

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE TAVERN LICENSE BROADSIDE

Seldom a week passes that the Foundation's attention is not called to either a news item or a separately printed document featuring a tavern license taken out in the name of Berry and Lincoln at New Salem. There has been a large number of posters of various sizes presenting this information which have become known to Lincoln students as The Tavern License Broadside.

This reproduction of two early documents associated with Lincoln's New Salem days which may be found in many forms and sizes usually is captioned "Abraham Lincoln's Saloon License" and it has been given nationwide circulation. A picture of Lincoln is often associated with a facsimile of the tavern license taken out by William F. Berry, and another facsimile of a "good behavior" bond purported to be signed by Abraham Lincoln, William F. Berry and Bowling Green. Without careful scrutiny, the observer would conclude that here is positive proof that Abraham Lincoln at one time ran a grocery or "grocery" as saloons were then called, and it is apparent from notations on the broadsides and the featuring of the alleged Lincoln signature that the purpose of the broadsides is to convey this idea.

*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* should be accepted as a final authority on the genuineness of all original documents which have come to the attention of its editors. Roy P. Basler and his assistant, Mrs. Harry Pratt, who are experts in the field of Lincoln's handwriting, in passing on the authenticity of writings submitted also have had the professional advice of three other Lincoln authorities, Paul M. Angle, the late J. G. Randall, and Benjamin P. Thomas.

Appendix two in the *Collected Works* presents a list of documents where some one other than Lincoln signed his name. The first manuscript noted where this occurs is on the peace bond mentioned above which follows in part:

"Know all men by these presents: We William F. Berry, Abraham Lincoln and John Bowling Green, are held and firmly bound into the County Commissioners of Sangamon County in the full sum of \$300. . . . Now if the same Berry and Lincoln shall be of good behavior and observe all the laws of this state relative to tavern keeping, then this obligation to be void or otherwise remain in full force.

"Abraham Lincoln (seal)  
"William Berry (seal)  
"Bowling Green (seal)"

The comment of the editors of the *Collected Works* who had before them this original bond now in the archives of the Illinois State Historical Society is as follows:

"1833, Mar. 6. William S. Berry signs Lincoln's name to a bond for license to sell liquor at Berry-Lincoln store at New Salem."

Here these authorities substantiate what leading Lincoln students have claimed for years that the signature in question is not that of Abraham Lincoln. William Townsend in his book *Lincoln and Liquor* published as early as 1934 states: "Apparently Berry subscribed his partners' name to the document, since an examination of the original shows that it is not in Lincoln's handwriting."

The other manuscript usually displayed, although not given so much prominence, is the license which was

issued on the strength of the bond. It however, was taken out by William Berry and apparently issued to him personally to do business in the name of Berry and Lincoln. An excerpt from the license follows:

"Springfield, Wednesday, March 8, 1833

"Ordered that William F. Berry in the name of 'Berry and Lincoln' have license to keep a tavern in New Salem to continue 12 months from this date. . . ."

While the documents seem to designate the firm name of the tavern operators as Berry and Lincoln, it is evident that Lincoln was not present when the bond was signed or it would have contained his actual signature. The same conclusion might be drawn with respect to the granting of the license to Berry individually instead of to the partners Berry and Lincoln.

During the first debate with Lincoln at Ottawa on August 21, 1858 Douglas made this statement early in his speech: "I have known him (Lincoln) for nearly twenty-five years. There were many points of sympathy between us. . . . I was a school teacher in the town of Winchester, and he a flourishing grocery-keeper in the town of Salem. (Applause and laughter)."

Mr. Lincoln opened his argument with Douglas in these words: "When a man hears himself somewhat misrepresented, it provokes him—at least, I find it so with myself; but when the misrepresentation becomes very gross and palpable, it is more apt to amuse him. (Laughter)."

Lincoln then goes on to discuss some politically important questions in which he had been misrepresented, passing by the more personal allusions until later in the speech when he says: "Now I pass on to consider one or two more of these little follies. The Judge is woefully at fault about his early friend Lincoln being a 'grocery keeper.' (Laughter). I don't know as it would be a great sin, if I had been, but he is mistaken. Lincoln never kept a grocery anywhere in the world. (Laughter)."

Abraham Lincoln in his speech at Charleston, Illinois during the debate on September 18, 1858 gave the definition of a forgery: "What is a forgery? It is the bringing forward something in writing or in print purporting to be of certain effect when it is altogether untrue."

With this definition before us and the statement of Lincoln's that he "never kept a grocery", we are inclined to look upon this whole tavern license transaction as it is now so widely publicized as a forgery. There is a tradition extant that Berry's procedure in securing the tavern license was responsible for the immediate dissolution of the merchandise partnership of the two men at New Salem.

See *Lincoln Lore* 494, 1143.