



Lincoln Lore

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Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
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THE LAST BOOK LINCOLN READ

J.G. Randall said of Lincoln that the "continual interweaving of good fun in his writings and speeches shows that humor was no mere technique, but a habit of his mind." His fondness for humorous writers was lifelong. All students of Lincoln's tastes in reading note his affection for such humorists as Orpheus C. Kerr (a pun on "office seeker" and the pseudonym of Robert H. Newell). Petroleum V. Nasby (the pseudonym of David Ross Locke) was another favorite. The day Lincoln first presented the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet, he began the meeting by reading "High Handed Outrage in Utica," a humorous piece by Artemus Ward (the pseudonym of Charles Farrar Browne). Lincoln's penchant for reading aloud from comical books apparently persisted to his dying day, when he regaled old friends with anecdotes from *Phoenixiana; or, Sketches and Burlesques*.

John Phoenix was the pseudonym of George Horatio Derby. Born in Dedham, Massachusetts, in 1823, Derby graduated from West Point in 1846. He served with distinction in the Mexican War and later led several exploring expeditions in the West, mostly in California. A wit and a notorious practical joker, he first gained literary distinction in California in 1853, when he was put in temporary charge of the *San Diego Herald*, a Democratic newspaper. Derby was a Whig in politics, one of a great tradition of Whig humorists, and he quickly turned the newspaper on its head politically. California howled with laughter. In 1856 he published *Phoenixiana*, a collection of humorous sketches which became immediately popular.

Naturally, Lincoln was attracted to the Whig humorist. In his debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Freeport on August 27, 1858, Lincoln charged his opponent with inconsistency on the question of the power of states to exclude slavery from their limits. Douglas, Lincoln insisted, had once charged that the Democratic administration of James Buchanan was conspiring "to rob the States of their power to exclude slavery from their limits." Douglas withdrew the charge when Robert Toombs of Georgia stated that only one man in the Union favored such a move.

It reminds me of the story [Lincoln continued] that John Phoenix, the California railroad surveyor, tells. He says they started out from the Plaza to the Mission of Dolores. They had two ways of determining distances. One was by a chain and pins taken over the ground. The other was by a "go-it-ometer" — an invention of his own — a three-legged instrument, with which he computed a series of triangles between the points. At night he turned to the chain-man to ascertain what distance they had come, and found that by some mistake he had merely dragged the chain over the ground without keeping any record. By the "go-it-ometer" he found he had made ten miles. Being skeptical about this, he asked a drayman who was passing how far it was to the plaza. The drayman replied it was just half a mile, and the surveyor put it down in his book — just as Judge Douglas says, after he had made his calculations and computations, he took Toombs' statement.

The reporters covering the speech noted that "Great laughter" followed.

The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum recently acquired a copy of *Phoenixiana*, notable because it belonged to David Davis, Lincoln's friend and Judge for the Eighth Judicial Circuit. Davis wrote his name and the date, "March 28th . . . 1856.," in pencil on the back of the frontispiece. The Sangamon County Circuit Court was then in session in Springfield, and Lincoln argued before the Court that day. One cannot help speculating that Judge Davis very likely showed the book to his friend.

If Lincoln owned a copy of *Phoenixiana* himself, its present location is unknown. It seems likely that he did, however. The description of Lincoln's last day by Katherine Helm, Mary Todd Lincoln's niece, mentions the book. After their carriage ride in the late afternoon, President and Mrs. Lincoln separated. The President entered the White House with Richard J. Oglesby, the Governor of Illinois, and some other political friends. According to Miss Helm, Governor Oglesby later recalled:

Lincoln got to reading



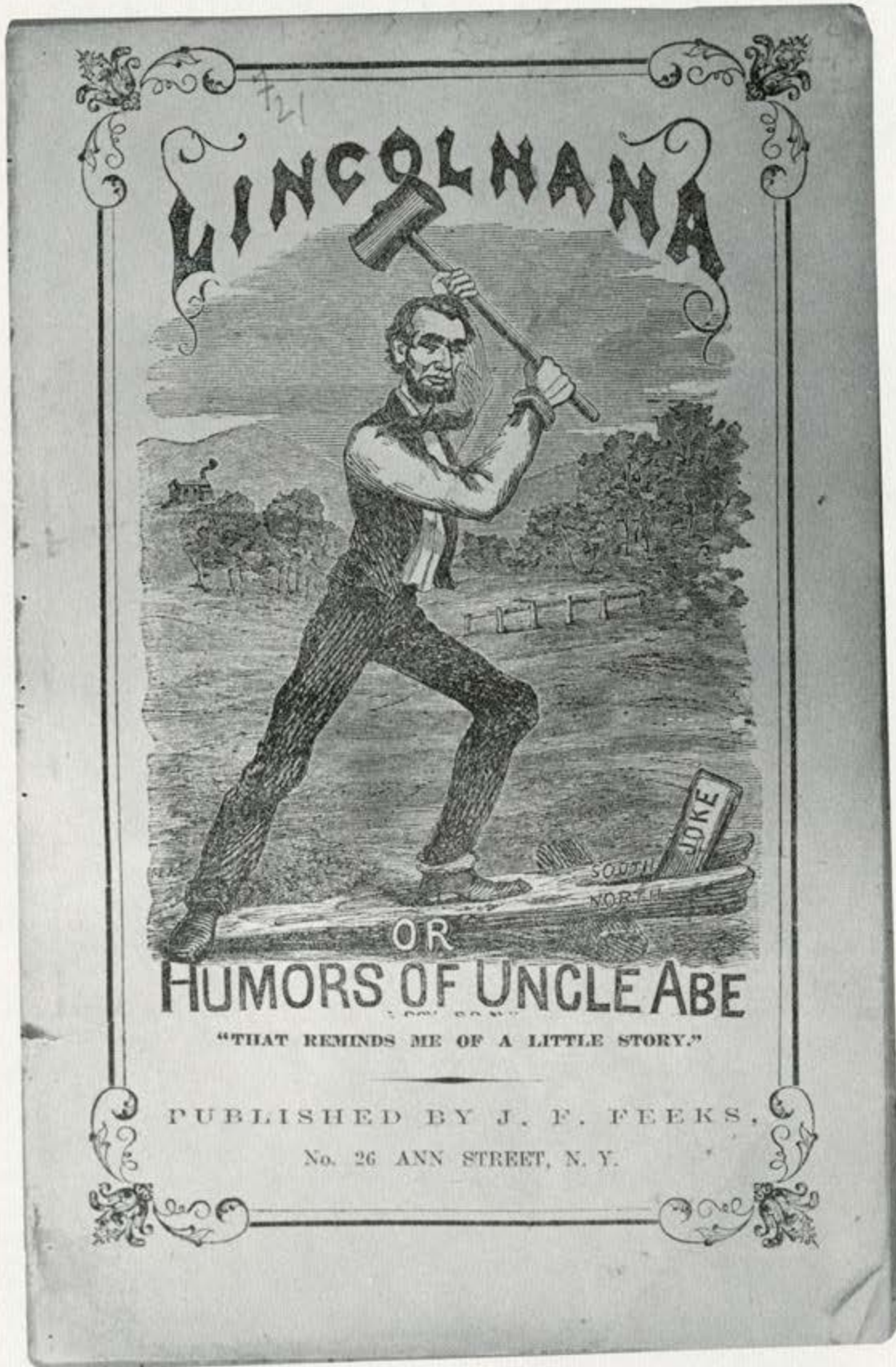
*Yours respectfully
John P. Squibob*

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FIGURE 1. The frontispiece of *Phoenixiana*, shown above, has this note printed under it: "This autograph may be relied on as authentic, as it was written by one of Mr. Squibob's most intimate friends."

some humorous book — I think it was by "John Phoenix." They kept sending for him to come to dinner. He promised each time to go, but would continue reading the book. Finally he got a sort of peremptory order that he must come

to dinner at once. It was explained to me by the old man at the door that they were going to have dinner and then go to the theater.



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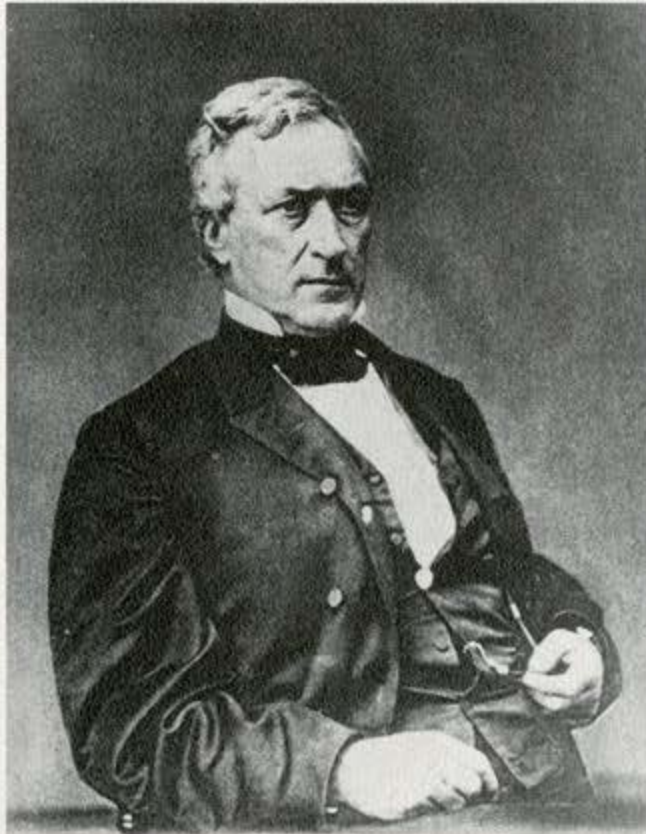
FIGURE 2. *Lincolnana* was one of several cheap paperbacks published during the Civil War which capitalized on the President's reputation for enjoying humor. Though this trait endears Lincoln to us today, it was not universally admired in his own day. Note that the cover of this book shows him splitting the Union with a joke. Lincoln was often pictured as a vulgar jokester, too small for the great office he occupied.

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL EDUCATION

President Lincoln gets high marks for political skill from almost all modern historians, but few have attempted to account for this skill. It often seems as though Lincoln burst from his mother's womb as a full-fledged politico, ready to wheel and deal, bestow patronage, and walk into a strong Presidency. Like everything else in Lincoln's life, however, political savvy came by dint of a gradual and difficult learning experience. In fact, Lincoln's political education may have been more difficult than his learning experience as a writer, a lawyer, or an orator. Politics can only be learned the hard way.

After his original apprenticeship under "Jerry Sly," the nickname of Lincoln's first law partner and political mentor John Todd Stuart, Lincoln learned the toughest lessons from Zachary Taylor. This is not to say that Lincoln had the close relationship with Taylor which he had with Stuart. Lincoln's political involvement with the Taylor Presidency, however, brought with it some stinging lessons the young Illinois legislator never forgot.

The Whig party in part grew from criticism of the organizational methods of the Democratic party, and Whigs, therefore, tended to be reluctant to adopt the organizational methods of the Democrats. Among Illinois Whigs, Lincoln and his close political allies like Anson G. Henry were leaders in urging better organization. Lincoln knew that this was the only hope of success for the party in his overwhelmingly Democratic state. In 1840 Lincoln wrote a confidential circular for the Whig State Committee suggesting that the way to "overthrow the *trained bands* that are opposed to us, whose salaried officers are ever on the watch, and whose misguided followers are ever ready to obey their smallest commands" was "to organize the whole State." The letter recommended the establishment of committees in every county to canvass voters to determine their preferences. When



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FIGURE 3. John Todd Stuart.



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FIGURE 4. Zachary Taylor.

Democrats seized on the circular as a campaign issue, Lincoln responded: "They set us the example of organization; and we, in self defence, are driven into it. . . . Let them *disband* their double-drilled-army of 'forty thousand office holders.'" Lincoln continued to "justify . . . urge . . . organization on the score of necessity." Still, Lincoln was Whig enough to tell John Todd Stuart, while advising him on local appointments after William Henry Harrison's election as President, "I am, as you know, opposed to removals to make places for our friends." Lincoln insisted on having some reason beyond mere partisan identification for removing officeholders.

Lincoln's Whig campaign address in 1843 continued to stress the necessity of organization. He favored the convention system for nominations, and he urged Whigs to run candidates for Congress in every district in the state, "regardless of the chances of success." He was still ahead of average Whig sentiment on these questions and "got thunder" as his "reward" for writing the address. When he served in the United States House of Representatives (1847-1849), Lincoln did what he could to gain offices and appointments for Whig allies, but there was little he could do. President James K. Polk was a Democrat and "could hardly be expected to give them to whigs, at the solicitation of a whig Member of Congress." Things changed with the election of Whig Zachary Taylor. Lincoln promised offices, for example, to Walter Davis: "When I last saw you I said, that if the distribution of the offices should fall into my hands, you should have *something*." In the end he shared a good deal of the power of distribution with incoming Whig Congressman Edward D. Baker of Galena. When he recommended a Whig appointee as Springfield's postmaster, Lincoln admitted that the only objection to the Democratic incumbent was that he was "an active partizan in opposition to us." He would "give no opinion . . . as to whether he should or should not be removed." He did not say, as he had to Stuart almost a decade before, that such men should not be removed.

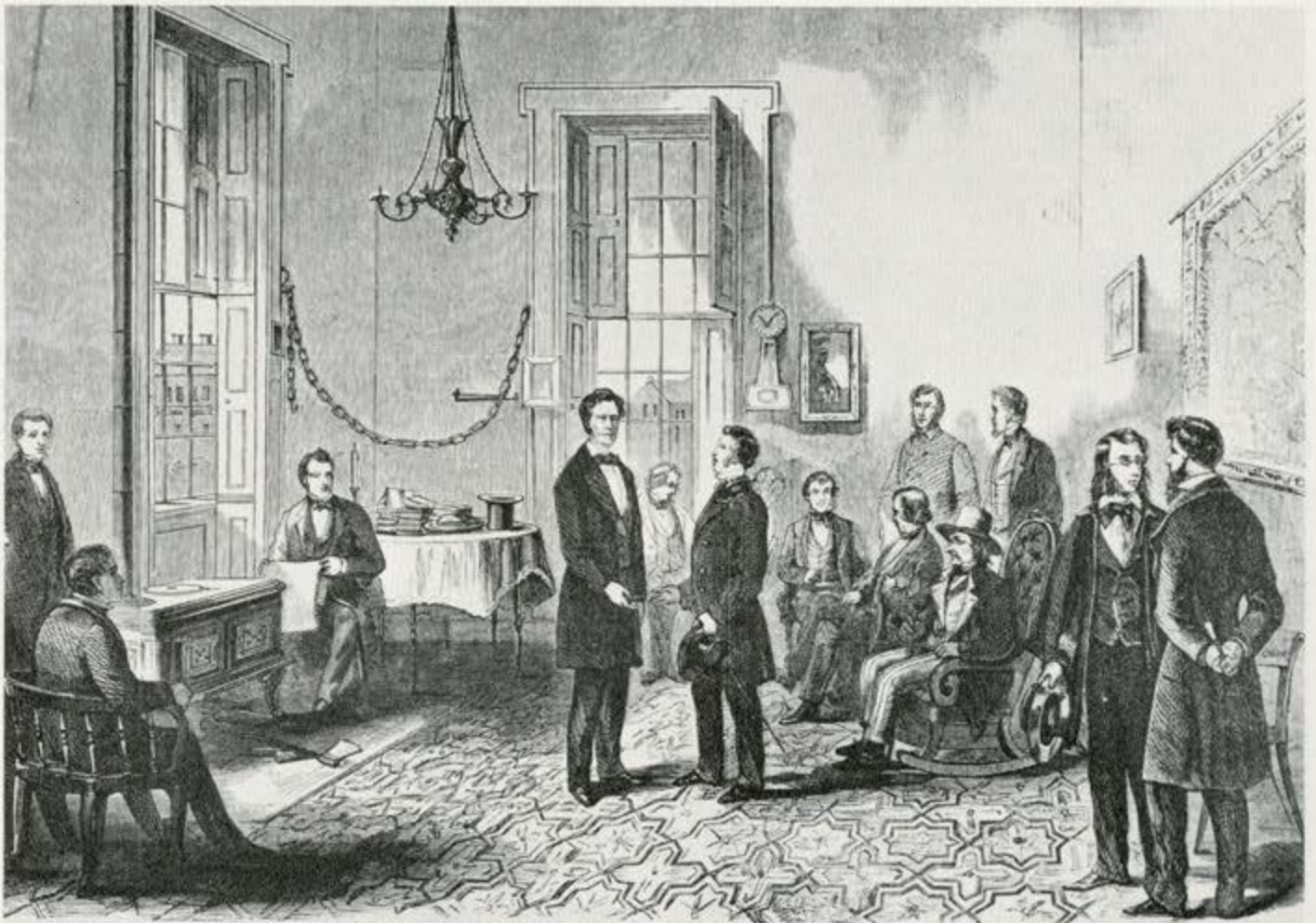
Since he did not run for reelection, Lincoln himself began to think of receiving a patronage appointment. But, he said frankly, "there is nothing about me which would authorize me to think of a first class office; and a second class one would not compensate me for being snarled at by others who want it for themselves." Eventually, Lincoln did become an aspirant for appointment to the lucrative General Land Office. He admitted that his major competitor, Justin Butterfield of Chicago, was "qualified to do the duties of the office," as were "quite one hundred Illinoisans." Lincoln argued that the office "should be so given as to gratify our friends, and to stimulate them to future exertions." Butterfield "fought for Mr. Clay against Gen Taylor to the bitter end," and it would "now mortify me deeply," Lincoln said, "if Gen. Taylor's administration shall trample all my wishes in the dust."

Taylor's weak partisanship gave Lincoln a new appreciation for the importance of the patronage. Taylor, Lincoln realized, "will not go the doctrine of removals very strongly." Leaving many Democratic incumbents in office, Lincoln insisted, gave "the greater reason, when an office or job is not already in democratic hands, that it should be given to a Whig." If "less than this is done for our friends, I think they will have just cause to complain." The appointment of Butterfield doubtless accelerated Lincoln's appreciation for distributing the patronage to friends as the ultimate bond of party loyalty.

Lincoln was out of office and largely uninvolved in patronage matters for more than a decade before becoming President in 1861. He brought with him to the office the traditional habits of a good party man, toughened by the

unhappy experience of the Taylor administration and heightened by the organizational needs of a new party, the Republican, now enjoying its first taste of national office. Lincoln was widely criticized for spending too much time on petty patronage matters while the Nation fell apart into civil war. However, the Republican party was only six years old and was as yet a loose coalition of former Whigs, former Democrats, and former Know Nothings. Lincoln had to exercise great care in distributing the patronage to keep this new coalition together. For this task Lincoln was peculiarly well equipped, for, though no one appreciated loyalty more than he, Lincoln was also free of any vindictive spirit. When Republicans who had supported other candidates than Lincoln at the nominating convention in 1860 worriedly wrote him, Lincoln responded that such things were "not even remembered by me for any practical purpose." He would not go "back of the convention, to make distinctions among its' members."

Personal loyalty was one thing, but party loyalty was quite another. Lincoln initiated the most sweeping removal of federal officeholders in the country's history up to that time. Of 1,520 Presidential officeholders, 1,195 were removed; since most Southern offices were left unfilled, this was almost a complete overturn. He appointed Republicans to almost all of these jobs. Lincoln's administration, the President explained frankly in 1862, "distributed to its' party friends as nearly all the civil patronage as any administration ever did." Lincoln never forgot the lessons of the weakly partisan Taylor administration.



RECEIVING HIS VISITORS IN THE GOVERNOR'S ROOM IN THE STATE HOUSE, SPRINGFIELD, ILL.—FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, MR. HENRI LOUIS.

From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 5. This comes as close as any contemporary picture to showing Lincoln in the act of distributing offices. After his election in 1860, Lincoln established a temporary office in the Illinois State Capitol to receive visitors. Needless to say, most of these visitors were seeking offices from the new administration either for themselves or their friends.