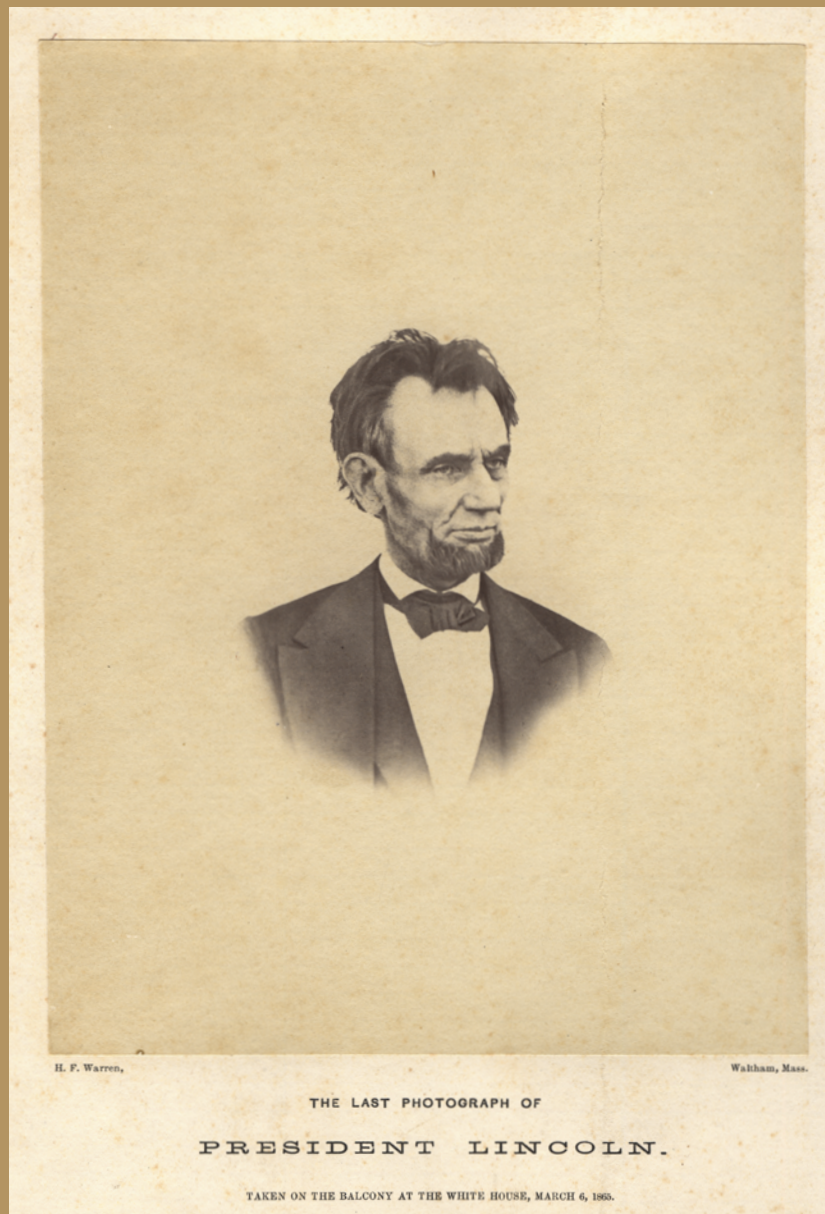

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Editor's Note



This issue of *Lincoln Lore* brings us new perspectives on Lincoln's life and legacy. In two wide-ranging interviews, esteemed scholars Lucas Morel and Louis Masur tell us about their careers, and what they have learned from their study of Abraham Lincoln.

In a fascinating Collections piece, Rolland Center Senior Lincoln Librarian Jessie Cortesi presents some remarkable items that show how Lincoln has been a marketing tool since his first run for president.

In a short reflection, we take a new look at an old photograph of Lincoln's parlor in Springfield. And in the final essay, we hear some new words

from Lincoln's law partner Billy Herndon. As always, my thanks to Jessie Cortesi and Chris Viel for all they do to help make each issue of *Lore* a reality.

— Jonathan W. White

On the Cover: "The Last Photograph of President Lincoln," taken by Henry F. Warren on the balcony of the White House on March 6, 1865. Lincoln was apparently annoyed that Warren had used Tad to get him onto the balcony for the sitting. (OC-1534)

An Interview with Lucas E. Morel

by Jonathan W. White

Lucas E. Morel is the John K. Boardman Jr. Professor of Politics and head of the Politics Department at Washington and Lee University. He is the author of Lincoln and the American Founding (2020) and Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government (2000); and editor of Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages (2015) and Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man (2004). He is a former president of the Abraham Lincoln Institute, a founding member of the Academic Freedom Alliance, a consultant for exhibits at the Library of Congress and National Archives, and he currently serves on the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, which will plan activities to commemorate the founding of the United States of America. His latest book is Measuring the Man: The Writings of Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln (2025), which he co-edited with Jonathan W. White.



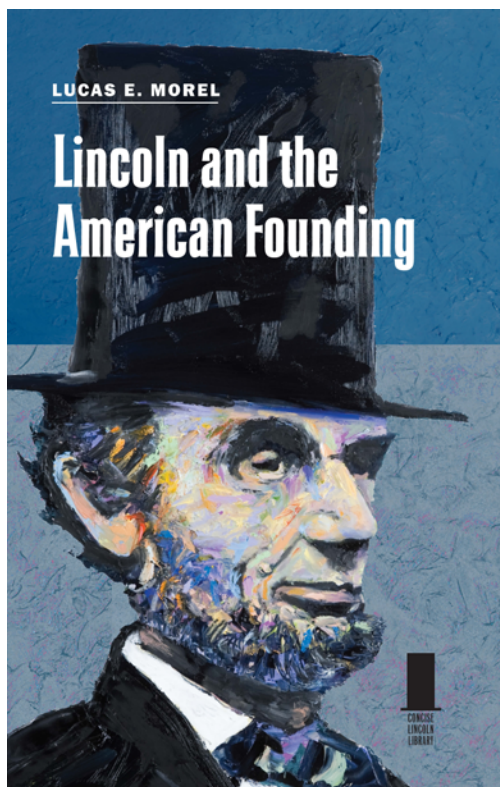
Jonathan White: As we approach the 250th birthday of the Declaration of Independence, how should Americans celebrate this milestone anniversary?

Lucas Morel: Reading the Declaration of Independence would be a good start. My first serious encounter with the Declaration was in a politics class as an undergraduate at Harvey Mudd College. The course was "What is Political Power?" with Professor William B. Allen, a noted scholar of George Washington. Professor Allen asked a basic question to start a discussion of the Declaration. I remembered a social studies teacher in high school who called it a "propaganda sheet." I kind of understood what that meant, and it sounded sophisticated, so I answered the question by repeating this claim about it being just a propaganda sheet. Professor Allen took a breath and then asked me, "Mr. Morel, did you *read*

the Declaration of Independence?” While I was taken aback by the simple question, I confessed I had no answer. But more importantly, I understood that Professor Allen was not trying to embarrass me. He was inviting me—and the rest of my peers—to trust our reading of the text as the beginning of a sincere attempt to understand the argument being made by the Second Continental Congress. Rather than replace my ignorance about the Declaration with his wisdom about it, Professor Allen wanted to see if he could motivate me to articulate a serious political argument on its own terms, and not bring to the text preconceived notions about it. That class was the start of my journey into the world of political theory. I proceeded to take every course Professor Allen offered. “The texts are our teachers,” he would say. Again, he wanted his students to begin their study by assuming the author had something worthwhile to say, even something with which they might disagree. In a word, the appropriate posture towards any author was one of intellectual humility.

Given that so much of our study of the American past is consumed by what we think we find wrong with it, the 250th birthday of the Declaration of Independence deserves our best efforts to try to understand what that generation sought to do on their own terms. This approach does not overlook what we find that was lacking in their efforts, but strives to understand what they achieved in the face of tremendous obstacles.

In addition to reading the Declaration, Americans should read great commentators and activists who looked to the Declaration for inspiration. They could do no better than to begin with the writings of Abraham Lincoln.



JW: What first drew you to the study of Abraham Lincoln?

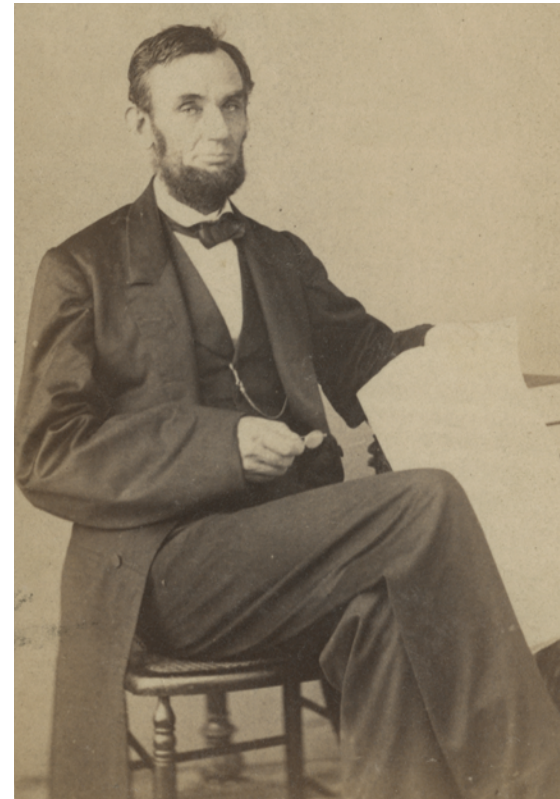
LM: After transferring to Claremont McKenna College as a junior, I took a course on political rhetoric. My professor, James Nichols (a student of Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*), was an expert on Plato’s dialogue, *Gorgias*, so we read various studies and examples of rhetoric, including the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. I began to see how persuading a single person differed from persuading a crowd—how the logic of an argument was only one part of successful rhetoric, and how speakers need to consider the opinions and prejudices of their audience in order to choose the right methods of argumentation (not to mention the character the speaker brings to the podium even before he or she utters a word).

I saw these three classical aspects of rhetoric—*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* as Aristotle presents them—at work in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. I was especially intrigued by the challenge posed by the *pathos* of America that Lincoln attempted to address. How did he try to steer public opinion towards greater alignment with the principles of equality and individual rights when the sentiments of his audience were shaped by pervasive racial prejudice, even in the free state of Illinois? How did Lincoln try to get white Illinoisans to see the connection between the security of their rights at home and the insecurity of the rights of Black people in the federal territories (i.e., their possible enslavement)? How could the spread of slavery into federal territory lead to its expansion into the free states (hint: he saw the *Dred Scott* ruling of 1857 as a step in that direction)? How does a politician build a bridge from where citizens are to where he wants them to go? In a government based on the consent of the governed, those who govern can only promote as much justice as they can muster majority sentiment to support. Lincoln’s words remain the gold standard in American politics, perhaps in all politics, for how he attempted to move his fellow citizens in a principled and sympathetic way.

JW: In public lectures I’ve heard you call Lincoln “America’s greatest defender.” What do you mean by that?

LM: Lincoln became the greatest defender of America not only by fighting to preserve the union of American states, but also by fighting to restore the principle of equality as the central idea of America. In doing so, he taught subsequent generations the true principles of self-government.

In preserving the Union, Lincoln preserved a constitutional way of life. He demonstrated that self-government could work from generation to generation. This required not just a commander in chief willing to exercise his authority to put down an insurrection, but a president who could motivate enough loyal citizens to recognize that self-government was at stake and therefore they should be willing to risk life and limb to defend it. Even with his most



Abraham Lincoln, photographed at Alexander Gardner’s studio in Washington, D.C., in 1863. (LFA-0033)

controversial decisions, like his suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, he directed the American people to the Constitution as the basis of his authority.

He also taught the nation that America was worth defending because America was good. It was the first government in history founded to protect the natural rights of individuals. Its constitution provided the greatest opportunity for the greatest number of people to be free and to pass that way of life down to their posterity—what the preamble to the Constitution calls “the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Lincoln did not think America was perfect, but he thought the principles of the Declaration and the structures of the Constitution were the best means of an imperfect people to improve their imperfect country—imperfect because it was established under circumstances that made the immediate eradication of slavery too difficult to accomplish while the nation sought its political independence from Great Britain.

As the decades passed, and the political attitude of some Americans towards slavery shifted from treating it as “a necessary evil” to defending it as “a positive good,” Lincoln joined other Americans in reminding the nation of its original promise of equality. He argued that the Founders “meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading

and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.” When some Americans insisted on the right to expand racial slavery into federal territory, Lincoln said that the Declaration’s principles should guide their constitutional actions. Viewing those principles as “applicable to all men and all times,” Lincoln had a philanthropic understanding of America as an exceptional nation, and at the moment of the nation’s greatest crisis, he called his country “the last, best hope of earth.”

JW: You’ve spent a lot of time thinking and lecturing about Frederick Douglass. What has drawn you to study him?

LM: I study Douglass for the same reason I study Lincoln . . . and Stephen Douglas and John C. Calhoun, not to mention Washington, Jefferson, and *The Federalist Papers*, as well as more contemporary politicians and activists—both those who have sought to narrow the gap between American political principle and practice and those who misinterpreted or rejected the ideals of the Founding. Douglass once said he sought to get white Americans “to trust the operation of their own principles.” He contributed mightily to the struggle to get Americans to live up to their noblest professions in what one could call the long civil rights movement that constitutes American history.

More specifically, Douglass served as a loyal opposition to Lincoln’s wartime presidency as they jointly sought to bring to fruition the promise of the American founding as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Douglass’s categorical abolitionism also contrasts with Lincoln’s more prudential antislavery constitutionalism, providing a better understanding of each man’s political thought and objectives. Today, where truly great leaders are few and far between, it’s a tonic to see two of our nation’s best men press the English language and the American regime towards its noblest purposes.

JW: Douglass experienced quite a transformation in his thinking about the United States. Tell us about his shift from being a Garrisonian to an anti-Garrisonian abolitionist.

LM: After Douglass escaped from Maryland, eventually settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he began reading an abolition newspaper called *The Liberator*. It was edited by the most famous abolitionist in America, William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was a pacifist and a man of firm, albeit idiosyncratic, biblical convictions. He believed that genuine moral reform could only be achieved through moral suasion—namely, the use of words to make moral or spiritual appeals—and not by any use of force, whether violent or political. Rejecting politics as a means of abolishing slavery, Garrison thought emancipation could only be accomplished through organizing abolition societies that would appeal to conscience through speeches, sermons, pamphlets, and books.

In addition, Garrison considered the U.S. Constitution as proslavery because of its compromises with the peculiar



Frederick Douglass had this photograph made when he visited Hillsdale College in Michigan on January 21, 1863. Hosted by the Ladies' Literary Union, his speech at the college chapel was titled "Popular Error and Unpopular Truth." (Hillsdale College)

institution: the major provisions include the three-fifths clause (which counted three-fifths of a state's enslaved population towards representation in the House of Representatives), the fugitive slave clause (which required slaves escaping out of a state to be returned), and the non-importation clause (which prevented Congress from banning the importation of slaves into the United States until 1808). Garrison once burned a copy of the Constitution at a Fourth of July rally in Framingham, Massachusetts; described the Constitution as a "covenant with death" and "an agreement with hell"; and called for the dissolution of the American union so free states would no longer have to help slave states to secure their slave population. During the 1840s, Douglass joined Garrison on the stump as an itinerant abolition speaker, recounting the horrors of slavery and lambasting the proslavery character of the Constitution and the American church. He eventually wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American*

Slave (1845)—the first of three autobiographies—which Garrison endorsed with a lengthy preface.

With the encouragement and financial support of British friends, Douglass decided to publish his own newspaper, *The North Star*, in December 1847, and began rethinking his interpretation of the Constitution. After studying the writings of Lysander Spooner, William Goodell, and Gerrit Smith (who would become a friend and benefactor), Douglass rejected the traditional proslavery interpretation held by both Garrisonian abolitionists and southern apologists for slavery. Adopting a strict, literal interpretation of the Constitution led him to see "principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery."

In 1852, in his "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech, Douglass publicly announced that if interpreted "according to its plain reading," the Constitution was a "glorious liberty document." For example, neither "slavery, slaveholder, nor slave can anywhere be found" in its preamble nor in any other part of the Constitution. Douglass no longer called for a disunion of the free and slave states, arguing in 1857 that "it is our duty to remain inside this Union, and use all the power to restore to enslaved millions their precious and God-given rights." Garrison's cry of "No Union with Slaveholders" (emblazoned on the masthead of *The Liberator*) would not relieve citizens of the free states of their responsibility to undo the harm they committed by extending slavery's lease on life through their original constitutional union with the slaveholding states. Douglass was now a political abolitionist: "My position now is one of reform, not of revolution. I would act for the abolition of slavery through the Government—not over its ruins."

JW: In what ways were Lincoln and Douglass similar and different in their views of the Founding and the Constitution?

LM: Their understanding of the American founding overlapped quite a bit, both in their interpretation of, and devotion to, the Declaration of Independence, especially its Lockean principles of human equality, individual rights, and government by consent of the governed. Douglass called them "saving principles" and Lincoln called its expression of self-government "absolutely and eternally right." Both men were antislavery men. They agreed that the Founders viewed slavery, in Lincoln's words, as "an evil not to be extended," and

under the U.S. Constitution, sought "the peaceful extinction of slavery." As Douglass observed, "All regarded slavery as an expiring and doomed system, destined to speedily disappear from the country." Both interpreted the Constitution in light of the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln referred to the Declaration's equality principle as "an 'apple of gold'" and the Constitution as "*the picture of silver*, subsequently framed around it."

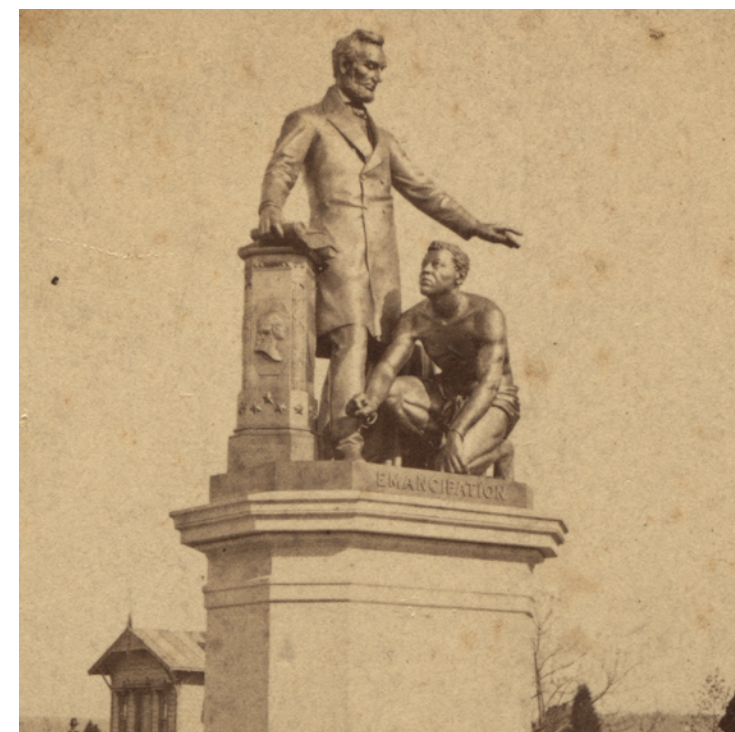
The fundamental difference was their interpretation of the constitutional clauses addressing slavery. Lincoln held the conventional view: despite never using the word "slave" or "slavery," the three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave clause, and the non-importation clause were all the result of compromises between states that wanted to hold onto the peculiar institution for the foreseeable future, and states that did not want the federal government to bolster slavery's grip on America. Ultimately, the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia concluded that maintaining national unity required concessions to a minority of the slaveholding states—South Carolina and Georgia in particular.

Without the American union, Lincoln believed there would be no security for liberty. Liberty required political independence from foreign powers; and independence required unity among the American states. To maintain that unity required that compromises be made, especially regarding slavery. Lincoln said, "I think that was the condition in which we found ourselves when we established this government. We had slavery among us, we could not get our Constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more, and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties."

In 1858, Lincoln stated, "I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist," but Lincoln thought that the federal nature of the U.S. Constitution—the American people dividing political powers between state and federal governments—left slavery mainly as a state institution. Congress was empowered to act on the peculiar institution in only a few cases (as the clauses mentioned above indicate), and could only abolish it within a federal context, like the territories out west. It possessed no authority to abolish it where it already existed in the states.

Douglass interpreted the constitutional clauses that dealt with slavery more strictly than Lincoln. As noted earlier, Douglass's interpretation of the Constitution through "strict construction" denied "the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it," an admittedly unconventional reading. Precisely because the so-called slavery clauses never used the word "slavery," Douglass thought they should not be construed to apply to enslaved people. Moreover, since the preamble explicitly mentioned "justice," "domestic tranquility," "general welfare," and "the blessings of liberty," Douglass thought the Constitution should be construed according to a plain reading of the text, and not any intentions of its framers, who after all met and deliberated in secret. As Douglass noted, "nothing but the result of their labours should be seen, . . . free from any of the bias shown in the debates." The debates "were purposely kept out of view, in order that the people should adopt, not the secret motives or unexpressed intentions of any body, but the simple text of the paper itself." This is what he saw as "the advantage of a written constitution," intended to last "for ages."

That antislavery Constitution, Douglass believed, permitted Congress to abolish slavery as an existential threat to the American republic. This is what made Douglass a vigorous critic of Lincoln throughout the Civil War, as the president chose not to make the war to save the Union a war to abolish slavery until over a year and a half had passed. Douglass would later give an account of their differences in a speech delivered in 1876 at the dedication of the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C. The climax of his candid, and at times provocative, chronicle of Lincoln's wartime presidency offers the clearest appraisal of Lincoln's statesmanship in all of Douglass's writings: "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."



Frederick Douglass delivered the keynote address at the dedication of the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1876. (LN-0223)

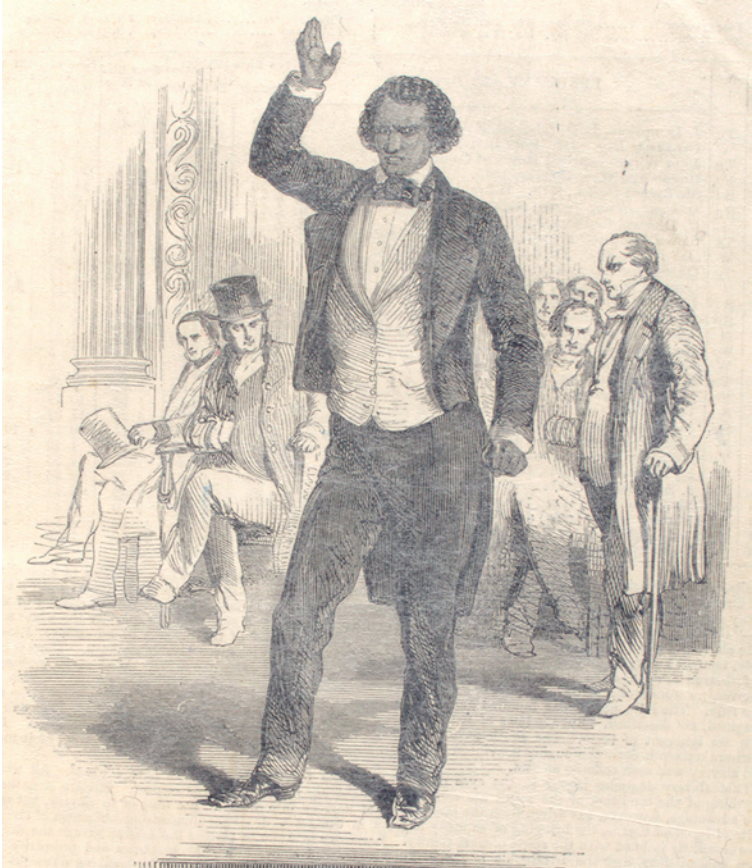
For Douglass, part of Lincoln’s genius was that even though he was sympathetic toward white Americans first and foremost, he saw the justice of extending the principles of the regime equally to Black Americans. Moreover, Lincoln brought enough of his countrymen with him to save the Union and secure emancipation. As Douglass put it in June 1865, “the American people, indebted to themselves for themselves, saw in . . . [Lincoln] a full length portrait of themselves. In him they saw their better qualities represented, incarnated, and glorified—and as such, they loved him.” Without that love, and the civic trust necessary to sustain popular government, Lincoln could neither have preserved the Union nor emancipated slaves.

Douglass concluded that Lincoln “knew the American people better than they knew themselves.” He knew what they professed to believe and respected them and their principles enough to hold them to them. Lincoln moved them to a greater commitment to their highest ideals. Douglass acknowledged that while Lincoln’s constitutionalism was not abolitionist in the strictest sense, its antislavery *bona fides* accomplished what Douglass’s own constitutionalism was unable to do.

JW: Douglass and Lincoln both valued free speech. Why did free speech matter so much to the abolitionists and antislavery politicians in the nineteenth century?

LM: Simply put, political reform required a free exchange of opinions. A month after Lincoln’s 1860 election to the presidency, a meeting of Boston abolitionists was mobbed for daring to discuss how to abolish slavery. Douglass commented on the violence that disrupted that public assembly. “To suppress free speech,” he explained, “is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.” By reminding us of the hearer, Douglass teaches us that free speech seeks an audience. When we forget the audience, the hearer, we forget that free speech is not an end in itself, but a means to an end—the discovery of truth. It is an appeal to reason. Douglass reminded us of the purpose of free speech—why we want to protect it, and why diversity of thought is so important: that is, because the purpose of free speech is to persuade.

Below the Mason-Dixon line, slave states employed despotic measures to silence opposition. “Slavery cannot tolerate free speech,” Douglass observed. Describing a free mind as the “the dread of tyrants,” Douglass said that the right of free speech “is the right which they first of all strike



“Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave, denouncing slaveholders and their religious abettors” from *The Uncle Tom’s Cabin Almanack*; or, *Abolitionist Memento for 1853* (London: 1852).

down.” In addition to mobbing abolition speakers, they censored the mails of abolition publications and prohibited slaves from learning to read. Douglass was all the more shocked that the mob preventing “the right of the people to assemble and to express their opinion” arose in Boston, the cradle of the American Revolution.

Douglass once explained why he chose to make his living as an abolition newspaper editor and orator. For enslaved Americans, he wanted “to speak and write in their vindication; and struggle in their ranks for that emancipation which shall yet be achieved by the power of truth and of principle for that oppressed people.” In short, free speech became his vocation, and his words would help shape public opinion in America for the next 50 years.

For him, speech—meaning an appeal to right and not might—held the key to the march of liberty in America. He pointed out that it was slavery that required “violations of free speech” for its protection, but he was confident that “truth must triumph under a system of free discussion.” Douglass declared, “Such is my confidence in the potency of truth, in the power of reason, . . . that had the right of free discussion been preserved during the last thirty years, . . . we should now have no Slavery to breed Rebellion, nor war . . . to drench our land with blood.” He insisted that “slavery would have fallen . . . as it has fallen . . . when men can assail it with the weapons of reason and the facts of experience.”

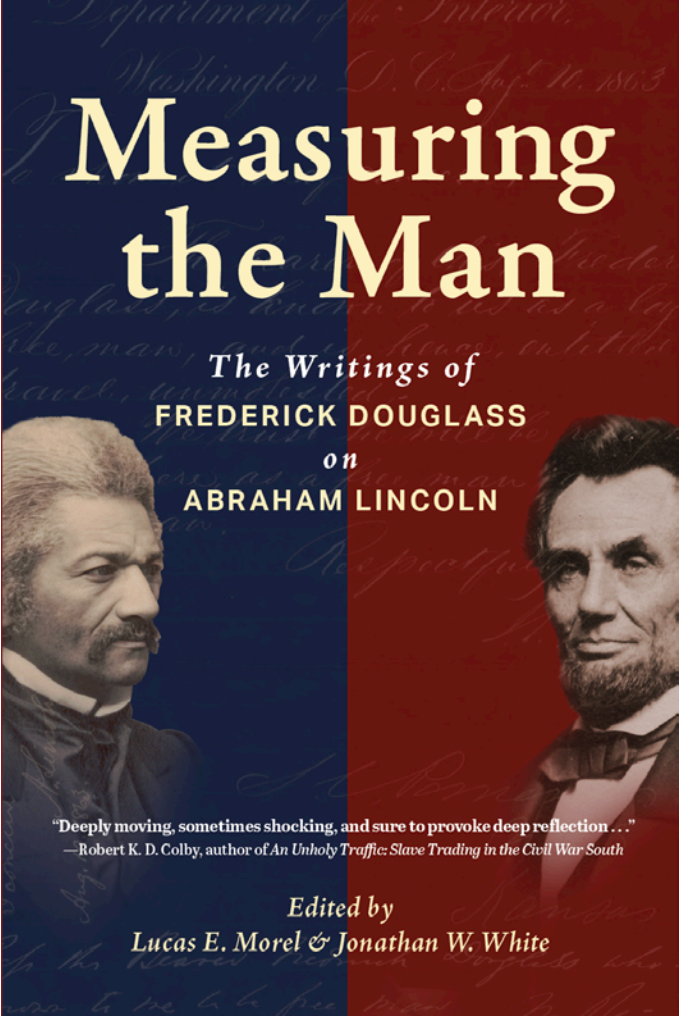
No one depended more on free speech, the power of words, to rise from poverty to the pinnacle of political power than Lincoln. In his 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln explained the importance of free speech in a government based on the consent of the governed: “In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.” Lincoln knew by his own political experience that in a free society, those who can shape public opinion are the true rulers. He helped shape the Republican Party into a legitimate opposition party to the Democratic Party in the 1850s. Although he did not win his bid to replace Stephen Douglas in the Senate, two years later he would be inaugurated as the first Republican president of the United States. This required the right of freedom of speech to operate without censorship or interference by the government.

JW: You and I are both very excited to see *Measuring the Man: The Writings of Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln* in print this fall. What do you hope readers will get out of this book?

LM: Regardless of their familiarity with the writings and oratory of Douglass, readers will find this chronicle of his expectations, criticisms, and appreciations of Lincoln from 1858 to 1894 eye-opening in its illustration of the tension between his abolitionist principles and his political strategies. As an abolitionist, Douglass was relentless in his demands that Lincoln turn the war for Union into a war for emancipation and employ Black Americans as soldiers. Readers will gain a deeper understanding of the connection between his calls for abolition and his expectations of equal citizenship in postwar America. For example, even as his political tactics shifted during the Civil War, Douglass was consistent in seeking the vote for Black men as a necessary defense against a slave power he thought would survive the abolition of slavery in the South.

We discovered that British newspapers were printing letters he wrote to abolitionists that no one has seen in 160 years. They display a wide range of his rhetorical eloquence, and the freedom with which he considered alternate paths to freedom and equality for Black Americans. This was especially true at pivotal moments during the Civil War, as Douglass did not always say the same thing to audiences in Great Britain as he did to those in the United States. A war that hastened to a close with the Union preserved but slavery intact was not a war he thought worthy of the blood and treasure of the nation.

Most astonishingly, within days of Lincoln’s assassination, Douglass shared with his British audience the expectation that Andrew Johnson could very well prove a better president for Black Americans than Lincoln had he lived! Douglass believed that Lincoln “thought the rebels should not



be punished, but petted, not conquered but conciliated,” and “thought to win back his enemies by his kindness, rather than compel their respect and obedience by his power.” In contrast, he said of Johnson, “As a man he is not equal to Mr. Lincoln, but as a ruler I think he will prove superior” because he “will answer better the stern requirements of the hour.” A summer would pass before Douglass would publicly criticize the new president, followed by a contentious interview with Johnson in February 1866 that dashed any hopes Douglass had for a Presidential Reconstruction that favored ex-slaves over ex-Confederates.

Although the anthology gives only Douglass’s side of the informal debate between him and Lincoln, the reader will infer a general sense of what the president was saying and doing (or failing to do) that disappointed Douglass. I guess you and I will need to get working on a companion volume, “The Republican Responds to the Radical,” to make it more of a fair fight!

JW: Now there’s an idea! Thank you so much for joining us today!



Although obscured by some damage, a print of “Washington Crossing the Delaware” can be seen here hanging above the sofa in Lincoln’s parlor in May 1865. Photograph by Ridgway Glover. (OC-0322)

“Fixed Upon My Imagination”: Abraham Lincoln and Washington’s Crossing

by Jonathan W. White

As a young boy in Indiana, Abraham Lincoln read at least two biographies of George Washington. When he was about fourteen years old, he borrowed a copy of David Ramsay’s *The Life of George Washington* (1807) from his neighbor Josiah Crawford. When the book got wet from rain that seeped into the Lincoln cabin, Crawford required Abe to cut corn for three days to pay for it.

The reading Lincoln did as a child stuck with him for the rest of his life. When he addressed the New Jersey state senate on February 21, 1861, he recollected “away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book . . . ‘Weem’s Life of Washington.’” Lincoln told the state senators: “I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply” as the Patriots’ struggle at Trenton at Christmastime in 1776. “The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single revolutionary event; and you all know, for you have all been boys, how these early impressions last longer than any others.” Lincoln recollected “thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have

been something more than common that those men struggled for.” Now, as president-elect, he was “exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for”—national independence, the “Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people”—shall be saved “in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.”

Emanuel Leutze’s 1851 painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware” also helped fix this pivotal moment in Americans’ memories and imaginations. A copy of the epic artwork was put on display in April 1864 at the Great Metropolitan Fair in New York City, where thousands of visitors gazed up at the iconic scene. Prints of the painting could also be purchased and displayed in the home. This stereoscopic view, taken in Springfield in May 1865, reveals a print of Leutze’s painting on the wall of Lincoln’s parlor. The print had not appeared in an engraving of Lincoln’s parlor published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in March 1861, indicating that it was likely hung by the Tilton family, who rented Lincoln’s home during the Civil War. Nevertheless, Lincoln would likely have been pleased to know that “Washington Crossing the Delaware” graced his parlor wall as he struggled to preserve what Washington had struggled to create.

An Interview with Louis P. Masur

by Jonathan W. White



Louis Masur is Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of American Studies and History at Rutgers University. He is a cultural historian whose publications include books on Lincoln and the Civil War, capital punishment, the events of a single year, the first World Series, a transformative photograph, and a seminal rock ‘n’ roll album. His publications include The Sum of our Dreams: A Concise History of America (2020), Lincoln’s Last Speech: Wartime Reconstruction and the Crisis of Reunion (2015), Lincoln’s Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union (2012), and The Civil War: A Concise History (2011). His latest book is A Journey North: Jefferson, Madison, & the Forging of a Friendship (2025). Masur’s essays and reviews have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and Slate. He has been elected to membership of the American Antiquarian Society, the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, and the Society of American Historians.

Jonathan White: Your first book, *Rites of Execution* (1989), explores the history of capital punishment in the United States from the American Revolution to the Civil War. What sort of changes in criminal justice occurred between 1776 and 1865? And what caused these reforms to occur?

Louis Masur: I became interested in the topic of the movement against capital punishment when I read several pieces by the abolitionists who included opposition to the death penalty in the panoply of the reforms of the day: antislavery, temperance, peace, education, prison reform. Following the Revolution, activists saw the death penalty as monarchical and antithetical to a republican form of government. Benjamin Rush was one of the early proponents of alternative punishments and the penitentiary emerged as a substitute for capital punishment. In addition to political reasons to oppose capital punishment, there were religious ones, and a drift away from Calvinism



Civil War patriotic cover showing Jefferson Davis hanging from the gallows with the motto, “The WRONG man in the RIGHT place.” (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

led liberal religious sects—Quakers, Unitarians, Universalists—to oppose the death penalty. As a result, in the period before the Civil War, the number of crimes for which one could be executed declined and some states abolished the death penalty.

Rites of Execution also explores the shift from public to private executions that occurred in antebellum America, a shift that spoke to larger changes in the culture. Executions were moved inside prison walls, in part because the sight of hangings affronted emerging middle-class sensibilities. In many ways, the Civil War put an end to this first movement to abolish the death penalty as activists found it a challenge to generate sympathy for death when untold numbers were perishing.

JW: *Rites of Execution* came out of your dissertation, which you completed at Princeton. I understand that you were a research assistant for James M. McPherson when he was writing *Ordeal by Fire*. What was it like to work with him?

LM: My first graduate seminar was with Jim McPherson. I wrote a paper on William Lloyd Garrison and the doctrine of immediate emancipation. From there, I was hooked on that generation of reformers. I learned a critical lesson

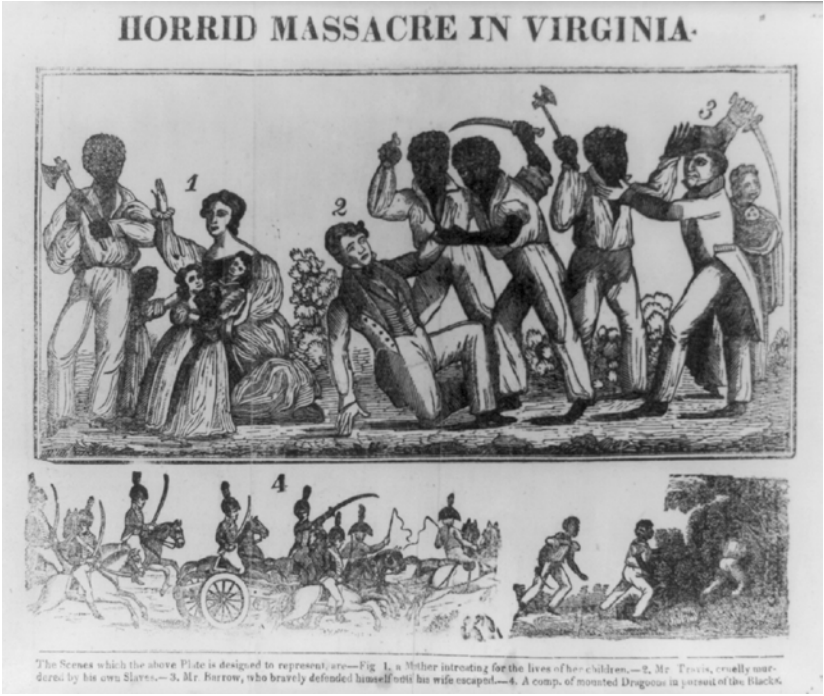
while serving as Jim’s research assistant: always go back to the primary sources. *Ordeal by Fire* was a vast synthetic work and Jim would have me check quotes that he found in various secondary works. Time and again, I would go to the sources and discover that the writer had gotten it wrong: a word here, a word there. Sometimes something more egregious that changed the meaning of the quote. It was a lesson that served me well when I wrote my concise history of the Civil War.

The Princeton history department was a remarkable place to be at that time, 1979–1984. It was dominated by Europeanists such as Natalie Davis, Lawrence Stone, Anthony Grafton, and Robert Darnton. (At some point, the department was featured in the *New York Times*.) What that meant was that Americanists could fly under the radar. Jim hadn’t yet won the Pulitzer Prize for *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Dan Rodgers arrived in 1980. John Murrin, Stan Katz, Nancy Weiss and others created a collaborative and supportive environment, though for someone like me, coming from a state university, Princeton posed various challenges. I was a lecturer at Princeton from 1985–1986 before taking my first tenure-track position. Amazing how quickly forty years can pass!

JW: On Lincoln’s birthday in 1831 the United States witnessed a solar eclipse—something you’ve written an entire book about. Tell us about that year. And why did this astronomical event captivate the nation in the way that it did?

LM: My idea for the book emerged in that first graduate seminar I took. Garrison’s newspaper *The Liberator* began circulation on January 1, 1831, and I continued to note other seminal events centered on that year: Nat Turner, nullification, Andrew Jackson, evangelical awakenings, Indian removal. Tocqueville and Beaumont visited in 1831. I use the eclipse and the themes of darkness and light to write about one of the seminal years in

American history. The book in many ways is about the staging ground for the Civil War that would erupt thirty years later. It was a challenging book to write in terms of figuring out the narrative structure. One day I woke up and wrote the line, “the heavens darkened and Nat Turner prepared to strike.” From there, after years of research and thinking about the events of the year and how to weave them together, the book came easily.



Scenes from Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

JW: Lincoln was a marginal figure in your first two books, but in recent years you’ve written several books that focus entirely on him and his times. What led you to make this transition?

LM: If there is something that ties together the approach I take in my work, it is the idea of the world in a grain of sand. I identify moments or texts (1831; a photograph; a record album) and seek to unpack them. Any nineteenth-century historian at one point or another seeks an opportunity to engage with Lincoln and that time came for me when I started to think about the period between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and the final Proclamation—one hundred days. While much had been written about the Emancipation Proclamation, I could not find much that focused on this pivotal period. The proclamation changed in important ways between September 22 and January 1, and I sought to explicate how those changes came to be and how Lincoln navigated those stirring days.

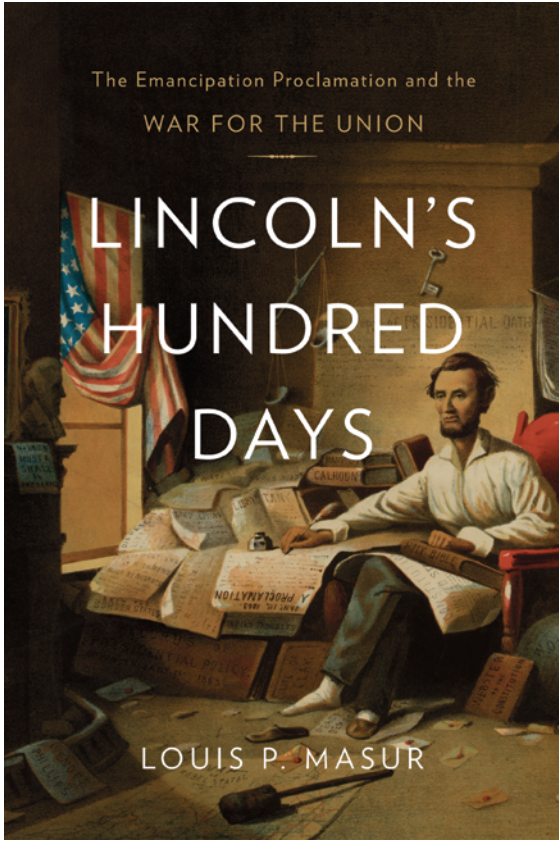
JW: The Emancipation Proclamation is often criticized today. Some see it as little more than a political ploy, while others say it didn’t really accomplish anything. Many of Lincoln’s critics also say that he waited too long to release it. What do you say to critics of the proclamation to help them understand Lincoln’s approach to slavery during the Civil War?

LM: I have little patience with critics of the Emancipation Proclamation. Frederick Douglass understood it as one of the polestars of American liberty along with the Declaration of Independence. Why did Lincoln wait? Because he had to, because he did not have the power as president to abolish slavery, and it took time both to see how the war progressed and to develop the doctrine of military necessity. It took time for the enslaved to run away and help force Lincoln’s hand. It took time to prepare the public for the action he decided to take in the summer of 1862.

Critics say it did not free all the slaves. Of course not. Lincoln had no power over slavery in the four border states. Slavery was a state institution. And the proclamation is filled with exceptions. It had to be. The rationale for freeing the slaves was military necessity. You cannot therefore free those enslaved persons where there is no longer a military necessity (hence the exceptions). To do so would be to make a mockery of the legal grounds on which the president as commander in chief is acting. Lincoln was nothing if not logically consistent. Read his rebuke to Salmon Chase on September 2, 1863. Why critics of Lincoln do not understand his clear position is confounding.

As for it not accomplishing anything, tell that to the thousands of enslaved persons who found freedom by running away after the proclamation was issued, tell that to the thousands of Union soldiers who rejoiced to now be fighting not only for Union but also for freedom, tell that to the tens of thousands of Black soldiers, whose service was authorized by the Emancipation Proclamation, and who helped win the war and rights to citizenship. Did it free all the slaves? No. Were most of the enslaved freed only on paper? Yes, but paper counts. The Declaration of Independence was a paper decree. The Emancipation Proclamation sets the stage for the Thirteenth Amendment. It transforms the meaning of the war.

At some point in the twentieth century, the luster of the Emancipation Proclamation faded as some sought to diminish Lincoln’s role as great emancipator and instead place the emphasis on how the enslaved freed themselves. “Who freed the slaves,” some historians asked? Many factors explain emancipation, but there is no answer to the question without Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation.



JW: You call your book on this subject *Lincoln's Hundred Days* (2012). Why is it important to focus on that particular stretch of time?

LM: History is the study of change over time, and the hundred days between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and the final decree illustrate this axiom as well as anything. One of my favorite assignments is to give students the two documents and ask them what changes? Remarkably, despite the opposition to the preliminary proclamation, the final document is more radical. Lincoln removes any reference to colonization and he authorizes the enlistment of Black soldiers. He suggests that the enslaved have a right to self-defense and he calls emancipation an act of justice. This despite punishing losses for the Republican Party in the November elections. Having made up his mind to free the slaves, Lincoln would not back down. He was often slow and deliberate in reaching a decision, but once he decided he seldom wavered. He would later say in his letter to James Conkling, “the promise, being made, must be kept.”

Lincoln suffered terribly during those hundred days. After Fredericksburg, he lamented “if there is a worse place than hell, I am in it.” And yet, at the same moment, he wrote his remarkable letter to Fanny McCullough in which he offered condolences on the death of her father and assured her she would be happy again. Considering that juxtaposition alone is enough to warrant a lifetime of studying Lincoln.

JW: You followed up with a book on *Lincoln's Last Speech* (2015). I always get goosebumps when I think about what it must have been like that night at the White House. Please describe the scene for us.

LM: April 11 was a Tuesday and as dusk approached the White House was “brilliantly illuminated” and bonfires and celebratory rockets lit up the sky. It had been two days since Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. Bands played; people sang. Tad admired the parades and at one point waved a captured rebel flag. Crowds called on Lincoln to speak. He did so briefly the day before, at one point calling on a band to play “Dixie,” joking that the Union would appropriate it as a captured prize of war. He promised that he would speak to the crowd the next evening, the eleventh. Mary Lincoln invited guests who could be seen through a window adjoining the portico from where Lincoln would speak. Elizabeth Keckly described the “weird, spectral beauty of the scene.”

One of Mrs. Lincoln’s guests was Marquis Chambrun, a French attorney who arrived in February 1865 and quickly became a favorite. He said of Lincoln that “as President of a mighty nation, he remains just the same as he must have appeared while felling trees in Illinois.”

JW: What sort of vision for Reconstruction did Lincoln lay out in his final speech? And how was his speech received?

LM: I wrote an entire book on the speech, so it is hard to summarize. His vision was to double down on the process he had initiated with his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in December 1863. He stood by his plan of government by which states would be restored to the Union: when loyal governments were established and state constitutions that abolished slavery adopted. Much of the speech was devoted to urging the readmission of Louisiana on these terms. In typical Lincoln fashion, he used a metaphor to make his meaning plain to the people. Louisiana’s government might not be perfect, but the government was “only as it should be as the egg is to the fowl.” He asked whether “we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it.”

Perhaps the most remarkable element of the speech is that he publicly endorsed Black suffrage for those who were educated and had served in the Union military. As with so many topics, he evolved to this position. A year earlier he wrote the governor of Louisiana and suggested Black men be included in the elective franchise, but added the suggestion was to him alone and not for public consumption. Democracy was everything to Lincoln and he knew that only with the franchise could the freedmen have their interests represented. This is not to say there was not some political expediency to it: Black men would vote overwhelmingly Republican until the 1930s.

Reactions to the speech were predictably partisan. He was praised for his statesmanship and common sense. The *New York Times*, a pro-administration paper, thought the speech reserved and wise. Others, however, thought the speech “fell dead” and was “vague.” Some mocked the chicken/egg metaphor, suggesting that rotten eggs should be smashed. What was clear to all, a battle with Congress over reconstruction lurked ahead. But that day Lincoln was jubilant. Congress would not be in session until December; he would work it out before then. He was not given that chance. John Wilkes Booth attended the speech. He turned to Lewis Powell and declared “that is the last speech he will ever make.” Three days later, he acted.

Historians enjoy counterfactuals and “what if Lincoln had lived” is a useful one. It is too simple to believe that he would have solved the intractable problems of Democratic Party insurgency and racial hatred that came to characterize the era of Reconstruction. To be sure, the freedmen



John Wilkes Booth being prodded by Satan to assassinate Lincoln. (LFA-0196)

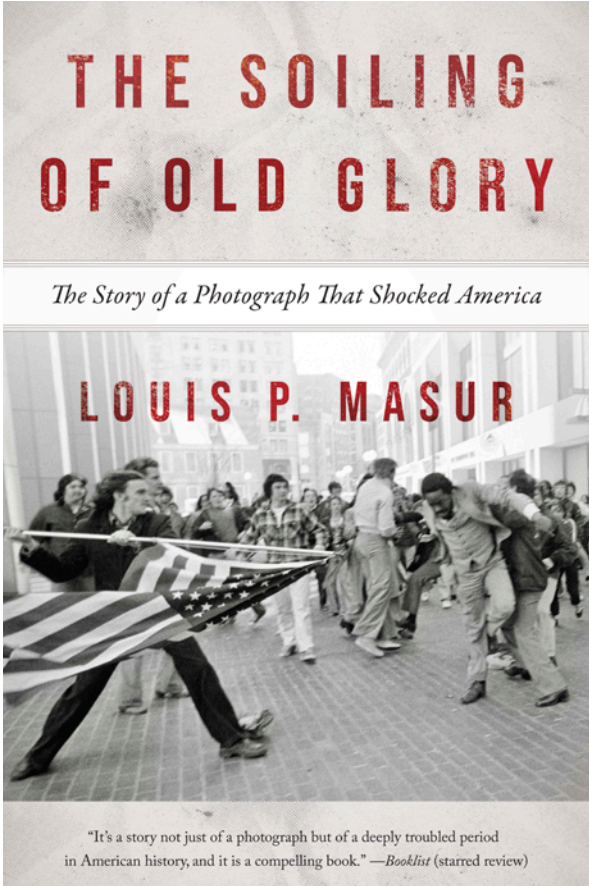
would have been better off with a president willing to use the federal government to help the transition from slavery to freedom. Frederick Douglass observed “whoever else have cause to mourn the loss of Abraham Lincoln, to the colored people of the country his death is an unspeakable calamity.” But counterfactuals take us only so far. In my concise history of the Civil War, I quote the novelist Cormac McCarthy: “We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was.”

JW: Most of your work is on cultural history. How does your work on Lincoln fit into your broader scholarship? You’ve also written about rock ‘n’ roll, baseball, and civil rights in the 1970s. Tell us a little bit about your work in these areas.

LM: I define cultural history broadly and intellectual history and political culture certainly fit the category. But more than that my work is an ongoing meditation on the meaning of America. Part of that enterprise involves looking at different sources and unpacking them: not only written texts, but images and songs. What is more American than baseball (soldiers played during the Civil War) and I’ve written about the first World Series. I’ve written about a Pulitzer Prize-winning flag photograph, *The Soiling of Old Glory*, and offer a way to read the image that promotes visual literacy (in researching that book, I learned that Old Glory first came into prominence as a nickname for the flag during the Civil War). I’ve also written about Bruce Springsteen’s album *Born to Run*, a meditation on the “runaway American Dream.” Springsteen has said that he has “spent his life judging the distance between American reality and the American dream.” So too Lincoln.

JW: At Rutgers you teach a course on “The American Dream.” What do students encounter in your class? And how do they tend to respond?

LM: I love that course. It is filled mainly with first-year students for whom it may be their only humanities course. I assign all sorts of readings, including Lincoln, of course. They read Ben Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the first “how to” book, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s wonderful novel *The Namesake*. It’s fascinating to discuss with them the various meanings of the American dream. For most, it’s about rags to riches (Lincoln’s “prudent, penniless beginner”). Others understand it’s about



a set of principles: democracy, equality, justice. We explore the mythology of the frontier and immigration. Of course, race is central to the course. Students watch and discuss Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. We spend a lot of time dissecting Langston Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again.”

The course is very popular, and I hope I get students to think harder about what it means to be an American. Some of them, to my delight, become American Studies and History majors and minors. I wrote a concise one-volume history of the United States that came out of teaching that course. It’s called *The Sum of Our Dreams*, and the title comes from a speech given by Barack Obama. The preface of the book is titled “Land of Hope and Dreams.” That’s a Springsteen song. It’s all connected!

JW: In your scholarship, you are especially interested in questions of narrative and literary nonfiction. You once wrote a piece titled “What Will it Take to Turn Historians into Writers?” Can you discuss that?

LM: I was a double major in History and English in college and I’ve always been interested in the boundaries between fact and fiction. Someone once said the only difference between historians and novelists is that historians find facts whereas

novelists invent them. Ever since the profession was founded, there have been periodic laments about “dry-as-dust” history and calls for more vigorous narratives. But academically trained historians focus more on historiography and argument, bloating their works with theses and notes. The writing of lively books intended for a general audience seemed to have been left mainly to the journalists, and in some ways still is today. Allan Nevins and Bruce Catton were both journalists.

It is one thing to be a historian, but perhaps another to consider oneself a writer. In a letter to Walker Percy, Shelby Foote summarized the endeavor this way: “Most people think mistakenly that writers are people who have something to tell them. Nothing I think could be wronger. If I knew what I wanted to say I wouldn’t write at all. What for? Why do it, if you already know the answers? Writing is the search for the answers, and the answer is in the form, the method of telling, the exploration of self, which is our only clew to reality.”

I’ve never moved explicitly into fiction, as Simon Schama did in his brilliant *Dead Certainties*, which offered an extended meditation on historical truth. But fiction, if well executed, can be remarkably effective in communicating the truths of the past. For example, I regularly assign Michael Shaara’s *Killer Angels* in my Civil War course. Students love it and there is no doubt it brings the Battle of Gettysburg alive. Historians would do well to think about what we might learn from fiction in writing nonfiction that strives for literary merit—how we can make our narratives come alive with character, plot, dialogue, form, and language while hewing to the facts as we know them.

Writing is hard. Anne Dilliard once said, “it is no less difficult to write sentences in a recipe than write sentences in Moby-Dick, so you might as well write Moby-Dick.” None of us can. But the striving is worthwhile.

JW: What are you working on now?

LM: I’ve just finished a book titled *A Journey North: Jefferson, Madison, & the Forging of a Friendship*. The opening sentence is “Jefferson loved to travel; Madison not so much.” It’s no “Call me Ishmael,” but it suffices. The book narrates a month-long trip the two took in late spring 1791 through New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Theirs is the most important friendship in American history, and the journey, a Founding Fathers road trip, deepened that friendship at a time of acute political division. The story allows us to see them as something other than politicians. I focus on their interests in botany, entomology, racial classification, and linguistics, which were paramount throughout the trip. It will be my tenth book. Not sure what is next, but I can feel Lincoln drawing me back.

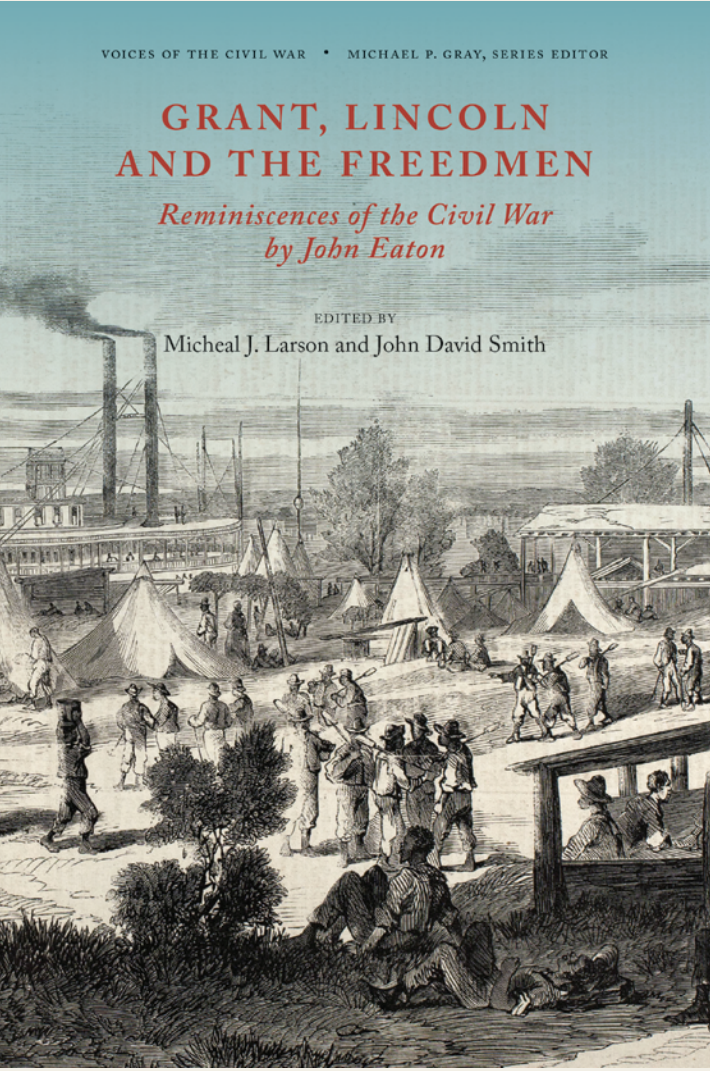
JW: That sounds fascinating, but I certainly do hope that Lincoln draws you back. Thank you so much for joining us!

BOOK REVIEW

Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War by John Eaton

edited by Micheal J. Larson
and John David Smith

Review by Andrew F. Lang



Amid the welter of post-Civil War reminiscences, John Eaton’s *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen* is a monumental achievement. The memoir abjures trivial partisanship and romantic hagiography, an uncommon feat within the vast contemporaneous literature. Eaton nonetheless worshipped the two men who adorn his title. He thus aimed “to give a faithful picture of the great President and the great General who guided us through the most tragic period of our National life.”

Such sentiments might parrot boilerplate Civil War-era nostalgia, though Eaton harbored a resolute objective. Published posthumously in 1907, the memoir appeared when the promise of emancipation and biracial civil rights endured great peril. The ripe fruits of the War for the Union now suffered relentless attacks from Jim Crow. Meanwhile, a nauseating cultural amnesia valorized the Confederate Lost Cause. Eaton implored his readers that a free republic depended on “devotion to our heroes and reverence for the ideals to which they pledged themselves.”

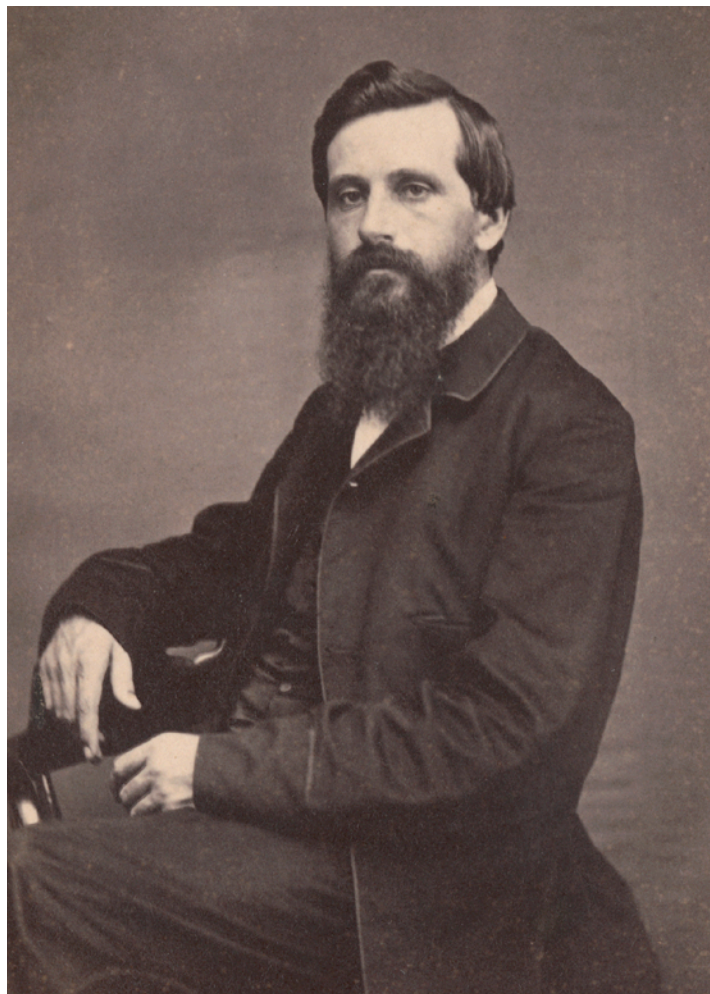
Eaton’s appeal rings hollow in our modern iconoclastic age. The fixation on “disrupting” or “reimagining” American history reduces the

nation’s virtuous leaders to their otherwise ignoble vices. The effort yields a nihilistic relativism that releases the “enlightened” present from any obligation to the past. Eaton anticipated and deplored this trend. When he gazed on “the character and standards” of Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, he found cures to civic fracture: respect, gratitude, and devotion to the objective good of history.

Eaton portrays decent men who pursued the right amid the revolutionary chaos of civil war. Lincoln and Grant attempted to conquer the arresting impasse of human bondage within a natural rights republic. Theirs was an honorable goal, and they triumphed. “The Negro’s status,” Eaton concluded, “changed from that of slave to freeman.” And yet, Eaton warned that complacency in victory bred regression. The fundamental charge

of the nation's new birth of freedom depended not on dispensing with but acquiescing to history. Lincoln, Grant, and especially those millions freed from chattel slavery understood this injunction. Echoing the two men he knew and most admired, Eaton reminds us that a more perfect Union necessitates generational reaffirmation to the proposition that freedom is not a stillborn gift, isolated in a distant historical epoch.

For more than a century, historians have elevated *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen* among the most consequential Civil War memoirs. But it appears now, for the first time, professionally edited and annotated by the superb talents of Micheal J. Larson and John David Smith. A masterwork of documentary editing and historical literacy, Larson and Smith's volume includes an extensive, first-rate introduction, bolstered by deep, discursive notes that texture Eaton's narrative. Despite critics who gently dismiss Eaton as a mid-nineteenth-century paternalist, Larson and Smith present him as "an enlightened yet conservative" humanitarian. Eaton's work in the complex process of wartime emancipation enlivened his moral hostility to "slavery's barbarities." He did not consider emancipation a means to an end. It was an end—if not a *beginning*—unto itself, a moment that compelled the nation to confront its destructive dogmas. And at the drama's nexus he met the great statesman and soldier.



John Eaton before the Civil War.
(William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan)

Born in 1829 in Sutton, New Hampshire, Eaton graduated from Dartmouth College and later trained as a minister at Andover Theological Seminary. Ordained in 1861, he enlisted as a chaplain in the 27th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, which experienced early service in Missouri, Tennessee, and Mississippi. In November 1862, Maj. Gen. Grant appointed Eaton Superintendent of Freedmen in the Department of the Tennessee, tasking him with managing the influx of formerly enslaved people seeking refuge within Union lines. Eaton organized camps, secured work and education for thousands of refugees, and established the foundation for the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, where he later served as an assistant commissioner. In early 1864, Eaton held the rank of colonel in the 63rd United States Colored Troops. After the war, as a fierce advocate of public education, Eaton became U.S. Commissioner of Education, a post he held from 1870 to 1886.

Eaton's remarkable wartime career brought him into intimate professional collaboration with Grant and Lincoln. He conversed extensively with the general and even on myriad occasions held private meetings with the president at the White House. His reputation as a forthright, philanthropic humanitarian convinced the Union's foremost leaders of his ability to manage the unprecedented refugee crisis spawned by the war's overwhelming human displacement. As United States armies penetrated the Confederate interior, tens and later hundreds of thousands of enslaved people sought sanctuary behind the lines. What was their status? What was the army's, much less the government's, obligation to wartime refugees? What did freedom mean?

Answers to these unprecedented questions demanded moral calculus. Wartime emancipation policies emerged almost as soon as the conflict opened, beginning with the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862. But humanitarian concerns were left largely to those on the front lines. When Grant selected Eaton as Superintendent of Freedmen, the former chaplain faced a near-impossible situation. "The whole question of methods dealing with the Negro had scarcely as yet been faced by the National Government," he wrote. In real time, Eaton watched the process of self-emancipation crack the once impenetrable shell of American slavery. And here was an obscure army chaplain now tasked with implementing revolutionary policies to address revolutionary circumstances.

Eaton embodied the Whig-Republican ideal that considered all humans the rightful owners of their bodies, consciences, and labor. "The complications arising out of the conditions of slavery," he thus observed, "must be met and solved." His work in the Mississippi Valley aimed to transform a stolid feudal aristocracy into an embryonic free-labor region. "To make the Negro a consciously self-supporting unit in the society in which he found himself, and start him on the way to self-respecting citizenship," he explained, "was the beginning and the end of all our efforts." Eaton did not dismiss the formerly enslaved as passive bystanders who were incapable of freedom. They were victims of a cruel system that stole individual dignity and the natural right to personal autonomy. Eaton genuinely believed in "the capacity of the Negro to take care of himself and exercise under honest and competent direction the functions of self-government." And in the dim dawn of liberation, freedpeople exhibited the traits of a thriving republican polity: the quests for personal improvement, economic mobility, and education.

Eaton's jurisdiction in the Department of the Tennessee oversaw nearly 114,000 former bondspeople. Approximately one-third received wages from the army as skilled mechanics, cooks, and laundresses. Meanwhile, more than half produced as fully self-sufficient laborers on deserted plantations. A

sizeable number also pursued education. To be sure, freedom in the wake of slavery was hardly idyllic. While rampant diseases debilitated refugee camps, freedpeople also withstood violent plantation raids from Confederate guerrillas. Despite disproportionate pay, the corruptions of the plantation leasing system, and the necessities of laboring for the Union war effort, Eaton highlighted the rapid changes sweeping the Mississippi Valley. "The systems of education and industry devised for the Negro were of the utmost value here, for nothing so completely demonstrated the ideal of free labor and of ultimately equal rights and opportunities for all."

Eaton emphasized the fundamental transformation in the relationship between the nation and Black Americans. No longer could people of color be so callously dismissed as mere merchandise, as static creatures powerless to improve and live with dignified independence. That "the black man suffered from the degradation of his lot as slave," so he also "yearned for freedom," and thus "did he personally justify the struggle which freed him; and in just so far is he entitled to his manhood." The promise of freedom would take decades to manifest. But its roots were planted in the very soil once home to the world's largest and richest slaveholding regime, now succumbing to the terrible swift sword.



"Contrabands Coming into Our Lines under the Proclamation," *Harper's Weekly*, May 3, 1863. (71200908408088)

Larson and Smith contest the simplistic criticism of Eaton as a white paternalist. Though a racial egalitarian, Eaton also believed that the formerly enslaved needed guidance, direction, and education out of the corrupting effects of slavery. But paternalism exists in the eye of the beholder. Eaton maintained genuine faith in Black humanity and the ability of *all* people to advance into self-sufficient autonomous individuals. Paternalism implies—and is often echoed today in various professional quarters—self-*ins*ufficiency and incapability. Eaton scoffed at such presumptuousness. He found in the Mississippi Valley “various forms of suffering, disease, and death” caused by the evils of slavery and the upheaval of civil war. “To evoke from this chaos conditions in which the whole mass might promptly live and labor with some assurance of justice and security, demanded, certainly, a definite system regulating industrial relations, and a vehicle of organization by which that system could be enforced.”

If that tremendous scenario “involved a type of paternalism,” Eaton admitted, then so be it. But his was hardly the infantilizing paternalism of slaveholders and some abolitionists. Eaton’s, rather, exhibited the pragmatic calculus of wartime contingency cut from moral duty. And this is what caught Grant’s attention. In June 1863, Grant wrote to Lincoln praising Eaton’s striking efforts as superintendent. “Mr. Eaton’s labors in his undertaking have been unremitting and skilful,” the general wrote. “He has been of very great service to the blacks in having them provided for when otherwise they would have been neglected.”

So impressed was he by a detailed thirty-four-page report penned by Eaton that Grant encouraged the chaplain to deliver the document personally to the president. Upon meeting Lincoln for the first time, Eaton observed the man’s “kindness of heart.” But he also saw “the spectacle of the President of the United States, conducting the affairs of the Nation in the midst of civil war, and genuinely affected by the discomfort” experienced by the freedpeople in their trial of liberation. The president’s concern derived from his egalitarian nature in which “there was not the slightest affectation, nor assumption of superiority.”

During their myriad wartime meetings, Eaton always noted Lincoln’s aching empathy. He documented Lincoln’s great pain for those who most suffered in the maelstrom of modern war. Eaton also saw in Lincoln a version of himself. The president was hardly a utopian idealist. And like Eaton’s hero, Grant, the president was a principled pragmatist whose moral core directed his actions. All three men retained an unbending faith in American institutions, in the nation’s virtues, in the human capacity to self-govern and better one’s lot in life. Such traits informed their commitment to emancipation. The attributes also revealed Lincoln’s enduring curiosity about Grant. The president always asked Eaton about that quiet general, how he intended to fight, whether he possessed the mettle to continue the war unabated.

It was less that Lincoln doubted Grant’s ability or commitment. It was, rather, that so few grasped what the war was truly about. The conflict tested not only the propositions of democracy and Union. The war also demanded of all Americans to determine the kind of Union that would emerge in the wake of secession and emancipation. On this matter, Eaton conceded, “these two men saw eye to eye, and recognized the essential elements in the issues that were presented.” Lincoln and Grant came to

believe that such elements were not up for debate. The war compelled national acquiescence to the self-evident truth of natural human equality, the dignity of the individual, the near sacredness of Union, and the flustering reality that divine Providence had punished a guilty republic.

John Eaton leaves us with a portrait of two men who were hardly perfect. But in Lincoln’s and Grant’s imperfections we also see the transcendent traits of the American statesman: a modest resoluteness, a scorn for impulsiveness, a firmness in the right, a recognition that moral deference is not subject to the whims of passion. For Eaton, both Grant and Lincoln embodied “the simple and fundamental elements of character. Both were essentially sane in morals and in intellect.” Perhaps most striking, neither Grant nor Lincoln were remarkable men. “Both were normal men first and great men afterwards.” Benevolent, humble, and altruistic, they were the kind of common citizens on whom a free republic depends. In our own age of political demagoguery, may we realign our national disposition away from the lusts of the present and back toward those enduring virtues of the past.

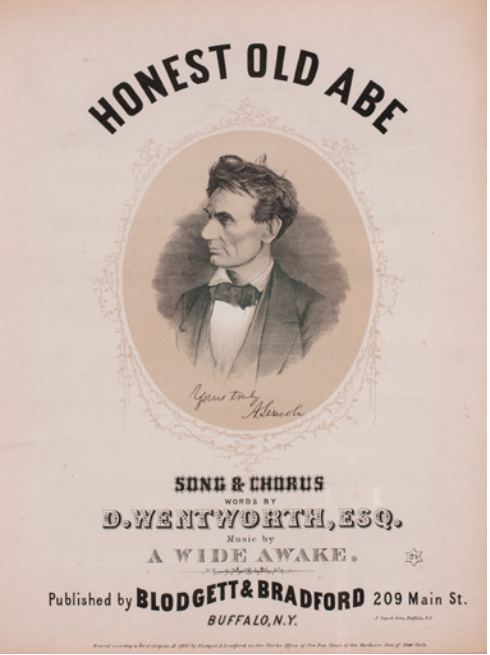
Andrew F. Lang is associate professor of history at Mississippi State University. He is the author most recently of *A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era* (2022), which was a finalist for the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize. A recipient of the Society of Civil War Historians’ Tom Watson Brown Book Award, he is now writing an intellectual and cultural biography of Lincoln’s nationalism.

Readers of *Lincoln Lore* can purchase a copy of *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen* directly from the University of Tennessee Press for a 30% discount by using the code 30LINCOLN. This offer is good through December 31, 2025. Visit utpress.org.

From the Collection SELLING LINCOLN

by Jessie Cortesi

Senior Lincoln Librarian, Allen County Public Library



Honest Old Abe Sheet Music (71.2009.081.0234)

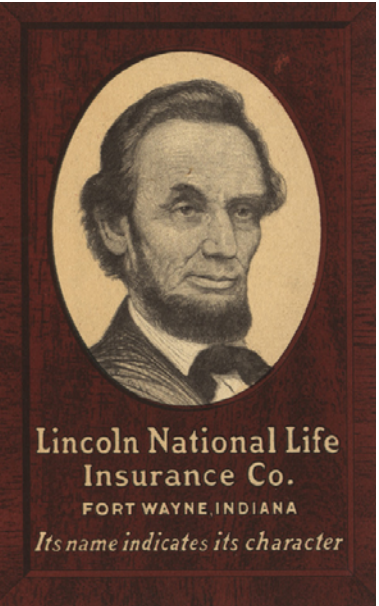
With his undeniable, unmistakable name recognition, Abraham Lincoln has in death become a national—if not worldwide—canvas for selling just about anything. His rags to riches story, exceptional character, and leadership of our nation through its most trying time have propelled him to everlasting fame. Indeed, he left an indelible mark on American public memory that has endured for 160 years, regardless of how interpretation of that memory may twist and turn with time and political allegiance.

One might say that only George Washington stands above Lincoln as our national hero. Yet, it is Lincoln and his legacy that is time and again most pervasively appropriated for ideological or financial motivations. Whether his star power is used to promote certain values or character traits or to sell commercial goods, any and all can find something in Lincoln to further their aims.

Political allies and supporters distinctly branded him during his lifetime in order to sell him to constituents, party

leaders, and ultimately the American public at large. Lincoln’s allies needed a clear brand and attractive, concise packaging to succinctly convey his appeal as a candidate and trusted leader, most memorably under the “Honest Abe” moniker. Like the public, promoters knew next to nothing about Lincoln when he became the Republican presidential nominee in 1860. They seized on sparse scraps of his background that neatly illustrated the party’s emphasis on Lincoln’s inspiring rise from log cabin origins, exemplified by the “Rail Splitter” nickname. During and following the war, he earned even more sobriquets: “Father Abraham,” “The Great Emancipator,” and “The Martyr President” or “Martyred Father.”

Lincoln was a poor salesman in life with his New Salem store, but was and is great promotional material for abundant reasons—his character, his humble beginnings and rise to be the most powerful individual in the nation, and especially his supreme recognition factor. The likeness and reputation of President Lincoln has been applied to sell just about anything in the 160 years since his death—charcoal, coffee, coats, insurance, engravings, cigars, you name it.



Lincoln National Life Insurance Company

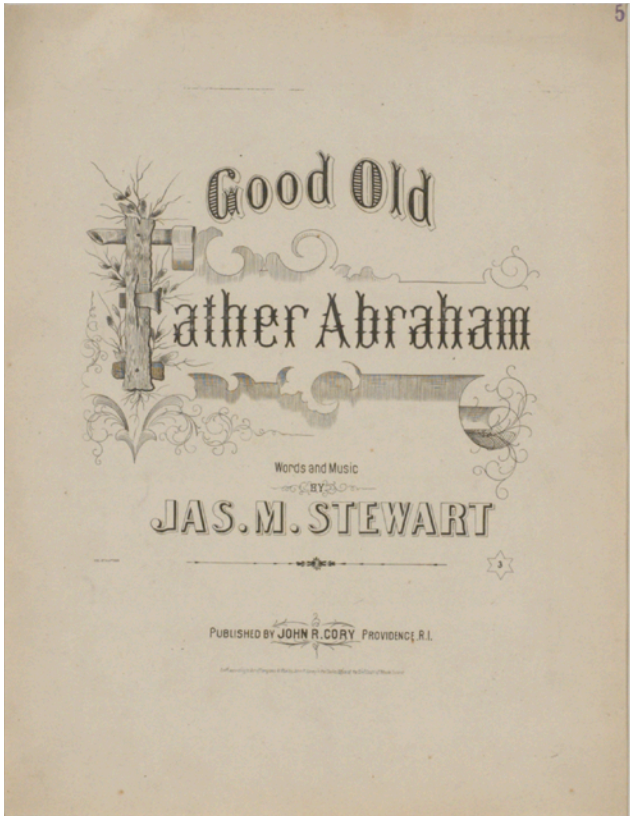
He’s used by folks of all political persuasions and by interests that Lincoln may well have taken issue with—including the Ku Klux Klan. The most unusual Lincoln commemorative pin we have in our collection commemorates the 1925 annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Ku Klux Klan on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Some imagery even positions Lincoln centered between the U.S. and Confederate flags.

Today, we continue to see advertisements using Abraham Lincoln to promote products, such as the Lincoln Motor Company and the insurance company Lincoln Financial. Notably, the advertising landscape has evolved in the extreme over the last century and half and has undoubtedly grown more insidious. Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist and philosopher, has said that “What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale,” as regards the main locus point of advertising today: social media. And in this new landscape of behavior modification dressed up as advertising, Lincoln continues on as something of a tabula rasa for any and all to paint their messaging on.

From an icon of freedom and justice to an icon of commercialism and proselytization, his image and legacy will be employed to sell products and ideas well on into the future.



J&P Coats (71.2009.085.26790)



Good Old Father Abraham Sheet Music (71.2009.083.0012)



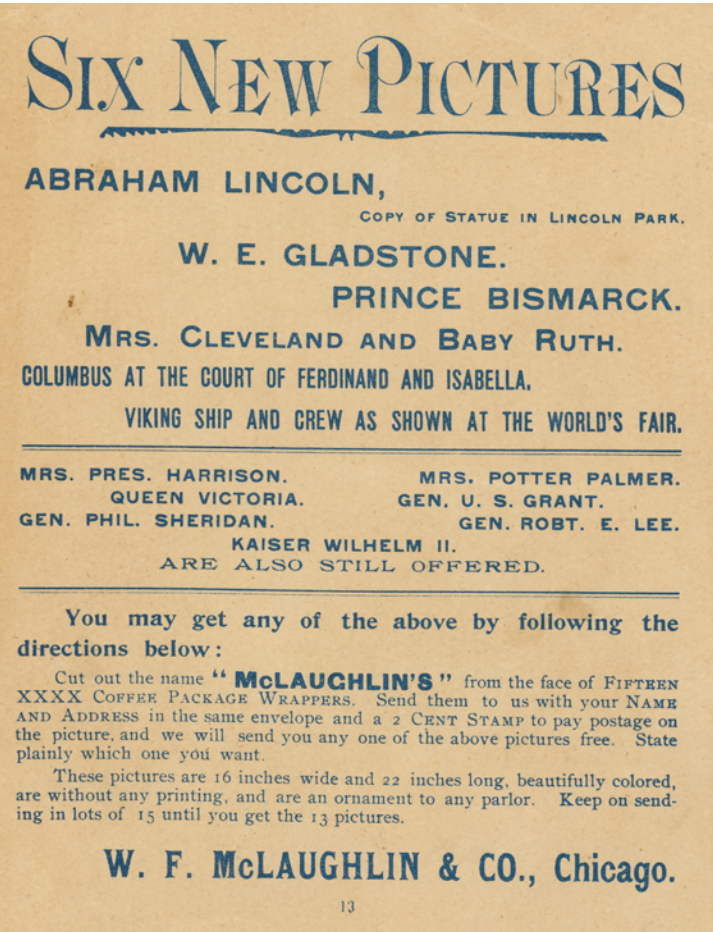
Joseph A. Reuss, Engraver & Printer (71.2009.085.26775)



Ku Klux Klan Commemorative Pin (71.2009.082.0673)



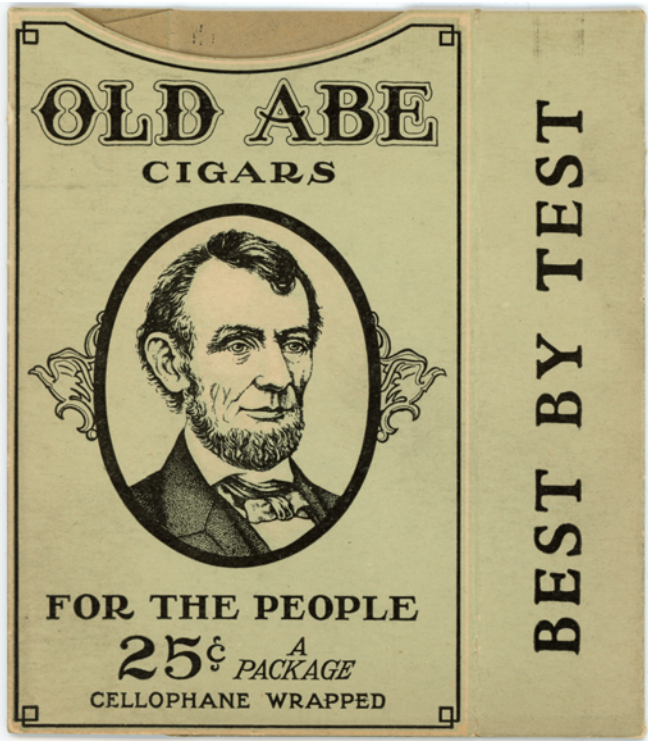
Red Hot Charcoal (71.2009.085.26778)



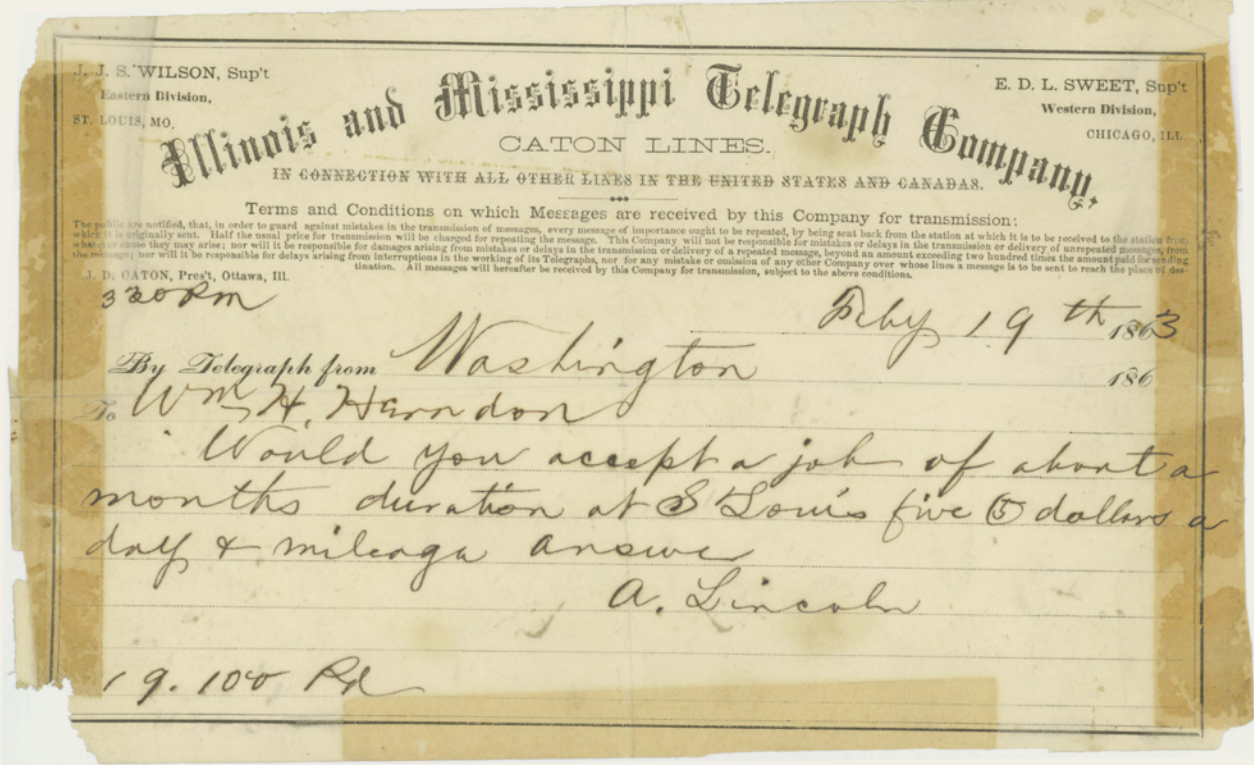
McLaughlin's Coffee (71.2009.085.26793)



Helmar Turkish Cigarettes “Birthplace of Lincoln”



Old Abe Cigars “For the People”



Telegram from Lincoln to Herndon, February 19, 1863. (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum)

A New Letter from William H. Herndon to Abraham Lincoln

by Jonathan W. White



Hull Grummond & Co. Cigar Box Label - “Rail Splitter”



Unbranded Lincoln Cigar Band - Lincoln Entering Richmond



Unbranded Lincoln Cigar Band - Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation

On September 6, 1883, the *Illinois State Journal* ran an article describing how Lincoln’s third and final law partner, William H. Herndon, had tried to procure a patronage position early in Lincoln’s presidency. “Herndon went on to Washington City and asked for some office,” the article stated. “Lincoln wanted to do something for Herndon, but not to give him anything which would expose his weakness in the public service.” It concluded, “When he settled on what he would give him, Herndon, whose expectations had been raised very high, became dissatisfied, and returned to Springfield, and was very sour on Lincoln.”

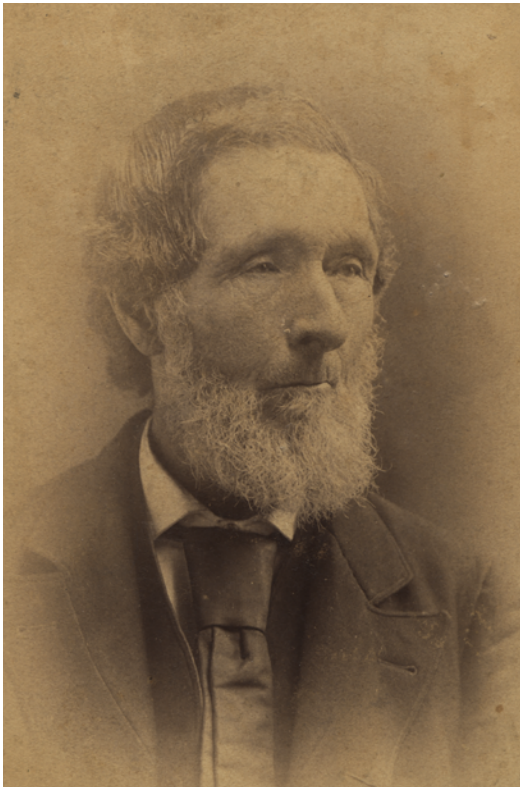
Herndon was infuriated by this “untruthful” and “meanly treacherous” article. On September 22, he penned a letter to the editor offering his own account of his dealings with Lincoln when it came to patronage. According to Herndon, Lincoln had come into their law office shortly before he

departed for Washington in February 1861 and said, “Herndon, do you want to hold any office under my administration?” to which Herndon replied, “No, Mr. Lincoln, I do not. I now hold the office of Bank Commissioner of Illinois and besides, I have a good practice in my profession; and if I take office under you, I will lose my practice and my present office.” Herndon pointed out that when he’d traveled to the White House in 1862 to discuss patronage matters, it was only to help a friend, Charles W. Chatterton. Herndon wrote in his 1883 letter to the editor: “I quickly got the office, ‘freely, without purchase; fully, without denial; and speedily, without delay.’”

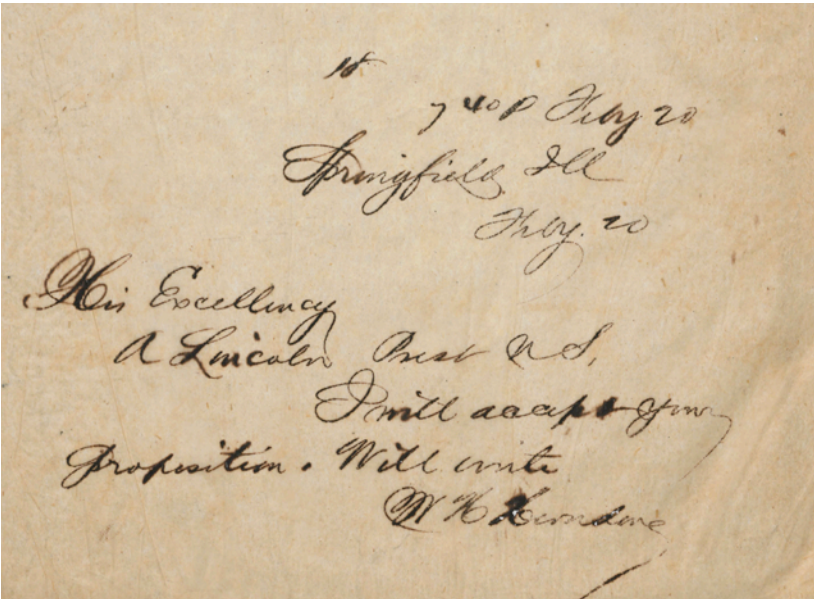
In fact, there is a curious backstory to this trip that Herndon did not include in his 1883 letter. Herndon had recently lost his first wife and was a widower with a gaggle of children. He began pursuing Anna Miles, a beautiful young woman who was eighteen years his junior. As Herndon’s

biographer David Donald writes, “Her older sister Elizabeth had some years earlier married Charles W. Chatterton, who wanted a federal job that would offer money and adventure. To please a prospective brother-in-law, Herndon volunteered to secure an appointment for him. In return, Chatterton and his wife would use their good offices in convincing Anna that Herndon would make an acceptable husband.” And so, in early 1862, Herndon helped secure Chatterton the appointment as Indian Agent for the Cherokee Agency. In return, Herndon got what he desired. Chatterton “immediately began to use his influence with Anna Miles,” as Donald put it, and her “reluctance crumbled” under “strong family urging.” The couple married on July 30, 1862.

In his 1883 letter, Herndon claimed that in 1863 he “again, for myself this time, asked Lincoln for an office”—but he did so, he insisted, in order to help another friend. According to Herndon, “Mr. Lincoln telegraphed me that he wished to give me an office, and mentioned what it was.” Herndon immediately replied that he would accept the position but then “sat down and wrote Mr. Lincoln that I could not accept the office,” and that he wished it to go to Lawrence Weldon, another attorney on the Eighth Illinois Judicial



William H. Herndon, ca. 1882 (LN-0718)

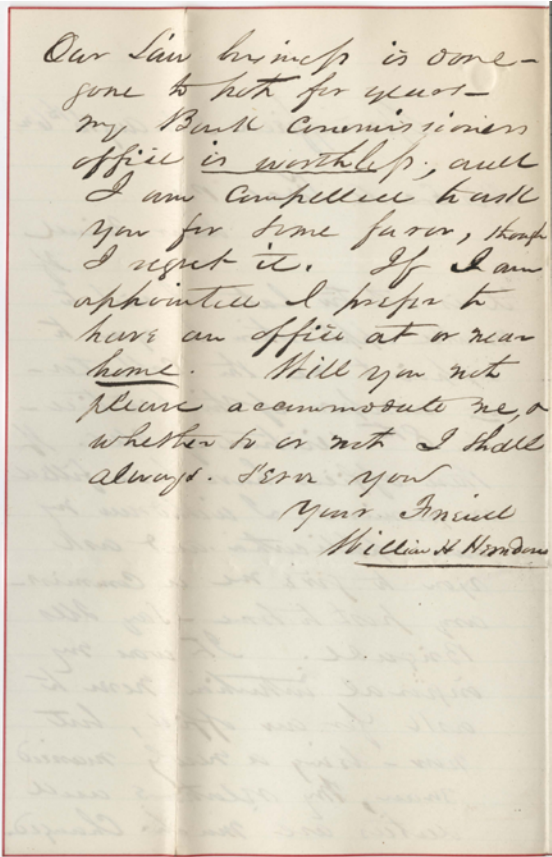
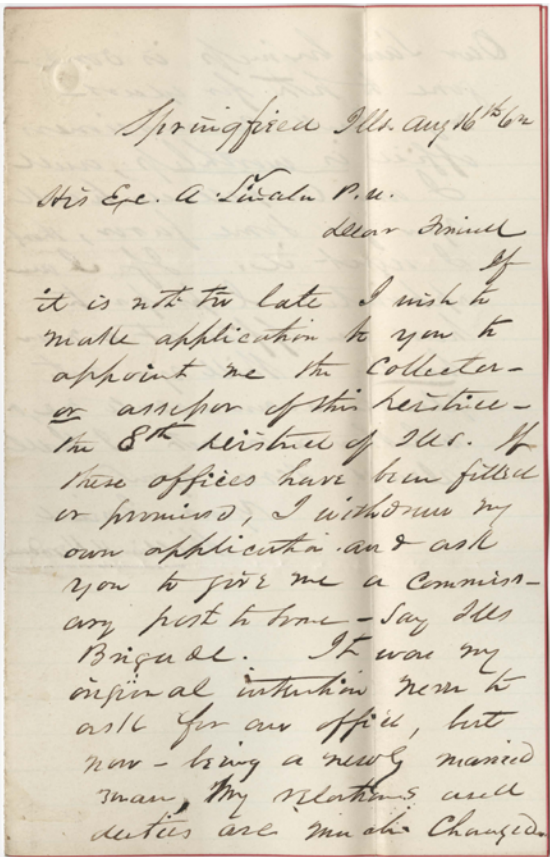


Telegram from Herndon to Lincoln, February 20, 1863. (Record Group 107 [Records of the Office of the Secretary of War], Entry 34 [Telegrams Sent and Received by the War Department Central Telegraph Office, 1861-1882], National Archives)

Circuit. “The reason why I telegraphed back to Lincoln just as I did, was because I did not wish anybody to know anything about our private affairs,” Herndon wrote in 1883. Further, he said, “it is my honest belief that Mr. Lincoln would have willingly given me any office that my ambition had struggled for.” For this reason, he insisted that there was no reason for him to “have a grievance against my best friend” or “be very sour against Mr. Lincoln,” as the *Illinois State Journal* article had intimated. Herndon wrote: “He gave me everything I wished for and asked for.”

Herndon assured the readers of the *Illinois State Journal*, “The dispatches between Lincoln and myself will be found in Springfield and Washington City, and I refer to them for the particulars.” In fact, there is corroborating evidence in the National Archives to support much of Herndon’s story. On February 19, 1863, Lincoln telegraphed Herndon: “Would you accept a job of about a month’s duration at St Louis, five dollars a day & milage? Answer.” Herndon replied the next day: “I will accept your proposition. Will write.” Two typescript letters held at the University of Illinois archives and a manuscript letter in the Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress further corroborate Herndon’s account. On February 23, 1863, Herndon explained to John G. Nicolay why he publicly accepted the position but then privately turned it down: “I preferred this course for I wanted no outsiders to say that I would not accept office, etc., from Mr. Lincoln. I cannot consent to accept such appointment; because I do not need it—don’t wish it—can’t leave my own self sustaining business, unless wished—demanded by Mr. Lincoln.”

But was this explanation entirely forthright? A previously unpublished letter at the National Archives reveals that Herndon had sought a patronage position for himself a few months earlier and not received it. The letter also sheds light on the state of the Lincoln and Herndon law practice during the Civil War.



Letter from Herndon to Lincoln, August 16, 1862. (Record Group 56 [General Records of the Department of the Treasury], Entry 258 [Applications for Positions as Internal Revenue Collectors and Assessors, 1863-1910], National Archives)

Springfield Ills. Aug 16th 62

His Exc: A. Lincoln P[res]. [of the] U.[S.]

Dear Friend

If it is not too late I wish to make application to you to appoint me the Collector—or assessor of this District—the 8th District of Ills. If these offices have been filled or promised, I withdraw my own application and ask you to give me a commissary post to some—say Ills Brigade. It was my original intention never to ask for an office, but now—being a newly married man, My relations and duties are much changed. Our Law business is done—gone to pot for years—My Bank commissioners office is worthless, and I am compelled to ask you for some favor, though I regret it. If I am appointed I prefer to have an office at or near home. Will you not please accommodate me, & whether so or not I shall always serve you

Your Friend

William H Herndon

The docketing on the letter indicates that no action was ever taken on Herndon’s request. Quite likely, Lincoln never saw it.

This letter was discovered on the website of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, a documentary editing project run out of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, that seeks to locate, transcribe and make available to the public every document sent to or from Abraham Lincoln. Members of the public are free to search their online collection, which contains high resolution scans (used here as illustrations) of more than 82,000 documents from the National Archives and Library of Congress. Hidden in plain sight—just waiting to be discovered—are gems that can reshape how we understand aspects of Lincoln’s life.

Readers can visit the Papers of Abraham Lincoln website at: papersofabrahamlincoln.org

Their online collection of documents from the National Archives and Library of Congress is available at: papersofabrahamlincoln.xmlref.com

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