

LINCOLN LORE

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THE ALMANAC IN THE ARMSTRONG CASE

At the October term (1857) of the Mason Circuit Court convening in Mason County, Illinois, William D. Armstrong, popularly called "Duff", was indicted along with James H. Norris for the murder of Preston Metzker on the night of August 29, 1857. Norris was immediately tried and convicted but a change of venue to the Cass County Court was secured for Armstrong. Because of a long friendship for Duff's parents, Jack and Hannah Armstrong, Lincoln offered to defend the young man.

The testimony of the leading witness for the prosecution emphasized the position of the moon on the night of the murder, and Lincoln used an almanac in refutation of the testimony which contributed somewhat to the acquittal of Armstrong. Space will not allow a review of Lincoln's personal interest in the case, the proceedings of the trial, or the findings of the jury, but the subject matter will be directly concerned with the almanac and its use.

This discussion has been suggested by the attention called to the moon in the recent July eclipse and the fact that it was an August moon which Lincoln observed to the advantage of his client, Duff Armstrong. While it must be admitted that the importance of the almanac testimony in the trial has been greatly exaggerated, it continues to serve as an interesting episode in the famous case.

Edward Eggleston's novel, "The Graysons", which came out just thirty years after the trial, featured the almanac incident as the basis for the climax of the story; and the presentation of Mr. Lincoln as one of the characters gave the episode a wide circulation.

The story of the use of a false almanac was in circulation during the Lincoln-Douglas debates and later found expression during the presidential campaign of 1860. It was given permanent form in Lamon's "Life of Abraham Lincoln" published in 1872, which claims that the almanac used on the occasion was "an almanac of the year previous to the murder." The writer of Lamon's Lincoln also claims that "the counsel forgot to examine the seemingly conclusive almanac and let it pass without a question concerning its genuineness."

There seems to be no positive evidence which will identify without question the original almanac used for evidence and the following compilation is made to show how widely opinion differs as to the title of the book and how it was used.

Most Lincoln students who are acquainted with Lincoln's standard of ethics have concluded that neither his legal standing nor his high sense of right and wrong would have allowed him to attempt such deception as is indicated in some of the statements compiled for this study.

Illustrated Family Christian Almanac for 1853

An almanac, said to have been the original one used, for some time was in the Chicago Historical Society Library, but it is no longer available. Dr. W. E. Barton made a careful investigation of the contents of the almanac and found it to have been "The Illustrated Family Christian Almanac" published for the year 1853. Some one had scratched out the date where it appeared and carefully changed it to 1857. It is Dr. Barton's conclusion that the almanac was changed sometime after the trial although the parties who had it for sale claim it was done at the direction of Lincoln the night before it was used for evidence.

The almanac in question it is alleged was presented by Lincoln to the assistant prosecuting attorney in the case and later on came into possession of the deputy sheriff who served at the time. He sold the almanac to a Chicago collector for \$50.00 and later it was acquired by the Chicago Historical Society.

Unknown Almanac for 1856

An attorney of Beardstown, a Mr. Carter, although not engaged in the case, was present during the hearing and said that he was "satisfied that the almanac was of the year previous." He also stated that he believed that he examined it.

Unidentified Almanacs for 1856 and 1857

J. Henry Shaw, lawyer for the prosecution, wrote:

"When an almanac was called for by Mr. Lincoln two were brought, one for the year of the murder and the other of the year previous." Mr. Shaw further continued that he believed "that Mr. Lincoln was entirely innocent of any deception in the matter."

Two Different Almanacs for 1857

One of the jurors engaged in the case stated that after Lincoln had read from the almanac he handed it to the jury for their inspection and "they compared it with another almanac for the same year and found they substantially agreed."

Unidentified Almanac for 1857

John T. Brady, one of the jurors on the case, gave the following version of the almanac episode:

"There has never been a question in my mind about the genuineness of the almanac. That it was an up to date almanac this I am sure of as it was passed up to the judge, jury and lawyers, who all examined it closely."

Goudy's Almanac

Upon the authority of James A. Dick, the sheriff, it appears to be a "Goudy's Almanac" that was used, although Dick did not know the date of the publication. He said that he saw the almanac "lying up on Mr. Lincoln's table during the trial and that Mr. Lincoln took it out of his own pocket."

Ayres American Almanac for 1857

A tradition confirmed by many who attended the trial states that "Lincoln sent Jacob Jones, a cousin of Armstrong, to a drugstore and obtained a patent medicine almanac which he used." Dr. Barton believed he had found sufficient evidence to show that the almanac was "Ayres American Almanac" for 1857.

Jayne's Almanac for 1857

According to Milton Logan, foreman of the jury who heard the case, "the almanac was a 'Jaynes Almanac', that it was one for the year in which the murder was committed and that there was no trick about it." Furthermore he said he was "willing to make an affidavit that he examined it as to its date and that it was the almanac of the year of the murder."

From these many testimonials it will appear how futile it is to determine absolutely just what almanac was used in the famous trial. One of the last three named titles was probably used but which one it is difficult to determine.