

LINCOLN LORE

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CONGRESSMAN LINCOLN'S PATENT

There is a deplorable lack of information about the activities of Abraham Lincoln while in Washington during the period of his only term in Congress. Of course there are available the proceedings of the House of Representatives in which he participated, but the accounts of his social activities and casual interests are few indeed.

There is one incident worth recording which, as far as we know, was his last business transaction before leaving Washington for home, and his return to private life. On March 10, 1849, he applied for a patent on, "a device for lifting boats over sand bars," thus the role of Congressman Lincoln as an inventor should be considered as one of the by-products of his congressional term.

While it is difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion as to just how early Lincoln started to work on his invention there seems to be fairly good evidence that some of the details for the boat lifting contraption were furnished the previous year when he was on his way home after the adjournment of Congress. He is known to have left Buffalo on September 24th by boat for Detroit.

There is a tradition that on this occasion when Lincoln was proceeding over Lake Erie, the steamer was grounded on a sand bar, accordingly "the captain of the vessel had all hands force barrels under the side of the ship below the water line." The informant recalling the incident stated that "slowly but surely the boat began to rise. Lincoln stood by at the rail watching intently. Taking a piece of paper from his jacket, he sat down, placed it on top of his high hat and began to make some sketches."

Possibly a story told by Gains Paddock, an old resident of Springfield, is the sequel to this Lake Erie episode. Paddock claimed:

"Abraham Lincoln came into John Williams' store on the north side of the square, which was the town's loafing place and where I was clerking during the summer, and stated that he believed he had solved the problem. He declared the Sangamon River was navigable and told us all to come over to the square the next day and he would prove his statement. Promptly at the time he had named, Lincoln walked into the place where the crowd had assembled, carrying under his arm a small boat model, which he placed in one of the public watering troughs, situated at each corner of the square. Placing bricks in the boat he sank it to the gunwalls and then using bellows blew air into compartments. As a result the boat and its load were lifted several inches higher in the water. He then explained the procedure to the people stating that if a sand bar were encountered all that need be done was to fill the compartments with air. Picking up the boat model he turned and walked away leaving the people arguing on the method of the plan."

When Lincoln left Springfield for Washington again on November 26 it is likely that he carried with him the model for his patent. On this trip he traveled by the river route via St. Louis down the Mississippi and up the Ohio. This trip might have given him further opportunity to observe the practicability of his anticipated invention.

John G. Nicolay recorded that Lincoln whittled the red cedar model which is eighteen inches long with his jack knife. One person who looked over the device remarked, "If this be true, young Lincoln was an admirably skillful whittler, for the model is not only symmetrical in its parts, but it is smooth and carefully finished, as if scraped with glass and rubbed down with emery paper."

How soon after Lincoln reached Washington he proceeded to carry out his plans to get his invention pat-

ented, we do not know, but he made the acquaintance of a patent lawyer, Mr. Zenas C. Robbins. Robbins was a former St. Louis man, having lived there for ten years, and had personally observed the difficulties which confronted navigation on the Mississippi. One evening Elihu B. Washburn called on Mr. Robbins and his wife at their home, and brought his friend Lincoln along. A few days after this, according to Robbins, "Mr. Lincoln walked into my office one morning with a model of a western steamboat under his arm. After a friendly greeting he placed his model on my office table and proceeded to explain the principle embodied therein that he believed to be his own invention, and which, if new, he desired to secure by letters patent. During my former residence in St. Louis, I had made myself thoroughly familiar with everything appertaining to the construction and equipment of the flat-bottomed steamboats that were adapted to the shallow rivers of our Western and Southern states, and therefore, I was able speedily to come to the conclusion that Mr. Lincoln's proposed improvement of that class of vessels was new and patentable, and I so informed him. Thereupon he instructed me to prepare the necessary drawings and papers and prosecute an application for a patent for his invention at the United States Patent Office. I complied with his instructions and in due course of proceedings procured for him a patent that fully covered all the distinguishing features of his improved steamboat. The identical model that Mr. Lincoln brought to my office can now be seen in the United States Patent Office. . . ."

"Mr. Lincoln's invention provided for placing under the guards of the boat, buoyant chambers, expansible buoyant chambers, made of some waterproof material, with the parts so arranged and connected with the engines that when the boat got aground the whole power of the boilers could be exerted to depress these chambers, and more than double the width of the boat, and of course raise the boat in the water. Then the power could be applied to the wheels and the boat could again go on its way rejoicing."

The following is a copy of the printed form which Robbins asked Lincoln to fill out and which was duly filed on March 10, 1849. The words printed in italics were filled in by Lincoln. The oath required was administered by J. L. Smith, a justice of the peace.

"The Petition of Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield in the county of Sangamon & State of Illinois Respectfully represents

"That your petitioner *has* invented, a new and improved manner of combining adjustable buoyant chambers with steam boats or other vessels which has not, as he verily believes been heretofore used or known, and that he is desirous that Letters Patent of the United States may be granted to him therefore, securing to him and to his legal representatives, the exclusive right of making and using, and of vending to others the privilege to make or use, the same, agreeably to the provisions of the Acts of Congress in that case made and provided, he having paid *thirty* dollars into the Treasury of the United States, and complied with other provisions of the said Acts.

"And he hereby authorizes and empowers his Agent and Attorney, Z. C. Robbins, to alter or modify the within specification and claim as he may deem expedient, and to receive his patent; and also to receive back any moneys which he may be entitled to withdraw, and to receipt for the same.

"A. Lincoln."