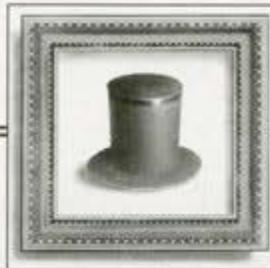


Lincoln Love

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“ELECTION-TIME IN AMERICA”: AN ENGLISHMAN’S VIEW OF POPULAR POLITICS DURING THE 1860 CAMPAIGN

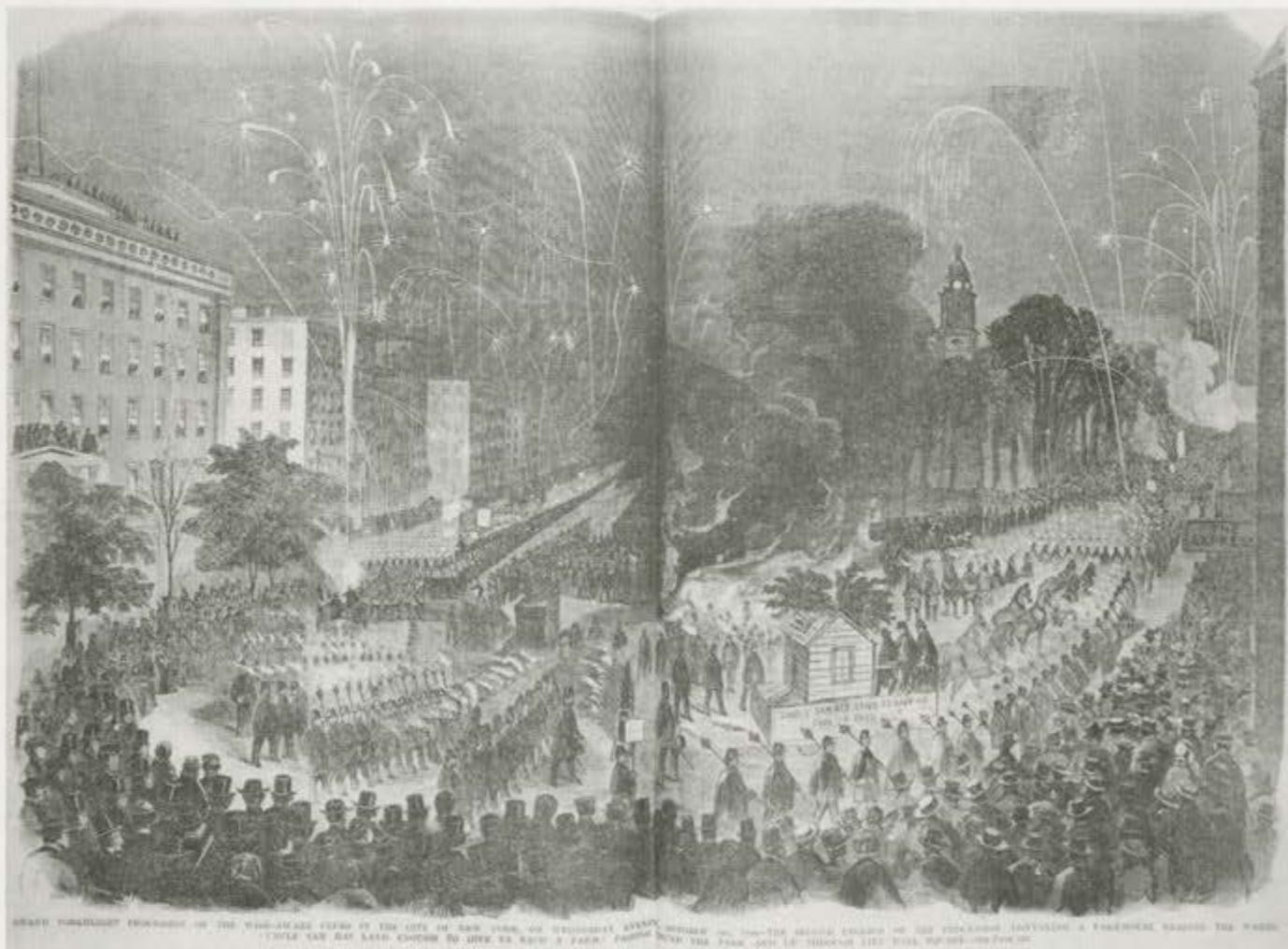
By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

(continued from previous issue)

The reporter for the New York *Herald* noted that “there was some-

thing so democratic about” the barbeque at Jones’s Wood because it provided “all sorts of reasons” that drew “all sorts of people” to the park. Among them was the opportunity to hear Stephen A. Douglas and

Herschel V. Johnson. With its offerings of food and German lager beer, games, entertainment, political folderol, and the speeches of the Democratic candidates, the barbeque offered many incentives for New Yorkers to play a part in American political life and it illustrates the multiple purposes that political gatherings served in the mid-nineteenth century.



A procession of Wide-Awakes on October 3, 1860, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 13, 1860.

For those who did not attend the event, papers such as the *New York Herald* and *New York Tribune* printed the candidates' speeches and told of the happenings there. The reporters for the partisan papers, however, attributed different political meanings to the ox roast. The *Republican Tribune* argued that it had not been a barbeque at all, for there had not been a fire: "The ox had apparently been cooked for uncounted days. . . . But even the cold cooked corpus of the slaughtered ruminant was not observable — the ox, in addition to being already cold and cooked, was cut up." The calf, having been roasted whole was "calmly reposing in dignified integrity, on an ashen rail, which impaled him lengthways. Significant Spectacle! A Democratic calf split by a Republican rail." The *Tribune* concluded that the whole affair had been a Democratic "hoax, a humbug, a deception, a fraud, a delusion, and a snare" (*New York Tribune*, 13 September 1860, p. 6).

When the *Herald's* reporter accounted for the disorder at the barbeque pit, he explained that two-thirds of the persons gathered there "were boys of the 'rowdy' class" hoping "to get into some position where they could be near the carver, who was preparing to 'cut up the bullock.'" (*New York Herald*, 13 September 1860, p. 3). The traveler followed the *Herald* reporter's lead in expressing the popular excitement surrounding the mass rally at Jones's Wood, but in his embellished account written for a literary magazine, he worked to build dramatic tension as thousands gathered around the roasting pit:

On the left-hand side of the pathway, some four thousand persons — two-thirds rowdy boys — with small flags, surround a large enclosure shut in with a pine fence. In the centre of this, are light temporary tables, piled with loaves of bread and heaps of "crackers" and biscuits, making the rowdy mouth water with carnivorous anticipation. The police, in large flat caps and blue frock-coats, with brass stars on the breast, look on at the pit, fifteen feet long, six feet wide, and four feet deep, where the ox, the sheep, and the hog, are roasting fragrantly.

Unlike the newspaper accounts, the traveler's story passed quickly over the speechmaking. He found it unnecessary to "pursue the vigorous speaker [Douglas] into his thirdlies and fourthlies," and wanted to move on to the barbeque. In fact, the barbeque (at noon) actually preceded the speeches (at two o'clock), but the traveler reversed the events to emphasize the former. In his account, when the "cutting-up" commenced, the speakers departed, "satiated with talking....dragging their relaxed uvulus and deafened ears back to the city," and apparently abandoning their listeners still at the park:

The police are driving interlopers outside the fence. Thousands of greedy eyes squint and roll — hands clutch, and expectation stands on tiptoe, eager for the fray. The hydra mob is greedy and disposed to be violent. At first all was reasonably decorous....

Impatient with the delay, and fearful of losing their shares, the mob now rushes to the fence, tears it down, and storms into the enclosure. The police, swamped, rally

round a table covered with pork, and round that of the chief carver. The mob overthrow the rickety table and crowd round the carver, who is urged to apoplexy with savage cries for "Beef, mister!" At last, faint and disgusted, he retires, and the crowd rushes at the relics of the ox....

Now, the mob, excited and wanton, but no longer hungry, take their revenge for having been kept waiting, by brutal mischief; a sack of salt is tossed in the air to the detriment of many eyes and many coats, and ... the remaining loaves are pelted about and destroyed, and the beef bones and lumps of meat are used as missiles. At this crisis, a great mind in the mob discovers the value of the crackers (biscuits), skimming the air — flying strong and swift, breaking painfully on noses and cheek-bones, hats and eyes. Lastly, ... one poor wretch is bonneted by a barrel, ... [and cuts] his face terribly; in a moment out go his fists, striking whoever is near him. Then the police, dreading the appearance of knives, break in and disperse the turbulent mob, and slowly the great assembly breaks and falls away.

Despite his focus on the barbeque, the traveler did not indicate that he was discouraged by the workings of American democracy. When he spoke of the two northern presidential candidates, he explained that Lincoln and Douglas had humble origins, but that both could hope to govern "in a great country where there is no impediment to prevent the poorest man of virtue and genius from attaining" the presidency. He nevertheless referred to Douglas as a "sturdy, unscrupulous man," and suggested his sympathy for the party of Lincoln by contrasting the ox roast with a Republican party parade:

Last night we had another procession: not merely the seedy thirty thousand who that morning assembled to eat the Douglas calf in the woods of Jones, but all the seething millions of New York and its suburb cities, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Hoboken: all to shout for Lincoln.

It is not possible to know which of the Republican processions the traveler observed during his stay in New York in the fall of 1860. The *New York Tribune* does not record a political parade having been held on the evening of September 12, the day of the ox roast. However, it does describe "The Great Torchlight Procession" of the evening of September 13, which he might have seen. The *Tribune* proclaimed the parade the "Brilliant Opening of the Wide-Awake Campaign" and judged that "contrasted with the practical barbarism of the barbeque the day before, the earnestness and gallant spirit of the first distinctive demonstration of the Wide-Awakes were very significant of the principle which animates the present campaign of the Republicans." The parade held that evening began at ten o'clock, moved down Fourth Avenue, Bowery, and Chatham Street, around the Park, and up Broadway to Union Square, where the Wide-Awakes were dismissed at midnight. (*New York Tribune*, 14 September 1860, p. 8.)

With their distinctive caps and oilcloth capes to protect them from the sparks of the lamps they carried, Wide-Awakes provided an exciting spectacle for nineteenth-century Americans. The first

Wide-Awake club had originated in Connecticut, but others were organized elsewhere in the northern states, attracting men with ritual, military symbolism, and camaraderie that inspired them with a sense of being a part of the movement to elect Lincoln. Historian Allan Nevins explained that, in New York, the 1860 presidential campaign parades were supposed to have "marshalled ninety thousand Lincolmites into line. Broadway was packed to view the spectacle, which moved even cynical reporters to flights of ecstasy."¹⁰

Although the Wide-Awakes were sometimes criticized by the opposition as a fad appealing to shallow young men, the traveler did not know exactly how to describe them. Explaining vaguely that the Wide-Awakes were "as potent ... as the 'KNOW-NOTHINGS' were a few years ago," he remarked that they "are the terror of the South, and of the democrats generally, throughout America. It is supposed they are really Abolitionist volunteers in disguise, and the violent opposition papers say that their rods and lanterns point to future murders and incendiarism. They have recently had, even in New York, very bloody conflicts with democratic mobs."

Whatever his reservations about the Wide-Awakes, the traveler became one more observer entranced with the parades, and he was in a good position to admire the one that passed by his hotel on Broadway:

When I left my hotel a little before midnight, and looked down the street, there were moving forests of torches advancing toward me from every point of the compass. Gradually they grew, these undulating lines of twin stars, from mere pins' heads of light to radiating suns, with rays and halos of their own. They advanced under starry arcs of discharged fireworks, under blue irradiations of Roman candles, projectiles that burst in the air like luminous rifle-bullets. Champ! went the New Jersey band, defiling down one strand. Champ! Champ! went the Brooklyn band, debouching into Broadway. Clash! Champ! champ! when the Hoboken band, meeting them full butt, and greeting them with "tiger" shouts, hei-hei-heing, and brazen welcome, and booms of tightened parchment. Now came on marching serried battalions of "Wideawakes," the flower of the New York youth. They marched two abreast, the officers wearing badges, and ribbons, and crimson scarfs, and each regiment with its fiery crimson colours. Each Wideawake wore a cap of oilskin, painted a vermilion colour, in addition to a shako, covered also with red oilskin. Each bore in his right hand a pole about five feet long, having a swinging oil lamp fastened in a frame at one end. There were whole companies with blue lamps, and others with red, so that, as they marched in perfect military array, wheeling and changing front with the mechanism of the soldier, they had the appearance of a Chinese Feast of Lanterns....

Now, the cannon round the statue of Washington, up towards the Fifth Avenue, bellowed to the welkin, and made the very stars wink, as if they were sneezing at the

sulphurous smell. Now, all the clubs drew up in square under the balcony of the St. Nicholas Hotel. Roman candles were fired and broke into blue stars, while the rockets blossomed high up in the sky, and cast down showers of fiery primroses. Bang—champ! went the bands, and "Hei!—hei!—HEI!!!" shouted the men in the red capes. The great Lincoln banner, that waved heavily across Broadway, grew transparent and golden with the torchlight.

"Three cheers for Lincoln!"

"Three groans for Douglas!"

"Three cheers and a tiger for Seward, and three hisses for Tammany Hall and the Soft Shells!"

Now a hush, partly broken by the approach of a band newly landed from Albany — a hush as a little knot of men appeared on the balcony, and waved their hands to deprecate shouts. ... Shouts enough to awaken Washington in his rude tomb on the banks of the Potomac. Fresh thunders of cannon, fresh rains of blue stars from the Roman candles, fresh tigers, fresh "That's good!" and "Sail on!" as some five thousand voices roared out an election song, of which I subjoin the first verse:

I hearkened in the east, and I hearkened in the west,

And I heard a fifing and a drumming;

And my heart bobbed up, in the middle of my breast,

For I knew that the people were a-coming,

Then pull off your coat, and roll up your sleeve,

Abe and the people are a-coming,

Oh, pull off your coat, and roll up your sleeve,

For LINCOLN AND THE PEOPLE ARE

A-COMING, I BELIEVE!"

"Election-Time in America" was a short contribution to a literary magazine, and the anonymous author of the piece created something that was not quite an eyewitness account of his experiences in New York in the fall of 1860. He wanted to entertain his audience with a story of the seriousness with which Americans lived their political lives. He selected from various details of that culture — its ephemera, rituals, and events — and blended them with some humor, embellishment, and an outsider's perspective to relay his impressions of New York during the tense presidential campaign of 1860. However his readers reacted to his narrative of an American "hurrah" campaign when they picked up their copies of *All the Year Round*, the traveler has provided us with a detailed and colorful glimpse into the popular political world of Lincoln's America.

Notes

10. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York, 1982), p. 336; Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln*, vol. 2: *Prologue to Civil War, 1859-1861* (New York, 1950), p. 305.



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NEWS FROM THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION

THE LINCOLN LEGAL PAPERS PROJECT

"Recent discoveries have finally put to rest forever the notion that Abraham Lincoln was a pettifogging lawyer whose practice consisted solely of 'morally correct civil cases.'" So notes Frank J. Williams, president of the Abraham Lincoln Association, in describing the work of the ALA's landmark research project, *The Lincoln Legal Papers: A Documentary History of the Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln, 1836-1861*.

The massive undertaking, launched in 1985, is expected to take at least a decade to complete. Professor Cullom Davis, the project's director, estimates that before research is concluded some 100,000 court records will be located, copied, edited, and annotated. "A crucial first step," notes Davis, "is the methodical search for legal records. It has already taken years of work — and will require visits to well over 100 Illinois courthouses and libraries throughout the country."

Among the 54,418 records already found, are 56 previously unknown documents written and/or signed by Lincoln — including one major discovery in the Macoupin County Court in Carlinville, Illinois. At 43 pages in length, Lincoln's answer in *Clark & Morrison v. Page & Bacon* is now believed to be the longest document he ever wrote. The rare manuscript was recently transferred to the Illinois State Archives.

Not only has the search for additional material expanded greatly — 30 courthouses were originally slated for research, but that number has risen to 72 — it has yielded significant surprises that will alter history's view of Lincoln the lawyer.

For one thing, the number of state supreme court cases involving Lincoln, previously believed to number 177, has risen to 313 — along with another 108 involving his law partners.

Some of the surprises have come spilling out of envelopes — literally. In 1991, old documents fell from a file in Macomb. They proved to be records from an 1838 Fulton County case, and while mundane in subject matter — a suit over unpaid promissory notes amounting to less than \$763 — six of the documents, all previously unknown, were found to be in Lincoln's hand.

Eventually, the Lincoln Legal Papers will issue both a complete facsimile edition on CD-ROM and a multi-volume print edition of the most important and representative cases.

"Lincoln's career as an attorney remains the last area of his professional life to be examined in the full light of history," commented ALA president Williams. "The Lincoln Legal Papers project promises to perform one of this century's greatest contributions to historical scholarship by filling this gaping void in our understanding of Lincoln."

BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS

Although the Lincoln Legal Papers project is sponsored by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, with major support from the ALA, the University of Illinois College of Law, and the Sangamon State University Center for Legal Studies, its progress also depends on private support from foundations, organizations, and individuals.

Recession-driven cutbacks in government funding make help from students and admirers of Lincoln more vital than ever.

According to project director Davis, individuals may assist in two ways: "First, advise project officials of known or reported

Lincoln legal documents in your locality. We seek photocopies of any document, record, letter, contemporary printed account or after-the-fact recollection that relates to Abraham Lincoln's entire 25-year-long legal practice."

"Second, supporters can accelerate our progress through direct financial assistance. Individual contributions have become a mainstay of our work, especially this year, when state funding has diminished and the competition for grants has intensified. Sustaining the dramatic accomplishments of recent years will require greater support than ever from individuals."

Davis — and ALA President Williams — ask that those interested in making tax-deductible contributions send their donations, made payable to The Abraham Lincoln Association, to: The Lincoln Legal Papers, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701.

A NEWLY DISCOVERED CASE

One of the many previously undiscovered cases was unearthed in the Clark County Court House at Marshall, Illinois, where Lincoln apparently argued while working in adjoining Coles and Edgar counties. Its discovery, Cullom Davis suggests, "has widened our search — for it proves that Lincoln had a more extensive practice than historians previously believed." The Archer case is an important discovery along that trail.

On January 5, 1837, William B. Archer, representing Clark County in the Illinois House of Representatives, borrowed \$4,400 from Governor Joseph Duncan of Jacksonville. Abraham Lincoln was also a member of the House. Archer apparently borrowed the money to build the Archer House Hotel in Marshall. He promised to repay the loan five years from the date of the promissory note, or by January 5, 1842, at 8 percent annual interest.

Governor Duncan assigned the note to Thomas January on July 12, 1839. When the note became due, January retained Lincoln and his partner, Stephen T. Logan, to file suit against William Archer. Lincoln wrote and signed the declaration stating the charges, and filed the document, one of two previously unknown Lincoln items uncovered in the case, on February 16, 1842. January sued for \$4,400 and sought an additional \$3,000 in damages. The defendant, a prominent Clark County citizen and senior member of the Illinois House and Whig party, did not contest the litigation. In May 1842, Archer defaulted, or failed to appear at the trial, and Judge William Wilson ordered to repay the \$4,400 plus \$1,877.33 in interest for a total of \$6,277.33.

Lincoln did not have to play an intricate game of legal chess in this case, but the litigation does show how his contacts in the state legislature enhanced his growing law practice by attracting wealthy and socially prominent clients. Indeed, the Archer case was typical of Lincoln's practice during the 1830s and 1840s, when Illinoisans were making a market economy culture out of a wilderness, and keeping lawyers busy with litigation over torts, debt, and real estate.

JOINING THE ALA

To join the ALA — or to obtain more information on membership benefits — write Membership, The Abraham Lincoln Association, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701. Memberships are available at several levels, all of which include a subscription to the twice-yearly *Journal*: Individual (\$25); patron (\$50); sponsor (\$125); benefactor (\$250); and corporate (\$500).