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ROCKFORD WAS LINCOLN COUNTRY

By Thomas S. Johnson

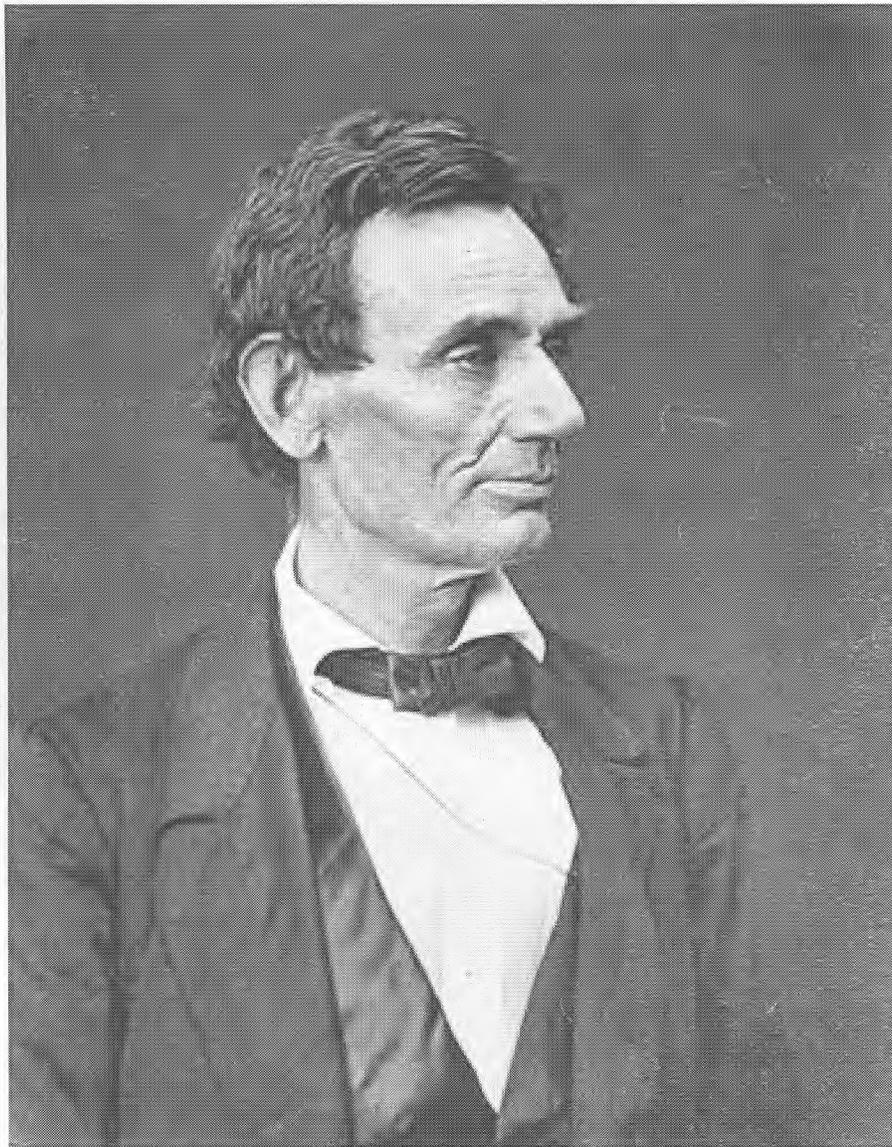


Photo of Abraham Lincoln – Taken about the time of the Manny Reaper trial in 1855. Source is the Library of Congress.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Since this is the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln it seems altogether fitting that we present an article on Lincoln's association with Rockford. This issue presents an article by Thomas S. Johnson that addresses Lincoln's connections to Rockford. Mr. Johnson is a previous contributor to the Nuggets and is an expert on Abraham Lincoln.

Thomas S. Johnson is a Rockford native, a graduate of Rockford College and Harvard Law School, and a partner at Williams McCarthy LLP, one of Rockford's oldest and largest law firms. He has been actively involved in planning various Illinois projects and events in observance of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial as Chairman of the Lincoln Bicentennial Committee of The Lincoln Academy of Illinois and as Chairman of the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of the Illinois State Bar Association. This article is based on remarks delivered by the author at a meeting of the Rockford Rotary Club in February 2009 in observance of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor



Judge Anson Miller
Courtesy of the Rockford Public Library

Rockford Was Lincoln Country

By Thomas S. Johnson

Everyone in the capital city of Springfield knew that Rockford, Illinois was Lincoln country:

- So many of his Rockford supporters planned to attend Lincoln's debate with Judge Douglas in Freeport that the Illinois Central had to run a special train.
- When word reached Rockford of Lincoln's selection as the new Republican party's candidate for President, a spontaneous rally took place at the Court House Square.
- Elmer Ellsworth -- commander of the Rockford City Greys -- had somehow dragged a howitzer to the roof of Chicago's Tremont Hotel to fire-off a proper salute to the new presidential nominee as soon as the delegates took their final vote.
- In the election which followed Lincoln carried his home town of Springfield, but only by the narrowest of margins. He won in Rockford by a landslide.

Rockford was Lincoln Country.

Abraham Lincoln first saw Rockford before there was a Rockford. This was in May of 1832 during the Black Hawk War, two years before Germanicus Kent and Thatcher Blake rowed their canoe down the Pecatonica to the Rock and down the Rock to Kent Creek. Captain Abraham Lincoln led his militia company, consisting of volunteers from New Salem, to Stillman Valley to bury the dead at the Stillman Run Massacre. Six weeks later, Lincoln returned to the site of the Stillman Run Massacre and was part of General Henry Atkinson's Army of the Frontier, which marched up along the Rock River through what is now downtown Rockford. They marched into the Michigan Territory -- now called Wisconsin -- to Lake Koshkonong in pursuit of Black Hawk. On July 11th, 1832, on their trip back home from Lake Koshkonong to New Salem, Lincoln and his fellow citizen-soldiers made camp near where the Jefferson Street Bridge now stands, and years later, he told his Rockford friend, Judge Anson Miller, that he was stunned with the wondrous beauty of the Rock River Valley.

One of Lincoln's fellow militia officers during the Black Hawk War was John Todd Stuart (a first cousin of his future wife, Mary Todd). He loaned Lincoln some books to study, and Lincoln joined him in the practice of law in Springfield where he taught himself the art of lawyering. And it was as a lawyer that Lincoln returned to Northern Illinois to what was by then the bustling town of Rockford, for perhaps the most significant law suit in the city's history, the famous Reaper Trial of 1855. Cyrus McCormick, Chicago's largest employer, manufactured the McCormick Reaper. A penniless 27-year-old Rockford inventor, John H. Manny, had developed a competing model, the Manny Reaper, for which he, too, had received a patent. McCormick ignored the young upstart in Rockford until the Manny Reaper defeated the McCormick

Reaper in two farm equipment competitions and farmers everywhere began buying the Manny Reaper, whereupon McCormick sued Manny and his Rockford partners, alleging a patent violation.

It was a very important law suit. A former Attorney General of the United States led McCormick's legal team. With financial support from several manufacturers in New England, John H. Manny (and his Rockford partners) were able to assemble their own blue-ribbon legal team, including two of the nation's leading east coast lawyers.

The lawsuit had been filed in the Federal Court in Chicago. The Manny lawyers decided that they needed local counsel, someone familiar with the local court. They retained Abraham Lincoln. He had been recommended by one of Manny's partners, Ralph Emerson, who had known him during the time Emerson had lived in Bloomington. Lincoln came to Rockford in July of 1855 to see the invention and to review the facts firsthand.

Although the east coast is full of places where Washington is reported to have slept, Rockford has no bed in which Lincoln slept. But there is an urban legend that there is a sofa at Tinker Cottage on which Lincoln may have sat during his visit Rockford in 1855. Alas, however, the curators at Tinker Cottage have been unable to confirm that the legend is true. Yes, Lincoln came to Rockford in July of 1855 to see the Manny Reaper. Yes, Manny's widow did, in fact, marry Robert Tinker. And yes, Mary Door Manny Tinker did move some furniture from the little house near South Main Street first to the mansion across the creek from Tinker Cottage and then to Tinker Cottage itself where it remains today. If Lincoln had visited Manny at his home, he may have sat on the sofa -- perhaps even spilling lemonade on it as some believe. However, there is no proof that Lincoln was ever at the Manny home, and, in fact, some local historians believe that he may have met primarily with the factory superintendent, William Knowlton.

Whether or not Lincoln's back side ever graced Mrs. Tinker's sofa, Lincoln did come to Rockford in July of 1855 to prepare for the Chicago trial of the Reaper case. He wrote a brief of the case which he sent along to the senior members of the Manny legal team and began preparing his closing argument. Then, for the convenience of the Judge, the case was reassigned for hearing in Cincinnati, both cities being part of the same judicial circuit, and there was no longer need for Illinois local counsel. But no one bothered to tell Lincoln. He dutifully traveled to Cincinnati fully expecting to make one of the three closing arguments. The big city, east coast lawyers on the Manny legal team were not impressed.

Here's how Carl Sandburg tells the story in his book *The Prairie Years*:

"Lincoln's colleague, Edwin M. Stanton, was a serious . . . man, strict in language, dress, duty. When his eyes lighted on Lincoln at the Burnett House in Cincinnati -- wearing heavy boots, loose clothes, farmer-looking, he used language reported as 'where did that long-armed baboon come from'".

Stanton then ignored Lincoln completely, humiliating him before the Court. *"Up and down the courtroom walked Lincoln", Sandburg said, "in his coat pocket a manuscript of his argument. Then the moment came when Stanton told the court that only two arguments would be made for the defense. Lincoln was out, his carefully planned speech not delivered."*

John H. Manny and his Rockford partners won the lawsuit and about two weeks later, Mr. Manny died. The suit was renamed as McCormick v. Talcott and appealed to the United States Supreme Court where the Rockford defendants won again. Their victory in the Reaper case encouraged the entrepreneurial instincts of other Rockford inventors and the Manny Reaper case is believed to have been a catalyst for Rockford's industrial growth. Although Mr. Manny did not live long enough to reap the rewards of his invention, his widow did, and so did his partners, including Ralph Emerson and Emerson's father-in-law, Wait Talcott -- resulting in the Emerson-Brandingham Company which would become Rockford's largest employer.

The lawsuit was also important to Lincoln. Although, he told his partner, William Herndon, that he had been "roughly handled by that man Stanton," he admired Stanton's staunch refusal to settle the case when they had the chance, his superior training and the masterful way he and the other big city lawyers argued the case. "I'm going home to study law!" he told Ralph Emerson after the trial. "These college trained men who have devoted their whole lives to study are coming west, I'm as good as any of them, and when they get out to Illinois I will be ready for them."

Despite his resentment at being humiliated by Edwin Stanton, years later President Lincoln appointed Stanton Secretary of War -- part of what Doris Kearns Goodwin famously called "a team of rivals." "Do you ever swear?" President Lincoln was once asked. "Don't need to," Lincoln replied. "I've got Stanton in cabinet."

Lincoln received a \$500 retainer and a \$1,000 fee for his services in the Reaper case. He sent the \$1,000 check back the first time it arrived. He said he hadn't earned it, he hadn't argued the case. But he was prevailed upon to cash the check when it was sent to him the second time. He told Ralph Emerson it was the largest legal fee he had ever received, about \$45,000 in today's dollars, perhaps the second largest fee he received in his entire career. It helped finance an addition to his house in Springfield, the only home he ever owned, and permitted him to take time away from his practice to run for the United States Senate.

Rockford supported Lincoln's political ambitions, first for the United States Senate and then for the presidency. Wait Talcott (one of Lincoln's clients in the Reaper case) and Judge Anson Miller were two of Lincoln's important political supporters in Rockford. Each served for a time in the Illinois Senate where they came to know and admire Mr. Lincoln. United States Senators were chosen by the state legislatures at the time rather than by popular election, and Anson Miller and Wait Talcott were two of Lincoln's floor managers during his unsuccessful attempts to become a United States Senator, first in 1854 and again in 1858.

On November 15, 1858, Anson Miller wrote to Lincoln to point out that although Lincoln's party had carried the popular election, because of how the legislative districts

had been gerrymandered, he lacked sufficient votes in the Illinois General Assembly to win his race for the United States Senate. "Had the people voted for you directly," he wrote, "instead of for members of the legislature, you would be our U. S. Senator today by a handsome majority."

Slavery was an issue in Lincoln's senatorial campaign, and Although Lincoln had to be careful what he said in public, in a private conversation with Wait Talcott, Lincoln said. "I know you Talcotts are strong abolitionists, and while I have to be very careful in what I say I want you to understand that your opinions and wishes have produced a much stronger impression on my mind than you may think." Their conversation made a deep impression on Wait Talcott. He was a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

The highlights of Lincoln's second race for the U.S. Senate were the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Rockford's support for candidate Lincoln was enormous. His supporters flocked to Freeport by every means available, including an eighteen coach special train filled with Lincoln's Rockford supporters. They heard Lincoln ask the famous Freeport Question -- pinning Douglas down on the slavery issue which cost Lincoln the office of Senator in 1958 but contributed mightily to his election as President two years later. Most historians think it was deliberate political strategy on Lincoln's part -- the larger game theory.

Rockford's support was even more enthusiastic during the presidential election of 1860. Elijah Blaisdell, a Rockford newspaper editor attended the meeting in Bloomington at which the Illinois Republican party had been organized and was so impressed with Lincoln that he changed the name of his paper to The Republican and endorsed Lincoln for president -- the first newspaper in the nation to do so. Speakers were brought to town, torch-lit parades were held, and intricate military marching maneuvers were performed at Wide Awake Rallies by the Rockford City Greys, a showy parade ground militia group even more popular than the drum and bugle corps we know today.

Elmer Ellsworth, the dashing young commander of the Rockford City Greys, was especially highly regarded. He was young, handsome, and had previously commanded another militia drill team which had won the national championship and toured the nation. At one of the military balls hosted by the young ladies of Rockford -- Elmer Ellsworth met Caroline Spafford -- the daughter of one of Rockford's leading bankers -- known to her friends as Carrie. In due course, he asked her father, Charles H. Spafford, for her hand in marriage. As Jon Lundin reports in his book *Rockford, an Illustrated History*: "The engagement was conditional, at Spafford's father's insistence, on Ellsworth's pursuit of a more responsible career than soldiering. And so, the young soldier left Rockford to begin his legal studies in association with the firm of Abraham Lincoln in Springfield."

By all accounts, Lincoln had a great affection for Ellsworth, and Mrs. Lincoln and the children adored him. Lincoln scholar, Michael Burlingame, said "In some ways their relationship resembled that of a medieval knight to his squire." He used his celebrity status to campaign vigorously on behalf of Lincoln's candidacy in 1860. He stood by his side as Lincoln bid his famous farewell to Springfield. He rode with Lincoln on the

train to Washington and the presidency. There, Ellsworth spent his days at the White House and his nights writing love letters to his beloved Carrie back home in Rockford. One of them is 17 pages long, part of the Lincoln collection of the Chicago History Museum.

Ellsworth continued his military work organizing a regiment of New York volunteers, "on the eve of the Civil War," as Jon Lundin reports. "He took Carrie's photograph with him wherever he went . . . 'My own darling Kitty,' he wrote in 1861 before marching his volunteers into Alexandria, Virginia, 'just accept this assurance, the only thing I can leave you -- the highest happiness I looked for on earth was a union with you.' It was a precautionary note, a soldier's farewell, even though hostilities had not yet broken out between the North and South.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be more than just a precautionary note. In her biography of Ellsworth, Ruth Painter Randall states: "The brief chats with the President, who took such a fatherly interest in his plans, and the way Mrs. Lincoln's face lighted up when she saw him, warmed his heart . . . but the Confederate flag was a sore subject when Ellsworth came to the White House as a home."

Carl Sandburg picks up the story:

"From the windows of the White House, Lincoln's spyglass caught the Confederate flag flying over the town of Alexandria eight miles down the Potomac River . . . Colonel Elmer Ellsworth and the regiment he had recruited in ten days from New York City fire department . . . were to sail on transports down to that town of 10,000 and capture it . . . Ellsworth was told the Confederate force . . . had agreed to evacuate and, with a few struggling picket shots, they had done so. They came to the Marshall House, a second-class hotel, flying at the top of its flagpole the secession flag. Ellsworth threw open the door . . . he mounted to the roof and cut down the secession flag . . . turned to descend . . . a man jumped from a dark passage . . . leveled a double-barrel gun square at the Colonel's breast . . . killing him at the instant . . . In Washington . . . The tolling of bells went on, the flags of public buildings at half-mast . . . Senator Wilson of Massachusetts, saw the President standing at a window looking across the Potomac. He did not move until we approached very closely, when he turned around abruptly . . . 'Excuse me, but I cannot talk,' he said . . . and to our surprise the President burst into tears . . . They brought the body into the East Room, where Ellsworth lay in state and was viewed by thousands."

His private secretary, John Hay, said that Lincoln loved him like a younger brother, and in one of his great letters, Lincoln wrote to Ellsworth's parents, "In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own . . . In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow, I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brave and early fallen child. May God give you that consolation which is beyond all earthly power."

And in Rockford, Illinois the entire city joined Carrie Spafford in mourning Elmer Ellsworth, age 24 of the Rockford City Greys, became a legend across the nation, the image of patriotic valor, widely acknowledged to be the first Union officer to die in the Civil War. When Lincoln issued his first call for volunteers, the members of the Rockford City Greys volunteered to a man. Women carried their sewing machines to the Concert Hall and worked through the night sewing uniforms. \$10,000 was pledged in support of the effort. The pulpits rang with patriotic fervor. "Beat your plow shares into swords," Dr. Thomas Kerr declared at Rockford's First Baptist Church. "And your pruning hooks into spears . . . It is the Christian's duty to suppress the rebel and restore the Union." The entire town lined the street as the volunteers marched off to the Illinois Central Station, becoming the nucleus of the storied 11th Illinois Regiment, led by the Rockford City Greys and their new commander, Captain Garrett L. Nevius. By the siege of Vicksburg he had become Colonel Nevius, the regimental commander, where at age 20, he was killed leading his troops, including the men of Elmer Ellsworth's Rockford City Greys in a charge against the Southern trenches.



Colonel Elmer Ellsworth
Courtesy of Rockford Public Library

Other Presidential calls for volunteers followed. Chad Brooks, one of the contributing authors of the book *Sinnissippi Saga*, reports that from a population of only 8117 the county sent more than 3,000 men to the Union forces, "As call after call for troops was sent out by the President, the county responded. After the call of August 4, 1862, Winnebago County placed 1,000 men in the field in 20 days . . . There were even a half dozen sailors from Rockford in the Union Navy."

"Beat your plow shares into swords," the Reverend Kerr declared. "And your pruning hooks into spears."

Wait Talcott was too old to volunteer and so he paid someone to volunteer in his stead and when the first Internal Revenue Code was passed to finance the war, to his surprise, Talcott received a handwritten note from President Lincoln appointing him Collector of Revenue for Northern Illinois. *To the victor belongs the spoils* was an honored political tradition. All of the postmasters appointed in Rockford during his Presidency had been Lincoln supporters. Although there was no vacancy in Illinois, Lincoln offered to appoint Anson Miller as a federal judge if he would move to New Mexico.

Lincoln's note to Wait Talcott appointing him Collector of Revenue was not the only handwritten note which is part of Rockford's Lincoln Heritage. Another one, the original of which is a treasured part of the archives of Rockford College, concerns another Civil War soldier from Rockford, a school teacher named Simon Preston.

Preston enlisted as a Lieutenant and was assigned very briefly to another fabled Regiment, the 15th Illinois Regiment. In August of 1861 in General Order #62 (the same General Order which named Ulysses S. Grant a Brigadier General), Preston was promoted to Captain and assigned as an Assistant Adjutant General -- first on the staff of Major General Halleck and then on the staff of Major General Horatio A. Wright. Wright was a West Point graduate who was then the commanding general of the Department of the Ohio, which included Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

Then mysteriously and without warning Captain Preston was unceremoniously discharged from the Army. Even a diligent search by the research staff of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library has failed to disclose what happened. And so, the basis for Captain Preston's discharge, like the provenance of Mrs. Tinker's sofa, seems destined to remain in mystery. The strange case of Captain Preston became somewhat of a cause celebre in Rockford. Lincoln's friends, Anson Miller, Wait Talcott and Ralph Emerson joined with several others who protested the dismissal: "Captain Preston in whose ability and integrity we have full confidence . . . has been unjustly discharged from his official station. We think his restoration to the service is a matter of justice to himself and of usefulness to the public."

Rockford's Congressman John F. Farnsworth brought their letter to the President and on the reverse side of their letter Lincoln in his own hand ordered the Judge Advocate General to provide him with a full report of the Preston case. With Lincoln's intervention, Captain Simon Preston was reinstated with the rank of Colonel and given command of a newly formed regiment of black soldiers, the 58th United States Colored Infantry. He ended the war with distinction, his name engraved on the African

American Civil War Memorial. On December 30, 1865, Simon Manley Preston of Rockford, Illinois was brevetted as a Brigadier General for "faithful and meritorious service" to the nation.

Ralph Emerson met with Lincoln for the last time shortly after Preston had been restored to military service. "We found Lincoln sitting very sad and pensive...News had just come in of one of the worst defeats of the war. We told him that we had come to tell him that no matter how dark the clouds and what might be said in the east, the great west was with him. He looked up with a sad smile...and his jaws came together with that firm grip we who knew him best were familiar with...and we knew what his iron determination was. He thanked us heartily for coming to tell him what the people thought 'at home.'"

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, was assassinated at the Ford Theater on April 14, 1865. His body was carried across the street to the Petersen House where Lincoln's family and the members of his cabinet gathered at his side.

At 7:22 a.m., the next morning, Dr. Robert Stone (Lincoln's family physician) and Dr. Joseph K. Barnes (the Surgeon General of the United States) pronounced him dead.

The Rev. Phineas D. Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, said a prayer.

And then, standing at the foot of Lincoln's deathbed, his face covered with tears, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's co-counsel in the Manny Reaper case those many years ago, declared: "**Now he belongs to the ages**"

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