Jacksonian atmosphere but for some reason broke away from the political traditions of his father and kinsmen.

According to Lamon, Lincoln's Indiana environment was wholly Jacksonian. He claims William Jones, for whom Lincoln clerked the last winter he lived in the state, was "an ardent Jackson man himself, and he imparted to Abe the true faith as delivered by that great democratic apostle; and the traces of his teaching were never wholly effaced from Mr. Lincoln's mind. While he remained at Gentryville his politics accorded with Mr. Jones's, and even after he had turned Whig in Illinois John Hanks tells us he wanted to whip a man for traducing Jackson." Dennis Hanks, although greatly confused as to when Abraham Lincoln became a Whig, admits that it was Jones who exerted the greatest political influence over Lincoln.

Lamon is in error about William Jones's politics as we now have evidence he was a Clay man. The *Evansville Daily Journal* of July 19, 1860, makes this statement:

"William Jones is an old citizen of the country who has taken little active part in politics since the Clay and Polk campaign and who on learning the defeat of his favorite in that memorable contest was for several days incapacitated for attending to his usual business. He appeals to his friends, to give old Abe their undivided support."

As early as 1825 and 1826 the *Western Sun* of Vincennes published eighteen long articles by or about Henry Clay. These were undoubtedly made accessible to Lincoln and probably furnished him with his first introduction to the great statesman.

In a biographical sketch which Lincoln prepared in 1859 he made the statement: "Always a Whig in politics." In the famous debate with Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, he referred to Clay as "my beau ideal of a statesman, the man for whom I fought all my humble life."

It does not appear as if there should be any confusion about the political atmosphere in which Lincoln moved previous to his first election to public office one hundred years ago, August 4, 1834.

Of this fact we may feel certain: that when Abraham Lincoln left Indiana for Illinois in 1830, just at the time he became twenty-one years of age, he was a follower of Henry Clay.