
AN AFFECTIONATE FAREWELL

Abraham Lincoln made only occasional stops in Peoria, even to visit. This was not unusual for Lincoln, who hardly visited anyone, anywhere, except his stepmother in Charleston, Illinois, and even that was rare. This does not mean, however, that Lincoln didn't travel. As a lawyer in the eighth judicial district, he frequented many cities in Illinois, but almost always to cover cases. Lincoln would make the best of his stays, for sure, oftentimes enjoying the company and establishments in each town before moving on to the next, the linked sequence of locations called a circuit. Many cities in Illinois honor the time, however briefly, the future president spent in their communities. He undoubtedly left a large footprint in the state. Statues and plaques adorn many city parks and courthouses, and for generations local historians and writers have kept the tales of Lincoln's sojourns in their small towns vividly alive. If he wasn't there for business, the stories generally go, he was just traveling through. But he was there. Peoria was not part of the eighth district, so Lincoln's time spent in the city was limited. Just the same, Lincoln is closely tied with Peoria for one singular day—and one speech. The story that follows explains why he was in Peoria that day and why it was such an important event. Despite being born in Kentucky, Lincoln came to Illinois as a young boy. So Illinois is and always has been considered Lincoln's home state. He spent most of his adult life in Illinois. It's where he met his wife, started a family, ran a business, and buried his second born son. So when he left to become president, Lincoln said a heartfelt goodbye to the people of his beloved Illinois. He would never return. And his rise to the White House, some would argue, began on a street corner in Peoria.

“THIS IS my literary bureau,” said president-elect Abraham Lincoln as he handed a “well-filled” satchel to Mrs. Elizabeth Grimsley,

daughter of Dr. John Todd, who happened to be the uncle of Lincoln's wife, Mary.

It was early February 1861, and Lincoln had stopped by the doctor's home (said to be one of the largest in Springfield) just days before traveling by train to Washington, D.C., where he would begin his first term as President of the United States. He asked Mrs. Grimsley to keep the bureau in her charge. It contained writings and lectures he hoped to save; his plan was to reclaim the bureau if he returned to Springfield. "But if not," Lincoln said, "please dispose of its contents as deemed proper."

A friend of Lincoln's, Dr. Samuel Houston Melvin, was also present that day. He remembered: "A tone of indescribable sadness was noted in the later part of [Lincoln's] sentence."

Melvin's concerns for his friend were warranted. A few days earlier, Lincoln had shown Melvin several letters "threatening [Lincoln's] life." Some predicted that Lincoln would never live to see his inauguration day.

"It was apparent to me that the threats were making an impression on his mind," Melvin continued, "although he tried to laugh the matter off." The literary bureau, not the threatening letters, Lincoln insisted, was of more importance.

While the threats on Lincoln's life were alarming, especially to his closest confidants, they weren't surprising. In 1861 Lincoln was, as one writer put it, "the most feared and most famous person in America." He was also the most vulnerable. Even the celebratory train ride to Washington was getting notice. After suspecting a possible ambush near Baltimore, a plan was crafted by the Pinkerton Detective Agency to keep the president-elect off the inaugural train—or at least concealed by a disguise—during the stretches deemed most susceptible to marauders or, worse yet, assassins. Lincoln would eventually go along with the plan, but no trouble occurred, or as Pinkerton would like to claim, was "thwarted" before it occurred.

Slavery was the inescapable issue during the fall of 1860, and Lincoln was the intentional instigator. The recently failed Senate candidate, whom many believed would never make it back to Washington, was now seen as America's savior by those who supported

his views on slavery and by slaves themselves who took a sudden interest in politics. Lincoln, they were told, although many did not know him by sight, "would set them free." Even southern newspapers noted the attention of slaves who lingered near courthouse squares and eavesdropped at local hustings, just to hear what the orators had to say.

On the other side were the plantation owners whose livelihoods were being threatened by a man they hardly knew. Lincoln had remained mostly out of politics after his single term in Congress ended in 1849, but as a private citizen he was asked to speak at several events and outings. People took notice. Soon there was a grassroots effort—fueled mostly by journalists—to consider the lanky lawyer from Illinois a potential nominee for president. When one reporter asked Lincoln about such a candidacy, he remarked, "I must in candor say I do not think myself fit for Presidency." But it was not a choice. Lincoln, a Whig Party favorite, was the spokesman for a contentious debate. Although many still knew little about him, his views on slavery were resonating across the land. His candidacy for president became unavoidable.

In addition, an outpouring of criticism, especially from the South, was inevitable.

Lincoln's actions could hardly be blamed for the Southern anger that was growing against him. In fact, the folksy lawyer mostly remained in Springfield during the 1860 campaign, continuing his law practice from the safety and comfort of his home office. At the time, this was not an uncommon practice for presidential hopefuls who resisted the unpredictability of stump appearances in favor of quiet dignity and respect. Not one public statement was released during this time. "Refer to my published speeches and debates," Lincoln would tell the eager reporters who often made long and frustrating trips to Springfield see him.

But the campaign of 1860 was changing in ways that Lincoln the man was not. Lincoln's onetime Senate rival, fellow Illinois politician and now presidential opponent, Stephen Douglas, jumped at the chance to entertain and enlighten an audience with his views. On a trip from Illinois to upstate New York to see his aging mother, Douglas made several unplanned stops at railway stations along

the way, stirring up crowds who demanded a speech. Douglas was happy to oblige the excited throngs, but the trip itself became a national joke—taking nearly two full months with detoured stops through New England, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Even Douglas' intent was questioned. Did he really plan to see his mother? No one was really quite sure.

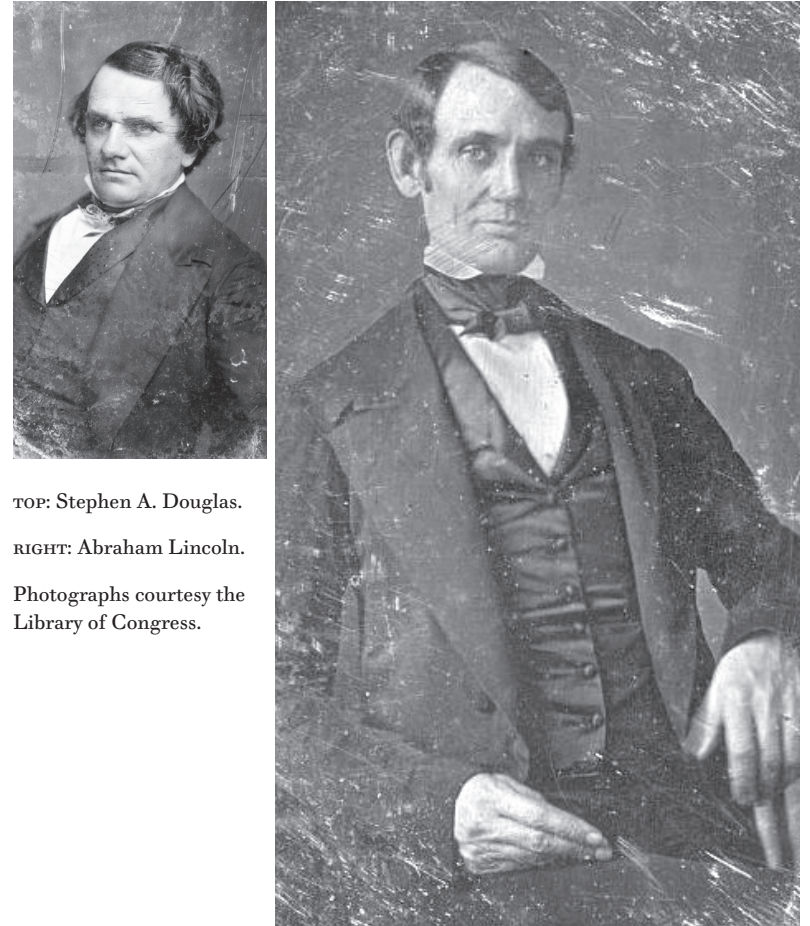
Lincoln held no grudge against Douglas or his tactics. To Lincoln, they simply experienced a difference of opinion in most matters. But as campaigners, they were literally miles apart. Lincoln had nothing to hide, he said, and instead let his long list of public orations suffice. These included a series of statewide debates with Douglas preceded by two speeches in Springfield and Peoria, where Lincoln directly challenged those on both sides of the slavery issue. "Wherever slavery is," he told the crowd on the state fairgrounds in Springfield, "it has been first introduced without law." The speech in Peoria was similar to the one in Springfield, but it is better remembered because Lincoln wrote it out for publication. Called the *Peoria Speech*, many historians widely regard it as Lincoln's finest moment, one that "changed the history of the United States."

LINCOLN SPOKE plainly that day in Peoria, his remarks grounded in historical research, holding forth against slavery and the moral judgment of men who are "created equal" by law. As he stated it: "Near eighty years ago we began by declaring all men are created equal, but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a 'sacred right of self-government.'

"These principles," he declared, "cannot stand together."

The speech put Lincoln in the center of the national debate over slavery and, more importantly, it put him back in politics. The one-term congressman from Illinois, virtually out of the public eye for nearly five years, was now re-energized—or perhaps more significantly, motivated—by personal convictions.

Lincoln's trip to Peoria in October of 1854 was actually in response to an invitation from the city's Whig Party supporters. The local Whigs wanted Lincoln to challenge Douglas, who was



TOP: Stephen A. Douglas.

RIGHT: Abraham Lincoln.

Photographs courtesy the Library of Congress.

expected in town for an address touting the Kansas-Nebraska Act, legislation written by Douglas and recently passed by Congress. Basically, the Douglas act endorsed the right of voters within states to determine whether or not it would be legal to own slaves in the state. The bill effectively reversed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, ending a ban on slavery in the Louisiana Territories. Lincoln was vehemently opposed. The invitation letter to Lincoln read in part: "[We] are exceedingly desirous that (if not too great a tax upon your time and strength) you will consent to be present and take a convenient opportunity, after the speech of Judge Douglas, to reply to it, and give us your own views upon the subject."

Lincoln seized the moment, arriving in Peoria in the wee hours of October 16, the day of the planned speeches. Douglas and his supporters were already in the city and said to be giddy with delight at Lincoln's apparent tardiness. Both men had booked rooms at the same hotel. In Douglas' mind, at least, Lincoln was embarrassingly late. Perhaps he would not be there at all, he thought. Lincoln finally checked in at 2 AM.

Later in the afternoon, Douglas ceremoniously arrived at the speech site in a decorated carriage followed by a marching brass band while Lincoln patiently waited in front of the courthouse at the corner of Adams and Main. "In strange contrast," wrote one observer, "was the quiet, undemonstrative entry of the tall, lank, homely and awkward Lincoln." A platform was constructed on the south corner of the courthouse, partly under the portico. The crowd was packed so close together that entering it from the outside was impossible. The officers and participants, including the 6'4" Lincoln, had to crawl through a first floor window just to reach the stage.

Douglas would speak first, followed by Lincoln, then a final closing remark from Douglas. Most Peorians were on the side of the Democrats, and Douglas' argument, as an adopted Illinoisan and a powerful influence in Washington, was persuasive. Douglas spoke for three hours, delivering an appeal mainly to his supporters in the region. Although no written publication of his speech exists, a reporter for the *Peoria Daily Union* described it this way: "After returning his thanks to the democracy of Peoria for the kind reception extended to him, Judge Douglas proceeded to discuss the principles of the Nebraska bill and to defend himself against the attacks of his opponents."

Douglas cast himself as a martyr standing bravely against the Whigs, who, he claimed, were not united in their opposition to slavery. "Opponents of the Nebraska bill do not like the principle which allows people to settle the slavery question themselves," the *Daily Union* reported him saying. "Is that principle right? Oh, Yes, exclaim some, but say they, you should not disturb the Missouri Compromise."

When Douglas finished, the band played and "six hearty cheers"

went up, noted the *Illinois Journal*. Lincoln was next, but first he checked his timepiece. It was near dinnertime, so he decided to wait. He invited the crowd to get something to eat first. "If you hear me now," Lincoln implored, "I wish you to hear me through."

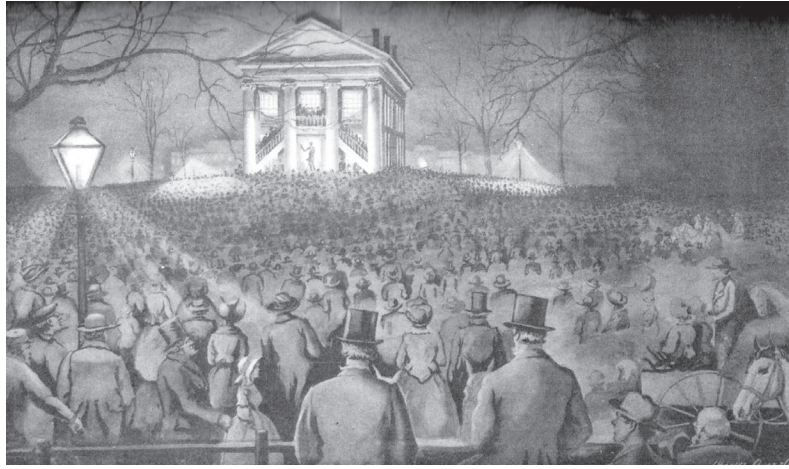
The crowd stirred as Lincoln urged them to return in a couple of hours. Lincoln's words were interpreted in different ways, but his intentions were clear. A combination of several accounts goes like this: "The judge has informed you that he is to have an hour reply to me," Lincoln said of Douglas's rebuttal. "I doubt not, but you have been a little surprised to learn that I have consented to give one of his high reputation and known ability this advantage of me. I can then finish my speech by ten and Douglas can finish his by eleven, which is not an unusually late hour of this season of the year. And, as he has the last speech, if you want to hear him skin me, you had better come.

"What do you say?" Lincoln then asked the crowd directly, perhaps just to see if they were listening. Surprisingly, they were.

A cheer went up, mostly from his supporters, and there were reports of hats being thrown up in the air. Lincoln must have smiled at the reaction. He had given himself time to gather up his thoughts and almost assuredly a large audience for his entire speech. Two hours later, when the crowd banded together again in nearly complete darkness, Lincoln began.

A witness from Peoria named Robert Boal, a doctor, gave this personal account of Lincoln's opening remarks: "Mr. Lincoln slowly arose, and after surveying the large audience, commenced his speech by saying: 'He [Douglas] thought he could appreciate an argument, and at times, believed he could make one, but when one denied the settled and plainest facts of history, you could not argue with him; only the thing you could do would be to stop his mouth with a corn cob.'"

The opening jab was a good one. But whether Lincoln actually said those exact words, especially "the corn cob" remark, is up for debate. When Lincoln returned to Springfield and dictated the Peoria speech, he failed to include it. Instead, Lincoln began more formally, insisting, "my remarks will not be, specifically, an answer to Judge Douglas; yet, as I proceed, the main points he has



Lincoln's Peoria speech on the steps of the old courthouse. Drawing by Charles Over-all. SEE PAGE 189 FOR CITATION.

presented will arise, and will receive such respectful attention as I may be able to give them.”

Lincoln immediately touched on the hot button issue, the Missouri Compromise, and attacked Douglas for trying to manipulate it. “The Missouri Compromise ought to be restored,” he argued. “For the sake of the Union, it ought to be restored. If by any means we omit to do this, what follows?”

Lincoln was at his eloquent best. “The spirit of the mutual concession—that spirit which first gave us the constitution, and which thrice saved the Union—we have strangled and cast from us forever,” Lincoln told the crowd. “Rise to the height of a generation of free men, worthy of a free government. The people’s will is the ultimate law of the land.”

Lincoln’s speeches during his presidency and especially the Civil War would be best remembered for their simple but effective words, spoken like a poem in some cases, like the Gettysburg Address. But in Peoria, it was the subject matter that resonated.

“The great mass of mankind,” Lincoln stated, “consider slavery a great moral wrong, and their feeling against it is not evanescent, but eternal. It lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice, and cannot be trifled with. It is a great and durable element of

popular action, and I think no statesman can safely disregard it.”

After Lincoln finished, he yielded the stage back to Douglas. According to witnesses, Douglas’ defiant rebuttal “manifested strong symptoms of anger.” The senator may have felt defeated or simply at a loss for words. He spoke for less than his allotted hour, it was reported, and seemed feeble in his efforts. His voice was hoarse and worn. Douglas’ angry reaction to Lincoln’s speech surprised many. Clearly, he had the support of the people that day and an opportunity to intellectually debate Lincoln’s words against him. But he chose not to. Instead his disreputable demeanor ended the day.

What occurred after the speech, known as “the Peoria Truce,” has also been refuted. According to Lincoln’s law partner, William Herndon, Lincoln and Douglas met privately and agreed not to challenge each other with any more debates. Actually it was a request from Douglas, who had bigger aspirations in mind, like the presidency. Lincoln was an outsider in Douglas’ opinion and a general pain in the neck. He urged Lincoln to step aside and in return, promised to cancel several speaking engagements in Illinois over the next several days. “I do not wish to crowd you,” Lincoln said graciously, and returned to Springfield. Douglas, however, did not keep his promise, according to Herndon.

Regardless of how the night ended in Peoria, four years later, Lincoln and Douglas would meet again as senatorial candidates in a series of debates, seven in all, throughout Illinois. Two years after that, they were opponents for the office of the president.

IN AUGUST of 1860, with Lincoln now a Republican candidate for president, thousands of supporters lined the Springfield streets and held a parade in his honor. The parade route marched right past Lincoln’s home, which enabled supporters a chance at least to greet him. Lincoln acknowledged the crowd and was so impressed by its size that he reluctantly agreed to travel by carriage to the state fairgrounds and make a short and reportedly awkward speech before quickly exiting back through the crowd onto a horse and hightailing it back home.

By this point in 1860, just a couple of months prior to the election,



Lincoln presidential poster.
Photograph courtesy
the Library of Congress.

opinions about Lincoln as a man and a candidate were beginning to solidify on both sides of the issues. In May of 1860, his popularity had soared during his famed “rail-splitter” speech, in which Lincoln told a feverish crowd how as a young man he split rails and built fences and homes along the Sangamon River. On cue, two old fence rails were brought down the center aisle through the crowd, draped in red, white, and blue streamers and a large banner. Both rails were made by Lincoln and a cousin on land just west of Decatur, the crowd was told. The place “was electrical,” wrote one observer, and went wild for Lincoln, who, as the banner proclaimed, became *The Rail Candidate for President 1860* the next day by winning the Republican nomination in a unanimous vote.

To a degree, the split-rail image was also fodder for Lincoln’s opponents who sometimes mocked it, but more commonly they were so impressed by its effectiveness that they tried to emulate the use of props and clever names for their own political gain. Supporters of John Bell, the Constitutional Union Party candidate, carried tinkling bells to rallies and called themselves the “bell ringers.” Douglas got into the act as well. The Democrats called themselves the “Little Dougs,” referring to their candidate’s diminutive size and nickname “Little Giant.” But neither candidate’s ploy worked as well as Lincoln’s.

The perception of a rail-splitter was a double-edged sword for Lincoln in another important respect. The hardline Southerners

viewed the image, popularized by editorial cartoons, of a man with “broad shoulders, bulging muscles and wielding an axe” as someone who would assail the South.

At the time, there was strong opinion on both sides of the slavery issue, with an obvious geographic split. But there was also a large middle ground of people who believed in compromise. Lincoln’s wild card was the Western territories. As America pushed westward and the Republican Party, led by Lincoln, touted the need for a transcontinental railroad, the question was simple: would the newly formed states be slave states or not? Those who were complacent about ending slavery and sympathetic to the plantation owners in the South still saw no advantage to spreading it elsewhere. A Lincoln presidency would support this cause. But what if Lincoln saw fit to end slavery entirely? Where would that lead? The Peoria speech had set the foundation of Lincoln’s stance against slavery, but questions remained how he, as president, would proceed.

An editor of a Louisville newspaper wrote Lincoln and asked several questions: “What would you do if elected? Would you interfere? Would it not be wise to say plainly you wouldn’t interfere?” Lincoln responded, “Those who have not read, or heeded, what I have already publicly said, would not read, or heed, a repetition of it.”

Lincoln’s resistance was understandable. An election was at stake, and already a nation was splitting at the seams. The South was slowly pulling away from the Union, and a backlash against the folksy, “uneducated” man from Illinois was growing.

While the early vote tallies narrowly supported Douglas over Lincoln in Illinois, nationally the Electoral College was clearly in favor of the Republicans. On the evening of November 6, 1860, in a building across from the Springfield telegraph office, Lincoln sat down to a dinner prepared by the Republican Ladies Club. When word reached the office that New York had gone with Lincoln, several ladies rushed in. A messenger followed with a telegram that Lincoln had clinched it. “How do you do, Mr. President?” they greeted the seated man.

THE NEXT February, the day before Lincoln would leave the safety of his home to become the 16TH President of the United States, a