



# Lincoln Lore

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## The Political Life Of New Salem, Illinois

Lincoln's earliest political surroundings have always somewhat baffled scholars. The reasons for this are many and varied. Inadequate documentation and Whiggery's marginal existence as almost a subculture in Democratic Illinois are two factors. A third, perhaps more important, is the unpopularity of the Whig party among historians. Much of the best work on Lincoln was produced at a time when historians were prejudiced against the Whigs. Most writers liked Lincoln well enough, but they disliked the party to which he devoted the greater part of his political life (he was a Whig twice as long as he was a Republican).

Only recently have historians come to have a greater appreciation for the importance, one might almost say the vision, of the Whig party. G.S. Boritt comes immediately to mind for those who work in the Lincoln field, but there are others, such as Daniel Walker Howe, who have been giving the Whigs a fairer shake. This new work has gained attention and made historians think. It has not yet stemmed the tide, and more students should be reevaluating Lincoln's early political environment.

All in all, the effect of the modern unpopularity of Whiggery on the study of Lincoln's early career has been to keep the number of such studies small and to emphasize Lincoln's personal popularity. Nowhere has this emphasis been more pronounced than in the work on Lincoln in New Salem.

Studies of New Salem rarely focus on the political life of the town in which Lincoln forged his early career. Historians have generally shied away from characterizing the town as Whig or Democratic. Most say only that it was democratic (with a small "d") and that this openness accounts for

Lincoln's opportunity to have a political career despite his "defective" education, his inability to settle into a successful vocation, and his penniless and debt-ridden economic status. The beginnings of Lincoln's career in the Illinois legislature seem to represent a triumph of personal popularity and of the American political system. That it was also a triumph of one political party over another rarely gains mention, much less careful consideration.

Here inadequate documentation is *not* a problem. The opportunity to understand Lincoln's political career before the 1850s is probably greater than for any other of America's political giants. Illinois's voters showed their preference at the polls orally, and clerks carefully marked how each citizen voted. Therefore, we know in Lincoln's case precisely—by name—who voted for him and against him. Knowledge like this is unobtainable even for twentieth-century politicians or contemporary elections. We know for sure who voted for Lincoln, something we can never know in the cases of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, or even Ronald Reagan.

### Who Voted for Lincoln?

The records do not exist for every precinct in every election, but a substantial number have survived. The poll books for the election of August 1, 1836, in New Salem precinct still exist. Lincoln was running for reelection to the Illinois House of Representatives. Sangamon County, of which New Salem was still a part, was to choose seven Representatives, and each voter could vote for as many as seven House candidates. Voters also chose a Congressman, a state senator, and

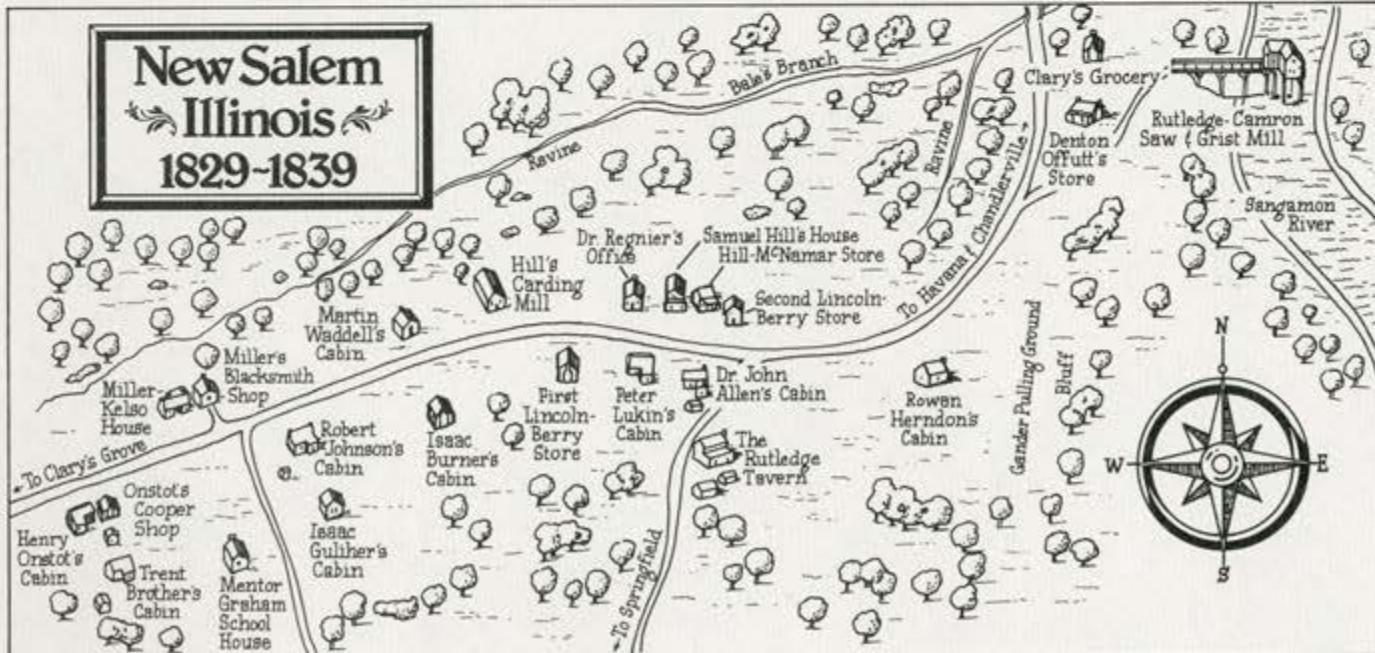


FIGURE 1. Map of Lincoln's home town from 1829 to 1837.

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various county officials. For this election, incidentally, there were two New Salem precinct polling places, a fact not previously mentioned in the literature. Only one of them was in tiny New Salem proper. The other was outside of the town, probably to the west and perhaps to the northwest. Both polling places drew voters from a wide area, and the polling place in New Salem itself attracted many more than the 25 to 50 voters who lived in the town.

The New Salem poll books show that it was a Whig town. John Todd Stuart, the Whig candidate for the United States House of Representatives, gained 86 votes to Democrat William L. May's 59. In the race for the state senate, Whig Job Fletcher outpolled Democrat Moses K. Anderson 73 to 67. In the races for the lower house, five of the seven Whigs gained more votes than any Democrat. Lincoln led the pack with a whopping 107 votes from the 145 voters who came to the polling place. He was followed by William Elkin with 84, Ninian W. Edwards with 84, John Dawson with 82, Dan Stone with 81, Robert L. Wilson with 69, and Andrew McCormick with 67. Lincoln students, of course, recognize these as members of the Long Nine. Thomas Wynne led the unsuccessful Democrats with 71 votes. He was a local man, and no other Democrat topped any Whig's votes in New Salem.

Thus the New Salem poll books also reveal Lincoln's immense local personal popularity, a factor properly noted by historians of the past. One should not ignore the partisan cast of New Salem, however. The peculiar system of voting on many candidates to represent Sangamon County in the legislature allowed for considerable ticket-splitting. Likewise, the rather tentative nature of party formation in Illinois at this date meant that the discipline or regularity of the voters was weaker than it would be in the 1840s, when ticket-splitting became rare. Richard P. McCormick, the outstanding expert on the formation of the Whig and Democratic parties characterizes the party situation in Illinois before 1835 as "chaos." Preparation for the 1836 Presidential election served to coalesce the voters somewhat and saw the Democrats institute a convention system for nominations. The opposition to the Democrats was still only loosely organized and did not put together a modern party organization until about 1840. Thus the degree of party regularity in New Salem was substantial under the conditions. One might say that in 1836 there were about 80 Whigs and about 60 Democrats.

Modern-day visitors to New Salem State Park might get a new feeling about the quaint pioneer village as they meander through it by keeping in mind the Whiggish cast of the town itself. Of course, the reconstructed village does not represent the town at one particular time. It represents a sort of average of a six-year period. Different people lived in the log houses at different times, and it is not possible to identify the politics of all its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, entering the village from the west, one first

encounters Henry Onstot's cabin. In 1836 he voted for Stuart, Lincoln, and the other six Whig candidates for the lower house. The Trent brothers' cabin to the south was full of Democrats. Alexander, Henry, and William Trent voted for May and, with one exception, for the Democratic candidates for the lower house. Alexander Trent, a veteran of Lincoln's company in the Black Hawk War, split his ticket to vote for his old captain. Joshua Miller and John A. "Jack" Kelso married sisters and lived in a double house north of Onstot's cooper shop. Both men were Whigs. Martin Waddell, the hatter, lived next door to Miller's blacksmith shop. Waddell was also a Whig. To the south of these residences lay Robert Johnson's cabin, Isaac Guliher's cabin, and Mentor Graham's schoolhouse. Johnson, a wheelwright and cabinetmaker, voted Whig. Guliher did not vote; perhaps he had moved on from New Salem. Graham lived outside town, but he came to town to vote for Stuart, Lincoln, and five Whig candidates for the lower house. He also voted for Thomas Wynne, a Democrat, for the state legislature.

Isaac Burner did not vote in New Salem in 1836. Alexander Ferguson, who had succeeded Peter Lukins as the local shoemaker, was a Democrat. The town's leading businessman Samuel Hill, Dartmouth-educated Dr. John Allen, and Dr. Francis Regnier were Whigs. The rest of the cabins on the east side of town were shops except the old Herndon cabin, the occupants of which in 1836 are unknown.

#### The Myth of the Clary's Grove Boys

The other New Salem precinct in 1836 was less solidly Whig. Lincoln got 50 of its 76 votes, but May edged Stuart, 40 to 34. In this area of Sangamon County, Lincoln's personal popularity did triumph over local political preference. The names of the voters at this unlocated poll include many of those associated with the Clary's Grove, Concord, and Sandridge areas.

A special mythology surrounds these residents of New Salem's outskirts. The "Clary's Grove boys," as they are called, were representatives of what some historians call the



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FIGURE 2. Joshua Miller's reconstructed blacksmith shop in New Salem.

first frontier. They were rough, fun-loving, and boisterous men of rather unsteady habits. Lincoln, the artisans, doctors, and businessmen of New Salem were men of the more settled second frontier. Lincoln's ability to capture the friendship of the Clary's Grove boys has always gained considerable attention from his biographers. First, it really was important. As members of his company in the Black Hawk War in 1832, the Clary's Grove boys had a hand in Lincoln's first political success: his election as captain of the unit. Second, the way he gained their respect—the famous wrestling match with Jack Armstrong—is the anecdotal stuff of which readable biographies are made. Unlike some important events, this one offers the bonus of making a good story.

Finally, Lincoln's friendship with the Clary's Grove boys has been the focus of much attention because of the peculiar importance of the American West to historians in the period when much of the great writing on Lincoln occurred. In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" identified American democracy and individualism with the West. The frontier was supposed to be the cutting edge of the experience that made America, America and not a pale imitation of the European culture from which most Americans stemmed. For Lincoln to capture the hearts and minds of the Clary's Grove boys was vital to the process by which he maintained his status as the ideal American statesman to most historians. This showed that, despite Lincoln's choice of the law as a vocation and his political and personal friendships with bankers and businessmen, he was linked to the vital experience that forged American democracy.

Scholarship has moved on since those times, and the frontier experience has greatly diminished in importance in the works of American history. The residue of this once important story remains in Lincoln biographies. Oscar and Lilian Handlin's recent *Abraham Lincoln and the Union* notes that Lincoln was "Equally at ease with the boys in the Clary's Grove gang and with the Reverend Cameron." A more important book, Stephen B. Oates's fine *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, carries the idea a bit farther. Describing Lincoln's campaign for the legislature in 1836, Oates says, "On the campaign trail, Jack Armstrong and the Clary Grove boys sang Lincoln's praises and helped keep order at his political rallies." Oates merely states explicitly what is implied in most of the Lincoln literature that preceded his book.

Jack Armstrong may have campaigned in 1836, but he did not vote, either in the state election in August or in the national election in November. And the Clarys were certainly Democrats. John, Spencer, and Zack Clary voted in the New Salem precinct in 1836. Spencer and Zack voted for William L. May and for the seven Democrats seeking seats in the Illinois House. John Clary split his ticket, voting for Stuart, Lincoln, and three other Whig aspirants to the legislature as well as for four Democrats running for the legislature. The Clarys voted in the poll outside New Salem. The other families associated with the Clarys have never been precisely identified, and the Clarys and Armstrongs may not have spoken for all the "boys." Nevertheless, this is not the stuff of which loyal campaign workers are made, and it seems almost certain that the Armstrongs and Clarys were no part of Lincoln's canvass for the Illinois House of Representatives in 1836. Politically, Lincoln was much more at home on the streets of New Salem than in Clary's Grove.

#### Whigs and Democrats in the Developing West

New Salem was solidly Whig. In the Presidential election the following November, the town's voters gave 65 votes to Hugh Lawson White and only 34 to Martin Van Buren (only one poll book for the precinct exists). Dr. Allen, Caleb Carman (at whose house, probably the Trents' former home, the poll was located), Robert Johnson, Jack Kelso, Lincoln, Joshua Miller, Dr. Regnier, and Martin Waddell voted for White. Alexander Ferguson and the Trents (who had apparently moved outside town) voted Democratic. Mentor Graham, who also resided outside New Salem, voted Whig.

Lincoln left New Salem for Springfield before the next election. In 1838 he again ran successfully for the Illinois legislature. New Salem had changed. Its citizens shared with most other residents of northwestern Sangamon County a



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**FIGURE 3. New Yorker Martin Van Buren's lack of popularity in the West spurred Whig organization in 1836.**

desire to form a new county with, of course, a new county seat. Lincoln and the rest of the Long Nine, busy with internal improvements bills and the drive to move the state capital to Springfield, were unresponsive. New Salem's residents registered their dismay at the polls in 1838. The Whigs lost ignominiously. Lincoln led the Whig candidates for the lower house of the legislature with a paltry 31 votes out of 122 (almost double the total of any other Whig candidate for the Illinois House but not even a third of what the Democratic candidates got). Even Lincoln's local popularity could not overcome the disappointment of New Salem's citizens. John Todd Stuart, who was immune from the county-division conflict in Washington, ran ahead of Lincoln with 39 votes but well behind his Democratic opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, who gained 81 votes. A few remained faithful to Lincoln (Waddell, Kelso, Carman, Miller, and Graham), but even they split their tickets, usually voting for Democrats for the other legislative seats. Feeling for division of the county all but obliterated party regularity.

Lincoln was gone from New Salem by then, and his popularity and that of the Whig party in the rest of Sangamon County swept him to victory anyway. It is the experience before 1838 that is important, and it really is important. This is not a quaint exercise meant to add some of the bright color of partisanship to your next tour of New Salem State Park, though lack of attention to party politics is a notable failing of historical reconstructions, which usually ignore partisanship for the sake of a bland patriotism. This is a step in the reconstruction of Lincoln's early political environment.

That environment is looking more Whiggish every day. We know that Lincoln's father was a Whig and that his cousin was a Whig. We now know that the village in which he chose to make his independent way in the world was Whig. There is no anomaly in Lincoln's affiliation with the Whig party. The tendency to associate the frontier with democracy and democracy with the Democratic party is a hangover from the days when the West was thought to be the key to the American experience. Lincoln was a son of America's frontier, all right, but the West was politically and socially complex. When Lincoln moved to New Salem, he left his Whig home for a Whig town.

## CUMULATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY 1979-1980

by Mary Jane Hubler

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, 50 Chatham Road, Harwich Center, Mass.; Arnold Gates, 168 Weyford Terrace, Garden City, N.Y.; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louise Avenue, Northridge, California; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C.; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons, or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

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1979-28

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Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 5/8", 10 (2) pp., illus., price, \$1.50.

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Abraham Lincoln/Franklin D. Roosevelt/(Device: Pendulum/Illustrated/Series/)/Pendulum Press, Inc./West Haven, Connecticut/[Copyright 1979 by Pendulum Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Book, cloth, 9 1/4" x 6 1/8", ix p., 150 (1) pp., price, \$11.50.

1980

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The/(Triangle)/Lincoln-Douglas/Triangle . . . /with/Naughty/Mary Lincoln/Forehead to nose illustrations of Douglas and Robert Todd Lincoln/Douglas (See page 29) Robert/Seduced by Latest/Paris Fashions/Charles J. Bauer/[Copyright 1980 by Charles Joseph Bauer. All rights reserved. First Edition. Published by Silver Spring Press, Silver Spring, Maryland.]

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Book, 1/4 cloth, 10 1/4" x 7 3/4", xxi p., 378 (1) pp., illus., price, \$19.95.

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In Re/James A. Peterson/From the Papers of James A. Peterson/White Oaks Farm/Yorkville, Illinois/[Cover title/] Pamphlet, flexible boards, 8 15/16" x 5 15/16", 12 (3) pp., illus., one showing James A. Peterson studying the records in the Mercer County Courthouse.