

## The 1828 Experience

~ Warm weather, high water ~ Building the flatboat ~ The launch mystery ~ Initial evidence for a spring launch ~ The case for a fall/winter launch ~ Weaknesses in the fall/winter launch hypothesis ~ Further evidence for a spring launch ~ The likely departure date ~ Launch site, cargo, itinerary, and speed ~ Down the Ohio River ~ Into the Mississippi River ~ Into Louisiana waters ~ Lingering along the Louisiana sugar coast ~ The attack ~ Locating the attack site ~ Recovering and proceeding ~ Arriving in New Orleans ~ Docking at the flatboat wharf ~ Narrowing down the docking site ~ Dispensing of the cargo ~ Life along the flatboat wharf ~ Dismantling the flatboat ~ To loose in New Orleans ~ Room and board ~ Conspicuous bumpkins ~ “Babel of all Babels . . . Freedom of all Seasons” ~ Window to the world ~ Slave on the run, slaves on the block ~ Jeweled exchange ~ Sightseeing ~ People watching ~ Retailing ~ Street life ~ Departure ~ A different view of Indiana ~ On to Illinois ~ Deep snows, dark trees ~

Winter never fully arrived in 1828. Temperatures remained within their autumnal range, often rising to balminess and only occasionally dipping to seasonality or below. Rain fell from persistent, cloudy skies, raising the waters of the Ohio and Mississippi. Trees grew and prematurely; delighted farmers assumed an early spring and sowed seeds accordingly. Word from Louisiana had it that ears were growing on Indian corn—in February!—while harvestable bolls blossomed on Mississippi cotton plantations. “[E]very thing presents an appearance of June on the banks of the Mississippi,” marveled one Louisiana paper, even as it fretted about the river “attain[ing] a height that is truly alarming. . . . The Ohio had already exceeded its banks and flooded Shawnee Town in Illinois with six feet of water.<sup>2</sup> Bad news for most folks, but good news for boatmen like Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln: high water meant swift sailing to New Orleans. First, however, they needed a flatboat.

One account written by a man named C. T. Baker in 1931 holds that the Gentrys purchased a salt boat (a flatboat formerly used to haul salt down from Pittsburgh) in Cincinnati with proceeds from cattle they had

1. *Lafourche Gazette*, reprinted by *The Farmers' Cabinet* (Amherst, NH), March 29, 1828, p. 2; see also Cary J. Mock, Adam Mojzisek, Michele M. Waters, Michael Chenoweth, and David W. Stahle, “The Winter of 1827–1828 Over Eastern North America,” *Climatic Change* 83, no. 112 (July 2007): 87–115.

2. “High Water,” *Village Register and Norfolk County Advertiser* (Dedham, MA), March 13, 1828, p. 2.

sold there. Baker contends that it was this pre-existing flatboat that Gentry, Lincoln, and a third crew member named Zeb Murphy took to New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> That account, however, is not substantiated by any other source. The fact that Lincoln himself clearly stated that he and Gentry traveled “without other assistance” undermines Baker’s credibility. All evidence suggests that Lincoln and Allen Gentry themselves built the flatboat, during which time Lincoln resided in Rockport.

The construction site was probably at Gentry’s Landing, a hundred-acre wooded parcel downriver from the Rockport bluff. This area afforded timber, space, and a good spot to launch.<sup>4</sup> Abe certainly possessed the construction skills; he “was thoroughly master of all the phases of frontier life” reported a neighbor, including “woods craft” learned from his father. The procedure for building a flatboat was recorded by John Calvin Gilkison, who, like Lincoln, was born in Kentucky in 1805 and later moved to Indiana where he built and piloted flatboats for many years. Gilkison’s instructions are paraphrased here and broken into fourteen steps:

1. Select and fell two straight hardwood trees (maple and oak if possible) of similar length and at least four feet in diameter. Larger loads require longer trunks.
2. Debark, split, hew, and chisel them down to two massive beams, thirteen inches thick and forty inches wide, with as much length as the trunks allow. (Where available, saw mills powered by water, or by steam after the 1810s, significantly eased this task.)

3. C. T. Baker, “Sandy Creek Landing Greets the Lincolns: An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Days in This Community and County” (1931), unpublished monograph held at Spencer County Library, Ref 977.2 B3 v. 24.

4. Francis Marion Van Natter, *Lincoln’s Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 57; Abraham Lincoln, “Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps,” June 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:62; William Dean Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (facsimile edition of campaign biography corrected by the hand of Abraham Lincoln) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 22.

5. Louis A. Warren, ed., “Lincoln, Miscelany, and Astronomy,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Association*, no. 1349, February 14, 1955. For property maps of Rockport in the late nineteenth century, see B. N. Griffing, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Spencer County, Indiana* (Philadelphia: J. Lake & Company, 1879), 61, and C. E. Wright, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Spencer County, Indiana* (Covisville, KY: John P. Morton & Company, 1896), 46–50.

6. Joseph Gillespie to William H. Herndon, January 31, 1866, in ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 181.

3. Taper one end of each beam from forty inches down to about twelve inches.
4. Haul the beams to an appropriate bankside location and lay them parallel, separated by a distance roughly one-third their length. They will form the flatboat's gunwales (pronounced and sometimes spelled "gunnel"), the two backbones to which all other components fasten.
5. Lay in to eight girders between the parallel gunwales, and join each girder to each gunwale with a dovetail mortise.
6. Lay two end girders at the bow and stern, and fasten them to the gunwales with dovetail mortises.
7. Lay "streamers" (crossbeams) across the girders, parallel to the gunwales, and join the streamers and girders with wooden pegs. The vessel at this point resembles a giant child's sled laid upside-down, with the tapered gunwales resembling the sled blades.
8. Lay planks across the streamers and fasten them with four or five wooden pegs each, forming the floor.
9. Caulk all seams by hammering in "twisted coils of well-broken hemp or flax," then pouring resin and hot lard into the crevices.<sup>7</sup> The bottom half of the vessel is now complete.

Next came a pivotal moment: the flipping. The family Helpers raised one gunwale with levers while holding down the other, then gently lowered the massive frame with ropes into the adjacent water body. The celebratory hoot that arose as the craft splashed and bobbed to life often times fell silent as leaks bubbled up and repairs were made. The next steps added verticality to what, at this point, constituted little more than a sturdy raft:

10. Cut studs (posts) three feet high and insert them vertically into mortise-cut every few feet into the gunwales.
11. Panel over the studs to form the walls of the flatboat.
12. Cut slimmer but longer studs and insert them down the middle of the flatboat, in mortise-cut into the girders. These posts will uphold the roof. (Some flatboats were entirely roofed like an ark; others were half-roofed. The Gentry-Lincoln vessel, being a small two-man craft,

7. John Calvin Gilkeson, "Flatboat Building on Little Rafton Creek, Parke County, Indiana," ed. Donald F. Carmony and Sam K. Swope, *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 4 (December 1964): 317.

- was probably half-roofed.)
13. Fasten short, narrow planks from the tops of the gunwale-mounted studs to the tops of the middle studs. These form the flatboat's roof, which was angled or pitched steeply enough to shed water, but flat enough to allow roof-top walking, poling, and oaring.
  14. Cover the roof planks perpendicularly with another layer of broader planks, then shingle them over and caulk them to keep out rain, the perennial enemy of grain cargo.

Now complete as a vessel, the flatboat required interior work to make a hold for cargo and a home for crew. A small woodstove and chimney provided for cooking and wintertime calefaction, while speckled stoves (stoves, hocks, corrals) maximized capacity. If Gentry and Lincoln roasted sacked hominy and smoked ham, floor space and ceiling hooks would have sufficed. A few inches of clay distributed evenly upon the floor helped seal crevices, absorb moisture, and protect the wood-plank floor from cooking fires.<sup>8</sup>

Last came navigational equipment: the steering oar (also called a “streamer,” functioning as a rudder) usually measured sixty feet or longer for larger boats, while the side oars (“sweeps”) needed to be roughly double the width of the flatboat. A short oar held at the bow, called a “couger,” helped keep the craft in the current. Two long, thin side sweeps protruding from the bulky vessels probably explain why flatboats came to be known as “breasthorns.”<sup>9</sup> Because Gentry and Lincoln built their craft to accommodate a minimal crew of two, they probably depended on the steering oar and poling for all navigation, and may have left off the side oars altogether.

No records describe the design of the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat, but a contract for a similar vessel made in Spencer County five years later may shed some light. The \$97.50 agreement found by researcher Louis A. Warren called for an eighty-foot-wide, sixty-five-foot-long flatboat with four-and-a-half-foot-high walls, two-foot-wide gunwales, and a two-inch-thick floor. A steering oar and two sweeps protruded from the stern

<sup>8</sup> Charles Carleton Coffin, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Gilkeson, “Flatboat Building on Little Raccoon Creek,” 101-322; HRA Gray & Pape, LLC, *The Evolution of a Sacred Landscape: A Historic Resource Study of the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Spencer County, Indiana* (Cincinnati, OH: National Park Service, 2002), 49; “In Flatboat and Keelboat Times On the Mississippi, Over Seventy Years Ago,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), March 19, 1895, p. 14, section f, c. 6-7.

and sides, while a cabin covered with a leak-proof roof occupied the rear. While this contract bears no direct relationship to the Gentry-Lincoln case, it is nevertheless informative because its purchaser, William Jones, was affiliated with the Gentry Store and probably had comparable transportation needs.

The size of the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat can be estimated by an 1834 journal describing a flatboat launched from nearby Posey County. It measured eighty feet long and seventeen feet wide (1,360 square feet), manned by five men. A crew of two could typically handle a vessel roughly half that size—40 or 45 feet long by 15 or so feet wide.<sup>10</sup>

Construction usually took one to two months, depending on the number of helpers and the availability of milled wood. (Hand-hewing significantly slowed down work, but also lowered costs.) Most Indiana men possessed basic carpentry skills and flatboat experience, making workers easy to find. Total costs typically ranged around one dollar per length foot, but were probably minimal for this two-man homemade enterprise.

Exactly when Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln launched their flatboat from Rockport is a critical piece of information because it directs us to the proper time window in which Lincoln would have arrived in New Orleans and thus enables us to reconstruct the daily city life to which he was exposed. While 100 percent of the historical evidence points to *either* an early springtime launch or a late-autumn/early-winter launch in the year 1828, *neither* alternative can be proven by primary historical documentation. There are no registries, no receipts, no contracts, and certainly no journals nailing down the date. But other sources of evidence and clues abound. The following discussion weighs the evidence for the two departure-date hypotheses and posits a judgment.

Contextual evidence accommodates the springtime hypothesis well. Warm temperatures, swiftly flowing rivers, high water levels easing the erosion of sandbars and other navigation obstacles, lengthening daylight, and economic bustle at the destination port all enhance the logic of a springtime launch. Exceptionally warm and wet weather in early 1828 caused extremely high waters in the Ohio and Mississippi, which might have prompted the ever-savvy Jones Gentry to organize a voyage to exploit the swift current. “The water is rising very fast and appears to be

10. Asbury C. Jacques, “The Journals of the Davy Crockett commencing December 20th, 1834,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 1 (March 2006): 8.

pretty well lined with flatboats," observed one navigator in 1835, indicating that rivermen actively reeled in the river and departed accordingly.<sup>11</sup>) Lincoln himself, as we shall see, set out from Illinois in the month of April for his 1831 voyage to New Orleans, which his own father had departed in March twenty-five years earlier. Port records show that flatboat arrivals in general peaked at New Orleans between late March and early May (when eight to nine flatboats registered daily), implying that upcountry departures peaked proportionately in March and April.<sup>12</sup>

Secondary evidence adds further credence to a springtime launch, the strongest coming from the research of William H. Herndon. As Lincoln's longtime Springfield law partner, close friend, and biographer, Herndon looms large in the literature of Lincoln's early life, so some background of his work is in order for the purposes of our study.

A few months after the president's assassination in 1865, Herndon set out for Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois to interview people with personal memories of Lincoln, in preparation for a book about his old colleague. The resultant 250-plus transcripts and letters have been described as "one of the most extensive oral history projects in American history." Herndon and collaborator Jesse W. Weik wove the information into narrative form and published it in 1889 as *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*.

The effort garnered more criticism than praise. Popular audiences reproached Herndon for the occasionally discomfiting portrayal his findings painted of the immortalized president: his plebeian roots, his apparent secularity, his bouts with depression. Historians criticized Herndon for sloppy interviewing methods and scoffed at the historiographical legitimacy of unverifiable, decades-old reminiscences. Herndon fueled the criticism when he mistakenly whipped up Lincoln's relationship with Ann Rutledge into a life-transforming romantic tragedy and disparaged Mary Todd's character in ways that influence her less flattering image to this day. Herndon became viewed by many Lincoln scholars as an opportunistic writer (note his book's title: *Herndon's Lincoln*) more so than a careful and reliable historian.

Nevertheless, Herndon's body of material constitutes an unmatched treasure trove of first-person perspectives on Lincoln's youth. His tireless

11. *Ibid.*, 20.

12. Wharfinger Reports/New Orleans Collector of Levee Fees Registers of Flatboats, Barges, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans, 1816–23 and 1845–49.

13. Charles B. Strozier, as quoted by Wilson and Davis in *Herndon's Informants*, xiii.

fieldwork and well-preserved notes form the source of hundreds of subsequent histories, biographies, and articles, and underlie much of what we think we know about Lincoln before he stepped onto the national stage. Indeed, many, if not most, of Herndon's critics are also Herndon citers. The situation is not unlike that of early decennial censuses, which abound in shortfalls but nevertheless represent valuable datasets. Are Herndon's findings like the hand-written population schedules of the old censuses, perfectly precise? Definitely not. Are most of them generally accurate? We have ways to evaluate their accuracy through corroboration, contextual evidence, informant reputation, and other methods. Do they represent the best available information on Lincoln's early years, in both depth and breadth? Definitely. Scholars have recently begun to reassess Herndon's unfavorable reputation, and rightly so.<sup>14</sup>

In 1998, historians Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis published Herndon's interview notes and correspondence, granting researchers convenient access to the actual words of Lincoln's aging contemporaries (who, incidentally, have suffered their own share of scholarly dismissal). Although the shortfalls of human memory and interviewing dynamics should always be kept in mind, these first-person collections offer valuable clues and perspectives for this study. Through these and other "way points," we can reconstruct the chronology, geography, and history of Lincoln's voyage to New Orleans—starting, of course, with the all-important launch date question.

Among Herndon's September 1865 inquiries was a valuable interview with fifty-seven-year-old Anna Caroline ("Kate") Gentry, whose deceased husband accompanied Lincoln to New Orleans decades earlier.<sup>15</sup> "My name is Mrs. Gentry, wife of Allen Gentry," she declared, "with whom Mr Lincoln went to NO for James Gentry Sen[ior] in April 1828."<sup>16</sup> Born around the same time as Lincoln and schooled with

14. Douglas L. Wilson, "Herndon's Legacy," in *Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 21–34.

15. Allen Gentry died in 1852 when, according to neighbors, he "got drunk and fell off the boat going to Louisville and was drowned." Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, Silas and Nancy Richardson, and John Rommel by William H. Herndon, September 14, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 116.

16. Interview, Anna Caroline Gentry, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 131.

him, the widow Gentry continued:

Speaking about the boat & the trip let me say to you that I saw the boat was on ice, saw it start and L[incoln] with it. . . . They went down the Ohio & Mississippi . . . they Came back in June 1828.<sup>17</sup>

Anna Gentry's clear personal memory forms compelling evidence for a springtime launch, particularly in light of her close relationship to one (indeed both) of the principals. A dangerous weather anomaly made April 1828 particularly memorable: after months of spring-like weather, daytime temperatures suddenly plunged from 60° to 22° F, and dropped lower at night. The hard freeze and light snow killed seedling crops and turned the balmy winter of 1828 into a long-lived "False Spring."<sup>18</sup> Anna's eight-year-old nephew Absalom Roby, who farmed that year, backed up his daughter's testimony when Herndon interviewed him on the same day in September 1865. Roby affirmed, "[Lincoln] and Gentry did go to N.O. in April 1828, as Said by my daughter . . . I was often at the landing from which Gentry & Abe started to N.O. . . ." But the elderly man later admitted, "My memory is gone & myself am fast going."<sup>19</sup>

Further substantiation of a spring launch comes from Herndon's interview with neighbors Nathaniel Grigsby, Stiles Richardson, Nancy Richardson, and John Romine on September 14, 1865. Romine in particular stated that "Lincoln went to N.O. about '28 or '29. . . . Boat Started out of the Ohio in the Spring—Abe about 30 years of age." A few moments later, Herndon scribbled down the enigmatic phrase, "Give about 2 months, which could mean "around two miles" or "around two months."<sup>20</sup> Luckily, Herndon later clarified his notes of the Romine interview with the phrase, "Gone about two months."<sup>21</sup> Thus we have corroboration of Anna

17. *Ibid.*, 131–132.

18. The temperatures were recorded by William Clark in St. Louis, Missouri, during April 2–5, 1828. Temperatures were probably similar in Rockport, Indiana, offset by half a degree or so, as the system moved eastward. William Clark, "William Clark's Diary: March 1826–February, 1831, Part Two, 1826–1828," ed. Louise Barry, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (May 1948): 143. For vegetative impacts of the April 1828 killing frost, see Beck et al., "Winter of 1827–1828," 87–115.

19. Interview, Absalom Roby, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 132.

20. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, Stiles and Nancy Richardson, and John Romine, by William H. Herndon, September 14, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 118.

21. William H. Herndon, citing John Romine, "A Visit to the Lincoln Farm, September 14, 1865," in *The Hidden Lincoln, From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*,



Gentry's stance that the trip began in spring, and that it lasted around two months. Romine's cousin-in-law of the man (James Gentry) who hired Lincoln to go to New Orleans. Makes three Gentry family members (along with Anna and Absalom) who knew Lincoln personally, all concurring on a spring launch.

Armed with this evidence, Herndon reported spring 1828 as the season of the flatboat launch in his 1889 biography. Specifically, he wrote, "In March 1828, James Gentry . . . fitted out a boat with a stock of grain and meat" for Allen and Abe, but stated no further dates, despite Anna's clear testimony that they departed in April and returned in June. Widely cited, Herndon's March 1828 judgment has since been adopted by numerous tertiary authors.<sup>22</sup>

A second hypothesis holds that Gentry and Lincoln launched in late December 1828. Setting out during the cold and brief days of year's end, when the river runs low and slow, might seem risky and counterintuitive. Incessant wind, frost, rain, fog, hail, and snow, for example, slowed one wintertime Indiana-to-New Orleans flatboat voyage to nearly twice the length of a typical spring trip. The inclement conditions also made the navigator "very unwell . . . with a bad cold [and] Ague [fever]. . . . The weather is fine for that disease."<sup>23</sup>

But winter travel was not without reason. An end-of-year launch delivered recently harvested agricultural commodities to market before they might go bad. It aligned particularly well with tobacco cultivation, as leaves are cut in August or September, stacked on poles in barns to dry for a few months, then braided in November and shipped in December. It coincided with the ideal season for transporting hog meat, as the autumn chill staved off decay in the period between slaughter and curing.<sup>24</sup> Year-end

ed. Emanuel Hertz (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 360.

22. William H. Herndon and Jesse William Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1889), 1:63.

23. William S. Ward, *Diary* [of Flatboat Trip from New Albany, Indiana to New Orleans, Louisiana, 1839], The Historical New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 2009.0139, p. 1, 27, 33, and 69 (hereafter cited as THNOC). Ward departed New Albany on January 19, 1839, and arrived in New Orleans on March 11, delayed mostly for weather reasons.

24. Interview, Jane Boultinghouse (great-great-great-granddaughter of Allen Gentry and member of an Indiana tobacco-growing and hog-raising family), by Richard Cam-

launches supplied foodstuffs to the New Orleans market just as demand rose with the city's higher wartime population. Cold-season launches also gave farmers something productive to do in the off-season, and freed up the subsequent spring for planting. In the case of Gentry and Lincoln, a December departure would have allowed them to work the river landing during the subsequent springtime busy season. While temperatures might have indeed plunged below freezing nightly, each southbound mile would have brought slightly warmer temperatures. Low water level surely slowed progress, but it also reduced the risk of losing control of the vessel. There were, after all, two greenhorns at the helm.

The December launch hypothesis stems from Gentry family oral history, as recorded and interpreted by two amateur historians working independently in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Their names were Bess V. Ehrmann and Francis Marion Van Natter.

An enthusiastic and multi-talented curator of the Spencer County Historical Society, Bess V. Ehrmann interviewed numerous Gentry descendants as part of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society's effort to write the "missing chapter" of Lincoln's life. "Many flatboatmen along the Ohio did make their trips in April," Ehrmann acknowledged,

but the Gentry family was always known to go in the late fall or early winter. There were other men who made their trips in winter, Mr. Lewis Gentry[,] the grandson of Allen Gentry[,] told me.

I have known intimately many of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of both James Gentry and Allen Gentry. All members of both families knew that their ancestors, three generations of them, made their flatboat trips to New Orleans in the fall or winter, after the hogs were butchered and the summer crops gathered and stored ready for marketing in New Orleans. Ice did not come in the rivers until late in the winter, and as Mr. Louis Gentry told me, "You must remember we were traveling south away from the cold."<sup>25</sup>

Francis Marion Van Natter interviewed Gentry family members around the same time (1936) and gave his findings into a book, *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years*, published posthumously in 1963. Van Natter's work is unusual for a Lincoln book; while it invents dialogue and

panella, December 5, 2008, Rockport, Indiana.

25. Bess V. Ehrmann, *The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Walter M. Hill, 1938), vii, 7.

imbues color into boyhood vignettes, it also contains scholarly apparatus such as footnotes and affidavit-backed interviews with local informants. Indeed, Van Natter worked tirelessly and traveled extensively to understand and reconstruct the flatboat trip, taking scrupulous notes and saving all research materials—which he later donated to the Lewis Library at Vincennes University.

Among Van Natter's archives is an affidavit signed by seventy-two-year-old E. Grant Gentry and notarized on September 5, 1936. Regarding the timing of the flatboat trip, the affidavit states that Allen and Abe left "some time between Christmas day 1828 and New Year's Day 1829," having "delayed leaving on the trip until after the birth of his expected child . . . born on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of December, 1828. . . ." Revealingly, E. Grant Gentry also stated in the affidavit that his information had been "passed to him by his grandmother, Anna Caroline Roby Gentry, more than fifty years ago."<sup>26</sup> What he did not know or perhaps misremembered, was that, when interviewed by Herndon in 1865, his grandmother pegged the departure date to April 1828, not December. Based on E. Grant Gentry's testimony, Van Natter, concurring with Bess Ehrman, judged the launch as taking place "[m]idway between Christmas Day [1828] and New Year [1829]," and proceeded to reconstruct the trip based on that chronology.<sup>27</sup>

What remains unresolved is the chasm between the Gentry family members' *eyewitness* memories of an April launch recorded by Herndon in 1865, versus the passed-down family memories of a December launch recorded by Ehrman and Van Natter in the 1930s. Interviews in 2008 by this researcher with two direct descendants of Allen Gentry revealed that whatever adamant December-launch memory might have existed in the 1930s did not persist into the 2000s.<sup>28</sup>

One Lincoln family member, not vaguely related to an autumn departure—but dubiously, it turns out. A June 1, 1865, interview with Abraham's earliest but oftentimes unreliable cousin Dennis Hanks recorded that "Mr. Lincoln went to N.C. in the fall. . ." Hanks then undermined his credibility when he continued, ". . . [the year] 36 or 37" (via Gideon

26. Affidavit, E. Grant Gentry, September 5, 1936, Francis Marion Van Natter Papers—Regional History Collection Number 136, Lewis Historical Library, Vincennes University (hereafter cited as Van Natter Papers).

27. Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood*.

28. Interviews, Jane Boultinghouse and Barbara Dillon (both great-great-great-granddaughters of Allen Gentry), by Richard Campanella, December 5, 2008, Rockport, Indiana.

Romine. . . .”<sup>29</sup> By Lincoln’s own words, we know for certain he launched in 1828 and accompanied Allen Gentry, no one else. If Hanks got the year, decade, and companion wrong, his reliability regarding the season is minimal.

Additional clues exist. On the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1828, Allen Gentry wed Anna Caroline Roby, thus confirming at the very least that Gentry and Lincoln were in Indiana on that date.<sup>30</sup> Anna became pregnant within a few days. This information leaves only a week for Herndon’s March launch estimate to prove true, although it does no harm to Anna Gentry’s April estimate. Nine months later, on December 18, 1828, Anna gave birth to their firstborn, James Junior.<sup>31</sup> The delivery, according to Ehrmann, “had delayed the southern trip as Allen had refused to go unless he knew all was well at home. Many years later when Lincoln became famous, the Gentrys were always to remember the date of this particular flatboat trip from the birthdate of the eldest son.” A local history buff if ever there was one, Ehrmann wrote and directed a biennial historical pageant, *When Lincoln Went Flatboating From Rockport*, in which the actor who played Allen Gentry was his own great-grandson.<sup>32</sup>

At least one modern-day Gentry family descendant concurred with Ehrmann, sensing that Allen Gentry (her great-great-great-grandfather) would not have parted with his bride once he learned of her pregnancy.<sup>33</sup> If Anna became pregnant around March 21, she would have realized it no later than three weeks hence, based on menstrual cycles. Presuming she told her husband promptly, Allen (and therefore Abraham) would have, under this theory, stayed home until the late-December birth. After a couple of days assuring the health of both mother and baby, the theory goes, the duo would finally have departed.<sup>34</sup> Van Natter also acknowledged the significance of the birth, although he erroneously dated it to December 28, 1828.

29. Interview, Dennis Hanks, by William F. Herndon, June 15, 1860, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 45.

30. The March 20 date comes from *Marriage Records—Spencer County, Indiana 1818–1845*, compiled by Christine Young, Ethel Smith, and Hazel M. Hyde (Thomson, IL: Heritage House, 1974), 8; other sources date March 19.

31. *History of Warrick, Vanderburgh, and Perry Counties, Indiana* (Chicago: Goodspeed, Bros. & Company, 1885), 452.

32. Ehrmann, *Missing Chapter*, 8, 98–137.

33. Interview, Barbara Dillon, by Richard Campanella, December 5, 2008, Rockport, Indiana.

34. *Ibid.*

But would Anna really have been better off with her husband disappearing into the wintry wilds as she struggled alone with her days-old firstborn? One may reason that the relatively low-risk early months of a pregnancy—balmy April, May, and June, in this case—offered the *ideal* time for a husband to depart on business. This would enable him to be home during the more perilous months of the late term, birth, and first weeks of infancy, when an Indiana winter would only make matters worse. Both mother and child face greater risks in the weeks after birth than in the weeks after conception. Contrary to Schumann's reasoning, the Gentry baby issue seems to *buttress* the April launch hypothesis, and *weaken* the case for a December launch. Van Natter dramatically describes "a blizzard [threaten[ing]] . . . a strong northwest gale . . . the December wind [grow[ing]] color and growl[ing] louder" within hours of the baby's birth. If all this were true meteorologically, such conditions seem to weigh *against* the likelihood of Allen flatboating into the blizzard while leaving an hours-old boy and first-time mother to fend for themselves. (Perhaps wintry conditions struck as fierce as Van Natter described. But Western explorer and scientist William Clark, stationed only two hundred miles away in St. Louis, personally recorded very different weather for the last five days of 1828: clear skies, generally calm, and temperatures ranging between 56° and 64° F in the morning and afternoon, with December 27 described as a "Beautiful Spring morning [and a] Fine Warm Evening."<sup>36</sup> Van Natter's blizzard diminishes his overall credibility.)

Another weakness in the December hypothesis is the fact that the Ohio and Mississippi rivers ran exceptionally low around that time, quite the opposite of the floodwaters earlier in the year. "The river began to fall in June [1828]," wrote river scientist John W. Monette in the 1850s, and "remained low from August until the last of December"—precisely the time Gentry and Lincoln allegedly departed.<sup>37</sup> William Clark, stationed at St. Louis, recorded the Mississippi "falling" consistently throughout the last ten days of December.<sup>38</sup> The trend continued into the new year: "The Mississippi has fallen eighteen inches," reported the *New Orleans Price*

35. Van Natter, *Lincoln's Childhood*, 57–58.

36. Clark, "William Clark's Diary," 171–172.

37. John W. Monette, "The Mississippi Floods," in *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 7, ed. Franklin L. Riley (Oxford, MS: Mississippi Historical Society, 1903): 464.

38. Clark, "William Clark's Diary," 172.

*Current* on January 11 settling at 10½ feet below high water mark, being 7½ feet lower than this time last year.” Two weeks later, it had “fallen [another] six inches [to] 11 feet below high water mark, being 8½ feet lower than at this time last year.” Equating to perhaps three to five feet above mean sea level at New Orleans, the current would have flowed around 1.5 to 2.2 miles per hour, peaking at only 2.0 to 2.3 miles per hour—roughly half the speed during springtime high water. Low water in winter could be dangerous as well as tedious, because it was prone to freezing over, particularly along slaw-water banks where flatboatmen could get ice locked overnight. It also brought obstacles closer to the surface: so weakly flowed both the Ohio and Mississippi in November that a snag rose each evening to the surface, puncturing the hull of the steamboat *Columbia* and sending it and its hundred tons of lead to the bottom.<sup>41</sup> If an experienced riverman like James Gentry witnessed these unfavorable conditions in late December, he might well have cancelled plans for a trip to New Orleans—unless, of course, he already executed that trip the previous spring.

Nevertheless, documents indicate that some flatboats did indeed depart Spencer County in December of other years. A January 22, 1821, letter written by resident William Morgan, for example, speaks of launching his flatboats for New Orleans one month earlier—meaning late December. More significant is the aforementioned William Jones flatboat contract of 1833: Jones once worked in Gentry’s store and may have owned it by the time he entered into the flatboat contract. If Jones’ annual business schedule resembled Gentry’s, then Jones’ delivery date for the flatboat may shed light on our issue. That date is December 1. Assuming a couple of weeks to load and prepare for the trip, this equates to a mid- or late-December launch. Another example comes from one of the best-documented flatboat voyages of the era, that of the *Davy Crockett*. It launched from Posey County, Indiana, for New Orleans on December 20, 1834—the same day, six years hence, that Gentry and Lincoln supposedly departed under the wintertime hypothesis.<sup>42</sup> None of these cases bear any direct relation to the Lincoln trip; they only show that December launches were not uncommon.

39. *New Orleans Price Current*, January 11 and January 24, 1829, as quoted in *Louisiana Courier*, January 13, 1829, c. 1, and January 26, 1829, p. 2, c. 5.

40. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “River Velocities at New Orleans, LA. Related to the Carrollton Gage,” [http://www.nhn.usace.army.mil/eng/edmd/velo\\_no.asp](http://www.nhn.usace.army.mil/eng/edmd/velo_no.asp) (visited December 1, 2008).

41. *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), November 4, 1828, c. F.

42. Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 8–24.

Lincoln himself fell just a few words short of clarifying the departure question. “When [he] was nineteen, still residing in Indiana,” he recollected in 1860, “[I] made [my] first trip upon a flat-boat to New-Orleans . . .”<sup>43</sup> His words rule out departure predating his February 12, 1828, birthday and postdating the 1829 birthday, but shed no further light. (Had he departed in December, might he have mentioned reaching his milestone twentieth birthday with a son voyage?)

Lincoln did, however, serendipitously imply a spring 1828 launch when he hand-picked a short biography entitled *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, written by William Dean Howells during the 1860 presidential campaign. Howells introduced his readers to Lincoln’s Indiana boyhood and brought them to the flatboat story:

The Lincolns continued to live in Spencer county until 1828, nothing interrupting the even tenor of Abraham’s life, except in his nineteenth year a flat-boat trip to New Orleans.

Howells wrapped up the flatboat story with a few lines of river poetry and a couple of voyage vignettes, then placed Lincoln back in Indiana. He started the next paragraph with the words “Four years afterward, on the first of March, 1830, his father determined to emigrate once more . . . for Illinois. . . .” When Lincoln edited the draft, the presidential candidate crossed out the word “Four” and wrote in “one,” meaning that the March 1, 1830, emigration date to Illinois postdated the flatboat trip to New Orleans by two years.<sup>44</sup> This corrected chronology aligns neatly with the spring 1828 departure hypothesis, and undermines the late-autumn 1828 hypothesis, which Lincoln presumably would have rounded off to “One year afterward. . . .” Because this piece of evidence positions Lincoln personally in the role of clarifying the timing of his flatboat trip as spring 1828, it is weighted heavily in this analysis.

It is greatly disappointing that both Thomas Lincoln’s flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1806 and Abraham Lincoln’s two trips in 1828 and 1831 all fail to appear in primary documentary evidence in New Orleans today. The city’s flatboat records—specifically those of the Collector of Levee Dues and the Warehouse, stored on microfilm and in the New Orleans Public Library’s City Archives—survive only for 1806, 1818–23, and for

43. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

44. Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 23.

certain wharves from 1845 through 1852.<sup>45</sup> When we plot out those existing records, we see that late-January and early-February arrivals (boats that would have left Indiana one month earlier) made mid-winter the second-busiest flatboat season of those years. However, the *busiest* flatboat season in New Orleans was spring, when arrival rates roughly doubled. This evidence, albeit contextual and nowhere near the year 1828, adds some additional support to the springtime hypothesis.

Despite the loss of the original flatboat records, we still have newspaper reports of that information. Perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence supporting the springtime hypothesis may be found in the daily “Ship News” (“Marine”) columns of the bilingual newspapers *New Orleans Bee* and *New Orleans Argus*. They listed activity at the Port of New Orleans by vessel type, origin or destination, and load. Flatboats (known as *chouans* in French) were listed by their origin, load, and local client. A survey of the *Bee*’s columns from April 24 through June 24, 1828—a time window generously spanning all possible Gentry-Lincoln arrival dates under the springtime hypothesis—uncovered more than 130 flatboats landing at New Orleans. The *Argus*, meanwhile, recorded around 140. An identical survey of arrivals in the *Bee* for January 15 through February 20, 1829—the equivalent time window for the December launch hypothesis—*found not a single flatboat arriving to New Orleans*. Unfortunately, editions of the *Argus* have been lost for early 1829, but we have every reason to believe they would generally mimic the *Bee*’s reports. The extremely low water in the river at that time, coupled with freezing temperatures, probably explains why what ordinarily would be the second-busiest flatboat season of the year saw zero flatboat traffic. (“Water low in Ohio—and ice making,” warned the *Bee* in mid-February; “Mississippi [is] closed at the mouth of Ohio; Tennessee and Cumberland [rivers] low.”) These data prove that not only was spring 1828 far busier than winter 1829 in terms of flatboat arrivals, but that mid-May 1828—as we shall see shortly, ranked as the *busiest flatboat period of the entire year*, by a wide margin, while January–February 1829 turned out to be among the slowest.<sup>47</sup>

45. Searches in all other New Orleans archives, as well as in national databases of historical documents at the institution and in private hands, failed to uncover the missing reports.

46. “Ship News,” *New Orleans Bee*, February 16, 1829, p. 3, c. 4.

47. Analysis by author, based on *New Orleans Bee*, April 24 through June 24, 1828, and January 15–February 20, 1829. Note: the 1828 editions contain shipping news only in French; by early 1829, the column appeared in both French and English.



Taking stock of the above discussion, we have zero primary documents proving a particular departure date, but ample evidence in support of the spring hypothesis. Anna Gentry said so clearly, and Absolom Roby and John Romine concurred. Lincoln himself left behind clues that buttress the springtime launch and said or phrased nothing to contradict it. Numerous strands of contextual evidence lend additional support to a spring departure, as do the invitingly high river stages of spring 1828 and the extremely large number of *Beaumont Argus* flatboat listings. Even Allen and Anna Gentry's situation involving their newborn baby renders a spring voyage more rational than a cold, slow, and potentially dangerous winter trip.

What supports the December hypothesis, on the other hand, is mostly a limited amount of tertiary evidence, reported by two researchers (Miss V. Ehrmann and Francis Marion Van Natter) working one full century after the launch, based on memories that post-date the Lincoln trip by decades. William Jones, the Gentry family associate who contracted for a flatboat to be delivered in the month of December, also lends some weak indirect support. All other strands of December-hypothesis support are contextual and less convincing compared to their counterparts. Most troubling is the near absence of flatboat arrivals documented in the *Beaumont Argus* "Ship News" listings during the January–February 1829 time window in which Gentry and Lincoln *should* have arrived, compared to the boom we saw in spring. Nearly all footnoted Lincoln books and articles that report the December hypothesis cite Ehrmann and Van Natter, who, with all due respect to their important contributions, may have methodologically leaned too heavily on the century-old memories of family descendants in timing the departure. Van Natter's use of affidavits may have ensured honesty on the part of his informants, but guaranteed nothing in terms of accuracy.

Balancing all of the above, this researcher judges that the springtime 1828 departure hypothesis enjoys a convincing preponderance of evidence. Assigning numerical values and weights to the various levels of evidence—a subjective but nonetheless worthwhile exercise—suggests that the springtime hypothesis is, conservatively speaking, at least four to five times stronger than the wintertime scenario (see graphic, "When in 1828 Did Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln Depart by Flatboat for New Orleans?").

We must now attempt to refine exactly *when* in spring 1828 Gentry and Lincoln departed. March is too early: despite Herndon's support, this

month has, as previously explained, a demonstrably small time window in which to prove correct. May or June, on the other hand, are too late. This leaves April as evidence by Anna Gentry's clear recollection of an April-to-June trip.

When in April? A killer frost on April 5–7 suddenly ended the “False Spring” of 1828, plunging temperatures by forty degrees into the teens (F) “accompanied with light Snow.” Presumably the duo would have waited out that wintry blast. By April 12, afternoon temperatures hit the 80s F.<sup>48</sup> Did they leave then? Anna Gentry drops a clue in her interview with Herndon:

One Evening Abe & myself were sitting on the bank of the Ohio upon the [flat]boat Spoken of. I Said to Abe that the Moon was going down. He said, “Thats not so—it don't really go down: it Seems So. The Earth turns from west to East and the revolution of the Earth carries us under, as it were: we do not see the sinking . . . The moons sinking is only an appearance.”<sup>49</sup>

Only a young crescent moon sets in the evening sky, one to three days after the new moon. In April 1828, the new moon occurred on April 14, thus young crescents would have set in the early evenings of April 15–17. Lacking any further clues and in light of the above evidence, this researcher posits that Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln poled out of Rockport, Indiana, on and Friday or Saturday, April 18 or 19, 1828.

We must address a few other questions before reconstructing the voyage. First, where exactly did Gentry and Lincoln launch? Anna Gentry, who waved goodbye as the men poled away, said Allen and Abe “started from yonder landing—Gentrys landing—about ½ a mile from the house due South of ¾ of a M below Rockport.”<sup>51</sup> Other neighbors initially

48. Clark, “William Clark’s Diary,” 109; Mack et al., “The Winter of 1827–1828,” 95–99.

49. Interview, Anna Caroline Gentry, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, *Herndon’s Informants*, 132.

50. U.S. Naval Observatory Astronomical Applications Department, “Phases of the Moon,” <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/MoonPhase.php> (visited December 1, 2008). For further information on this moon, see Louis A. Warren, ed., “Lincoln, Miss Roby, and Astronomy,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National City Foundation*, no. 1349, February 14, 1955.

51. Interview, Anna Caroline Gentry, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865,

reported that the boat “Started from Rockport,” but then amended, “a Short distance below rather than the Gentry landing.”<sup>52</sup> James Gentry originally purchased this hundred-acre riverside tract from a man named Daniel Grass in 1825; a year later, he transferred ownership to son Allen. The wooded parcel offered a convenient source of timber for Allen and Abe’s flatboat.<sup>53</sup> Gentry Landing, intersected by a small stream (Spanker’s Branch) and located a few hundred feet downriver from the limestone cliff (Hanging Rock) forming Rockport in time, later became known as the Old Flatboat Landing.<sup>54</sup> The local community has embraced this locale: Ben V. Ehrmann reported in the 1930s that Louis Gentry pointed out to me the exact spot where his father told him the Gentry flatboat was loaded when Lincoln was Gentry’s helper.<sup>55</sup> Ehrmann’s biennial historical pageant, *When Lincoln Went Flatboating From Rockport*, took place here in the late 1920s. A limestone monument erected in 1937 marked the spot as “Old Lower Landing” and explained its significance in subsequent ceremonies, including reenactments in 1958 and 2008, launched from here as well. The collective memory of Rockport, Indiana, in every way, shape, and form, holds that this was the spot.

Beyond, what was their cargo? Amateur flatboat operations in this region carried the standard potpourri of Western produce—corn, oats, beans, pork, beef, venison, livestock, fowl, lumber, hemp rope, tobacco, whiskey—sacked and barreled and caged, corralled and piled and bottled in organized chaos. Among boatmen, this was known as “mixed cargo,” as opposed to the “straight cargo” (single commodity) favored by large professional flatboat enterprises. Informants interviewed in 1865 remembered Lincoln had “[hailed] some of the bacon to the River”—smoked hog meat, in preparation for the voyage.<sup>56</sup> A neighbor recalled buying pigs and corn from the Lincolns, leading one researcher to posit that the cargo probably comprised the two premier agricultural commodities of

in *Herndon's Informants*, 131.

52. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, Silas and Nancy Richardson, and John Romine, by William H. Herndon, September 14, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 118.

53. Warren, “Lincoln, Miss Roby, and Astronomy.” For property maps of Rockport in the late nineteenth century, see Griffing, *Historical Atlas of Spencer County*, 61, and Wright, *Historical Atlas of Spencer County*, 46–50.

54. Affidavit, E. Grant Gentry, September 5, 1936, Van Natter Papers. Locals once called the Rockport cliff “The Lady Washington;” today it is simply known as “the bluff.”

55. Ehrmann, *Missing Chapter*, 108.

56. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, Silas and Nancy Richardson, and John Romine, by William H. Herndon, September 14, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 118.

the region, “hogs and hominy.”<sup>57</sup> Gentry family memories, recorded in the 1930s, cite “hogs” and typical Indiana “summer crop” as their ancestors’ standard flatboat cargo.<sup>58</sup> Another family story, reported by seventy-two-year-old E. Grant Gentry in 1936, claimed the flatboat carried “pork, corn in the ear, potatoes, some hay (was not a regular hay boat), and kraut in the barrel” (apparently there were no hoop poles or tobacco. . . .) Lincoln himself proposed a clue: “The nature of part of the cargo-load, as it was called,” he wrote in 1860, “made it necessary for [us] to linger and trade along the Sugar coast of Louisiana.”<sup>59</sup> What might have been the nature of their cargo, that it would have traded better at the sugar plantations below Baton Rouge than in New Orleans proper? The aforementioned E. Grant Gentry testified that “the cargo was destined for . . . sugar plantations where white men owned slaves and negro slaves; the corn and hay being bought for the mules, and the meat and potatoes for the slaves.”<sup>60</sup> The cargo may well have included “barrel pork” (as opposed to bulk pork), which southern planters demanded as a low-cost, high-energy food for slaves. Plantation caretakers constantly required a wide range of Western produce to maintain their village-like operations, and exchanged them for cotton or sugar, which flatboatmen once carried downriver. One 1824 report, for example, explained that flatboats navigated “from the Ohio, down the Mississippi to New Orleans, touching at the small towns in their way, and if possible disposing of a part of their multifarious cargo.”<sup>61</sup> Thus Lincoln’s sugar coast clue may not mean too much, except that it rules out straight cargo (by reference to “part of the cargo-load”). After “lingering” along the coast, flatboats would then proceed on to New Orleans, where buyers for the standard commodities of cotton and sugar abounded. We know for certain that the cargo belonged to the Gentry family, and by extension to Allen Gentry; Abraham was merely a hired hand earning a set wage.<sup>62</sup>

Third, did they travel at night? Nocturnal navigation could add thirty or more miles to daily progress. It also risked perils, especially given the

57. William E. Bartelt, “There I Grew Up”—Remembering Lincoln’s Indiana Youth (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2009), 34.

58. Enrmann, *Missing Chapter*, 7.

59. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

60. Affidavit, E. Grant Gentry, September 5, 1936, Van Natter Papers.

61. Jacquess, “Journal of the Davy Crockett,” 22.

62. William Newnham Blane, *An Expedition Through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822–23, By An English Gentleman* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1824), 102 (emphasis added).

63. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, by William H. Herndon, September 12, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 114.

high, fast waters of spring 1828. Both men would have needed to be at the ready with steering oar and pole all night, allowing no time for sleep. We know for certain no one else helped: “[I] and a son of the owner,” wrote Lincoln in 1860 “without other assistance, made the trip.”<sup>64</sup> Given that neither man ranked as a expert pilot—this was Gentry’s second trip and Lincoln’s first—the duo probably resigned themselves to tie up at night. Flatboatmen minimized the lost travel time by launching pre-dawn, landing after sunset, and taking advantage of moonlight whenever possible.

It is worth noting that Francis Marion van Natter, who hypothesized Gentry and Lincoln leaving in bitter-cold late December, held that the men traveled northbound to avoid the flatboat icing up along the bank while tied up. Given the extremely low river stages at that time, this caution would have exposed the grasshorns to unforgiving risk. Another flatboatman testified to these twin dangers: “The Ohio is quite Low and from the quantity of Sand Bars that Stare us in the face at Every turn we think it unsafe to run windy days or dark nights.”<sup>65</sup> (Van Natter also wrote that two other flatboatmen, Steve Birch and James H. Cunningham from Concordia and Stephenson, Kentucky, lashed their vessel with the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat and traveled together for hundreds of miles. While “lashing up” was commonly practiced for safe travel and companionship, no other reliable source backs up this story. Lincoln himself, as previously noted, specified twice that he and Gentry traveled “without other assistance.”<sup>66</sup>)

Fourth, at what velocity did Gentry and Lincoln travel? Flatboats generally floated at the speed of a brisk walk or jog depending on river stage and their navigational trajectory within the channel. High springtime waters meant a steeper gradient to the Gulf and flow rates of five or six miles per hour or more. When the river ran low (late summer through early winter), flow rates dropped to half or two-thirds the springtime pace. Evidence comes from various journals. One flatboatman, for example, reported covering “ninety miles in twenty-four hours” near Natchez, a speed of 3.75 miles per hour.<sup>67</sup> An English traveler in November-December

Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

65. “William P. Dole: Wabash Valley Merchant and Flatboatman,” ed. Donald F. Carnony, *Indiana Magazine of History* 67, (December 1971): 358.

66. Van Natter, *Lincoln’s Boyhood*, 5; Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62; Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 22.

67. Diary of Micajah Adolphus Clark, as transcribed in “Fifty Years at Voyage to New Orleans Told Of In a Diary Kept in 1848,” *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans), July 9, 1905, part 3, p. 13, c. 5.

1828 reported that “[t]he current [drags flatboats] down at a rate of four miles an hour.”<sup>68</sup> The *Navigator*, an influential western river guide book published from 1801 to 1824, reported that a typical flatboat launched around Rockport, Indiana, took about four or five days to float down the Ohio, followed by three to four weeks down the Mississippi to New Orleans, a voyage totaling approximately 1,300 miles. This equated to 40 miles per day (three to four miles per hour, depending on day length) to 52 miles per day (four to five miles per hour). Pinpointing flatboat speed can be deceptive: one expedition floated from the Ohio/Mississippi confluence to New Orleans (1,023 miles) in two weeks, representing a breakneck pace of 77 miles per day. Careful reading of the journal, however, indicates substantial nighttime travel. When the total hours are tabulated, it averaged a rather normal 3.5 miles per hour.<sup>69</sup> River conditions aside, speed could be maximized by holding the centerline of the current above the thalweg (the deepest trench in the channel, which leaned to either side when the river meandered), away from the friction and debris of the banks. Thus, the skill of the pilot, as well as the flatboat’s design, also affected traveling speed.

The previously mentioned 1828 water levels marked exceptionally high and swift for the Mississippi River—and by extension the Ohio, which accounts for the lion’s share of the lower Mississippi’s water volume. A report filed from St. Francisville, Louisiana, on March 8 stated that

[t]he Mississippi river is now from 2 to 4 inches higher at this place than comes within the memory of man . . . . As the river is still rising, and as the highest flood is rarely over earlier than the end of April, may we not yet see it this spring as high as it was in 1830 . . . when . . . it was at least three feet higher than it now is . . . ? Two crevasse have [already] been made at Point Copee. . . .<sup>70</sup>

This level roughly equates, according to modern-day measurements, to surface velocities averaging 5.2 to 6.0 miles per hour, and peaking at 6.7 to

68. Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1832; republication, 1936 original), 1:22.

69. I estimated 297 hours of daytime and nighttime travel over 1,023 miles, based on the journals of Theodore Armitage, “Flatboating on the Wabash—A Diary of 1847,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 9, no. 4 (December 1913): 273–275.

70. As reported in the *Daily National Journal* (Washington, D.C.), April 12, 1828, Issue 1373, column A.

7.9 miles per hour.<sup>71</sup> Friction and occasionally strong headwinds would reduce this speed somewhat, such that we may reasonably assume a 5.5-mile-per-hour flatboat speed for the springtime launch scenario. These velocity data, which derive from modern-day Army Corps of Engineers formulae, corroborate the pioneering work of John W. Monette, whose circa-1850 study *The Mississippi Floods* described scientifically the river system in a way never done previously. Monette clearly would have concurred with the above estimate:

It will be remembered that below the junction of the Ohio with the Mississippi, during the flood, presents a deep, wide and turbid river, often covered with driftwood and *flowing at the rate of five or six miles per hour*.<sup>72</sup>

1828 qualify as a flood year. Indeed it did; Monette described it as “probably the greatest flood, and the highest water known in the lower river within the last fifty years.”<sup>73</sup> Thus we settle on the 5.5-mile-per-hour estimate for the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat. If we assume twelve hours of travel per day (daylight in the region and season) or thirteen to fourteen hours minus time for launching, docking, problems, and other stops, we estimate progress at around 66 miles per day.

Gentry’s Landing at Rockport, lying between river miles 857 and 858 as enumerated from Pittsburgh, marked mile zero for Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln as they poled their flatboat into the gray Ohio River dawn, around Friday or Saturday, April 18–19, 1828.<sup>74</sup> They launched carefully into the Ohio’s tricky “riffles” (ripples), something that Lincoln would later describe as a key skill for successful navigation.<sup>75</sup> Within

71. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “River Velocities at New Orleans, LA. Related to the Carrollton Gage,” <http://www.nvn.usace.army.mil/eng/edhd/velocities.asp> (visited December 1, 2008).

72. Monette, “Mississippi Floods,” 7:42 (emphasis added).

73. *Ibid.*, 444.

74. Historical river mileage measurements range widely, depending on the source, technique, year, and river conditions. Extensive river engineering and rechannelization has since markedly reduced the distance to the sea. The mileage data follow are based on those in Zadok Cramer’s 1818 guide, *The Navigator* (Pittsburgh: Cramer and Spear).

75. Lincoln once told a group of Sunday school children, “the only assurance of successful navigation of certain ‘riffles’ depended upon the manner in which [the flatboat] was started. . . . So it is with you young folks.” “As In Years Gone By,” *Chicago Daily*,

hours, he expanded his personal geography, laying eyes on terrain he had never seen before. The free North lay to their right, the slave South to their left. Gentry, the veteran, probably took pride in pointing features out to his friend. While the awful blast two weeks earlier had killed nascent vegetation, forests and fields were now rejuvenating with new life, and it looked beautiful. The landscape into which they floated pleased the eye of a visitor who steamed the same route a few months earlier; she noted its “primeval forest [hanging] in solemn grandeur from the cliffs . . . broken by frequent settlements [interspersed with] herds and flocks. . . . Lining the river’s edge were perpendicular rocks, pretty dwellings, with their gables and porticos, then were “wild intervals of forest,” interrupted by “a mountain torrent . . . pouring its silver tribute to the stream. . . .” Nearly every feature of the upcutting Ohio River Valley a scenic delight—*La Belle Rivière*, as the French called it.<sup>76</sup>

Danger lay below the beautiful islands with sandy-bottomed rapids could trap a loaded flatboat beyond the capacity of two men to free it. Experienced boatmen watched for them assiduously—even in high water, which tended to mask and relocate obstacles—more so than eliminate them. Along with large towns, major confluences, prominent topographic features, and distinctive structures, islands served as mile markers and metrics of trip progress. Those flatboatmen who left behind diaries and journals make this abundantly clear.<sup>77</sup>

Gentry and Lincoln would have spied their first impediment about two hours after launch: inundated trees on sandy islands along a slack-water shore. After passing distinctive yellow-tinged banks (site of a now-abandoned eighteenth-century frontier post, at the 12<sup>th</sup> mile of their journey), islands appeared every few miles. Some were settled; most were wild with dense willows; one stood out for its clusters of mistletoe. They then came upon a curious earthen knob—probably an Indian mound, one of many in the floodplain—known locally as French Camp for an old trading house from colonial times.<sup>78</sup> Somewhere in this vicinity the men tied up the flatboat for their first night’s rest.

That evening afforded a first opportunity for Abraham to jot down his experiences. Unfortunately for us, he did not; indeed, the notion prob-

February 13, 1895, p. 5.

76. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 1:246.

77. See, for example, the 1839 diary of flatboatman William S. Ward, THNOC, Accession Number 2009.0139.

78. *The Navigator* (1818), 114–115.



ably never crossed his mind. Not the diary-keeping type, Lincoln even at the height of his political campaigns never felt comfortable with autobiography. He wrote publicly of himself only when pressed, and even then, veiled personal revelation by using terse syntax and referring to himself in the third person. He left no journals whatsoever of either of his trips to New Orleans.

The two substantial villages Abraham and Allen encountered, around the 80<sup>th</sup> mile of their trip, occupied an area known as Red Bank. Evansville on the Indiana side of the Ohio, Henderson on the Kentucky side. Ten years earlier, Henderson comprised 50 houses of brick and wood, 2 stores, indifferently supplied, 2 long tobacco warehouses, a post office, a jail, and court house," an inventory that could describe any number of cities in 1820s river communities. A notable navigation hazard awaited them a few hours later: Diamond Island (97<sup>th</sup> mile), "large and noble," appeared to form two great and formidable rivers, so sudden and equally divided is the current here, and so broad, that you scarcely know which to take for the Ohio."<sup>79</sup> That description, written in 1818, reminds us that what appears obvious in a map often presents a far more confusing geography when negotiated from a vessel.

Lincoln and Gentry would have come upon the mouth of the Wabash River, the largest tributary so far in their 135-mile journey, after dawn of their third day. The Wabash/Ohio confluence marked their passage out of Indiana and into Illinois, providing Abraham with his first views of the state that would one day proudly claim him as its greatest citizen. Seven miles downriver appeared a former Shawnee (Shawnee) Native American community, its population of a few hundred (including many free blacks) recently flooded out by the record-breaking spring water. Had they stopped at a low-water time, they might have discovered, as did another visitor, that "[a]rrons, heads of fish, as well as the bones &c., of these people, are frequently found in the neighbourhood."<sup>80</sup> The men might also have learned of the state's government-owned salt mines, which employed locals and drew flatboat traffic. The aptly named Saline River joined the Ohio shortly downriver.

Battery Rock (156<sup>th</sup> mile) formed the most prominent topographic landmark since Rockport. The hundred-foot-high cliff extended nearly a

79. Ibid., 116–117.

80. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, reprinted in *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, OH: A. H. Clark, 1905), 22:200–201.

half-mile, set among what one flatboatman described as “some of the most stupendous [*sic*] scows in nature.”<sup>81</sup> The feature also marked a “dangerous and conspicuous [sand] bar,” and often sent rocks tumbling treacherously into the river.<sup>82</sup> Beyond Battery Rock appeared another noted landmark, dubbed Cave-in-Rock by river travelers. “A most stupendous, curious and solid work of nature,” this “House of Nature” came to be as water carved out the base of hundred-foot-high limestone cliffs. The resulting cavern afforded shelter to travelers for generations, many of whom experimented with its echo-chamber acoustics and carved their identities into its soft rock walls. Long associated with bandits and adventurers, Cave-in-Rock also attracted the attention of naturalists, including a German nobleman who visited in 1823. “The rocky wall in which this well-known opening is situated,” wrote Maximilian, Prince of Wied,

marked with regular, narrow, yellowish grey or reddish strata of limestone, and is crowned with cedars and other trees. . . . Calcareous petrifications, or rather impressions [of ancient plants and leaves], are very numerous, [as are] sea shells and animal remains. . . .<sup>83</sup>

Visitors pondered the origin and significance of Cave-in-Rock’s ancient enigmas. They also noted the hawks that regularly perched on the red cedars atop the bluff.

The frequency of sand bars, shoals, snags, “sawyers,” “planters,” logs, and channel-splitting islands, with names like Hurricane Bar and The Three Sisters, increased around their 70<sup>th</sup> mile voyage, near the mouth of the Cumberland River, was identified as where Aaron Burr camped on his flight to Mexico in 1806–7. Another, at the 209<sup>th</sup> mile, gave Allen and Abraham their first view of Louisiana bald cypress. This distinctive Southern swamp tree, a deciduous conifer with yellow-green springtime needles, would increasingly dominate banksides as the men progressed downriver.

<sup>81</sup> Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 9.

<sup>82</sup> *The Navigator* (1818), 119.

<sup>83</sup> Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, in *Early Western Travels*, 22:200–201.

<sup>84</sup> The terms “snags,” “sawyers,” and “planters” described “floating trees, washed from the shore, which drift down till the roots or branches . . . fasten into the mud and become as firm as when standing in the forest. Should a boat be so unfortunate as to strike one of these, it would in all probability prove fatal.” Tilly Buttrick Jr., “Voyages, Travels and Discoveries” (1831), in *Early Western Travels*, 8:59.

Near the Ohio's confluence with the Tennessee (Cherokee) River was Dickey's Elbow, a reminder to flatboatmen of the dangers of their trade. Here in February 1811, five flatboats that tied up in the slack waters of a bankside "elbow" (natural flip) froze in place and had to be rescued. The confluence also spanned sandy obstacles and current shifts, the latter exacerbated in account of swift-flowing high water. Years later, this location would witness the rise of the city of Paducah, Kentucky. Mile 277, a high bank of yellowy silt surrounded by stagnant water and swamp, once hosted the French colonial Fort De L'Ascension, founded in 1757. The Americans replaced it with Fort Massac in 1794, but changing military priorities left it in ruin by the time Gentry and Lincoln passed. Another troop outpost, Fort Wilkinson, met a similar fate a few miles downstream.<sup>85</sup>

Toward the end of their fourth day, April 21 or 22, Allen Gentry might have recognized the environs and recommended tying up for the night. Reason: a pilot would not want to tackle the approaching challenge with darkness falling. Just ahead, at mile 264, the Ohio River broadened, grew more turbulent, and doubled in volume as it joined the Father of Waters— which, only 230 miles upstream, had gained the sediment-laden waters of the Missouri River. Lincoln and Gentry may have thrilled at the moment their flatboat dashed into the Mississippi into waters drained from the unmapped Rockies and now heading straight south to New Orleans and the sea. Years later, Lincoln would marvel, "I don't know anything which has much more power [than] the Mississippi."<sup>86</sup>

Exhilaration would have swiftly yielded to caution, because the rivers' differing water levels scrambled the hydrology in unpredictable ways, particularly during high-water conditions. "[T]he current naturally throws you over towards the Willow Point," a guidebook warned boatmen.

When the Ohio is the highest, your boat is taken half way across the Mississippi. When the latter is master, you will have to row pretty hard, to reach [the Mississippi's] current, the Ohio, in such cases, being backed up for several miles . . .

85. *The Navigator* (1828), 114–126.

86. Lincoln allegedly made this remark to English war correspondent William H. Russell weeks before the Civil War broke out. Russell would later publish his experiences in secessionist New Orleans and throughout the South during the early years of the conflict. As quoted in Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 388.

[W]hirls, or whells or bills . . . are so large and strong that a boat is thrum half around it in passing over them, and sometimes shot so rapidly out of them . . . that it takes strong rowing to get her under way again.

Heavy, load-bearing flatboats handled the currents better than light vessels bearing passengers. All watercraft needed a stout, strong, active, and experienced man, and no other [at] the steering, for in this depends very much the safety of the boat and cargo." Lincoln by all accounts possessed the strength for such a task, while Geney had the experience. The duo glided through the union of two of the most noble rivers in the universe" without incident.<sup>87</sup> The "clear and transparent" waters of the Ohio "remain[ed] separated and distinct, reluctant to unite in struggling for supremacy" with the "thick and turbid" waters of the Mississippi.<sup>88</sup> Finally, after two or three miles, the twin currents intermixed inexorably, and Geney and Lincoln found themselves in a wider, murkier, wilder, and more curvaceous riverine environment. Surely they breathed a sigh of relief in their flatboat, built with their own hands, survived the confluence unscathed. Once the navigational excitement died down, another realization might have struck Abraham: he was now completely immersed in the slave South.

Ahead lay the main leg of the two-leg journey. Endless hours of tranquility, punctuated by occasional moments of alarm and action, awaited them. To pass the time, flatboatmen often sang songs of the "common people," including the folk tune "Barbara Allen," hymns like "Am I a Soldier of Christ," and "what is called canal songs and love songs [whose words one] cannot repeat. . . ." A cousin recollected that Lincoln enjoyed "any thing that was Lively," but "Never would sing any Religious Songs it apered to Me that it Did Not seem [suite] him. . . ." A neighbor recalled "He was always quoting Poetry and "love Snakespear. . . ."<sup>89</sup>

Wider and flatter than the Ohio Valley, the Mississippi Valley allowed the river to wend more sinuously, so that the journey ahead measured "1000 miles by water, but only 500 by land."<sup>90</sup> Rookie flatboatmen

<sup>87</sup> *The Navigator* (1818), 127.

<sup>88</sup> William Newton Mercer, "From Louisville to New Orleans in 1816: Diary of William Newton Mercer," ed. Edwin Adams Davis and John C. L. Andreassen, *The Journal of Southern History* 2, no. 3 (August 1966): 378.

<sup>89</sup> Letter, Nathaniel Grigsby, January 21, 1866; letter, Dennis F. Hanks, April 2, 1866; and interview, Caleb Carman, October 12, 1866, all with William H. Herndon, in *Herndon's Informants*, 168, 242, and 374.

<sup>90</sup> *The Navigator* (1818), 128.

laughed in impatient exasperation when the sun hit them in the face, side, and back within the same hour, as yawning meanders added five to ten extra river miles for every mile of southward progress. *Why not cut off these meanders and save all that time?*, an inquisitive mind might have asked. That the river retained its exceptional level is evidenced by a Louisianan who was undertaking the same journey at the same time as Gentry and Lincoln, reporting that the Ohio and Mississippi both [flowed] very high . . .”<sup>91</sup>

Sinuosity meant more complicated river currents, more sandy banks and islands, more debris jams, and slower moving traffic. *The Navigator* warned travelers of these hazards with admonitions like “Just not go too near the Iron Banks, there being an eddy near the shore under the ‘Isle’ pretty close to the right hand point just above the head of the island,” and “one of the most dangerous places in low water between the Ohio and New Orleans.” The guide also took time to point out historic sites, namely old forts and frontier posts, as well as the local curiosities that universally appealed to travelers. One island, for example, was home to a man James Hunter, the only man I ever knew who seemed to take a pride in [being] a professed gambler.” Hunter raised hogs, cattle, and geese on the island and kept flatboatmen supplied with meat, butter, and milk.<sup>92</sup>

The 321<sup>st</sup> mile of the journey, and the 57<sup>th</sup> on the Mississippi, presented a geological point of interest probably missed by Gentry and Lincoln on account of high water. Here, a bank suddenly dropped off by three to four feet, the rocks upon it tilted in a manner that “clearly evince the concussions of the earth” occasioned by the infamous December 1811 New Madrid earthquake. Everyone in the West remembered or heard stories about that tectonic aberration; Lincoln’s own cousin referred to it as “the Shaking of Earth” and remembered it as a milestone in his life.<sup>93</sup> By the time Gentry and Lincoln floated by seventeen years later, the visual vestiges of the earthquake had grown obscured, but the stories lived on. Shortly downriver was New Madrid proper, a favorite overnight spot for flatboatmen.<sup>94</sup>

Peckasaw Bluffs, rising at the 25<sup>th</sup> river mile below the Ohio/Mississippi confluence, formed a series of topographic landmarks reminiscent

91. *New Orleans Bee*, 1828, 100, 2.

92. *The Navigator* (1818), 155–157, 161.

93. Dennis F. Hanks, to William W. Herndon, March 7, 1860, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 227.

94. See Timothy Flint’s colorful 1816 description of flatboatmen overnighting in New Madrid, in “Appendix A: Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s.”

of the Ohio River Valley. Tennessee lay to the east, the Arkansas Territory to the west. The bluffs also marked navigational treacheries with names like Devil's Race Ground and Devil's Elbow. The fourth bluff, a long high one of soft silty soil located south of the Wolf River confluence, hosted Fort M'Kerker. Settled a decade earlier by "what is called the *half breed* . . . a mixture of the whites and Indians, a race of men too indolent to do any permanent good either for themselves or society,"<sup>95</sup> the fort would soon abut the new city of Memphis. At the time Gentry and Lincoln passed, that nascent Tennessee city counted roughly a few dozen store frame houses, and log cabins with one hundred or so residents — "not yet so rich, or so populous, as the ancient capital of Egypt," as the cynic put it.<sup>96</sup> Memphis' riverside landing would have been inundated at this time.

Downriver from Memphis, all topographic reference disappeared on both banks. Eastward beneath the rising sun was the wild swampy floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers (the so-called Mississippi Delta, Native American territory at the time); westward under a setting sun lay the equally wild Arkansas delta country. Compared to the Ohio River Valley and its bucolic bluff-top towns and cultures, "the only scenery along this lonely stretch of the Mississippi" was still forest—forest—forest, except where the river receded to form a sand bar or batture, where "a young growth of cane-brake" arose.<sup>97</sup> There was, however, one curious exception: hundred-foot loess (wind-blown silt) bluffs that suddenly appeared to the west of the river, unlike most of the topography of the lower Mississippi Valley. Blanketed with hardwood forests, the ridgeline rose and dissipated within ten river miles. Today these bluffs comprise St. Francis National Forest near Helena, Arkansas.

Mile 659 of the journey (395<sup>th</sup> on the Mississippi, April 27–28) brought Gentry and Lincoln to their first encounter with a major Western tributary, the Colorado-born Arkansas River. "Furs, peltries, buffalo robes, &c., in exchange for goods, white key, &c." often passed through here, in large pirogna flatboats. Had the men stopped at the confluence, it would have provided Lincoln with his closest interaction to date with the far western frontier and its traders. Like the Missouri, the Arkansas changed the Mississippi more so through the siltation of sediment than water volume. Muddier water, warmer climes, flatter topography, and more jungle-

95. *Ibid.*, 162–165.

96. J. Orin Oliphant, ed., *Through the South and West with Jeremiah Evarts in 1826* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1956), 120.

97. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 1:44–45.

like vegetation made real their sense of penetration into the Deep South. So too did extraordinary fauna. “Alligators or crocodiles have been seen as high up as the Arkansas,” noted *The Navigator*.

The duo now sailed the least-populated and wildest part of their journey, roughly halfway between the friendly confines of their Indiana home and their exotic destination. Among the few citizens of this wild region were woodcutters and driftwood collectors living with their families in primitive huts along the banks, who made a living by supplying the wood for steamboats or lumber for export. “Great quantities of timber is got here for the Natchez and New Orleans market,” explained *The Navigator*, noting that it remained unresolved as to whether the trees constituted a private or public resource. “Louisiana cost the United States 14,000,000 dollars,” it marveled, but its “cypress trees [are] worth ten times more than the land they grow on.”<sup>98</sup>

A few days later, unbeknownst to them, Gentry and Lincoln entered Louisiana waters. The Mississippi by this time finally ceased rising; still extraordinarily high and swift, the river would fall slightly by about eight inches during the remainder of their journey.<sup>99</sup> The scenery remained unchanging until shortly after the Yazoo River joined the Mississippi from the east, at which point a series of rounded hills and plunging ravines drew close to the river. Atop sat the community known by the Spanish as Nogales and by early Anglos as Walnut Hills (85<sup>th</sup> mile of the journey 591<sup>st</sup> down the Mississippi, around April 20–May 1) until the Vick family and others from the New Jersey region settled there in 1820. By 1828, the well-situated site of Vicksburg commanded the lofty perch over the Mississippi. Conceivably it created a lasting mental image upon which Lincoln could draw thirty-five years later, when the fate of the nation rested in part on military action under his command here. Vicksburg’s landing, like most others, lay partially underwater in the spring of 1862.

Subsequent settlements on the Mississippi’s rugged eastern bank usually embodied two topographically distinct sections: a residential district “on the hill,” and a riverfront landing “under the hill.” The former consisted of a domesticated world of families, gardens, stores, and churches, surrounded by farms and plantations. The latter was invariably commercial,

98. *The Navigator* (1818), 130–131, 174; Trollope, *Domestic Travellers*, 1:28.

99. This is based on a weather report in the *New Orleans Price Current*, as reported in the *New Orleans Argus*, May 19, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

rough, and raffish—the working end of town, dominated by competitive men “on the make, busily tending to river commerce. Connecting the “lower town” were roads cut into the side of the perpendicular cliffs of earth, communicating with the upper town.”<sup>100</sup> The slave trade played out most visibly on the landings, as its shackled victims were marched on those roads like so many head of cattle. One traveler in this era reported, “In all the towns I have passed [along the Mississippi River] there were crowds of negroes for sale.”<sup>101</sup> Interactions between flatboatmen and slaves took various forms, ranging from curious stares, to uncomfortable empathy, to camaraderie, to illicit trade, to violence. One flatboatman in 1830 was arrested by a planter for allegedly selling whiskey to his slaves; the ensuing melee cost the boatman his life.<sup>102</sup> Landings also exhibited some of the “madness, the roar of debauchery,” gambling, drinking, merriment of the Sabbath, “profligacy, assassinations, and all sorts of iniquity.”<sup>103</sup> For the rest of their voyage, Grant and Lincoln would be exposed to an increasingly humanized riverfront, with higher population levels, larger numbers of slaves, frequent landings, more visible displays of wealth and enterprise, extensive plantation agriculture, and an increasingly subtropical ambience. With the wilderness of the inland delta behind him, Abraham Lincoln was now entering the heart of the Slave South for the first time in his life. He witnessed it from a river-landing perspective, and most assuredly saw numerous slaves in transit on the levees well before arriving at New Orleans.

Those landings that were not inundated bustled with men loading last season’s ginned and baled cotton onto New Orleans-bound steamboats. Upcountry flatboats docked at these mini-ports, too—places such as Warrington, Grand Gulf, and Rodney (“Petit Gulf”), the latter two “so called from the great number of eddies and whirlpools which are always found here.”<sup>104</sup> One flatboatman described Rodney and its topography a few years after Lincoln’s voyages:

This is a small but flourishing place. There is a splendid

100. Joseph Holt Ingraham, “Dots and Lines—No. I; Or, Sketches of Scenes and Incidents in the West,” *The Ladies’ Companion, A Monthly Magazine, Embracing Every Department of Literature* 11 (New York: William W. Snowden, 1839): 53.

101. James D. Davidson, “A Journey Through the South in 1836: Diary of James D. Davidson,” ed. Herbert A. Kellar, *Journal of Southern History* (n.p.): 3 (August 1935): 359.

102. “New Orleans, July 19,” *New-York Morning Herald*, August 13, 1830, p. 2.

103. Ingraham, “Dots and Lines,” 40.

104. Mercer, “Louisville to New Orleans in 1816,” 401.



Church just below town[] built of brick . . . vary in size . . . with pews in the finest style. We then walked on the top of the hill that is at the back of town. It is at least 150 feet higher than the town. Here you can get a beautiful view of the place and of the river. [sic].<sup>105</sup>

All those hill-top towns and plantations generated substantial demand for upcountry produce. Flatboatmen accordingly inquired about prices for their commodities at each stop, and would not turn down a decent deal if offered. Oftentimes they sold items piecemeal: a smoked ham, a bushel of corn, a few chickens (“On almost any terms, Chickens are the best thing to take on a flat boat,” lamented one rueful boatman. “They were getting sickler & I was glad to get rid of them. . . .”)<sup>106</sup> Greater levels of human activity below Vicksburg signaled to flatboatmen that they should keep their eyes for serious trading opportunities. Lots of months to spend here, lots of money. Recalled one elder many years later,

Between the years 1822 and 1830 it was a common thing to see a flatboat, moored at the bank at Rodney between twenty and thirty large flatboats, heavily loaded with western produce. Some were bound to New Orleans, while also peddling their produce along the river, while often the entire cargoes were sold at Rodney.<sup>107</sup>

Itinerant retailing from docked flatboats had a long history throughout the riverine West, particularly the lower Mississippi. Many flatboats were nearly as commodious as the stores of Main Street merchants, and some were almost as well stocked. Low or no rent kept expenses down, and new sources of supply and demand could be exploited with a little poling and floating. Some flatboat merchants had dubious reputations—“chicken thieves,” they were called, on account of the suspicion that they stole from one plantation and sold to the next—while others operated as respectably and professionally as town storekeepers.<sup>108</sup>

While professional flatboatmen with clients in New Orleans had no choice but to beeline to their big-city agents, amateur or speculative ex-

105. Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 18.

106. *Ibid.*, 12, 14–15, 17–20. For more evidence of en route trading, see also “William P. Dole,” 335–363.

107. “In Flatboat and Keelboat Trade,” *Daily Picayune*, March 19, 1896, p. 14, section f, c. 6–7.

108. Lewis E. Atherton, “Itinerant Merchandising in the Ante-Bellum South,” *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 19, no. 2 (April 1945): 43–47.

peditions often traded en route.<sup>109</sup> Some “worked the river” in methodical steps—loose cable, float downstream, pole in, drop anchor, tie-up, haggle, sell, loose cable—repeatedly, from plantation to village and onward. One flatboatman made “some eight trips down the Mississippi . . . selling produce at all the points from Memphis to New Orleans.”<sup>110</sup> Trading before reaching New Orleans offered certain advantages. It put hard cash in pockets right away, “a bird in the hand . . . .” It could also dramatically shorten the expedition, saving time and expenses while minimizing risk. But trading en route could also yield lower prices and weaker profits. And it eliminated the long-awaited chance to “see the elephant” and partake of New Orleans’ delights.<sup>111</sup> Some flatboatmen got the best of both worlds by selling upcountry produce en route, re-filling the vacant deck space with locally gathered firewood or southern commodities such as cotton and sugar, then proceeding to sell them in New Orleans.

Certain amusements could be found along the river—and not solely those of liquor, laugh, and lass. Ninety-one-year-old John A. Watkins remembered one operation that Gentry and Lincoln may well have laid eyes on, if not experienced. “One of the features of the flatboat system,” recalled Watkins,

was that a certain boat was tastily fitted up with a stage, with scenery and with other appointments for theatrical exhibitions. This floating theatre was tied up for several months at a time at the Rodney landing during the seasons from the year 1826 to the year 1830, and the company gave performances which were highly enjoyed by the country-folk of the vicinity, and along the river. ‘Hamlet,’ ‘Othello,’ ‘Richard III,’ the melodrama—they hesitated at nothing.<sup>112</sup>

This remarkable flatboat theatre, performed by “the accomplished Chapman family—father, mother, children, and grandchildren,” illustrates that Western river trade constituted an economy in-and-of itself, with a host

109. The historian Michael Allen’s characterization of professional versus amateur flatboatmen, in “Appendix A: Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s.”

110. As cited in “William P. Dole,” 336 (emphasis added).

111. The nineteenth-century expression, “to see the elephant,” probably traces to the traveling carnivals of the era, which often held out their most popular exhibit, a live elephant, as a sort of event climax. The expression came to mean seeing everything there was to see, to witness the utmost. It gave the phrase darker implications: “seeing the elephant” meant experiencing combat first-hand.

112. “In Flatboat and Keelboat Times,” *Daily Picayune*, March 19, 1896, p. 14, section f, c. 6–7.

of food vendors, suppliers, bankers, entertainers, innkeepers, prostitutes, and others eager to accommodate the cash-carrying riverman's every need and desire. It also may have presented Lincoln with his first fleeting encounter with theater, a diversion he would come to cherish until his very last moments.

Gentry and Lincoln drew closer to the world of high culture as they approached the unquestioned queen of the Mississippi bluff cities, Natchez. They arrived around May 2–3, two weeks after departure, 500 miles into their journey and 695 miles down the Mississippi. Established as Fort Rosalie in 1716 by the same man (Benoit) who founded New Orleans two years earlier, Natchez rose by the early nineteenth century to rank among the most important and wealthiest enclaves in the Southwest. By the time Lincoln arrived in 1828, the city had recovered from a series of devastating epidemics, and was poised for an era of economic and urban expansion. Flatboatmen approaching the city would catch sight of a magnificent new lighthouse mounted atop light-colored earthen cliffs “clothed with clouds of foliage” set among the spires and roof-tops on the 200-foot-high hill. *Their* world, however, awaited them at the landing—“Natchez Under the Hill,” as it has long been called—where, according to a mid-1830s observer,

several hundred flatboats lined the levee, which was piled for two thirds of a mile with articles of export and import, the stores were crowded with goods and customers, and the throng was as dense as that in the busiest portion of New Orleans.<sup>113</sup>

Natchez Under the Hill ranked bigger, busier, and rowdier than all other bluff-country landings. American flatboatmen earned themselves sobriety and a reputation here as early as the 1750s that Spanish Governor Gayoso prohibited them from climbing the hill and invading the town proper. That prohibition ended with Americanization, but the flatboatmen's reputation did not. In subsequent decades saw the emergence of a veritable industry of vice on the riverside sandbar, with numerous taverns, dance halls, grog shops, boarding houses, and brothels all catering to flatboatmen—“the most infamous place I ever saw,” according to one witness.<sup>114</sup> High wa-

113. Ingraham, “Dotted Lines,” 7. The lighthouse, completed a year before Lincoln's visit, was described by the *Natchez Ariel* and reported in *American Advocate* (Hallowell, ME), June 20, 1828, p. 1.

114. As quoted by Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763–1815: Ohio and Mississippi River Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 129–130.

ter flooded much of Under the Hill's honky-tonks at the time of Gentry and Lincoln's visit, it not so much that the men could not tie up for the night. Natchez constituted a major stopover for flatboat traffic, and it is reasonable to believe that Gentry and Lincoln took advantage of the protection against wind and current afforded by the half-moon-shaped harbor. Given Natchez's stature—this would have been the largest and most famous city Lincoln visited to date—flatboatmen often climbed the hill and hid some sight-seeing, leaving behind one crewmember to guard the cargo. (Those aboard the flatboat *Davey Crockett* a few years later took the time to climb Natchez's hill—to witness the hanging of Bluckman and later attend church.<sup>115</sup>) This respite further postulates that Gentry and Lincoln traveled one-third their normal daily mileage on day 2 or 3, as to allow for some exploration (and possibly trading) here.

Poling out of Natchez set Gentry and Lincoln on the final 300-mile sprint of their 1300-mile journey. Shallow, pebble-bottomed tributaries such as St. Catherine's Creek and the Homochitto River intercepted their passage on the high Mississippi side to the east, while bottomland forest and the occasional cotton plantation dominated the flat Louisiana side to the west. Fort Adams, a military outpost dating to colonial times and now a small settlement, marked roughly the thousandth mile since their Rockport launch. A few miles later they passed the famous 31<sup>st</sup> Parallel, a former international border that now demarcated the Mississippi/Louisiana state line. They were now entirely in Louisiana. Straight west of that invisible demarcation, muddy water borne in the Rocky Mountains of Mexico (New Mexico today) flowed in from the Natchitoches plantation region. This was the Red River, the last major tributary from the western side of the valley to join the Mississippi. Its waters also flowed "very high and rising," and within a few weeks would flood the town of Alexandria in central Louisiana.<sup>116</sup> When conditions allowed navigating through the Red River's infamous logjams, shipping traffic serving the fertile Natchitoches sugar cane region (one of the oldest in the state and infamous for its brutal brand of bondage) merged onto the Mississippi at this point. Boatmen here would catch sight of the uppermost end of lower Louisiana's 400-mile-long system of manmade levees, lining the Mississippi wherever bluffs or terraces did not.<sup>117</sup>

115. Jacquess, "Journals of the *Davey Crockett*," 20–21.

116. "Marine Register," *New Orleans Argus*, May 29, 1828, c. 5. For more on the serious flooding of Alexandria, see *Louisiana Courier*, June 2, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

117. "Mississippi Levees: Memorial of Citizens of the State of Louisiana, in Favor of

Immediately below the Red River lay a confusing and potentially dangerous fork. “Be careful that you keep pretty close to the left [eastern] shore from Red river,” warned *The Navigator*,

to avoid being drawn into this current, which runs out on the right shore with great rapidity. This is the first large body of water which leaves the Mississippi, and falls by a regular and separate channel into the Gulf of Mexico.

This was Bayou Canafalio, today’s Atchafalaya River, the first distributary (that is, water flowing out of the main channel) of the lower Mississippi. Steering onto the east prong of the fork, the men’s attention would have been caught by an “astonishing bridge” of trees, branches, and debris drawn out of the Mississippi by the Atchafalaya’s current. So dense and uncut was the logjam—at the 1,000<sup>th</sup> mile of the trip, 700<sup>th</sup> on the Mississippi, in early May 3–4—that cattle and horses are driven over it.<sup>118</sup> The eighty-mile-long Red River Raft wreaked hydrological havoc on the area’s ecology under normal conditions, let alone during high water. By one 1828 estimate, “the enormous quantity of branches, trunks of trees, &c . . . [had] gained at least one mile per annum,” and “back[ed] up the water upon the land for many miles,” making “a lake of what was before a prairie. The forests too . . . are often killed by the overflow of water, and after standing for a few years with their roots rotted, the trees become rotten and fall,” thus worsening the blockage.<sup>119</sup> The logjam also frustrated economic interests in the Acadian (Cajun) and Red River regions, by limiting direct navigational access to points south. In a problem-solving mind, the situation cried out for intervention.

Navigation interests on the Mississippi were additionally frustrated by the circuitous Old River meander, which lengthened travel time by hours. Rivermen hoped someday to avoid this loop by excavating the so-called Great Cut-off across a swampy five-mile neck that separated the two yawning meanders (as occurred naturally in 1722 at nearby False River).<sup>120</sup> Over the next decade, the Old River cut-off would be excavated and the Red River logjam would be cleared. Both internal improvements tremendously aided river interests and economic development, but also instigated

Nationalizing the levees of the Mississippi River,” U.S. House of Representatives, Mis. Doc. No. 41, January 13, 1873, in reference to H.R. 3419, p. 8.

118. *The Navigator* (1818), 192.

119. “The Raft of Red River,” *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, October 17, 1828, p. 2.

120. *The Navigator* (Pittsburgh: Cramer, Spear and Eichlam, 1814), 218.

a sequence of hydrological processes that would seriously threaten southeastern Louisiana and New Orleans a century later.

The busy little port of Bayou Sara, named for one of the last significant tributaries draining into the Mississippi, formed another “under-the-hill” landing, typical of the east-bank bluffs below Vicksburg. Bayou Sara’s higher inland section was actually a separate town, St. Francisville, known for its scenic beauty and the prosperity of the surrounding West African-*Creole* cotton country. This undulating region had changed from French to British to Spanish to independent to American hands within fifty years; by 1820 it deviated from the rest of southern Louisiana in that English-speaking Anglo-American Protestants predominated over Franco-American Creoles and Acadians. The opposite was the case on the flat western side of the river, the Point Coupée region, which represented General’s and Lincoln’s first encounter with an extensive, century-old Franco-Catholic region in Louisiana. The physical, cultural, and agrarian landscape changed along with the ethnic makeup, as *The Navigator* explained in 1811:

Here commences the embankment or Levee of the right [eastern] side of the river, and continues down to New Orleans, and it is here where the beauty of the Mississippi and the magnificent prospect of the country open to view. [The bank, from here], and from Bayou Rouge on the left, rise down to the city of Orleans, have the appearance of one continued village of handsome and neatly built . . . frame buildings of one story high . . . stand[ing] considerably elevated on piles or sicets from the ground, are well painted and neatly surrounded with orange trees, whose fragrance add much delight to the scenery.<sup>121</sup>

Another observer described the French Louisiana sugar manors as “large square edifices with double piazzas, and surrounded by orange and other evergreen trees [and] the extensive brick ‘sucriene’ or sugar house.” This arrangement differed from the “unpretending cottages [with] the humble wooden ‘gin” of the Anglo-American cotton landscape on the eastern side of the river. That latter environment petered out at Port Hudson—last of the bluff landings—and at nearby Profit’s Island, the penultimate of the rocky atolls. The topography to the east now tapered off from bluffs with white-faced cliffs to a forested terraces, drained by the very last tributary of the Mississippi Valley, Bayou Rouge Bayou. Here, too, this stream sat

121. *Ibid.*, 221.

the small city with that circa-1799 name, still years away from becoming the capital of Louisiana. Baton Rouge did, however, host the United States Barracks, a recently erected complex of five two-storied structures arranged in the shape of a pentagon, serving officers and soldiers deployed to the South West under the command of Lt. Col. Zachary Taylor. With pearl-white classical columns gleaming on the verrace, the Barracks regularly caught rivermen's attention.

An intriguing legend posits that Lincoln did more than merely gaze at the Barracks from afar. The story seems to have originated with college professor and Confederate veteran Col. David French Boyd, who served as president of Louisiana State University when the institution occupied the decommissioned Barracks in the late 1800s. Boyd perused old garrison papers and recorded the notable military figures listed as visitors, among them the Marquis de Lafayette, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, George A. Custer, and others. Boyd claimed to have identified two other famous names in the papers, each denoted as "civilian" and undated. One was Jefferson Davis, the other was Abraham Lincoln. If true, the record would be the only surviving first-hand vestige of Lincoln in Louisiana. This researcher has been unable to find the "garrison records" that Boyd inspected and thus cannot verify his claim. Intuition, however, works against it. The notion of an anonymous poor young flatboatman visiting a restricted military facility, signing in, and perhaps even spending the night seems highly improbable, not to mention inexplicable. Why would he leave the flatboat? Why would he even approach the barracks, and why would the guards allow the ill-clad youth in? Even if Boyd correctly identified Lincoln's name, it does not follow that Lincoln visited the Baton Rouge barracks. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis served in the Black Hawk War (1832), as did former barracks commander Zachary Taylor. War records might have gotten mixed up with barracks records.<sup>122</sup>

122. Florence B. Huguet, "The Famous Men Who Passed Through Their Portals," *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, June 25, 1961; Walter L. Fleming, *Louisiana State University 1862-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1936), 440-441; Jonathan France, "United States Barracks (Pentagon Barracks)—Historical and Descriptive Data," Historical American Building Survey Report (HABS No. La-1134), Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1978. I searched the papers of David French Boyd, stored in the Special Collections of Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University, and found no clues to support Boyd's claim. Further inquiry with the National Archives and Records Administration revealed that its records on the Baton Rouge Barracks (393.7, "Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, Part 5, Military Installations") almost entirely do not date the era in question.

After departing Baton Rouge around May 4, Gentry and Lincoln floated out of the alluvial valley of the Mississippi River and entered its deltaic plain. No longer would “flats (like the oasis of the desert) relieve the eye of the traveller long wearied with the level shores,” as one visitor described the topographical transition.<sup>123</sup> The banks—called natural levees—now lay *above* the surrounding landscape, forming the region’s highest terrestrial surfaces; cypress swamp, saline marsh, and salt water lay beyond. The Mississippi River no longer collected water through tributaries but spread it, through distributaries such as bayous Manchac, Plaquemine, and Lafourche (“the forks”). This was Louisiana’s legend of “sugar coast”: home to plantation after plantation, with their manor houses fronting the river and dependencies—slave cabins and “long lots” of sugar cane stretching toward the banks—ramp. The sugar coast claimed many of the nation’s wealthiest planters, and the region had one of the highest concentrations of slaves (if not *the* highest in North America). To visitors arriving from upriver, Louisiana seemed more Afro-Caribbean than American, more French than English, more Catholic than Protestant, more tropical than temperate. It certainly grew more sugar cane than cotton (or corn or tobacco or anything else, probably combined). In an upcountry new comer, the region felt exotic; its society came across as foreign and unknowable. The sense of mystery bred anticipation for the urban culmination that lay ahead.

But Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln were there for business, not touring. Like other flatboatmen, they decided—possibly more likely, had been instructed by James Gentry—to remove their partying hats at this point of the journey and don their salesmen hats. Lincoln himself stated that, during his “first trip upon a flat-boat to New Orleans . . . [t]he nature of part of the cargo-load . . . made it necessary for [us] to linger and trade along the sugar coast.” Flatboatmen would pole along the slack outer edge of the levee, drop anchor, “cable up” at the plantation landing, inquire for the manager, and offer to trade. “We are now in the sugar belt,” wrote one flatboatman upon reaching the same region; “[t]he river is always dotted with up-country boats, sometimes a score being in sight at once.”<sup>124</sup> They

Personal communication, T. Juliette, Textual Archives Services Division, National Archives and Records Administration, February 18, 2009. Gratitude goes to Marc Wellman, John Sykes, Jim Davis, and Judy Smith for assistance on this topic.

123. Ingraham, “Dots and Lines,” 38.

124. Clark, “Flatboat Voyage to New Orleans,” *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1905, part 3,



shared the banks with washwomen, water-retrievers, fishermen—and a sight that startled a particular traveler of this same era:

I was surprised to see the swarms of children of all colours that issued from these [plantation] abodes. In infancy, the progeny of the slave, and many of his master, seem to know no distinction, they mix in their sports, and appear as fond of each other, as the brother and sisters of one family.<sup>125</sup>

Entrepreneurs also dotted the bank, setting up “tents and board camp” to “catch all the wood and timber floating in the river” and make “rafts which they sell to the sugar mills for fuel.”<sup>126</sup> Each cluster of riverfront life—which included riverside towns like Plaquemine, Donaldsonville, and Iberville as well as plantations, offered potential trading opportunities for flatboatmen and other *caboteurs* (postal peddlers). Some arranged their vessels like riverfront stores during the day, and free boarding houses at night. “Lingering” is how flatboatmen described this itinerant river trading.

For the purposes of our chronology, “lingering” is interpreted here as slowing down from the estimated progress of thirty-six miles per day to half that pace upon entering the deltaic plain, and half again for a few days in the heart of the sugar coast—the busiest, most cultivated, most populated, and most prosperous hundred-mile stretch of the entire Mississippi River system. Some flatboatmen sold everything they had and dismantled their vessels before ever reaching New Orleans, selling the lumber to the Flat Boat Wood Yard in Iberville Parish or to similar scrap dealers set up for just that purpose.<sup>127</sup>

In addition to plantations, certain natural features punctuated the journey down the lowermost Mississippi as well. One was a hairpin meander below Baton Rouge that previously saw a plume of river water eastward into lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain. Called Bayou Manchac, this waterway once hosted the main channel of the Mississippi. Later, it

p. 12, c. 6.

125. William Bullock, *Sketch of a Journey through the Western States of North America: from New Orleans . . . to New York, in 1822* (London: J. Miller, 1827), xiii.

126. Clark, “Flatboat Voyage to New Orleans 8,” *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1905, part 3, p. 13, c. 6.

127. Charles J. Pike, *Coast Directory of 1847* (ribbon map), THNOC, Accession Number 1953.3; see also Adolphe Henry and Victor Gerodias, *The Louisiana Coast Directory, of the Right and Left Banks of the Mississippi River* (New Orleans: E. C. Wharton, 1857), 16–18.

flowed as a distributary until fellow Westerner Andrew Jackson sealed it off in preparation for his campaign against the British in 1814–15. A similar feature, the Bayou Plaquemine distributary, appeared on the west side eight miles downriver. Such forks were worth avoiding, particularly during high water, because the turbulence caused treacherous currents and sandy shoals. So high flowed the Mississippi that, just below Bayou Plaquemine, a crevasse (breach) opened in the levee while Gentry and Lincoln passed. Reporters documented it only a day or so later:

Baton-Rouge, May 10. The Levee has given way on the plantation of Joseph Erwin, Esq. two miles below Plaquemine, and also on that of Mrs. Wilson next below . . . A gentleman . . . informs us that the breach is of considerable width, and from ten to fifteen feet deep. It is not expected that it can be stopped.<sup>128</sup>

Levee construction ongoing since the 1720s reduced the frequency of crevasses in south Louisiana, but by no means terminated them. Major levee failure flooded New Orleans in 1816 and 1849, while smaller breaches like those at the Erwin and Wilson plantations occurred periodically.

Flatboatmen en route to New Orleans expressed relief knowing that Claiborne Island would be their last navigation-impeding mile, and Bayou Laourche their last snail-producing distributary. After lingering and trading along the sugar coast for a roughly a week (starting, in this estimated chronology, around May 5), Gentry and Lincoln tied up for the evening of May 12 or 13 approximately sixty miles above New Orleans. That night would prove to be the most memorable, and dangerous, of Lincoln's entire river career.

Using his characteristic brevity and speaking of himself and Gentry in the third person plural, Lincoln recalled many years later what happened next:

[O]ne night they were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the necks, but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat, and then "cut cable" "weighed anchor" and ran.<sup>129</sup>

128. "Baton-Rouge, May 10," *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1826, p. 3, c. 2.

129. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

Biographer William Dean Howells offered a compelling account of the incident, worth quoting because Lincoln personally reviewed Howells' draft and tacitly validated that which he did not edit:

One night, having tied up their "cumbrous boats," near a solitary plantation on the sugar coast, they were attacked and boarded by several stalwart negroes; but Lincoln and his comrade, after a severe contest in which both were hurt, succeeded in beating off the assailants and driving them from the boat. After which they weighed what anchor they had, as speedily as possible, and gave themselves to the middle current again.<sup>130</sup>

Neighbors interviewed by William Herndon in 1865 readily recalled the incident, suggesting that Gentry and Lincoln featured in the residence stories about their New Orleans adventure. "Lincoln was attacked by the Negroes," recalled neighbors;

no doubt of this—Abe told me so—Saw the scar myself—suppose at the Wade Hampton farm or near by—probably he was now at a widow's farm.

Anna Gentry shed more light on the incident, which her spouse Allen experienced firsthand:

When my husband & L[incoln] went down the river they were attacked by Negroes—Some Say Wade Hamptons Negroes, but I think not: the place was below that called *Mdme Bushams Plantation* 6 M below Baton Rouge—Abe fought the Negroes—got them off the boat—pretended to have guns—had none—the Negroes had hickory Clubs—my husband said "Lincoln get the guns and shoot["]—the Negroes took alarm and left.<sup>132</sup>

John R. Dougherty, an old friend of Allen Gentry whom Herndon interviewed on the same day as Anna, corroborated her details with first-person knowledge of the site:

Gentry has shown me the place where the niggers attacked

130. Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 23.

131. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, Gas and Nancy Richardson, and John Romine, by William H. Herndon, September 14, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 118.

132. Interview, Anna Caroline Gentry, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 131 (italics in original).

him and Lincoln. The place is not Wade Hampton's—but was at Mrs. Busham's Plantation about 6 miles below Baton Rouge.<sup>133</sup>

Dougherty was not the only Lincoln associate with personal connections to the site; Lincoln's cousin John Hanks claimed to be in the vicinity when the attack occurred in 1823. "I was down the River when Negroes fired to Rob Lincoln's boat," told Herndon in 1865, but "did not see it."<sup>134</sup>

When exactly did the Louisiana incident occur? We have three waypoints to triangulate: (1) a plantation located below Wade Hampton's place specifically (2) affiliated with a woman named "Busham" or "Bushan" (3) located around six miles below Baton Rouge. Wade Hampton's sugar plantation remains a well-known landmark today, marked by the magnificent Houmas House in Thibodaux, which was not twelve years after the incident to replace the antecedent house. Just below the Hampton place, we seek a woman-affiliated plantation whose surname could only be remembered as sounding like "Busham" or "Bushan." A parish census in 1829, the federal census of 1830, and detailed plantation maps made in 1847 and 1858 record no such surnames, nor a woman-headed household in the specified location.<sup>135</sup> But Herndon apparently gleaned additional information that did not appear in his interview notes because when he published *Herndon's Lincoln* in 1889, he reported "the plantation" belonging not to "Busham" or "Bushan," but to the rhythmically "Duchesne"—specifically "Madame Duchesne."<sup>136</sup> That surname, common in France but not in French Louisiana, also fails to appear in the aforementioned sources.<sup>137</sup> The 1829 St. James Parish Census does list a Dufresne family (with

133. Dougherty's acknowledgment that he "don't know Lincoln" grants him an extra level of credibility, in light of the tendency of some informants to weave themselves into history by overstating their interactions with the future president. Interview, John R. Dougherty, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 133.

134. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, June 13, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 45.

135. Analysis of 1830 Enumeration Census of Ascension Parish by author, using digital files transcribed by Lisa Johnson and Alexandra Norred Pardue Pike, *Coast Directory 1847* (ribbon map), THNOC, Accession Number 1953.3; A. F. Perce, *Norman's Chart of the Lower Mississippi River* (New Orleans: B. M. Norman, 1858).

136. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 1:63.

137. The Historic New Orleans Collection's Louisiana Land Survey—six reels of microfilm, recording land owners and locations—reveals not a single listing with any of

nineteen slaves), but they do not align with our criteria. The 1830 federal census records only two Duchesne families throughout the entire region, both from New Orleans proper.<sup>138</sup>

Yet there was a Duchesne woman affiliated with this area: French-born Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769–1852), who in 1825 founded the Convent of the Sacred Heart (St. Michael's), present-day Convent, located two miles below the Hampton Plantation.<sup>139</sup> Duchesne established Catholic missions, orphanages, convents, and schools for the American branch of the Society of the Sacred Heart, focusing on the Francophone regions of St. Louis and south Louisiana. She became well known and well-loved in these areas; people call her “Mother Duchesne,” and the institutions she founded became known as “Mother Duchesne’s convent,” “Mother Duchesne’s school,” etc., even if she did not reside there. In fact, Duchesne was on assignment in St. Louis when Centry and Lincoln flooded south, and was recorded by the 1830 census as residing in a convent in that Missouri city.<sup>140</sup> Mother Rose Philippine Duchesne was canonized a saint by the Catholic Church in 1988; a shrine in St. Charles, Missouri, entombs her remains today.

It is plausible that the property affiliated with the woman whose name sounded like “Busham,” “Bushman,” or “Ducheste” was in fact Mother Duchesne’s convent. Centry and Lincoln may have heard that name from passersby or river traders, and reasonably assumed it was a plantation, notable because it was owned by a woman. The convent itself certainly resembled a large plantation house of the era (see photograph in graphic section). Thus, Mother Duchesne’s convent, after thirty-seven years of Indiana storytelling, became “Mdm<sup>e</sup> Bushans’ Plantation.” No other explanation has come to light.

We have one final problem in situating Lincoln’s Louisiana melec: Wade Hampton’s plantation is not located six miles below Baton Rouge, neither by terrestrial nor riverine measure—but exactly *sixty* river miles.

these three surnames.

138. Their heads of households were Barthelemy Duchesne and Ferd Duchesne; neither had any apparent connection to an upriver plantation. Population Schedule # 73 and #220, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, 1830 U.S. Federal Census. See also Acadian Parish Records, 1806–1829—St. James Parish Census of 1829, MSS 23, Folder 3, Item 1, THNOC.

139. Roger Baudier, *Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Roger Baudier, 1939), 293, 572.

140. This is evidenced by a letter reproduced in M. Lilliana Owens, “Loretto Foundations in Louisiana and Arkansas,” *Louisiana History* 2, no. 1 (Spring, 1961): 212–213. Mother Duchesne appears in the 1830 Census on Population Schedule #328, St. Louis Township, Missouri, 1830 U.S. Federal Census.

Just as Indiana story telling over many years may have converted “Bushan” to “Duchesne,” it also may have shifted “sixty” to “sixty-two.” It is worth noting that the countryside located six river miles below Baton Rouge lies only slightly beyond the cotton dominant terraces and bluffs of the Mississippi River’s lower east alluvial valley, and barely onto the sugar-dominant deltaic plain. Sixty miles below, however, brings us to the heart of the Louisiana sugar region. Given that Lincoln said he and Gentry “linger[ed] and trad[ed] along the Sugar coast”<sup>141</sup> before the attack occurred, it sounds as though they were deep into sugar country, not recently arrived at its brink.

In sum, the basis of this researcher’s position is that Gentry and Lincoln were attacked near, or at, things, a convent and girls’ school founded by a full American settler. We can say with greater confidence that the melée occurred within St. James Parish, sixty to seventy-two miles downriver from Baton Rouge on the east bank of the river (as evidenced by all three of our waypoints: Baton Rouge, Hampton’s plantation, and Duchesne’s convent). Some biographers position the incident as having occurred near Bayou Lafourche and Donaldsonville, but those features are across the river and a few miles above where the evidence indicates.

Who were the attackers? Numerical probability suggests they were slaves from a nearby plantation. Circumstances, however, imply they might have been runaways. Fugitive slaves were desperate for resources, and (arguably) more inclined to run the risk of stealing to survive. Apparently the attackers spoke English, since they understood Gentry’s holler to “get the guns”<sup>142</sup> and not a single source mentions French words flying. This suggests the men were “American” slaves, as opposed to the French-speaking Creole slaves who predominated on the sugar coast—thus making the fugitive theory slightly more plausible. Only a few days after the incident, the local sheriff jailed three medium-build “American negro” men, ages 24–32 and speaking English only, who were in St. James Parish “without any free papers.”<sup>143</sup>

Legions of Lincoln biographers have imparted dramatic detail into the episode. Others pondered the impact of the Great Emancipator nearly perishing at the hands of the very people he would later liberate, and won-

141. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1859, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

142. Interview, Anna Caroline Gentry, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 131.

143. “Notice—Detained in the Jail of the Parish of St. James,” posted May 22, *New Orleans Argus*, May 29, 1828, p. 1, c. 5; “Detained in the Jail of the Parish of St. James, on [May] 23,” *ibid.*, May 29, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

dered if some attackers survived long enough to be fed by their victim. Retellings in modern-day articles and travelogues often de-racialize the incident, describing the attackers as “seven men.” Others ignore it altogether, perhaps for the inconvenient twist it inflicts upon the traditional black-victimhood narrative associated with Lincoln’s New Orleans experience. One writer took another tactic, explaining, with zero evidence, that the slaves were really “half-starved slaves of a no-good plantation owner,” and went so far as to fabricate Lincoln saying, “I wish we had fed them instead of fighting them. . . . the owner is really more to blame than they,”<sup>144</sup> despite Lincoln’s actual testimony of their lethal intention.

On a different level, the incident provides insights into the nature of race relations and slavery in this time and place. Blacks attacking whites contradicts standard notions about the rigidity of racial hierarchies in the antebellum South—a hierarchy that, particularly in the New Orleans area, was more rigid *de jure* than *de facto*.<sup>145</sup> On an ethical level, one may view the incident as producing not seven culprits and two victims, nor vice versa, but rather nine victims—victims of the institution of slavery and the violent desperation it engendered. On a practical level, we learn from the incident two details on the flatboat voyage itself: that the men traveled unarmed, and that they indeed avoided nocturnal navigation by trying up at night.

Some say Lincoln received a lasting scar above his right ear from the fight; others say the wound landed above his right eye, although one is not readily apparent in photographs. One informant said Lincoln specifically showed him the scar.<sup>146</sup> The *memory* of the incident certainly lasted a lifetime, and that is perhaps the most significant message we can take away from this episode: according to Lincoln’s *public* autobiographical notes, the attack, and not slavery or slave trading, formed the single most salient recollection of both his Louisiana voyages. A private statement was a different matter, more on this later. It is no exaggeration to say that Lincoln came very close to being murdered in Louisiana. The incident may also

144. Susan K. Thomas, “A Little Story on the Early Life of Abraham Lincoln, Told by His Sister,” *Morning Herald* (Hagerstown, MD), February 2, 1954, p. 3, c. 2.

145. See, for example, Roger A. Finke, “Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans,” *American Historical Review*, no. 3 (February 1969): 970–931.

146. As recollected by Leonard Swett, in *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, ed. Allen Thorndike Rice (New York: North American Review, 1889), 461–462. Swett misremembered the details of the attack, reporting it as having taken place in Natchez.

underlie an unverified story that Lincoln acquired during his New Orleans trip “a strange fixation—that people were trying to kill him.”<sup>147</sup>

Nursing their wounds, the shaken and bloodied men made off in the darkness and continued downriver. The rising sun revealed plantation houses—some modest, some palatial—fronting both banks at a frequency of eight or ten per mile and set back by few hundred feet from what one traveler described as the river’s “low and slimy shore.”<sup>148</sup> Lacking topographic landmarks, rivermen used planter houses as mileposts. Bayley, Arnolds, Fortes, Barange’s—“said to be the handsomest on the river.”<sup>149</sup> Surely Gentry and Lincoln saw the sinuous lines of whitewashed slave cabins behind each planter’s residence (levee heights were far lower than they are now) but they may not have seen multitudes of slaves in the cane fields. At this time in May, Louisiana sugar cane began to develop “oints” and required little field labor until “October or November, when they cut, grind and boil the cane. . . .”<sup>150</sup>

Did Gentry and Lincoln continue to stop and trade after the attack? According to the aforementioned Indiana researcher Francis Marion Van Natter, Gentry family descendents interviewed in the 1920s contended that the men not only continued their coastal trading but sold off all their cargo, dispensed with their flatboat, and then “caught a cotton boat for New Orleans.”<sup>151</sup> This is not impossible, but it is improbable, particularly in light of the problems previously identified in Van Natter’s research. First of all, neither Lincoln nor his contemporaries dropped a hint of such a scenario. Secondly, Gentry and Lincoln were plainly shaken by the attack, and being only a day from New Orleans, would reasonably want to “linger” no more. Recall that biographer William Dean Howells wrote (with Lincoln’s personal oversight) that Gentry and Lincoln made off “as speedily as possible, and gave themselves to the middle current again,”<sup>152</sup> insinuating they bee-lined for their destination after the attack. Thirdly, selling off everything would have made their trip to New Orleans purely recreational for the two wounded men—and costly, sans the free trans-

147. Morris B. Higgins, “Seldom-Recalled Lincoln Visit to Orleans on Flatboat Traced,” *Morning Tribune* (New Orleans), February 12, 1940, p. 7, c. 3.

148. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 1.

149. *The Navigator* (1814), 223.

150. “Cultivation of Sugar,” *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1823, p. 3, c. 2.

151. Van Natter, *Lincoln’s Boyhood*, 144.

152. Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 23.



portation and shelter provided by their flatboat. Van Meter's scenario thus seems unlikely.

As Gentry and Lincoln steered downriver, the passing parade of plantation houses occasionally gave way to clusters of humble cottages. Then the parade resumed, in ordered sequence: manor house in front of dependencies and sheds, in front of slave cabins, in front of cane fields, with oaks, fruit orchards, and gardens on either side. "The negro quarters are well arranged," wrote the flatboatman; "invariably white and spread in full view of the river, giving the appearance of a continuous settlement."<sup>153</sup> Church steeples punctuated the riverside landscape: Central [St. Charles and Bona Carre] [Bonnet Carre] Church marked the 942<sup>nd</sup> and 960<sup>th</sup> mile down the Mississippi, while the oft-noted Red Church (100<sup>th</sup> mile) lay halfway between the distinctive West Indian-style double-pitched roofs of the colonial-era Ormond and Destrehan plantations (both of which still stand). Simple wooden cottages appeared in isolation amid fenced gardens—then in greater densities, then merging into contiguous villages, separated by fewer and fewer agrarian expanses. Shipping traffic increased; more and more Gentry and Lincoln found themselves dodging and evading other vessels. Malodorous and noisy operations—steam-powered saw mills, sugar refineries, distilleries, soap factories, tallow handlers (renderers of animal parts for candle-making)—indicated a proximate metropolis. A cacophony of distant whistles, whets, bells, horns, hoof beats, and hammer blows filtered across the 2,000-foot-wide river, growing ever louder. Long brick warehouses for tobacco and cotton came into view, some pressing cotton lint with horse or steam power.<sup>154</sup>

Finally, in the midst of one particularly spectacular meander, a great panoply of rooftops arose on the left horizon—pavilions glistened off myriad domes and steeples, amid plumes of steam, smoke, and dust. All of Gentry and Abraham Lincoln had finally reached New Orleans, after 1,009 miles on the Mississippi and a grand total of 1,273 river miles since departing Rockport. The same day that started off too early with the frightening

153. Clark, "Flatboat Voyage to New Orleans," *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1905, part 3, p. 13, c. 6.

154. Some of these details are drawn from Welcome A. Greene's 1823 journal description of the riverfront activities immediately above New Orleans. They may have changed somewhat by the time Lincoln passed them in 1828. Journal of Welcome A. Greene, reproduced in "Being the Journal of a Quaker Merchant Who Visited N.O. in 1823," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 16, 1921, section 4, pp. 1 and 6.

nighttime attack in St. James Parish, ended with the springtime sunset bathing the Great Southern Emporium in a golden glow.<sup>155</sup>

To what degree can we pinpoint the date Abraham Lincoln first set foot in New Orleans? Because he and Gentry arrived (according to this reconstructed chronology) around dusk on May 13 or 14, it may not have been until the next morning that they paid the six-dollar fee to the Collector of Free Dues. Those records for the year 1828 have been lost, denying us primary-source confirmation of their arrival. However, as previously explained, the local bilinguals *New Orleans Bee* and *New Orleans Argus* reported the Collector's activities in their daily "Marine Register" and "Marine" ("Ship News") column, which listed port arrivals and departures. These newspapers mostly survive. Scanning the files from mid-April through mid-June 1828, we count 158 flatboats arriving to the port, originating from Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, Virginia (today's West Virginia), and Bayou La Pêche. The *Argus* reported roughly the same number. Many of the flatboats carried cotton; some from Kentucky brought *houcauts* of tobacco, ham, flour, and whiskey. Most freight was already commissioned to local merchants and not owned by the flatboatmen. Only one flatboat is recorded as coming from Indiana, but it definitely was not Lincoln's, because it arrived too early (April 19–20), bore the wrong cargo (tobacco), and belonged to a professional merchant (as opposed to an amateur owner on board).<sup>156</sup> But then we find a few exceptional listings in the middle of May, each reflecting the previous day's activity. The *Argus* reported in its flatboat section of May 14 the arrival of "Several boats from the western country, with flour, bacon, &c. [with] owners on board."<sup>157</sup> Three days later, the *Bee* reported, "Quinze chalans de divers endroits, avec du produits du pays [Fifteen flatboats from various places, with products from the country]."<sup>158</sup> The *Argus* on May 17 reported those same arrivals as "Fifteen flat boats from the Western country with flour, whiskey, bacon &c. to owners on board and to order."<sup>159</sup> Tallies

155. Did the attack happen on the same day as the arrival to New Orleans? If the incident occurred somewhere between Burden and Convent (60 to 72 river miles above New Orleans) and Gentry and Lincoln escaped in pre-dawn darkness at the assumed velocity of 5.5 miles per hour, they would theoretically arrive at New Orleans in about twelve hours—late afternoon or early evening of the same day of the attack.

156. *New Orleans Argus*, April 21, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

157. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1828, p. 2, c. 4.

158. "Nouvelles Maritimes—Port de la Nlle.-Orleans, *New Orleans Bee*, May 17, 1828, p. 2, c. 4. "Marine" listings appeared only in the French section at this time in 1828.

159. "Marine Register," *New Orleans Argus*, May 17, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

from both newspapers rank mid-May 1828 as the *busiest flatboat week of the entire year*, by a wide margin, with the *Bee* counting 53 arrivals and the *Argus* enumerating roughly 73 (see graphs, “Flatboat Traffic Arriving to New Orleans, 1828-29 . . .”). Unlike most other flatboat listings in either newspaper, these entries (1) mention miscellaneous farm products rather than standard plantation commodities like cotton and tobacco; (2) indicate how many of the flatboatmen owned their own cargo; (3) describe the flatboats’ origins as “various places” in the Western country; and (4) lump together more flatboats than any other entry for an entire year. These clues suggest that the arrivals mostly constituted small amateur flatboaters from tiny towns with little-known names—places much like Rockport, Indiana. When we consider the overall chronology of the voyage and experientiality of these particular listings, we gain confidence that the *Lincoln* flatboat was among those reported in the May 14 or May 17 newspapers. Perhaps they arrived on May 13, paid dues immediately, and appeared in the next day’s newspaper, or perhaps they arrived on or after May 14, paid dues the next day or so, and appeared in the newspaper a day or so later, meaning May 17. (It is not until June 3 editions of the *Bee* and *Argus* that we see another entry for small owner-on-board flatboats arriving “from the Western country”—a date nearly three weeks too late to align with all other chronological evidence of the Gentry/Lincoln voyage.<sup>160</sup>) The May 14 listing and the prior May 11 listings may be the closest we every get to documentation of the future president’s first arrival in New Orleans.

Veteran flatboatmen like Gentry knew where to go and what to do: steer into the current toward the upper end of that long thorny line of poles, masts, rigging, sails, and smoke stacks. Silhouette of the great Western fleet, the bustling accoutrements belonged to local vessels like the *bateau à vapeur* (steamboat) *Columbia* departing for Bayou Sara, and ocean-going sailing ships bound for Liverpool, France, and Bordeaux. Those craft crossed paths with the brig *Castillo* putting out for New York; the schooner *Union*, bound for Charleston; and the *Correo*, destined for Tampico, Mexico. Outgoing vessels made room for the Mexican kigs *Doris* and *Orono*, bringing in passengers and *campêche* wood from across the Gulf, and the *bateau de remorque* (tugboat) *Grampus* coming in from the mouth

160. “Marine Register,” *ibid.*, June 3, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

of the Mississippi.<sup>161</sup> The hydraulic maneuvering— involving ships that Lincoln had previously seen only in drawings, borne for exotic destinations he knew only through books—played out less than a mile downriver from their destination. The stretch, the lowly up-town flatboat wharf, saw none of the spectacular sights and sounds of the downtown steamboat and sailing harbors, but bustled nevertheless with impatient pilots flailing pole, crossed ropes, and hurled invectives. Gentry and Lincoln, as it turned out, picked a good time to arrive: mid-May 1828 saw more flatboat arrivals (53) than any other ten-day period during the surrounding year, with the highest single-day total (28) being reported in the *New Orleans Bee* on May 17.<sup>162</sup> Among those *chalars* docking with Gentry and Lincoln were ten from Tennessee and Alabama delivering cotton to local American merchants, five from Kentucky with cotton and tobacco mostly consigned to local dealers, and fourteen small amateur operations like theirs, originating from various upcountry places.<sup>163</sup>

Once at the doorstep of “the grand mart of business, the Alexandria of America,” wrote *The Navigator*, the archetypal flatboatman

leaps upon shore with ecstasy, securing his boat to the bank with a careful tie, mounts the Levee, and with elated heart and joyful countenance, receives the warm and friendly nod of a fellow citizen, to whose integrity he confides, and to whom in confidence he can dispose of his cargo.

That flowery commentary underreported the challenges flatboatmen encountered at the New Orleans levee, which ranked even in the “warm and friendly” hands of fellow American citizens as a rough-and-tumble place.

The technical machinations of flatboat docking involved approaching, evading other vessels, negotiating a slot for lining in, and tying up while river currents, surface winds, and impatient competitors formed a shifting obstacle course. One flatboatman described what could go wrong

161. “Nouvelles Maritimes—Port de la Nlle.-Orleans, *New Orleans Bee*, May 17, 1828, p. 2, c. 4. Illustrating the dangers of steam navigation in this era, the *Campus* wrecked only three months later, when its six boilers exploded while towing four vessels. Seven men were killed, five were missing, and four were wounded. “Items,” *Norwich Courier* (Norwich, CT), September 17, 1828, 3.

162. Survey of daily “Maritime” columns in the *New Orleans Bee* conducted by author from April 1, 1828, through March 31, 1829.

163. “Nouvelles Maritimes—Port de la Nlle.-Orleans, *ibid.*, May 17, 1828, p. 2, c. 4.

164. *The Navigator* (1814), 225.

As we were pulling in to make a landing [at New Orleans] one of our sweeps broke, which handicapped us. We pulled with all our power for several miles, then ran in before the landing and [had to pull] back by ropes. After we got in [we] found we had [been dragging] the largest kind of a log all day, which explained why our boat was so difficult to manage. . . .<sup>165</sup>

Once a flatboatman jumped ashore and looked around, he would have noted the unique topographical curiosity at which first-time visitors marvel to this day. Unlike the landings lying *below* the bluff-top cities—river, the landings in New Orleans lay *above* its city. What struck me most,” wrote a visitor from Edinburgh during the same year, “was the [Mississippi] surface being six or seven feet higher than the level of the streets of New Orleans. . . . [I]t seemed as if the smallest shake [would] submerge the city.”<sup>166</sup> The impression would have been even stronger given the high water of 1828–1829.

While we cannot determine precisely where Genov and Lincoln docked, contextual information helps narrow down the possibilities. We know that in 1828, flatboats, barges, and other small-pcount vessels docked in a zone starting at the foot of Notre Dame and adjacent Julia streets in Faubourg St. Mary and extending upriver. How far river depended on overall flatboat activity and docking density, the topics of our next discussion.

A tally of *New Orleans Bee*'s “Maritime” columns for the month leading up to Lincoln's arrival reveals 104 *chaloans* docking at New Orleans.<sup>167</sup> Official reports usually undercount actual figures, so when we adjust for unreported arrivals, local traffic, “lingering” flatboats, and other activity not likely to appear in the newspaper, we can increase that figure by roughly half. That estimate (of around 150–160) is substantiated by analyzing the surviving Wharfinger reports from 1819–22 and 1845–49 and interpolating what sort of activity may have occurred in 1828. Given an average of 112 dues-paying flatboats (not including barges) arrived annually

165. Clark, “Flatboat Passage to New Orleans,” *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1905, part 3, p. 13, c. 7.

166. Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh and London, 1830), 3:319–320.

167. Tally of “Maritime” columns of *Bee* conducted by author from April 17, 1828, through May 17, 1828.

during 1819–22, compared to 1,940 flatboats per year during 1845–49, we calculate that an additional 54 flatboats arrived every year between the early 1820s and the late 1840s.<sup>168</sup> That puts 944 flatboats (512 plus eight years' of the 54 flatboats-per-year increase) arriving to New Orleans during the year of 1828. It also puts 1,188 flatboats arriving to New Orleans during the year 1833—the key year, because that's when visitor Joseph Holt Ingraham estimated “about two hundred of these . . . ‘flat-boats’ . . . and ‘keel-boats’” docked along the uptown flatboat wharves.<sup>169</sup> If Ingraham estimated accurately, this means that 17 percent of the entire year's arrivals could be seen docked simultaneously at any one moment. Applying this percentage to 1828's total arrivals, we corroborate that around 160 flatboats docked at any one time (17 percent of 944) during the busy season.

One-hundred-sixty docked flatboats, each typically measuring 12 to 20 feet in width and requiring about five feet of space on either side, form a 4,160-foot-long flatboat wharf. Density in docking was inconsistent: those lucky enough to tie up closest to the busy Notre-Dame/Johnson end of the wharf docked two-deep or three-deep, sacrificing the convenience of banks' adjacency in exchange for proximity to inner-city commercial activity. (An 1828 riverfront sketch made by Capt. Basil Hall, one of the best visual depictions of a Lincoln-era flatboat landing, illustrates this practice; see graphic section.<sup>170</sup>) One report noted that flatboats “moored so closely together by the river-side, that they may run along . . . their flat-covered tops with equal facility as upon the deck of a ship,” something also evident in Hall's sketch.<sup>171</sup> Flatboatmen who tied up at the quieter, upriver end of the wharf generally spread out and gave themselves elbow room to unload and disassemble their vessels, including occasional open spots (for water, for access, or because of sedimentation or wharf damage) along that line of approximately 160 flatboats, we can safely extend the 4,160-foot-long uptown flatboat wharf by a few blocks.

Based on the above estimations, this analysis views the uptown flatboat wharves in May 1828 as extending roughly one mile upriver from the

168. Statistical analysis by author based on Wharfinger Reports/New Orleans Collection/Levee Dues-Registers of Flatboats, Barges, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans, 1818–23 and 1845–49, Microfilm #75-109 QN420, New Orleans Public Library, Louisiana Collection.

169. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee* (New York, 1835), 1:105.

170. Cap. Basil Hall, “The Mississippi at New Orleans,” drawn around 1828 and engraved by W. H. Lizars. THNOC, Accession Number 1974.000.576 P.C. 30-11-A.

171. “Flat-Boat Commerce,” J. D. B. De Bow, *Commercial Review of the South and West* 4, no. 4 (December 1847): 556.

foot of Notre Dame and Julia streets in Faubourg St. Mary, with docking occurring at the highest density at that downriver end and thinning out around Richard and Market streets in the faubourg La Course and Annunciation. The latter are generally marked the upper edge of urbanization in New Orleans at the time (the adjacent suburb of Lafayette, across Felicity Street in Jefferson Parish, was under development<sup>172</sup>), so it serves to reason that flatboat packing generally correlated to urban density.

Eyewitness confirmation of this one-mile estimate comes from Robert Goodacre, who saw the same sight from the same angle and wrote “For the first mile along the coast of the Mississippi, flat boats or other forms continued in line. . . . This motley collection is succeeded [below Notre Dame Street] by the steamboats. . . .”<sup>173</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe corroborated the estimate when he viewed the port from the roof of the Bishop’s Hotel on New Year’s Day 1834 and estimated “ships and boats of every size [extended] upwards of two miles. . . . [H]igh up the stream lie the flats, arks, and barges. . . .”<sup>174</sup> Given port expansion between 1828 and 1834, and given the location of the Bishop’s Hotel at the corner of Camp and Canal, Latrobe’s two-mile estimation aligns well with our one-mile estimate. Additional corroboration comes from the detailer’s journal of the flats at *Davy Crockett*, which landed “at the upper end of Lafayette New Orleans” in February 1835: seven years of port expansion led by that time extended the flatboat wharf upriver to across Louisiana Avenue, which, at that time, was in the Jefferson Parish city of Lafayette.<sup>175</sup> One final corroboration of the length of the flatboat wharf comes from an 1885 reminiscence of the 1820s, when “hundreds of [flatboats lay] side by side, so that one could walk almost a mile on their curved decks without going ashore.”<sup>176</sup>

Another eyewitness account differs markedly from the above. James Stuart, who visited New Orleans during a busy month of March in 1830, wrote that “[t]here are sometimes 1500 flat boats lying at the sides

172. “For Sale, A valuable property, situated in Jefferson parish, Lafayette suburb . . .,” *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1826, p. 4, c. 3.

173. “New Orleans—Goodacre’s Lecture,” *Delaware Weekly Advertiser and Farmer’s Journal*, March 27, 1826, vol. 1, no. 28, p. 4, c. 4.

174. Charles Joseph La Trobe, *The Explorer in North America* (New York, 1835), 2:244–245.

175. Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 23.

176. New Orleans Press, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs* (New York: Will H. Coleman, 1885), p. 201.

of the levee at a time . . .”<sup>177</sup> This extraordinarily high number does not concord with other evidence. Stuart’s use of the word “sometimes” suggests exceptionality or hyperbole. Maybe he included all vessels across the entire port, or perhaps he accidentally added an extra zero to a more likely estimate of 120.

The circa-1828 flatboat wharf occupies today’s Warehouse District and Lower Garden District riverfront—but does *not* align with the present-day riverfront. Slight shifts in the channel of the Mississippi River in the early 1800s, coupled with the fact that the flatboat wharf occupied the point-bar side of the river’s crescent-shaped meander, allowed an ever-growing sandy beach (batture) to form along the Faubourg St. Mary levee. The question of whether public or private interests owned this valuable new riverfront and spawned a decades-long legal controversy, reflecting differing Creole and American legal philosophies and personally involving at one point Pres. Thomas Jefferson. By the time Lincoln arrived, the so-called St. Mary Batture had formed one to two extra blocks of new land east of Tchoupitoulas Street, which were surveyed with the appellation New Levee Street (today’s South Peters Street) and where, where permitted, Front Levee Street (now Convention Center Boulevard). Further alluvial deposition plus subsequent levee realignments during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appended another two to four blocks of cityscape to the colonial-era riverfront. This means that the Lincoln-era flatboat wharf is now landlocked hundreds of feet away from the present-day edge of the Mississippi River (see graphic section for photographs and maps). Flatboat remnants have been occasionally uncovered in the soils of today’s Warehouse District and Lower Garden District (a newspaper in 1883 reported the “haul of an old [flat]boat, recently dug up on one of our front streets while the men were preparing the foundation of a building.”<sup>178</sup>

Probability helps narrow down Gentree and Lincoln’s likely landing site. We can be nearly certain that they did *not* dock in the Old City. Some flatboats did land around the bend of Cornwell Street (“I counted thirty-nine” steamboats docked around Canal Street, stated Robert Goodacre in April 1820, “below these is another continuous line of flat boats, or ark . . .”<sup>179</sup>). But these flatboats specifically served downtown markets with fresh vegeta-

177. James Stuart, *Two Years in New America* (Edinburgh and London: Robert Cadell and Whittaker and Company, 1833), 2:232.

178. Charles E. Whitney, “Flatboating Days,” *Times-Democrat*, June 10, 1883, p. 5, c. 5–6.

179. “New Orleans—Goodacre’s Lecture,” *Delaware Weekly Advertiser and Farmer’s Journal*, March 27, 1828, p. 1, c. 4 (emphasis added).



bles, fish, game, firewood, and other retail produce, rather than upcountry bulk produce. Instead, it was the uptown flatboat wharf that almost certainly received Gentry and Lincoln. A coveted spot near Notre Dame/Julia would have been unlikely, because professional merchant navigators running major flatboat operations tended to monopolize that valuable space. Greenhorn amateurs like Gentry and Lincoln probably settled for an edge uptown and toward Richard and Market streets. The most probable landing site lies somewhere among the open fields immediately south of the Mississippi River bridges, along South Peters Street near the Henderson intersection. On the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, these fields lay vacant, weedy, and eerily silent.

Large-laden flatboatmen needed to dispense of their cargo. Lacking any clues on how Gentry and Lincoln handled this critical task, we must look to the experience of other boatmen in this era. Professionals sold their freight in a very different manner than their amateur peers. Merchant navigators and agent flatboatmen, who captained or contracted voyages on a regular basis, generally delivered their order to local clients on a familiar, colleague-to-colleague basis. They carefully marked their cargo with initials and numbers to ensure the right parcels went to the right owners. Evidence from the *New Orleans Bee* indicates that most flatboat cargoes arriving in spring 1828 were already owned by local merchants. Those clients expecting deliveries of cotton usually had Anglo names like Townsely, Christy, Ferguson, Hagan, and Fowler; those awaiting sugar from Bayou La Plaque had Francophone names like Peyroux and Bi-varde.<sup>180</sup> Occasionally thieves would exploit the handover and make off with unguarded cargo, as might have been the circumstances behind this announcement a few days prior to Lincoln's arrival:

Cotton Lost—Any person having received from Obadiah Gordon's flatboats, eight bales of cotton, marked G B, Nos. 1 to 8, shipped at Jackson, Tennessee, will confer a favor by communicating [with] Smith & Luce, 15 Common-st.<sup>181</sup>

Farmer flatboatmen like Gentry and Lincoln had to figure things out on

180. "Maritime" columns, *New Orleans Bee*, April 15 through June 15, 1828 (analysis by author).

181. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13, 1828, p. 1, c. 1.

their own.<sup>182</sup> The *Boulevard* described such amateur outfits as *propriétaire à bord*. They lined the wharf and displayed their goods like in one long linear market, awaiting customers. According to an 1828 account, “[h]ams, ears of corn, apples, whisky barrels are strewn upon [each flatboat], or are fixed to poles, to attract the attention of the buyers.”<sup>183</sup> Anyone who approached was buttonholed by crew members to work out a deal. For a greenhorn country boy negotiating multiple sales in a brusque and competitive port city could be an intimidating and high-stakes experience. *Who’s not worthy? Who’s a crook? Should we hold out for a better price? Is this counterfit money?* “[A] great degree of rudeness, and a great deal of swearing” flourished among the various players on the flatboat wharf.<sup>184</sup> Commonly news during the week of Lincoln’s arrival reported cotton doing well, sugar fairly stable, molasses going down, pork selling well at \$4 per barrel and fish, salmon selling readily for the past three months but “feeling dull.” Flour selling at 11¢ per barrel, whiskey at 2½ cents per gallon, and sales weakening on bagging and rope.<sup>185</sup> If numerous flatboatmen arrived with similar cargo, these prices could plummet. If buyers colluded, flatboatmen again suffered. If inspectors found fault with the quality of the produce, the entire cargo could be seized and auctioned off as damaged goods, for the benefit of the Port. Every day passing without a buyer meant depreciating cargo, mounting expenses, and further delay before the next paying job. The anxiety got the best of some men, luring them into arson in the hope of an insurance settlement. “Last week,” wrote one New-Orleanian a few years before Lincoln’s visit,

a poor man, who had a flatboat loaded with 200 to 400 barrels of flour, newly arrived from the upper country, finding no price for his cargo, in a fit of despair, set fire to it at mid day, which communicated to two other flatboats and consumed the whole.<sup>186</sup>

One rare description of a flatboatman’s vending experience comes from

182. The term “farmer flatboat” comes from Michael Allen, “The Riverman as Jacksonian Man,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (August 1990): 317–31.

183. Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London: Hurst, Catherwood, and Co., 1828), 146.

184. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:239.

185. “New-York Market” and “The N. Orleans Price Current of May 17,” *New Orleans Argus*, May 19, 1828, p. 2, c. 4–6.

186. “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in New-Orleans,” *Patron of Industry* (New York), January 24, 1821, p. 2.

Asbury C. Jacques, who restocked with wood after selling his original cargo on the sugar coast. He and his crew, in February 1835,

landed at the upper end of Lafayette [*sic*] New Orleans on 19th at two o'clock in the morning. Directly after we landed we were offered \$1.75 per cord for our wood. We tried most of the brick yards for wood yards, but the highest offer we have had is \$2.00 per cord. The steam boats wont have it, they want Ash. [The next day,] Spring we can do no better, we have sold out to a French man named De.li.shau at \$3.00 per chord. We had to sell our beef at about half its value. I sold 1 lb & 1/2 lb of beef at \$5.00 dollars.

There was another option if no wholesaler offered the right price: flatboatmen could retail their cargo piecemeal directly to citizens. Retailing garnered higher prices for smaller quantities, and if it took more time than wholesaling, so be it: flatboatmen slept for free on board their decked vessels, and few complained about extra days in this subtropical boom and Gomorrah. “Retailing flatboats,” however, earned the wrath of nearby storekeepers, who paid high rent and taxes and resented the competition from scruffy “Kaintucks.” “The owners of the flat-boats no sooner arrive,” wrote one business writer, “than they open their floating shops for the sale of their respective cargoes; and as their prices average little more than one-half of those . . . in the stores of the city, there are always numbers of customers thronging the levee and keeping the [flatboat wharf] in a state of remarkable liveliness.”<sup>187</sup> Storekeepers battled flatboatmen on this issue throughout the antebellum years, getting the city (in 1823) to fine them five dollars per day if they retailed beyond eight days after landing.<sup>188</sup> Later they succeeded in banishing retailers to the nuisance wharf, over a thousand feet above Notre Dame/Julien, or the retailers would face a severe twenty-dollar fine.<sup>189</sup> But this simply pushed the activity river.

Storekeepers were not alone in hating flatboatmen. The upcountry lads

187. “Flat-Boat Commerce,” J. D. B. E. Bow, *Commercial Review of the South and West*, no. 4 (December 1841), 55.

188. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 24, 1823, p. 150 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, New Orleans Public Library Louisiana Collection (hereafter cited as NOPL-LC).

189. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 23, 1824, p. 327 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC; *Louisiana Advertiser*, December 2, 1826, p. 2, c. 3; *New Orleans Bee*, June 22, 1835, p. 2, c. 1.

also earned the reproach of townspeople by fouling the air and polluting the water. Cane cores, debris, and human waste routinely went directly in the Mississippi, and accumulated along the uptown wharf for the same reason that its dimen[si]ons deposited there. Crews using their flatboats as boarding houses produced as much waste as a small family. Those using their vessels as open-fire cooking and smoking operations (to keep meat from spoiling) threatened the highly flammable cotton bales stacked on the wooden wharf. A non-board fire one month before Lincoln's arrival led to an entire flatboat igniting, a spectacle that attracted a crowd of all too-hearty onlookers. "A number of persons vociferated—*crier for advice*," recounted a mild merchant in the next paper a week later.

—the most dangerous advice that could have been given, as she might inevitably have drifted among the shipping [possibly igniting] the steamboats, and part of the city. . . . The practice of smoking bacon in flatboats lying at the levee is dangerous and mischievous, and we believe, contrary to law.<sup>190</sup>

Indeed it was: six weeks earlier, the City Council prohibited flatboatmen from smoking meat on board.<sup>191</sup>

Smoking bacon was but one illegal nuisance. Other flatboats "exhale[d] an odor so fetid [from] spoiled corn, and filth of hogs . . . that [a landlord's tenants] have come to notify him, that they were about to leave, not being able any longer to resist those unsanitary exhalations [of] said flatboats. . . ."<sup>192</sup> Neighboring homeowners winced at the flatboatmen's "horses, fat and lean cattle, sheep, hogs[,] all sorts of domestic poultry, and various kinds of large and cumbersome material" dumped in their neighborhoods and driven through the streets.<sup>193</sup> The men themselves were deemed, like their livestock, to be nuisances—particularly "Kentucky men, [who] were infinitely the worse of the whole party," as one suffering traveler explained.

[T]he unheard-of volubility of oaths incessantly uttered, and the delight they appeared to take in cursing and blaspheming,

190. *Louisiana Advertiser*, April 19, 1828.

191. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 1, 1828, p. 202 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

192. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of August 21, 1824, p. 54, and Session of March 1, 1828, p. 202, of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

193. "New Orleans—Goodacre's Lecture," *Delaware Weekly Advertiser and Farmer's Journal*, March 27, 1828, p. 1, c. 4.

were only equalled by the profigate *novelty* of the execrations with which their most different observations were interlarded, and which exceeded every thing that I could possibly have imagined. There were, doubtless, some respectable individuals [among them; if only they could] have been separated from the rest. . . .

Uncouth young rascals fouling the city, clogging the wharf, underselling respectable businessmen, swaggering, swearing, raising Cain: no wonder agitated “subscribers” denounced the lowly flatboatmen regularly in anti-bellum newspapers. Decency usually forced the aggrieved parties to use decorous language in the printed word. *Spoken* word, however, flew more liberally, as evidenced by the variety of choice moniker and reputations ascribed to the upcountry lads. “They’re the hoosiers of Indiana, the suckers of Illinois, the pukes of Missouri,” went one characterization of New Orleans flatboatmen;

the buckeyes of Ohio, the red horses of Kentucky, the mules of Tennessee, the wolverines of Michigan, the eagles of New England, and the corn crackers of Virginia. . . . It’s a great caravansary filled with strangers, temperate enough to make your hair stand on end, drinkin’ all day, gamblin’ all night, and fightin’ all the time.<sup>195</sup>

So widespread grew the flatboatmen’s repugnant reputation (deservedly or not) that it tainted all working-class Anglo-American men and became entrenched in countless historical narratives told many years later. “[H]undreds of flatboats came down the river, and the city swarmed with bargemen,” went a typical characterization (this one from the *American Monthly* in 1901);

—a rough, disorderly class which by its coarseness of manner, lack of culture, and keeness for a bargain, gave an evil savour to the name “American,” so that to this day many old-fashioned residents of the old quarter still look upon the Anglo-Saxons as a semi-barbarian. . . . And one day, occasionally, the negro

194. Henry Tudor, *Narrative of a Tour in North America* (London: James Duncan, 1834), 2:54–55.

195. “Extracts from the Clockmaker,” *The Madisionian*, 2, 6th ed., 19, October 20, 1838, p. 1. Another version of this piece appears as “Sam Slick’s Description of New Orleans,” *Barre Gazette* (Barre, MA), 5, Issue 37, January 25, 1839, A. 1.

expression *Mercains coquins* ["American rascals"].<sup>196</sup>

Most flatboatmen working the uptown wharf were young Anglo-American males from farming families, poor but hardworking and entrepreneurially motivated, uneducated but savvy, and native to any one of the Western states (although often generalized as "Kaintucks"). Not many locals worked there; those who did tended to be Irish immigrants rather than the Creoles and Frenchmen associated with New Orleans' downtown markets and wharves. Those of African descent seemed to number few, and often wandered about unshackled and apparently unharmed. A first-time flatboatman expecting the exotic might have been surprised. New Orleans' uptown flatboat wharf turned out to be much like the various "under-the-hill" landings of Vicksburg, Natchez, Bayou Sara, and other Mississippi River towns, except a hundred times larger and a whole lot flatter. Economically and culturally, the wharf formed the trans-Appalachian West's toehold in New Orleans, populated by a revolving cast of characters floating in and steaming out on a weekly basis. A few blocks away lay the Northeast's permanent toehold in New Orleans—Faubourg St. Mary, which, according to one antebellum visitor, reflected "here a little of Boston, there a little of New York, and some of Philadelphia, with something of the *rus in urbe* so charming so common to New England towns. . . ."<sup>197</sup> Gentry and Lincoln would not have to disassemble their flatboat before exploring *that* city, not to mention *the other* city across Canal Street.

Disassembling a flatboat went a whole lot faster and easier than building one, but it still took time, space, and a sawn. "The weather has been warm, but otherwise favorable for outdoor business," reported the *Price Current* when Gentry and Lincoln dismantled their vessel—"until yesterday [May 16], when it became showery."<sup>198</sup> Flatboatmen annoyed port officials when they lingered too long in reconstruction. The city intervened in 1819, 1822, 1827, and 1831 with laws stiffening penalties on the unsanctioned or excessively slow "demolition of Caissons, Barges, Keelboats, Rafts, 'Ca-

196. Albert Phelps, "New Orleans and her construction," *The Atlantic Monthly* 88, no. 525 (July 1901): 123.

197. A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattan in New Orleans; or Phases of "Crescent City" Life* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1851), 35.

198. *New Orleans Price Current*, as reported in the *New Orleans Argus*, May 19, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

jeaux' and other small craft." At one point, the City Council resolved to "cast adrift" any empty flatboat after twenty-four hours of unloading.<sup>199</sup>

Once deconstructed, flatboat lumber was often purchased by the city to cover the wharves to construct the city's *banquettes* ("little benches," raised wooden sidewalks along muddy streets), to build sewerage chutes into the river, and for other municipal purposes.<sup>200</sup> Massive gunwales might also see a second life as structural beams, although their tapered ends and moisture rendered them less than ideal. Flatboat boards often became clapboards for the city's thousands of wooden cottages, particularly in the immigrant neighborhoods adjacent to the uptown flatboat wharf (today's Lower Garden District and Lake Channel). Smaller planks ended up in the ubiquitous picket fences lining the muddy streets of outlying faubourgs. Demand for wood ran high; lumber from a dismantled flatboat typically returned one-quarter to one-half its initial construction cost.<sup>201</sup> It is safe to say that some flatboat lumber remains in service today as studs, beams, rafters, and joists in historic New Orleans houses, frozen in place for nearly two centuries after an epic journey from virgin forests, down the Mississippi, to the flatboat wharf.<sup>202</sup>

We postulate Gent and Lincoln took three or four days after their May 13–14 arrival to tend their cargo, disassemble their flatboat, and sell the lumber, the men would have been released from their duties starting around May 16–18. After this moment of liberation, flatboatmen often treated themselves to a few days or weeks "footloose" in the big city, free from farm toil and nagging kin. Wrote one Ibosier flatboatman after

199. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 8, 1819, p. 107 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC. See also June 2, 1819, p. 75 for a later amendment; *Conseil de Ville*, Session of June 1, 1822, pp. 87–88 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC; "An Ordinance supplementing the ordinance concerning the police of the Port of New-Orleans, June 23, 1831," in *General Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New-Orleans* (New Orleans: Jerome Bayou, 1831), 339; *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 10, 1827, pp. 348–351 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

200. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of February 22, 1817, p. 127 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC. Session of October 23, 1825, p. 241 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

201. *The Navigator* (1840), 33; Elias P. Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817–1818*, ed. Frederic M. Ogg (Cleveland, OH: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 79.

202. The local term "bargeboard house" denotes such buildings, but is often applied loosely to just about any historic structure finished off with mismatched scrap lumber.

completing his work at the wharf:

[O]nce more [I] was foot loose to look out for my self now about two thousand miles from home [sic]. . . I was in the city [of New Orleans] about 9 days.<sup>203</sup>

Unfortunately, neither Lincoln nor Gentry had their Indiana acquaintances left behind any waypoints to retrace their steps. The few words Lincoln wrote of his two Louisiana visits pertain mostly to the voyage, not the destination. We can only gather evidence of what was going on in the city from primary sources, and reconstruct the urban and social landscape to which Lincoln was theoretically exposed.

Activities on the land side of the one-long flatboat wharf gave the disembarking men their first taste of city life. There, rickety wooden “caravanserais” (flophouses) offered four basic services to flatboatmen and other transients: victuals, drink, entertainment, and board. In front on the ground floor was the saloon; in the back were roulette, faro, and other gambling tables all operating in plain sight. (Gambling, legal in private quarters but prohibited in public spaces, nonetheless abounded throughout the city.) Upstairs was the boarding house, usually with laundry-footed balconies. Offensive odors, originating from the fecal riverfront, from kitchens behind the saloons, from outhouses and from beasts of burden, assaulted the nose. Cacophonous—hammer blows, drum beats, tolls, peddler bells, and roulette calls such as “Twenty-eight on the red” or “Eagle bird by chance”—assailed the ear.<sup>204</sup>

Once past the flatboat wharf, the cityscape and its attendant humanity upgraded markedly. New Orleans was, after all, the South’s greatest city, and while it might have exhibited an Old World look and *laissez-faire* attitude to visitors from New York or Boston, it struck rural Westerners as dazzling, modern, and meticulously managed—at least in the urban core. Sturdy brick storehouses and townhouses, rising three and even four stories high, exceeded what Lincoln saw in Natchez in size, number, and style. Roughly half the city, and most of the main commercial areas, boasted paved streets with curbstones and nighttime illumination from whale-oil lamps. Additional paving, curbing, and lighting improvements were the topics of discussion at City Council meetings, particularly for

203. John Wilkinson, “To Do It Myself: Footloose on the Old Northwest Frontier,” ed. William C. Wilkinson, *Indiana Magazine of History*, no. 4 (December 1990): 415–416.

204. Whitney, “Flatboating Days,” *Times-Democrat*, June 11, 1883, p. 5, c. 5.



Faubourg St. Mary, whose Anglo citizens shook their fists at the various municipal slights they perceived emanated from the politically more powerful Creole faction across Canal Street).

Paved streets meant smoother and faster flowing traffic, fostering efficiency but also danger. Horses and mules, often driven by free people of color or hired-out slave-pulled wagons, trucks, and drays at speeds fast enough to injure or kill unwary pedestrians. For “the Safety and Facility of traffic in the Streets,” the city in 1827 prohibited galloping or driving the animals at anything faster than “a stepping pace.” Penalties for breaking the ordinance, which was posted on walls and street corners, ran five to fifty dollars for free people and ten lashes for slaves (unless the master paid the fine).<sup>205</sup> Similar ordinances regulated—under penalty of fine or whip—where peddlers and merchants could and could not vend; where smoky forges, foundries, and steam-engine shops could operate; and where run houses and distilleries could function. Shortly before Lincoln’s visit, the City Council even regulated masked balls, limiting them to the period from January 1 through Mardi Gras, requiring a license, and forcing revelers to reveal their identities to policemen upon arriving at the ball.<sup>206</sup> Shortly after Lincoln’s visit, the City banned bathing in the river or Carondelet Canal and publically appearing naked or in indecent costume.<sup>207</sup>

New Orleans might have seemed unforgiving and carefree to buttoned-up newcomers, but city fathers fought that anti-business image, and endeavored to reverse it through law and order. How well they succeeded is another matter.

We can safely presume two issues demanded the men’s attention as they set forth into the city. First came food. Due to what they might have bought come from the previous cited flatboatman Asbury C. Laquess, who shopped for edibles and sundries after disposing of his cargo and vessel on the uptown wharf:

205. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of February 24, 1827, pp. 339–340 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

206. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of November 22, 1827, pp. 115–116; Session of December 15, 1827, pp. 147–148; and Session of December 29, 1827, p. 158–159 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

207. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of July 19, 1828, p. 285 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

We today laid in our groceries. I got 1 sack of coffee at 13 cts per pound, 1 lb of sugar at 6 1/2 cts per lb, 1 lb of mackerel at \$7.50 & 1 kg of rice at 4 cts per pound. The whole amounted to 49.50¢. I also bought 1 pair of half boots at \$1.75, The Life of William Wallace at \$1.00 & The Poetical Works of Pope at 40 cts.<sup>208</sup>

Stretching those meager flatboat wages could prove a challenge to a rural chap in an expensive city. “Nothing can be got done here without a considerable payment of money,” complained a traveler shortly after Lincoln’s visit. “I had to pay a quarter of a dollar for sewing the silk part of an umbrella, one of the whalebones . . . and a dollar per dozen for charged for washing clothes, no matter what they be. . . . *The object of all seems to be to make money, and not to spend it.* . . .”<sup>209</sup>

The next question involved shelter. New Orleans abounded with high-end hotels, mid-range inns, boarding houses, and low-end caravanserais. Residents also opened their homes—cautiously, and for good reason—to earn a few extra dollars renting an attic or servant’s quarters to a stranger. Where might Gentry and Lincoln have boarded? So many rooms operated off the record that we cannot narrow down the possibilities. Yet one researcher has offered a startlingly precise answer to the question: 819 St. Ann Street, three blocks behind present-day Jackson Square in the French Quarter.<sup>210</sup> The house at that address today certainly looks the part. Built around 1811 for a free family of color named Cazeliers, it is an imposing one-and-a-half-story, two-family brick cottage with a gable roof and four distinctive attic windows. Twin two-story brick quarters in the rear accommodated slaves, servants, or boarders.<sup>211</sup> What casts doubt on this legend is the fact that the house-address system enumerating this structure as 819 St. Ann Street was not established until 1894; addresses in the pre-mail-delivery days of 1828 were ad hoc, highly irregular, and poorly documented. Without primary documents such as guest registers, and without the name of the host family or hotel, how could the memory of Lincoln’s 1828 boarding house have been “updated” to the 1894 house-numbering system? Lincoln would then have had to establish a personal relationship that remained in the memory (name and all) of a neighbor or

208. Jacquess, “Journals of the Dan Crockett,” 23.

209. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:235–236 (emphasis added).

210. Van Natter, *Lincoln’s Boyhood*, 145, 208. In a footnote, Van Natter identifies the source of this information simply as “traditional.”

211. Vieux Carré Survey, Binder 75, entry for 817–819 St. Ann Street.

landlord until he became famous three decades later. This is unlikely, but not impossible: a shall see credible evidence exists from the 1831 flatboat trip that Lincoln indeed established precisely such a relationship, with a man named Ferguson in Arkansas.

The 819 1/2 Ann Street legend has been repeated by at least one tertiary source. Today the house stands majestically but unmarked for its alleged—and dubious—Lincoln association.

Western boatmen were self-aware of their lowly and disdained place in New Orleans society. It was not something they necessarily suffered or resented; in fact, many embraced their rugged, devil-may-care reputation, going so far as to give their vessels names such as *True Poverty*, *Adventure*, *Half Times*, and *Drunkard*.<sup>212</sup> Sometimes urban elites granted the boatmen begrudging admiration. During Lincoln's visit, for example, a local paper characterized their "western blood" as "half steamboat, half alligator. . . ardent, generous, daring, witty, blunt, and original."<sup>213</sup> More often than not, however, the relationship between the establishment and the boatman was a contentious one, and the characterization of the latter leaned decisively toward the unflattering, the prejudiced, and the ridicul-

Attire presented a favorite target, as flatboatmen sported a certain look ambling around town. Lincoln probably donned garments in New Orleans similar to those he wore back home, inventoried by one informant years later:

flax & low linnen pantaloons . . . about 5 inches too short in the legs and frequently holed but one Suspender. . . . he Wore a Calico Shert, [a] coarse Brogue Tan Couler[,] Blue Yarn Socks & straw Hat—one style and without a band.[<sup>214</sup>

Needless to say, such ill-fitting garb drew snickers among the *fashion-*

212. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, *Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940), 57, 65, 85, 126.

213. The article, a review of a New Orleans theatrical production entitled "Lion of the West," appeared during Lincoln's second visit to New Orleans, but reflected sentiments that had existed in 1828 and earlier. From the *New-York Courier & Enquirer*, "Louisiana Courier," May 28, 1831, page indeterminable, c. 1.

214. Statement, Abner Y. Ellis, to William H. Herndon, January 23, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 170.

ables” of this famous, vain town.<sup>215</sup> New Orleanians stereotyped upcountry flatboatmen in the same way that residents today poke fun at French Quarter tourists or Ninth Ward hipsters. “The Primitive Hoosier,” wrote the *Picayune*, “is untrammelled by the artifice of fashion and as free from the constraint of toppers as the mighty rivers of the West [or] the buffalo herd over the wild prairie. . . .” A pocketful of cash from “the plunder of his flatboat” plus a city full of soft-goods stores inspired rag-clad country lads to upgrade their image—all too often, unfortunately, without proper sartorial counsel:

He has just donned a new blue dress coat with silk linings and flowered gilt buttons. His new pants look rather smart for the present fashion, but this is possibly account for—how were of stocking fit or French cut, the instep, and thinking they pressed rather close he has curtailed them of some six inches of their fair proportion.

A close look, wrote the *Picayune*, suggested that you can take the Hoosier out of Indiana, but you can’t take Indiana out of the Hoosier.

He glories in still wearing the same unpolished peg boots and the woolen, round-topped, wide-leaved hat which he set out from home.

“A life in the woods for me,” the flatboatman seemed to say to big-city life.<sup>216</sup>

Flatboat crews, mates, in groups of two, three, four, five, ambled the streets of New Orleans as young men often do when in a new environment: slowly, not cocked, hands in pockets, with an affected swagger geared to communicate confidence, hide discrimination and intimidation, and suppress all outward signs of curiosity, surprise, or delight. *Act like you’ve seen it before; never let ‘em see you impressed.* All that changed if individuals found a chance to break free of the group. Ah, anonymity. Nothing liberated a country boy like exploring the big city alone. He could “cut the cable” on teasing and gossipy comrades and severed all channels of communication with the folks back home. New Orleans, then and now, catered to the curious and adventurous single male visitor in just about every way imaginable.

215. Davidson, “Journey Through the South in 1836,” 358.

216. *Daily Picayune* (early 1840s), as reproduced in “The Primitive Hoosier,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 1, no. 2 (Second Quarter, 1905): 96–97.

Observing the behavior of young men today, sauntering in the French Quarter while on leave from service, ship, school, or business, offers an idea of how flatboatmen acted upon the stage of street life in the circa-1828 city. We can imagine the Gerry and Lincoln, twenty and nineteen years old respectively, wearing new clothes and a shoulder bag, looking about, inquiring what the other wanted to do and secretly hoping it would align with his own wishes, then shrugging and ambling on in a mutually non-sensual direction. Lincoln would have attracted extra attention for his striking physiognomy, his bandaged head wound from the attack on the sugar coast, and his six-foot-four height, which towered ten times over the typical American male of that era and even higher above the many New Orleanians of Mediterranean or Latin descent.

Quite the conspicuous bumpkins were they.

One cannot help pondering how teen-aged Lincoln might have behaved in New Orleans. Young single men like him (not to mention older married men) had given this city a notorious reputation throughout the Western world, condemnations of the city's wickedness abound in nineteenth-century literature. A visitor in 1823 wrote,

New Orleans is of course exposed to a greater variety of human misery, vice, disease, and want, than any other American town. . . . Much has been said about [its] profligacy of manners . . . moral debauchery, and lawlessness. . . . [This place has more than once been called the modern Sodom.]<sup>217</sup>

An anonymous booklet catalogued the city's vices with discourses entitled "Extent of Licentiousness," "Regular Prostitutes," "Prostitution of Wives," "Slave Girls Hired As Bed Companions," "Disregard of the Sabbath," "Brawl Fighting," "Drinking Houses" and "Vagrants," among others. The writer held back when he characterized New Orleans as "this Babel of all Babels, this Sodom of all Sodoms . . . this modern Golgotha."<sup>218</sup>

What enticed visitors to indulge in Sodom's various iniquities was the intersection of desire, opportunity, and anonymity. For flatboatmen, distance from home meant a separation from the mother, wives, sisters,

217. Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years . . . in the valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hillard, and Co., 1826), 305, 309.

218. Anonymous, *New Orleans As It Is: Its Manners and Customs* ("By a Resident, Printed for the Publisher," 1850), 6.

and aunts of their domestic lives. Older flatboatmen often lamented this separation, youths modeled in it, and at least one wailed eloquently on it:

Men thrown together from all parts of the United States and in deed from the whole world with their [sic] various manners and habits unresisted by the presence of female influence exhibit a scene of extraordinary novelty and is probably one of the best places for a man to acquire a knowledge of human nature.<sup>219</sup>

That “knowledge” might include gambling, sharpening (cheating at gambling), smoking, drinking, fighting, or patronizing the city’s sex industry. Citizens fairly or unfairly branded flatboatmen with the worst reputation of any transient group in the city and viewed their uptown landing as both a source and target of criminal activity. “[T]he flat-boats permanently moored on the levee . . . are the dens of sharpers by day and robbers and murderers at night,” reported the *Bee* a few years after Lincoln’s second visit; “let not the slightest precaution is used.”<sup>220</sup> A visitor five years earlier reported seeing flatboats “used as hucksters shops, dwelling, pigpens, music[s], coopers shop, etc.”<sup>221</sup> Others disdained the time-long “line of gambling-shops” formed by the flatboats on Sundays, not to mention the boatmen themselves, who, by one hyperbolic 1830 account, numbered “5000 or 6000” during the springtime peak (one percent of the entire city’s population).<sup>222</sup> Genery and Lincoln likely witnessed this madness along the wharf—indeed, throughout the city, even on Sundays. “This place is one of the worst I ever witnessed,” wrote one newcomer a few years earlier, “the chief amusements are gambling and drinking . . . quarrels and even murders are very frequent here.”<sup>223</sup> Another, writing in 1828, observed “the coffee-houses, grog-shops, and the *establisments* [drinking holes] . . . were open as usual [on Sunday] . . . A kind of music, accompanied with [singing] resounded in almost every direction . . . To a new com[er] . . . this

219. Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 24.

220. *New Orleans Bee*, as quoted by the *Patriot and Eagle* (*Patriot and Democrat*, Hartford, CT), August 8, 1835, p. 2.

221. Journal of Wellesley G. Green, reproduced in “Being the Journal of a Quaker Merchant Who Visited N.O. in 1827,” *Times-Picayune*, October 16, 1921, section four, pp. 1 and 6.

222. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:232.

223. “Extract of a Letter from an Emigrant in New-Orleans,” *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport, MA), October 17, 1817, p. 3, c. 2.

appears very shocking."<sup>224</sup> Another man reported, "drinking establishments are coin[ing] money; they monopolize the corners of every square; whole rows of them may be found in some localities, and new ones are springing up every day."<sup>225</sup>

While such establishments were scattered citywide, one particular district catered specifically to boatmen and other transients. Nicknamed "the Swamp," it was located about a dozen blocks straight inland from the uptown flatboat wharf, where Julia and Girod streets petered out into Faubourg St. Marie's out-over backswamp.<sup>226</sup> This wasteland received all that civilized New Orleansians did not want in their backyard. The Marie Girod Street Cemetery was laid out here in 1822; the swelly turning basin of the New Orleans (New Basin) Canal followed in 1852; Charity Hospital and its yellow fever patients came in 1835. Gas works, garbage dumps, slantytowns, and stables would later find a home in this back of town. So it comes as no surprise that the flatboatmen's demographic ended up here as well, within a stone's throw of the cemetery. Very few first-person descriptions of this loathsome dire survive; the account derives from a reminiscence of the 1820s–30s reported in 1883. "The Swamp," it explained, "was a great rendezvous for the flatboatmen, and here they reigned supreme, the city police never caring to invade those precincts. . . ." The Swamp, like Bourbon Street today, repelled some visitors, but enticed others. The captains or owners of the flatboats were of the more provident sort and generally avoided the district, "but the hired men seldom cared to save their money" and "usually stayed here until they had spent or gambled the results of their trip away, then left for home by land." The account described some of the Swamp's characters:

Old Mother Colby, a dame of about 50 winters, and 200 pounds, kept a boarding house and paravansary in "The Swamp," known as the "Sure Enuf Hotel," the lower floor of which was occupied as a saloon, with a gambling room just behind. The old woman was a great favorite with the boys, and she [did well] by their patronage. She rented the saloon to two Mexican brothers by the name of Corrales, one of whom dealt faro, whilst the other attended the [game].<sup>227</sup>

224. Sealsfield, *Americans As They Were*, 147–148.

225. "Life in New Orleans," *Ohio Statesman* (Columbus), May 7, 1847, p. 3, c. 2.

226. Some historians situate "The Swamp" closer to the levee, perhaps conflating it with the generalized gambling and drinking that occurred along the flatboat wharf.

227. Whitney, "Flatboating Days," *Times-Democrat*, June 10, 1883, p. 5, c. 5.

Did Lincoln partake of New Orleans' opportunities for escapism? More than a dozen contemporaries of Lincoln's youth testified that Abraham not only eschewed alcohol, but avoided its affiliated vices as well, even when interviewers pressed for salacious details. Illinois neighbor William G. Greene went out of his way to declare Lincoln "entirely free from the vices [of] running after Women[,] Drinking Whiskey or playing Cards of Money."<sup>228</sup> Abner Y. Ellis "wondered how [Lincoln] could be so extremely popular and not drink and Carouse with them," illustrating a resistance to peer pressure. "I am certain he Never Drink any intoxicating liquors [nor did he] smoke or chew Tobacco."<sup>229</sup> Others recounted Lincoln's advocacy of total abstinence as part of a temperance movement that swept the West in this era. Former Illinois congressman Robert L. Wilson, for example, declared resolutely, "I never Saw Mr. Lincoln drink. [H]e often told me he never drank, had no desire for the drink, nor the companionship of drinking men."<sup>230</sup> Other neighbors, however, allowed that "Sometimes [Lincoln] took his dram as Every body did at that time," but insisted he was always temperate.<sup>231</sup>

Regarding women, most informants pegged Abraham as a "Very shy Man of Ladies," perhaps according to one, "on account of his awkward appearance and his waring apparel." One associate remembered him as "a Man of strong passion for woman—[but] his Conscience Kept him from seduction—this saved many—many Women."<sup>232</sup> The man who interviewed those informants in 1866, former law partner and biographer William H. Herndon, harbored a secret reason for such inquiries. In the 1880s Herndon privately shared a story with a colleague that Lincoln had once confided to him: that around the year 1835-6 Mr. Lincoln went to Beardstown [Illinois] and during a devilish passion had Connection with a girl and Caught the disease" of syphilis.<sup>233</sup> Herndon never felt entirely

228. William G. Greene to William H. Herndon, November 27, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 142 (emphasis in original).

229. Statement, Abner Y. Ellis to William H. Herndon, January 23, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 170.

230. Robert L. Wilson to William H. Herndon, February 10, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 205; see also Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, 1809 to Twenty-two, 1816-1830* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 1955, reprinted 2002), 170-171.

231. Interview, David Turnham, with William H. Herndon, September 15, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 121.

232. Statement, Abner Y. Ellis, January 23, 1866, and Interview, David Davis, September 20, 1866, both with William H. Herndon, in *Herndon's Informants*, 170 and 350.

233. As quoted and interpreted by Douglas L. Wilson, *Forer's Voice: The Transforma-*



confident or comfortable with the story and excluded it from his book, for good reason: Lincoln's future marriage and family life seemly contradict such an allegation. What, if any, dalliances Lincoln may have indulged in at Beardstown or elsewhere is impossible to say, but given that zero contemporaries ever recalled Lincoln drunk, violent, reckless, or lewd, we have every reason to believe he behaved in a more level-headed manner in New Orleans than most boatmen. The man, throughout his life, famously revered restraint and discipline over pleasure and indulgence.

An inquisitive young man like Lincoln with three weeks' time disposed would have gravitated toward the many newspapers available in this cosmopolitan port. First-person evidence says he read them voraciously at the City Post Office and Gentry Store back home; his own stepmother testified that "He was a Constant reader [of newspapers] I am sure of this for the years of 1827-28-29-30."<sup>234</sup> Unlike Indiana's papers, however, those in New Orleans—the *Bee*, *Argus*, *Louisiana Courier*, *Louisiana Advertiser*, *Mercantile Advertiser*, and others—ran in French, English, and sometimes Spanish.<sup>235</sup> Competition raged among their Chartres Street offices, the "Newspaper Row" of the mid-antebellum era. Each editor reveled in pointing out the other's errors and inconsistencies, and wailed indignantly whenever their own blunders appeared undetected in competitors' pages.<sup>236</sup> The local dailies shared newsstands with "European, Northern and Western Papers received regularly," and mingled them with their own content.<sup>237</sup> Great reading they were not: the vast majority of every edition comprised commercial advertisements carried over from the previous day. Market reports, shipping news, lottery announcements, runaway slave notices, plagiarized articles, bad poetry, sentimental valets, patronizing moral les-

*tion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 127–129.

234. Interview, Sarah Bush Lincoln, by William H. Herndon, September 8, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 107.

235. Only partially can we inventory what Lincoln might have read: nearly all editions of the *New Orleans Bee* and *New Orleans Argus* survive for mid-March through early June 1828, but only a few early-June editions of the *Louisiana Courier* remain, and even fewer of the *Louisiana Advertiser*.

236. For examples that appeared during Lincoln's second visit, see "The Argus vs. The Bee," *New Orleans Bee*, June 9, 1831, p. 2, c. 1, and a plagiarizing situation in *ibid.*, May 26, 1831, p. 2, c. 1 and June 4, p. 2, c. 1.

237. "Globe Coffee House," *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (New Orleans: John Adams Paxton, 1830), unpaginated opening section.

sons, freaky anecdotes, and vitriolic political editorials—unchecked by the vaguest notions of journalistic objectivity—filled the rest of a typical four-page, half-French-half-English edition of a circa-1828 New Orleans newspaper.

There was much to editorialize about in the spring of 1828. A concurrence of events made politics particularly polemical that season. Just weeks earlier Denis Leclercq defeated Anathole Peychaud in the New Orleans mayoral race, while ten council seats went before voters. They competed for attention with the U.S. presidential campaign—a mudslinging rematch of the bitterly controversial 1824 election, in which westerner Andrew Jackson won a plurality of both the popular and electoral votes in a four-candidate, one-party field, but John Quincy Adams obtained the presidency after Congress handed down the final selection. Subsequent years saw the emergence of a more manageable two-party system. In 1828, Jackson headed the Democratic Party ticket while Adams represented the National Republican Party (forerunner of the Whig Party, and later the Republican Party). Jackson's heroic defeat of the British at New Orleans in 1815 had made him a national hero with much local support, but did not spare him vociferous enemies. The year 1828 also saw the state's first election in which presidential electors were selected by voters—white males, that is—rather than by the legislature, thus ratcheting up public interest in the contest.<sup>238</sup> Every day in the spring of 1828 the local press featured obsequious encomiums, sarcastic diatribes, vicious rumors, or scandalous allegations spanning multiple columns. The most infamous—the “coffin hand bills,” which accused Andrew Jackson of murdering several militiamen executed under his command during the war—circulated throughout the city with rapturous fervor in the weeks leading up to Lincoln's visit.<sup>239</sup> New Orleans in the red-hot political year of 1828 might well have given Abraham Lincoln his first massive daily dosage of passionate political opinion, via newspapers, broadsides, bills, orations, and overheard conversations.

Newspaper articles published during Lincoln's visit also conveyed the interesting, the curious, the disturbing, and the poignant. Congress, reported in the *Bee*, debated funding an expedition to the South Sea, to establish trade routes and exploration posts to aid the whaling industry. The French prepared for an expedition against the Turks, while the Netherlands negotiated with Guatemala about “cutting a canal to unite the Gulf

238. Joseph G. Tregle Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Study of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 208–228.

239. *Ibid.*, 220.

of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean,” a story of particular interest to New Orleans shipping merchants.<sup>240</sup> Of even greater relevance was an article on the recent English “success of combining the steam engine with the rail road,” in which “a train of loaded carriages was dragged along by one little steam engine, a distance of 25 miles within two hours.” The reporter mused, “[w]ithout in reality changing the distances of places,” this invention “would have the effect of bringing all parts nearer to each other.”<sup>241</sup>

Indeed, the emerging technology of steam-driven rail conveyance sparked entrepreneurial imaginations on both sides of the Atlantic. Its successful introduction to the trans-Appalachian West would give Lincoln the due time and the opportunity to rise professionally in both the legal and political realms.

Another issue that would play an important role in Lincoln’s future, river navigation, ran regularly in New Orleans papers. Among the stories were the damages of the spring fresh water witnessed by Lincoln, and this news:

A law has been introduced into Congress, and . . . passed by the House of Representatives, allowing the Parishes of Iberville, St. Mary, St. Martin, Lafayette and St. Landry . . . to open our navigation with the Mississippi. . . .<sup>242</sup>

That article foretold of the circa-1830s effort to clear out the Red River log jam and open up navigation throughout the Mississippi, Atchafalaya, and Red River regions—a move that would prove, in time, economically beneficial but hydrologically dangerous.

On another topic that would figure prominently in Lincoln’s future, there was this story picked up from the London *Courier*:

[A] small schooner came in [to Bahia] from the coast of Africa, with 400 slaves. . . . [S]he had originally taken on board 600 in all, male and female; but being chased by a ship of war, to prevent capture and to lighten the vessel the captain had thrown two hundred of them overboard.<sup>243</sup>

Lincoln did not have to transport himself mentally to Bahia to imagine

240. *New Orleans Bee*, May 12, 1828, p. 3, c. 3–4; May 13, 1828, p. 3, c. 2.

241. “Rail Roads,” *ibid.*, May 29, 1828, p. 3, c. 2.

242. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1828, p. 3, c. 2.

243. *Ibid.*, June 2, 1828, p. 3, c. 2.

the machinations of institutionalized slavery. He did not even have to raise his eyes from the newspaper. Practically every page abounded in runaway notices, which appeared day after day in concurrent newspapers, to the point that its subscribers almost gained personal familiarity with the fugitives. Only their degrading one-word names and physical scars are known to history, but collectively, those who chose to flee that spring may have read Lincoln's name and influenced his conscience in ways we can only guess. Their plight did affect him: "I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught," Lincoln wrote many years later, "and carried back to their . . . unrewarded toils."<sup>244</sup> Among the slaves on the ship during his New Orleans visit was (according to the masters' perspective) the "Negro woman *Nancy*," who "had the habit of selling cake . . . has a black skin, a large breast, a fearful look. . . ."<sup>245</sup> Ten dollars awaited the tender of "Kit," a 39-year-old American negro, "one of his nostrils somewhat larger than the other."<sup>246</sup> The "creole Negress named *Celestine*" despite her presumed sub-humanity, managed not only to "speak English, French, and Spanish," but to outsmart her master, who pointedly warned sailors' captains not to "harbour said slave."<sup>247</sup> (Only a few days later, a local court convicted three more black sailors of hiding a runaway on board, punishing them with an impossible-to-pay two hundred-dollar fine plus a year in prison.<sup>248</sup>) Youths such as the mulatto buckrit, the mulatto Rueben ("rather slender, but well made . . . very . . . looking") and the "creole *Negro Boy by the name of PHILIP*, aged about 9 years, who speaks French only" also took flight.<sup>249</sup> The pursuers were not solely men: Madame Rouquette of St. Charles Street in the Faubourg Tremé offered ten dollars for the return of her "creole Negress named *Catherine*; 5 feet 2 inches in height, french measure, she is of a large face, is a hawk of goods."<sup>250</sup>

Other ads were posted by runaway jailers who suspected their prisoners were runaways, and alerted city subscribers in the hope of returning them to their masters. One jail announcement from West Feliciana seemed to describe a typical rural American family of the day—"Jim, andanny his

244. Abraham Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, August 24, 1855, in *Collected Works*, 2:321.

245. *New Orleans Bee*, May 9 and afterwards, 1828, p. 4, c. 2.

246. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13, 1828, and afterwards, p. 1, c. 5.

247. *New Orleans Bee*, May 9 and afterwards, 1828, p. 4, c. 3.

248. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

249. *Ibid.*, May 9 and afterwards, 1828, p. 4, c. 3; *New Orleans Argus*, May 13 and afterwards, 1828, p. 1, c. 6; *New Orleans Argus*, May 30, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

250. *New Orleans Bee*, June 3, 1828, p. 3, c. 4.

wife, and their 2 children Margaret and Martha, [who] have on each a calico dress, red ground; Margaret has on a pair of shoes, and Martha a small head dress of coarse linen; Jim has a good cotton shirt, drab plantations, and a very good narrow brimmed hat"<sup>251</sup>—except for the fact that, legally speaking, it constituted an unclaimed-property notice. Another jail ad from Baton Rouge unintentionally impugned the very master it sought to sell by describing the detained slave as “much scarred with the whip.”<sup>252</sup> Sometimes the jailed runaways escaped again: two maroons fled the Jefferson Parish Jail near the uptown flatboat wharf around the time Lincoln and Gentry docked; one was named John, the other Abraham.<sup>253</sup> A sensitive reader like Lincoln, peering into the day-to-day workings of the institution of slavery for the first time, might have appreciated the poignancy of a story published around the day he and Gentry departed New Orleans:

A negro in Jamaica was tried for theft, and ordered to be flogged. He begged to be heard, which being granted, he asked, “if white man buy stolen goods, why he be no flogged too?” “Well,” said the judge, “so he would.” “I are den,” replied Mungo, “is my Massa he buy [s]tollen goods, he knev me [s] toolem, and yet he buy me.”<sup>254</sup>

Between the runaway alerts and the jail notices were announcements regarding the commerce of slaves. New Orleans being the South’s busiest slave marketplace, Lincoln would have been exposed to more slave trading here than in any other place in the geography of his life, even more so because springtime marked the peak of the commercial season. Most slaves changed owners via two primary paths: masters privately transacting with individual buyers, and auction houses publicly handling the transaction with a group of buyers. Advertisements for these vended privately by masters read with the same cadence and tone of a modern classified ad: basic specifications, unctuous assurances of quality, potential disadvantages couched as silver linings, and a point of contact, all set within an economy of words. A “good and pretty Negro . . . American by birth, but is perfectly acclimated to this country, is 15 years of age, and speaks the French language” went on the market directly from the home of her master, just

251. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13 and afterwards, 1828, p. 1, c. 2.

252. *Ibid.*, May 20 and afterwards, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

253. *Ibid.*, May 13 and afterwards, 1828, p. 1, c. 5.

254. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

at the time that Lincoln and Coghry landed.<sup>255</sup> A man named Justin was offered “For Sale or Hire” two weeks later, followed shortly by a deal for a “likely Negro fellow.”<sup>256</sup> One ad reads like a contemporary garage sale, except for its human chattel:

[O]n Wednesday [May] 14<sup>th</sup> . . . at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, in St. Philippe street, between Royal and Bourbon streets, near the theatre [will be sold] an assortment of Household Furniture, consisting of Beds, Tables, Sops, Looking-Glases [sic], Chairs, Silver Plate, &c. ALSO, AT THE SAME PLACE, A Family of Slaves, to wit—the father, mother, and six children. CONDITIONS—the furniture cash down, the family of slaves, to 1, 2, and 3 years, by furnishing endorsed notes bearing mortgage. . . .<sup>257</sup>

Public auction houses engaged in similarly detached and matter-of-fact language in describing slaves, and did so with far greater frequency, and a loftier sense of official sanction than individual sellers. It is not coincidental that the city's premier slave-auction house, Hewlett's Exchange, occupied the busiest intersection of the city's most prominent thoroughfare: Chartres Street,

the “Broadway” of New Orleans and the resort of the fashionable of the City for Shopping and Promenading. In Chartres Street I saw the fine people of the City. The Creole population constitute the *Fashionables*. . . Chartres Street is also the promenade of the fashionable Prostitute, who flunts along in her gaudy trappings, the subject of gaze and remark of all who resort to this famous Street.<sup>258</sup>

On the corner/lakeside corner of Chartres Street at the St. Louis intersection stood a two-story brick edifice with arched openings, a tile roof, and a stucco exterior, reflecting typical Spanish colonial and Creole style. Inside operated famous, notable Hewlett's Exchange, serving the married white male establishment all its business and pleasure needs.

255. *New Orleans Bee*, May 10, 1828, p. 4, c. 4.

256. *New Orleans Argus*, May 20, 1828, afterwards, 1828, p. 3, c. 1; *ibid.*, May 30 and afterwards, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

257. *New Orleans Bee*, May 12, 1828, p. 3, c. 4.

258. Davidson, “Journey Through the South in 1836,” 53.

Gaudy décor and ostentatious allusions to greatness, via gigantic paintings of Washington and Napoleon, spoke to the aspirations of owner John Hewlett's clientele. Here the aristocracy and the upwardly mobile gathered to buy, sell, discuss, flirt, socialize, dine, drink, gamble, and board. Everything that constituted property in antebellum Southern society—land, houses, vessels, cargo, equipment, wine, furniture, and black people of both genders and every possible age and background—changed owners at Hewlett's Exchange. (Horses, mules, and carriages, needing outdoor space, were by law auctioned on a lot located one block away.<sup>259</sup>) A diary written a few years after Lincoln's visits attests to the Exchange's importance.

Hewlett's Exchange is upon Chartres Street. It is here that "merchants do most congregate." In it [there are] auctions of slave Lots do take place from 10 AM. 3 P.M. is a scene of tumultuous confusion in which all the business and professional men of the City engage. *It seems to be the soul of New Orleans. . . .*<sup>260</sup>

Just as New Orleans ranked as the nation's busiest slave-trading city, so did Hewlett's Exchange rank as New Orleans' busiest slave mart. Visitors knew about "the Exchange"; it appeared on the antebellum tourism must-see list along with the levee, market, grave-ground, cemeteries, and quadroon balls. "He [who] does not visit it cannot [claim to have] seen all of New Orleans," wrote the previously quoted sightseer.<sup>261</sup> Many visitors bravely, if hesitantly, wandered in during the midday auction-block rituals, and some of them documented the spectacle they witnessed. Those opposing slavery, such as English abolitionist Edward Strutt Abdy, emphasized the degrading banalities of the institution:

Slaves for sale at New Orleans are publicly exposed at the mart or auction-room; the men ranged on one side, and the women on the other. Purchasers are in the habit of examining the mouth and the limbs in the same way that a horse is subjected to the scrutinising touch of the farrier. The joints are tried and turned, to see if they are strong and supple. Should the back,

259. "An Ordinance concerning the sale of horses, mules, or other animals, carriages, gigs, carts, drays, &c.," February 23, 1822, *General Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New-Orleans* (New Orleans: Jerome Bayou, 1831), 121.

260. Davidson, "Journey Through the South in 1836," 358 (emphasis added).

261. *Ibid.*, 358.

or shoulders, or any other part of the body, exhibit marks of frequent or severe flogging, the “animal” is set aside, as rebellious and refractory. Twice a week, an exhibition takes place, during the season; and the human cattle are paraded through the streets, decently dressed, and in regular file, to attract customers.

Other dissenting travelers, such as diarist James D. Davidson, drew more ambivalent portraits:

I saw a likely negro woman and her three children selling at a public auction. The mother and children wept bitterly during the sale. I pitied them. But the people here are hardened to such things, and they look upon them with indifference. I saw others sold, but they appeared to be cheerful. They were dressed up neatly for the occasion, the women with turbans and handkerchiefs upon their heads, which improve their appearance very much. They are thus marched in a line into the Streets to some public Corner, or Exchange, where they remain from day to day until sold. I was surprised to find them looking as cheerful and unconcerned as they did. . . .<sup>263</sup>

Victims of the auction block, denied the education and the opportunity to scribe their perspectives, left precious few recollections for posterity. One, eighty-six-year-old Frank Bell interviewed in 1937, seemed to explain the slaves’ apparently “cheerful and unconcerned” demeanor (which surprised Davidson) as a technique to manipulate the master-slave relationship toward the latter’s better treatment. “Yessir, I’ve seen several slaves sold,” Bell recounted:

Boy oh boy they would shout and holler and laugh cause they say if [a new] master on the farm bought them they have good manner. [But my] master . . . kept me in chains cause I’ve did it so like he want me. . . . [Master] he stay drunk and he was mean. He shoot several men.<sup>264</sup>

262. Abdy based his description on the reports of another traveler during 1833–34. Edward Strutt Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America: From April, 1833, to October, 1834* (Cambridge, England: John Murray, 1835), 3:12–13, 387.

263. Davidson, “Journey Through the South in 1836,” 359.

264. Interview, Frank Bell, by B. E. Davis, September 27, 1937, *American Slavery: A Composite Autobiography*, Second Supplemental Series, Texas Narratives, vol. 02T, 237–238.



Another slave perspective comes from ninety-three-year-old Sara Ashley, who remembers being bought at age five by an itinerant speculator named Henry Thomas and removed from her Mississippi home for the New Orleans auction block. “He buy up lots ’n’ niggers ’n’ sell ’em,” recalled Ashley.

Us family was separate. My uder two sisters ’n’ my fadder was sold to a man, I never know he name, in Alabama. I stay wid de speculator’s ’bout fo’ five ’r’ ten year. Den dey put me up on de block ’n’ bid me off. Dat was in New Orleans. I was scare ’n’ I don’t know but dey put me up dere anyway. Dey sol’ me ’n’ my two sisters to a man from de Georgy [Georgia]. I tink dey pay ’bout a ’bout an dollar’ to me.<sup>265</sup>

Another centenarian Silvia King (who was told by her masters that she was born in Africa in 1804) told an interviewer in 1937, “De ship . . . come to dis country to New Orleans an’ dar I wuz put on de block an’ sold.” She continued,

Yassum, I knows how dey done on de block. All de black wuz chained an’ all dar close wuz stripped off wen dey wuz bittin’ ’em ready fer de block. Dey all, chillun, ’n’ in min an’ in had ter stan’ on a big wooden block, lak de butcher man chops an’ saws he meat on. . . . De folks [white] wuz gwine ter buy de niggers, dey come roun’ an’ pinch you, an’ feel ob your body all ober, an’ look fer scars an’ see you got any broken bones ’fore dey buy you. Effen any ob de niggers don’t want ter take deir close off de oberseer, he git a long, black whip an’ cut ’em up hard.<sup>266</sup>

During the weeks of Lincoln’s visit, auctioneers J. Le Carpentier, Isaac L. McCoy, Tom Mossy, and others handled the slave bidding, which ran from late morning through mid-afternoon. Three slaves went on the block—“all field hands, full guarantee—as Lincoln and Gentry tied up on the dock in mid-May.<sup>267</sup> A few days later, “Gabriel, creole, aged 21 years; Mary, American negro girl, aged 4 years; and Marie, aged 18 years, with her three children, Nina, Louise, and Bastile” were auctioned via a court

265. Interview, Sarah Ashley, by F. D. Dibble, June 10, 1937, *American Slavery: A Composite Autobiography*, Second Supplemental Series, Texas Narratives, vol. 02T, 87–88.

266. Interview, Silvia King, by P. W. Davis, 1937, *American Slavery: A Composite Autobiography*, Second Supplemental Series, Texas Narratives, vol. 06T, 2224.

267. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13 and afterwards, 1828, 1.2 c. 6.

order stemming from a lawsuit by the renowned John McDonogh (later the benefactor of the city's public school system).<sup>268</sup> A probate auction the next day set four black Creoles—Francoise, Marie Rose, Josephine, and Joseph—with new master.<sup>269</sup> On May 23, another Court of Probate sale involved women who were neither Creole (Louisiana born) nor American (born domestically out of state). They were described as

Nine: an African negress aged about 70 years . . . with her two children . . . Germaine, a Congo negress aged about 60 . . . Marie, a Congo negro aged about thirty years.<sup>270</sup>

Born in Africa respectively around 1703, 1768, and 1805, these three women experienced first-hand the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade. International slave trading was banned by the United States in 1808, but it continued *de facto* to varying degrees for years afterward.

Monday's end proved to be busy at Hewlett's Exchange. On May 30, twenty-nine-year-old Mary, "a first rate cook, washer and house servant—well guaranteed," was sold. The next day, at 11:30 a.m., "A family of SLAVES," including twenty-one-year-old mulatto Henry, his nineteen-year-old wife Matilda, and their two-year-old child, came up for bids.

Henry is intelligent, speaks English and French, a first rate house servant, Matilda understands housework, nursing, a plain cook, and washing and ironing, they have been brought up in New Orleans, and are consequently acclimated.

Also for sale in the 11:30 a.m. time slot was fifty-year-old bricklayer Fortune and his wife Lydia, plus thirty-nine-year-old Byrum, who "has been employed in Soap Factory." At noon, it was seventeen-year-old Lucinda's turn. All four auctions within that forty-minute window, determining the fate of seven individuals, were handled by the same auctioneer, Isaac L. McCoy.<sup>271</sup> Seventeen-year-old Charles ("free of the vices and in all respects prescribed by the law; said negro has been ten years in the country, is very intelligent, and fit for a retail store") and forty-year-old Nane were auctioned on June 2 and 4.<sup>272</sup> Finally, on June 10, three slaves sold at Hewl-

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 1, c. 2.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., May 22 and afterwards, 1828, p. 4, c. 2.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., May 15 and afterwards, 1828, p. 1, c. 3.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., May 29 and afterwards, 1828, p. 2, c. 6; *ibid.*, May 17 and afterwards, 1828, p. 1.

<sup>272</sup> *New Orleans Argus*, May 24 and afterwards, 1828, p. 2, c. 6; *ibid.*, June 3, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

ett's, one "with a cancer on [he] nose," another "with her back broken."<sup>273</sup> If we make the conservative assumption that the *Beecher and Argus* auction ads comprehensively covered the public slave-auctioning scene, then at least thirty-one slaves named above, were traded at the corner of Chartres and St. Louis during Lincoln's visit.

We cannot place Abraham Lincoln with documentary evidence in the crowded and chaotic auction room of Hewlett's Exchange. Consider, however, the circumstances: (1) Many visitors in this era made a point of seeing famous Chartres Street, whose intersection with St. Louis Street—which Hewlett's Exchange dominated—formed the premier commercial crossroads with the great commercial crossroads that was New Orleans. (2) Visitors knew about Hewlett's, unquestionably the city's foremost slave exchange, and those who left behind journals often documented the proceedings therein, furthering its notoriety. (3) During Lincoln's 1828 visit, the Exchange hosted at least one slave trade per day, and at one point seven slaves changed owners within forty minutes, giving him plenty of opportunity to witness an auction. (4) Lincoln himself wrote in 1860 of having seen "slavery and slave markets [in] New Orleans" (more on this later).<sup>274</sup> A reasonable connecting-of-dots leads this researcher to posit that Lincoln probably visited Hewlett's Exchange and, with equal probability, bore witness to one or some of the aforementioned slaves traded there.

Other intrigues—though perhaps none as disturbing—enticed the visitor into New Orleans' narrow streets and anonymous crowds. The most notable sight of all, of course, lay one mile downriver from the flatboat wharf, where beehiving steamboats docked either side of the foot of Canal Street. May and June 1828 saw a total of 149 steamboats arrive at the Port of New Orleans, a pace of two to three per day. Farther downriver docked the great eastwise and international fleet of fully rigged ocean-going sailing ships (three masts or more), smaller and more maneuverable brigs (two masts), and one-mast schooners, of which a total of 182 arrived during Lincoln's month—over three per day.<sup>275</sup>

273. *New Orleans Argus*, May 14 and 15 onwards, 1828, p. 1, c. 3.

274. Abraham Lincoln to Alexander Hamilton Stephens, January 19, 1860, in *Some Lincoln Correspondence with Southern Leaders before the Outbreak of the Civil War*, from the Collection of Judd Stewart (New York: J. Stewart, 1909), 8.

275. Computed from *New Orleans Price-Current* compilations, reproduced in "Monthly Arrivals," 1826–29, *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (1830), unpaginated appendix.

Nearly as interesting as the shipping activity was the exotic cargo they unloaded. A Cuban schooner arriving on May 26, for example, unloaded pineapples, plantains, limes, oranges, and mangoes. These delicate tropical fruits, rarely seen upcountry, were all consigned to various local merchants in a city that would dominate the nation's tropical-fruit industry for over a century to come.<sup>276</sup> Many of those merchants operated on Levee and New Levee (now Decatur) and North and South Peters) streets, which were lined with stores of dry goods and equipment stores. Others, particularly fruit vendors, offered a vast array of foodstuffs and curios at the already famous "Creole" "French" market on Levee Street, a complex that comprised the butcher's arcade at St. Ann Street and fruit-and-vegetable stalls at St. Philip Street. For retail shops, banks, and professional offices, there were lively Canals, majestic Royal and wide-open Canal streets, as well as Common, Gravier, Camp, and St. Charles in the Faubourg St. Mary. For opulent townhouses, there were Bourbon, Royal, Condé, upper Canal, and other streets in both the Old City and St. Mary. The mansions of the Old City and St. Mary, and nearly all of faubourgs Tremé and Marigny, were interspersed with the humble cottages of the working class.

For municipal and religious structures, there were the magnificent brick-arch-around-the-edges Place d'Armes and its frontier City Hall, St. Louis Church, and rectory. What Lincoln could not have seen is the Jackson Square we know today: the renovated Greek revival-style St. Louis Cathedral, the twin bell-brick Pontalba buildings, the mansard roofs and cupolas atop the *cabildo* and *Presbytère*, and the landscaped square with the Andrew Jackson statue, all postdated Lincoln's visits by over two decades. Nor would Lincoln have seen the iron-lace galleries for which the French Quarter would later gain fame: iron-casting technology appeared in the city around the time he first visited, but did not manifest itself in frilly designs until around 1850. Illustrations in Lincoln books and ephemera commit an anachronism by graphically depicting young Abraham beneath iron-lace galleries of the French Quarter. In fact, at the time of his visits, only narrow Spanish-style balconies with simple wrought-iron finilevers and railings lined the upper floors of townhouses and storehouses.

Day trips to the adjacent countryside beckoned many visitors. New ferries offered continual service across the Mississippi to Algiers, where

276. Cargo Manifest 56, Schooner *Grecian*, from Havana, Cuba, landing in New Orleans May 26, 1828, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, 1820–1902*, microfilm M259, roll 7, New Orleans Public Library.

boat-building, boiler-making, and other shipping industries operated. That trip might have had particular appeal to Lincoln, recalling his own ferrying experience on the Ohio River. Back on the east bank, sightseers could stroll the Bayou Road out to the plantations and gardens along Bayou St. John, and the adjoining Metairie and Gentilly roads, visit the picturesque (if malodorous) turning basin of the Carondelet Canal, and investigate the famous above-ground cemeteries, which were tourist attractions then as they are now. A day trip to the Lake Pontchartrain shore—five miles straight north—became more accessible in spring 1828, as seen in this invitation, which appeared in the local newspaper when Lincoln and Gerry arrived:

Notice to Lake Bathers.—The subscriber informs his bathers, that he has repaired the lake road, and that it may now be traveled night and day without danger.<sup>277</sup>

Awaiting bathers at the lakeshore was Harvey Elkins's public bathhouse, built the previous year at the Bayou St. John outlet to offer "an agreeable Retreat from the City . . . during the scorching heat of our summer sun." Elkins extolled the brackish bay's "salubrity . . . coolness of water . . . beautiful prospect [and] fine fish."<sup>278</sup> The spectacle of Abraham Lincoln frolicking in subtropical salt water under a springtime sun is not a typical one associated with his flatboat trip to New Orleans, but it is a possible one.

So too is the scenario of his exploring the lower *banlieue*—that is, the city's downriver outskirts, comprising present-day neighborhoods of Marigny, Bywater, Lower Ninth Ward, and Armand Circle en route to the already-famous Chalmette battlefield, 12 miles away. There, on January 8, 1815, Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson and his famously "ragtag" local militia routed professional British troops, decisively ending the War of 1812 and any further English antagonism of its former colony. The enduring national fame of Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans, coupled with his current presidential candidacy and his Western origins, might well have motivated Lincoln and Gerry to visit the battlefield, as so many other visitors did. Jackson himself had campaigned in New Orleans only four months prior, marking the twentieth anniversary of the battle.<sup>279</sup>

277. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13 and 14, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

278. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of June 23, 1827, p. 11 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC; "Pontchartrain Retreat," *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (1830), unpaginated opening section.

279. "Gen. Jackson at New Orleans," *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven), February 5, 1828, p. 2.

Years earlier in Indiana, Lincoln had read William Grimshaw's *History of the United States*, which climaxes with the triumph at Chalmette. Years later, Lincoln advocated a resolution in the Illinois state legislature to commemorate "the victory of New-Orleans, and the military fame of Gen. Jackson, though he could never find in his heart to support him as a politician."<sup>280</sup>

Lincoln would have seen, heard, smelled, and tasted a level of cultural foreignness in New Orleans that he would experience nowhere else for the balance of his life. Timothy Flint described the diverse humanity a few years earlier, and, quite appropriately, included flatboatmen in the dizzying mosaic:

This city exhibits the great variety of customs, and foreigners; French, Spanish, Portuguese, Irish [and] common people of all the European nations, Creoles, all the intermixture of Negro and Indian blood, the moody and ruminating Indians, the inhabitants of the Spanish provinces, and goodly [French] of boatmen, "half horse and half alligator" . . . [M]ore languages are spoken here, than in any town in America. There is a sample, in short, of every thing.<sup>281</sup>

"Americans, English, French, Scotch, Spaniards, Swedes, Germans, Irish, Italians, Russians, Creoles, Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, and Brazilians," marveled C. D. Arfwedson of New Orleans' ethnic diversity a few years after Lincoln's visits. He continued:

This mixture of languages, costumes, and manners, rendered the scene *one of the most singular that I ever witnessed*. . . [They] formed altogether such a striking contrast, that it was not a little extraordinary to find them united in one single point. If there is a place [representing] the confusion of tongues as the Tower of Babel, it certainly is New Orleans.<sup>282</sup>

Joseph Holt Ingraham—who might have crossed paths with Flint and

280. "Remarks [of Abraham Lincoln] to the Illinois Legislature Concerning Commemoration of the Battle of New Orleans," *Illinois State Register*, January 15, 1841, in *Collected Works*, 1:226.

281. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 308.

282. C. D. Arfwedson, *The United States and Canada in 1832, 1833, and 1834* (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), 2:56 (emphasis added).

Arfwedson, bore witness to the same phenomena and came away with similar impressions:

[T]ruly does New-Orleans represent every other city and nation upon earth. I know of none where is congregated so great a variety of the human species, of every language and colour. Not only natives of the well known European and Asiatic countries are here . . . but occasionally Persians, Turks, Lascars, Maltese, Indian sailors from South America and the Islands of the sea, Hottentots, Belgians, and, for aught I know to the contrary, Symmezzans.<sup>283</sup>

So too Henry Edward Durell a decade later:

Jews and Gentiles, the Frenchman, Italian, Spaniard, German and American, of all conditions and occupations. . . . What a hubbub! what a conglomeration of strange faces, of the representatives of distinct people! What a contact of beauty and deformity, of vulgarity and good-breeding! What a collection of costumes. . . .<sup>284</sup>

While nearly all sections of the city exhibited ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious diversity, the constitutions and proportions of that intermixture varied spatially. Catholics—including white and black Creoles; “foreign French” from France or Haiti; and Spanish, Caribbean, Latin American, Italian, and other immigrants—predominated in the lower half of the Old City and the lower *banlieue*. (Only a few months before Lincoln’s arrival Spanish colonists, who had been “banished from Mexico” after its independence, arrived in significant numbers at the lower city.<sup>285</sup>) Protestant Anglo-Americans and other English-speakers, on the other hand, generally gravitated to the upper streets of the Old City, throughout Faubourg St. Mary and in the new upper-*banlieue* developments of Duplantier, Solet, La Course, and Annunciation. Area near the flatboat wharves tended to be immigrant-dominated, although the main influxes of Irish and Germans would not arrive and settle here until the 1830s–50s. Enslaved blacks, meanwhile, were scattered throughout the city profusely,” as one newspaper put it, a geography driven by masters’ desire to keep their

283. Ingraham, *South-West by a Yacht*, 1: 9.

284. Henry Didimus (Henry Edward Durell), *New Orleans As I Found It* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), 29–30.

285. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 1, 1828, p. 199 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

domestic slaves hand, and controllable.<sup>286</sup> A small number of Jews lived in a dispersed pattern, unaffiliated with a congregation—until 1828, when a leader filed for a state charter to create the city's first permanent Jewish organization. (Congregation Shangari Chassed Gates of Mercy) would also form the first lasting Jewish congregation outside the original thirteen colonies. Its charter request appeared in the local newspapers precisely during Lincoln's visit.

Visitors noticed the city's prevailing downtown-Creole/uptown Anglo-cultural geography and the intermixed patterns therein. This description illustrates the level of foreignness to which Lincoln would have been exposed upon strolling the lower city:

The number of French and of American inhabitants is roughly the same [throughout all of New Orleans]; but the French predominate in the old town, [where] almost all foreign posts speak the French language and very many of the store-keepers are unable to speak English.<sup>287</sup>

These Francophone storekeepers filled their window displays Paris-style, with a dazzling array of notions and curiosities from around the world, the likes of which a first-time country visitor could hardly imagine back home. Fine clothing, imported from Britain and quite possibly made from cotton previously shipped through New Orleans, could be bought at 50 Toulouse Street, at Newton's (soon to open at 55 Chartres), or at Theodore Nicholet Co., which also offered sundry European spirits. This being a "wine town" with a taste for fine drink, liquor dealers abounded—at 118 Royal, at the Levee, at 182 Royal, and elsewhere. Imports came from Havre, Bordeaux, and elsewhere, demonstrating the continued commercial and cultural relations between France and New Orleans. There was also locally brewed rotgut available at any dram shop, or wholesale from the main liquor store at 24 Custom House (now Iberville). Pharmacies like Bonaparte's Apothecary—an early drugstore chain with outlets at 33 and 77 Tchoupitoulas—were particularly picturesque, with long marble counters and colorful rows of mysterious remedies, half of which caused more problems than they cured.

Eateries proliferated. Gentry and Lincoln, raised on corn and pork,

286. *Daily Picayune*, "A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans," September 23, 1843, p. 2, c. 3.

287. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:235.



might have been amused by the Globe Coffee House announcing that “A fine green turkey will be dressed this day; soup ready at 11 o’clock; turtle steaks.” Among those who dined at that fancy restaurant were diplomats from England, France, Spain, Mexico, the Netherlands, Brazil, Sweden, Norway, Sardinia, Sicily, Denmark, Colombia, and Switzerland, all of whom operated consulates within a few blocks of the Globe’s upper-Chartres street locale. Exotic foods like pâté, sardines, sweetmeats, and vermicelli unloaded recently off the brig *Commerce*, were displayed for sale at 56 Gravier. Fruits in municipal markets abounded with exotic fruits and local specialties such as *gombo*, thick with fresh seafood, but unknown upcountry.

Other shops specialized in Western products, a bit more familiar to our Indiana men. Beaver hats—all the rage in this era, made from pelts harvested by mountain men in the Rockies—were displayed elegantly at 18 Canal Street and in the new store on St. Peter Street by the plaza. Kentucky and Tennessee tobacco ended up in any one of dozens of smoke shops, such as 5 Toulouse, 9 Camp, and 36 Magazine. *Graisette* (lard) and whiskey arriving from Cincinnati could be found in stores such as Charles Byrne’s, just off Canal Street, which maintained an enormous rotating inventory of incoming flatboat freight:

FLOUR, Wisconsin [sic] . . . first proof New Orleans Rum . . .  
Bacon, compound Hams, Sides and Shoulders . . . Lard, Bees  
Wax . . . Pork . . . Beef, put up at Cincinnati . . . Gin, Brandy  
. . . Rye Whiskey . . . Sugar . . . Rope, for sale by Chas.  
Byrne, No. 5 Dorsiere-st.<sup>289</sup>

Byrne’s competed with scores of other dry-goods stores; their ads filled newspaper columns as much as their shops dominated the streetscapes of Levee, Tchoupitoulas, and other riverfront thoroughfares. The name of one Canal Street store—Lincoln & Green—might have caught Abraham’s attention; inside, he could find anything from twine to mackerel.<sup>290</sup> Need a saddle? 30 Levee. Specie, mace, oil, carpenter’s plane, blamstone, liner, flags, paint, glass, or hardware? Visit Martinstein & Hall at 9 Bienville. Glassware? 46 Canal Street. How about reading material, an almanac or that new book about Columbus by Washington Irving? Benjamin Levy’s on Chartres was the city’s premier bookseller. Another, William

288. “Foreign Consuls Resident,” *New-Orleans Directory & Gazetteer* (1830).

289. *New Orleans Bee*, May 29, 1828, p. 3, c. 5.

290. *Louisiana Courier*, November 13, 1828, p. 3, c. 6.

McKean's at 9 Canal Street, advertised Timothy Flint's recently published *Geography and History of the Western States* (quoted above), in which Lincoln could have read about the very flatboating experience he was living.<sup>291</sup> Theater buffs, like aficionados, and musicians went to John Klemm's at 49 Canal, his quarters for musical instruments and sheet music, including "the admired Overture, Chorus of Highlanders Waltz and Quickstep to the Overture of La Dame Blanche," which had just played at the theater. Klemm also advertised a collection of New Songs, Variations, Rondos, &c, for the *Piano Forte*.<sup>292</sup>

Service-oriented businesses ranged from the mundane to the exotic. "Doctor Reno" announced the move of his "Sulphorous baths" from 122 St. Ann to 256 Barracks, assuring prospective clients that "[t]he room for the reception of white people is totally separate from the one fixed for the negroes." Reno also charged different prices according to race.<sup>293</sup> If you wanted your hair done, the hairdresser at 182 Chartre offered his services as well as buffalo-horn combs, false hair, beaver gloves, and exotic body perfumes. If you needed your dress jacket cleaned, dyed, or mended, visit 61 St. Peter. If you sought a license to peddle hawk, or exchange merchandise on the great roads and water courses in this state, apply at Corbin and Levee, No. 43. Try your luck at a quick fortune: F. V. Barbet's lottery office at 37 St. Louis, opposite Hewlett's Exchange, can arrange a spin of the "Wheel of Fortune." If your timepiece malfunctioned, visit the watchmaker on Chartre's Street near Mr. Blanchet's druggist store—a few doors down from Mrs. Herries' Hotel, between St. Louis and Toulouse. Locals seeking to improve their minds were invited to tour the new Jefferson Lyceum, offering language and math classes in Bernard Marigny's old plantation house in the faubourg bearing his name.<sup>294</sup>

For every business that advertised in the *Bee* or *Argus*, dozens more lined the streets or operated off the books. Other forms of street life were even less documented by the local papers. Peddlers and hawkers barely ap-

291. "Flint's Geography and History of the Western States," *ibid.*, October 23, 1828, p. 4, c. 3.

292. *New Orleans Argus*, May 28, 1828, p. 1, c. 1 and page 2, c. 6. All other shop information gleaned from editions of the *Bee* and *Argus* from mid-May through early June 1828.

293. *New Orleans Bee*, May 9 and afterwards, 1828, p. 4, c. 6.

294. Shop information gleaned from the *Bee* and *Argus*, mid-May through early June, 1828.

peared; one of the few who posted an advertisement offered a French-made “mechanical water” (puppet show) for sale at St. Ann and Condé. Real theaters regularly filed ads; the famous Orleans Theater presented *Mr. Good Fortune* plus comedy and vaudeville acts (“The Cat metamorphosed into a Woman”) during Lincoln’s visit. Later it ran *The White Lady*, an opera in three acts, followed by a two-act farce *The Despair of Jocrisse* and a three-act vaudeville *The Huzzar of Felsenheim*.<sup>295</sup> Crime also made the news, including typical urban delinquencies such as a horse stolen on Esplanade Street, a cotton bale lifted from Tencoupitoulas, a gang targeting pedestrians throughout downtown, the post office burglarized of eight dollars, and a purse snatching.<sup>296</sup>

Two special events brought crowds to the plaza in Faubourg Tremé, situated six blocks behind the Place d’Armes. There, in the building of the public square of Rampart Street, for admission of fifty cents, ran a “Panorami” picture of the *City of Paris, the Capital of the Kingdom of France*.<sup>297</sup> Ads for the traveling exhibit, featuring bird’s-eye views of Paris’ famed places and gardens, appeared in English and French for the entire length of Lincoln’s visit.<sup>298</sup> Sunday evening, May 15, saw another special event at the same place: a “Grand Exhibition of Fireworks [at] N. Orleans Square, back of the Panorama [Exhibit of Paris]. It cost one dollar (children and people of color, fifty cents) to enjoy a “grand display of Pyrotechny.”<sup>299</sup> The racial awareness manifested in that pricing policy matched a class-based attempt at segregation, in which mechanics and seamen (including flatboatmen) were encouraged to visit only on weekends so that “ladies and gentlemen” might enjoy the exhibition on other days without brushing shoulders with the working class. The policy brought an important response from one citizen, who declared himself “proud of the appellation of an AMERICAN MECHANIC.”<sup>299</sup>

This being Sunday, the exhibit and fireworks would have been joined by another noteworthy spectacle: the weekly convening of slaves enjoying their off-day with drumming and dancing. What the newspapers called New Orleans Square was known by everyone else as Circus of Congo Square, another must-see sight on the visitors’ circuit and a rare example

295. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13, 1828, p. 2, c. 6; May 19, 1828, p. 3, c. 1; May 23, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

296. Gleaned from the *Bee* and *Argus*, mid-May through early June, 1828.

297. *New Orleans Bee*, May 9, 1828, and afterwards, p. 3, c. 4.

298. *New Orleans Argus*, May 22, 1828, p. 3, c. 2.

299. “To the editor of the Louisiana Courier,” *Louisiana Courier*, May 11, 1831, page undeterminable, c. 1.

of an officially (although reluctantly) tolerated public display of African American cultural expression. The sight horrified and thrilled white visitors unaccustomed to black performance, particularly on the Sabbath, as evinced by this traveler who witnessed the spectacle two decades before Lincoln's visit:

[A] walk in the rear of the town will . . . astonish [your] bewildered imaginations with the sight of twenty different dancing groups of the wretched Africans, collected together to perform their *worship* after the manner of their country. They have their own national music, consisting of a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes, from two to eight feet in length, three or four of which make a band. The principal dances or leaders are dressed in a variety of wild and savage fashions, always ornamented with . . . the tails of the smaller wild beasts, and those who appeared most horrible always attracted the largest circle of company. These amusements continued until sundown when one or two of the city patrol show themselves with their cutlasses, and the crowds immediately disperse.<sup>300</sup>

So popular did Congo Square grow by the time of Lincoln's visit that the City Directory followed its entry for "Circus, Public Square [on] Rampart Street" with the words, "where the Negroes dance on the Sabbath."<sup>301</sup>

Combined with the migrant Parisian exhibits and the spectacular pyrotechnics, the "bewildering" and "savage" spectacle of the African slaves must have made Sunday, May 25, 1828, quite a day at Congo Square— smack in the middle of Lincoln's three-week visit. New Orleans' other public parks—the Place d'Armes in the Old City, Washington Square in Faubourg Marigny, Lafayette Square in Faubourg St. Mary, and Coliseum Square and Annunciation Square in the upper faubourgs—regularly hosted circuses, magicians, freak shows, "natural philosophers," bull-fighting, predator-versus-predator animal fights, public floggings, and executions.

Grant and Lincoln surely spent a fair amount of time promenading the levee, where refreshing breezes rolled off the river and constant shipping activity offered free entertainment. Sixty-eight ocean-going ships, fifty brigs, ten schooners, and six sloops—forming a "fleet" of at least

300. Christian Schultz, *Travels of . . . Inland Voyage Through the States of New-York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee . . . Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808* (New York: Isaac Riley, 1810), 2:197.

301. Unpaginated section entitled "Streets, &c.—Rues, &c." in *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (1830).

three hundred masts lined the Old City wharf on May 20. Port calls numbered more than a day than on the same date for any two previous years combined, and probably the most up to that point in the history of the rapidly growing city.<sup>302</sup>

Among the brigs was the *United States Bell*, which arrived on May 17 or 18. After tying up and positioning its flying bridges, the *Bell's* sailors poured rum and drink, and workers began extracting sacks, crates, and parcels. One man dipped in and out of a darkened entrance leading into the hold, as if arranging something. Finally he emerged with someone behind him. It was a black man, chained to another, he to a third, and so a fourth. The cattle comprised men, women, and children, some apparently forming families or fragments thereof. "Norfolk," mumbled some spectator from Norfolk, Virginia, the latest domestic importation from the most fertile regions of the Old South to the slave-demanding Southwest and its labor-hungry sugar and cotton plantations. One hundred sixty-nine slaves eventually materialized from the *Bell* and gathered on the levee, rubbing the painful subtropical sun from their eyes and stretching atroped limbs as much as their chains allowed. The unceremonious arrival of these African-Americans, their names lost to history, earned no more than two lines in the local newspaper: "Black United States Bell, de Norfolk, avec 169 esclaves."<sup>303</sup> Where they were taken cannot be ascertained but most likely they spent time at the slave depots in Frenshurg St. Mary or Marigny. There, they would have been prepared for the auction block, for delivery to owners already assigned, or for display on sidewalks like furniture. This practice so disturbed residents—more for reasons of neighborhood nuisance than moral degradation—that a "petition, signed by several inhabitants of the City, whose purpose is to ask the Council to take such steps as may be necessary to prevent exposing negroes for sale on the sidewalks" circulated two months before Lincoln's visit. The City Council, prioritizing for commercial interests, rejected the petition and allowed the practice to continue.<sup>304</sup>

If Lincoln caught sight of this coffle, it would have represented the single largest documented public exhibition of slave commerce during his three-week visit. The second largest group arrived toward the end of his

302. *New Orleans Bee*, May 23, 1831, pp. 2 and page 3, c. 3. The table in this article reports shipping activity for 1825 through 1831.

303. "Nouvelles Maritimes-Port de Nlle.-Orleans," *New Orleans Bee*, May 19, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

304. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 1, 1828, pp. 201–202 and 222 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

visit, when the Bayou Sara steamboat *Florida* delivered bales of cotton to various local merchants, along with “17 slaves, 2 horses, 4 oxen to D. Barrow [and] 17 slaves to J. J. Berford. . . .”<sup>305</sup> These two importations brought 203 African Americans into the New Orleans slave market. Together with the thirty-one slaves who changed owners at Hewlett’s Exchange, the numerous runaways, the hundreds hired out as peddlers and laborers, and the thousands toiling in courtyards and fields, they formed a vast cross-section of slavery for Lincoln to see.

When Lincoln rather flatboated to New Orleans in 1807, his only option to return home involved keel boats, horses, and his own two feet. Two decades of technological progress changed all that. Abraham’s trip home from New Orleans would present yet another new experience for the young man: his first long-distance voyage on a steamboat.

When did Gentry and Lincoln leave New Orleans? We previously established that the pair left Rockport around April 18 or 19 and returned in late June. Their departure from New Orleans can thus be estimated by backing out the typical time a New Orleans steamboat needed to travel 1200 miles up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers against the high water of that year. For reasons that will be explained shortly, this researcher estimates that Lincoln’s northbound steamboat trip took roughly thirteen to fourteen days. Backing this time span out of a late-June Rockport arrival puts Gentry and Lincoln leaving New Orleans sometime during the second week of June.

Now we must determine what steamboats left for Ohio River destinations in that time window. Steamboats departed New Orleans most days of the week, but the lion’s share traveled no further than Bayou Sara or Natchez. Those destined for upcountry cities like Louisville or Nashville (stopping at selected intermediary landings) numbered only one or two per week. Scanning the newspapers, we find the 400-ton *Amazon* scheduled to leave for Louisville on Thursday, June 5, at 10 a.m., the 278-ton *Florida* (the same steamboat that, days earlier, imported thirty-four slaves) departing on Sunday, June 8, at the same hour, and the 153-ton *Emerald* departing Tuesday, June 10.<sup>306</sup> Gentry and Lincoln could have boarded

305. *New Orleans Argus*, June 3, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

306. *Louisiana Courier*, June 4, 1828, p. 3, c. 4; *New Orleans Argus*, June 6, 1828, p. 2, c. 1; *Ibid.*, June 7, 1828, p. 2, c. 1. Vessel weights come from “Steam-Boats in the Orleans Trade,” *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (1830), unpaginated rear section.

any of these steamboats—or other “soft-scheduled” vessels that departed whenever their cargo holds and passenger cabins filled. It is also possible the Indiana men hitched a ride on a regional steamboat, and then transferred as they progressed upriver.<sup>307</sup>

Steaming the Mississippi rated far safer than flatboating, but did incur some risk. Just a few weeks earlier, the Louisville-bound *Car of Commerce*—which Gentry and Lincoln would have passed as they floated downriver—“burst her boiler.” The fourteen dead, twelve dying, and thirty injured people were mostly crew and deck passengers (as opposed to higher-paying cabin passengers), and undoubtedly included returning flatboatmen.<sup>308</sup> It was common had such accidents become the order of the day Gentry and Lincoln left for home, the *Louisiana Courier* published an editorial denouncing negligent engineers and firemen responsible for the many disasters.<sup>309</sup>

Few details survive about Lincoln’s return trip. In terms of expenses, a neighbor declared that Lincoln was paid “\$8.00 per month—from the time of starting to his returning home, [plus James] Gentry paid his way back on a [steam]boat. This I know.”<sup>310</sup> All Gentry’s brother recalled that Abe and Allen returned as “deck passengers,”<sup>311</sup> who traveled with minimal accommodations to keep fares low. Deck passengers often performed onboard services in exchange for heavily discounted passage. “This trade gives employment to hundreds of men,” wrote Samuel Judah in 1827:

These flatboatmen return up the river in steamboats as deck passengers which costs them nothing. Deck passengers are required to help loading & unloading.<sup>312</sup>

Returning flatboatmen made their uncouth presence known to genteel passengers, among them the dandy English traveler Frances Milton Trollope, who steamed upriver around the same time as Gentry and Lincoln.

307. Unfortunately, the “Marine Register” columns in local newspapers did not regularly record steamboat departures; the above information comes from advertisements.

308. “Dreadful Catastrophe,” *New Orleans Argus*, May 19, 1828, p. 2, c. 3.

309. “Communicated—Engineers,” *Louisiana Courier*, June 4, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

310. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, by William H. Herndon, September 12, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 114.

311. Louis A. Warren, ed. “Lincoln’s Return Trip from New Orleans,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 472, April 1938.

312. Samuel Bernard Judah, “A Journal of Travel from New York to Indiana in 1827,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (December 1921): 311.

"The deck, as is usual," she wrote:

was occupied by the Kentucky flat-boat men, returning from New Orleans, after having disposed of the boat and cargo which they had conveyed thither. . . . We had about two hundred of these men on board, but [their] part of the vessel . . . is so distinct from the cabins, that we never saw them, except when we stopped to take in wood; and then they ran, or rather lunged and vaulted over each other's heads to the shore, where they all assisted in carrying wood to supply the steam engine; the performance of this duty being a stipulated part of the payment of their passage.

Mrs. Trollope relied on a secondhand report when she passed judgment on the lads' behavior: "they are a most disorderly set of persons, constantly gambling and wrangling, very seldom sober," and sometimes thieving.<sup>313</sup> Flatboatmen themselves were less inclined to scribble their observations (much less defend their reputations), although some kept diaries of their experiences. One described his return trip from New Orleans using a phonetic orthography that captures the accent and enunciation of circa-1832 southern Indiana (see footnote for translation):

I got pasage on a large steeme boat for Evans ville on the ohio river in the state of Indiana paid 7.00 on Deck and founde my one grub and slep on aborde on a blanket of my one the boat that I was on was a large boat 8—boilers side whees name Ellen Douglas had on about 300—Deck passengers whene she left the City of New orleans . . . [They] barrid one with cillery. I left the boat in the nite wente up into town saide all nite. . . .<sup>314</sup>

Approximating Lincoln's return time requires an understanding of steamboat speeds. Journals from mid-century travelers hold clues. One comes

313. A number of military officers and civilians also on board with Mrs. Trollope met with greater approval by the judgmental daughter—until, that is, she had to suffer their table manners. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 1:22–27.

314. Translated, this passage reads, "I got passage on a large steamboat for Evansville on the Ohio River in the state of Indiana. I paid \$7.00 [to stay on] deck, and found my [group?] and slept on board on a blanket of mine. The boat that I was on was a large boat—eight boilers and a side wheel, named Ellen Douglas; had on board about 300 deck passengers when she left the city of New Orleans. . . . [They] killed one [victim] of cholera [who had become ill in New Orleans]. I left the boat in the night, went up into town and stayed all night. . . ." Wilkinson, "Footloose on the North West Frontier," 414–416.



from Adam Hodgson, who, in 1801, steamed 320 miles upriver from New Orleans against high springtime water in a period of four days, or 80 miles per day.<sup>315</sup> The previously cited circa-1832 account recollected that it took “a bout 7 Days to reach] Evansville Indiana [sic]” from New Orleans,<sup>316</sup> a 1,193-mile journey traversed at an impressive (possibly questionable) pace of 170 miles per day. An 1834 traveler wrote that “a journey from New Orleans to [Cincinnati, measuring 1560 river miles] can now be performed in twelve” days, or 130 miles per day.<sup>317</sup> An 1835 voyage from New Orleans to Evansville took sixteen days, or 75 miles per day.<sup>318</sup> Clearly, a number of variables are at play here, including the velocity of the current, currents, the size and power of the vessel, its load, the number and length of stops, and whether mechanical or navigational problems arose. If Gentry and Lincoln taken the powerful *Amazon*, which departed June 5, they might have arrived home as early as June 13, because that same vessel a few months earlier traveled from New Orleans to Louisville fully loaded and against strong current, in only nine days.<sup>319</sup> The *Amazon*, however, was exceptional and possibly expensive. This researcher postulates Lincoln used a mid-range steamboat with a more typical 90- to 100-mile-per-day travel speed, which would have covered the 1,273 miles between New Orleans and Rockport in roughly thirteen days or two weeks.

If Gentry and Lincoln departed on June 5 and steamed upriver at this speed, they would have traversed the lower coast during the first two days of the voyage. The vessel would have reached Natchez on June 11 and Vicksburg the next day, before entering the bottomland wilderness of the Mississippi-Louisiana-Arkansas upper-delta country, where “the eye of the traveler long wearied with the level shores.”<sup>320</sup> Civilization returned at Memphis, after which came the old French towns of Missouri, the Ohio River confluence around June 18, and finally Rockport on June 21. Actual dates could range two or three days on either side of these approximations.

315. Adam Hodgson, *Remarks During a Journey Through North America in the Years 1800, 1820, and 1821* (Samuel Whiting: New York, 1823), 163, 167.

316. Wilkinson, “Footloose on the Northwest Frontier,” 415.

317. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States*, 3:64.

318. This vessel left New Orleans on Tuesday February 22, 1835 at 10 a.m. and arrived in Posey County, Indiana, near Evansville, on March 9 at 10 p.m. Jacques, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 24.

319. *Western Sun* (Vincennes, IN), May 24, 1828, as quoted by Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 186.

320. Ingraham, “Dots and Lines,” 38.

The upriver trip would have given Lincoln a reversed, loftier, and more social perspective of the riverine geography. He would have viewed the landscape from a perch at least ten or a dozen feet higher than his surface-hugging flatboat. He also would have interacted with scores of fellow passengers cramped into close quarters, sharing conversation and anecdotes about their travels—quite different from what he and Gentry experienced on the way down. Both men would have brushed shoulders with peevish, pinching deck passengers like themselves, and possibly slaves recently purchased at New Orleans. We can only speculate whether this return voyage gave Lincoln his first prolonged, personal interaction with African Americans in the midst of their life-altering transition. Lincoln did describe a similar spectacle on the steamboat *Lebanon* between Louisville and St. Louis in 1841. While not part of Lincoln's New Orleans experience, the 1841 incident provides striking detail on the riverine transport of slaves, and illustrates how the intricate section of rivers and slavery informed Lincoln's formative years, in terms of moral outrage and, paradoxically, rationalization:

A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes, from different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and was fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a gut-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood—their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers . . . sisters . . . wives and children—and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master . . . ruthless and unrelenting. . . . Yet amid all these distressing circumstances . . . they were the most cheerful and apparently [*sic*] happy creatures on board. One, whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually, and the others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards, from day to day. How true it is that "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," or in other words, that He renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best to be nothing better than tolerable.<sup>31</sup>

Lincoln recalled that searing memory again in 1855, revealing his mental

321. Abraham Lincoln to Mary Speed, September 27, 1851, in *Collected Works*, 1:260.

anguish in a poignant discourse about slavery:

I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hurried down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes, and unrewarded toils; but I bite my lip and keep quiet. In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low-water trip, on a Steam Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with chains. *That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border.*<sup>322</sup>

Young men completing their first long-distance journey view the warmth of family differently upon returning home. A place like Spencer County that suddenly appears quite mundane compared to the now-expanded universe of the recently returned rookie flatboatman. Spencer County folks might likewise seem a bit more rustic vis-à-vis the characters of the Mississippi, the nabobs of Natchez, the aristocrats of the sugar coast, or the Frenchmen of New Orleans. Young globe-trotters favored the company of their worldly fraternity, those who had already “seen the elephant” at New Orleans.

Abraham Lincoln returned home in the opening days of summer 1828, two months after departure. His payment, at eight dollars per month, represented the largest lump sum he had earned to date. Being below legal age, however, “law and custom” dictated that he hand the money to his father.<sup>323</sup> Thomas Lincoln, in turn, did not hesitate to remind his son that chores beckoned around the Pigeon Creek homestead. It was as if Abraham had never left.

Falling back under father’s control was but one of Abraham’s increasingly suffocating domestic problems. Two of his stepsisters married within the extended clan—one to distant cousin Dennis Hanks, the other to Dennis’ half-brother Squire Hill. Both couples remained in the cramped Lincoln household and wasted no time in populating it with offspring. Then another Kentucky relation moved in: John Hanks, the son of Abraham’s biological mother’s uncle on her paternal side, who also came to be

322. Lincoln to J. F. Speed, August 24, 1855, in *Collected Works*, 2:320 (emphasis added).

323. Sandburg, *Prairie Years and The War Years*, 47.

known as Abraham's "cousin."<sup>324</sup> John and Dennis Hanks, respectively seven and ten years older than Abraham, would later play important roles in the flatboat story.) The Lincoln cabin grew crowded and contentious; Abraham was outgrowing it, the clan, and all of Pigeon Creek. His rumored teenage crush on Anna Roby—now Allen Gentry's wife for over a year and mother of their infant son—may have further complicated his social ties.

The mind-expanding trip to New Orleans surely played a role in Lincoln's disenchantment with home. But he could not readily return to that riverine world. The opportunities of the Ohio River lay a full day's walk away; the excitement of New Orleans lay a month away. The possibility of liberation further faded when a neighbor declined to recommend Abraham for a steamboat job until he reached age twenty-one. Lincoln grew estranged from childhood friends, and by some accounts, from his father. He became restless and antagonistic at home. John and Dennis Hanks, for their part, went out on separate trips to investigate opportunities in Macou County, Illinois.<sup>325</sup> At least five members of the Hanks family had settled there by June 1829.<sup>326</sup>

Abraham's only refuge from the banalities of home was the local post office and store, affiliated variously with James Gentry, his kin Gideon Rollins, and local merchant William Jones. That enterprise offered the company of other worldly men, with whom Lincoln could swap stories, read newspapers, talk politics, and earn some money. William Jones proved especially interesting to Abraham: nine years his senior, Jones emigrated from North Carolina and had lived in Ferris Haute and Louisville before losing his wife and children. He arrived at Pigeon Creek in 1827 with the intention to remain and prosper here. Jones carried a grander vision and lived in a bigger world than most local folk: he knew farming, business, the river, New Orleans—and politics. He talked about politics. Abraham admired Jones, who in turn recognized the youth's potential (probably hearing of his successful New Orleans expedition from James Gentry) and hired him at the store. During late 1828 and 1829, Lincoln unpacked boxes, drove a team[,] cut up Pork, chop[pe]d wood [and] clerked for

324. For lineage, see Louis A. Warren, ed., "The Relatives of Lincoln's Mother," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln Nationality Foundation*, no. 479, June 13, 1938.

325. Interview, William Wood, by William H. Herndon, September 15, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 124; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 204.

326. A petition signed by Charles, James, John, and two men named William Hanks, dated June 25, 1829, is filed in the Hanks Family Papers, Manuscript Collection, SC 644, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

Jones" in an area immediately west of Gentryville later known as Jonesboro. William Jones, a future colonel, reciprocated with modest financial compensation and intellectual nourishment, in the form of loaned books, conversation, and political mentoring. "Col Jones told me that Lincoln read all his books," recalled one neighbor many years later. Said another, "Col Jones was Lincoln's guide & teacher in politics." This being around the time of Andrew Jackson's presidential election (in which Abe could not yet vote on account of his age), there was plenty of political food for thought, around which Lincoln could formulate his political character. Locals remembered Jones saying "over & over again that Mr Lincoln laid the foundation of his Character in Spencer Co Indiana" and "that Lincoln would make a great man one of these days. . . . Said so as far back as 1805 or 29 or thereabouts."<sup>327</sup>

An awkward incident one year after the New Orleans trip yanked the maturing but not yet fully matured Abraham back into the petty world of past grievances. How he dealt with it reflected his growing sophistication as well as his lingering adolescence. Two Grigsby brothers—kinsman Aaron, the former brother-in-law whom Abraham resented for not having done enough to aid his ailing mother Sarah Lincoln—married their fiancées on the same day and celebrated with a joint "infarce." The Grigsbys pointedly did not invite Lincoln. In a mischievous mood, Abraham exacted revenge by penning a ribald satire entitled "The Characters of Ruben," in which the two grooms accidentally end up in bed together rather than with their respective brides. Other locals suffered their own indignities within the stinging verses of Abraham's poem, nearly resulting in fisticuffs. The incident both reflected and exacerbated Lincoln's growing rift with all things related to Spencer County.

Harvests and profits on the Lincoln farm served little to brighten prospects. Nor did another outbreak of mill sickness during the winter of 1828–29, which killed villagers and livestock. The only good news seemed to come from neighbors who had migrated to Illinois, namely cousin John Hanks. "I wrote to Thos Lincoln what Kind of a Country it was," recalled Hanks years later, reporting good harvests on rich alluvial soil in the central part of that state.<sup>328</sup> John convinced Dennis Hanks to emigrate, who

327. Interviews with John R. Dougherty, Nathaniel Grigsby, and John S. Houglund, September 16–17, 1865, by William H. Herndon, in *Herndon's Informants*, 127, 130, 133; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 188.

328. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 456.

in turn sold his half brother Squire Hall on the idea. Because both men had married two of Sally Lincoln's daughters, the notion of family separation arose. Should the extended Lincoln clan go two separate ways, one remaining in the mediocre circumstances of southern Indiana, the other to the promise of a new life westward? Or should they all move together? Sally Lincoln bent her husband's ear.

Reluctantly, Thomas agreed to emigrate, although it is unclear exactly when. We know that Thomas and Sally returned to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, to sell off (on September 8, 1829) their town lot, as if in preparation for a move. We also know that neighbor Charles Grigsby secured a bond toward purchasing Thomas Lincoln's farm on November 26. A few weeks later, on December 12, the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church issued Lincoln a "letter of Dismission." The subsequent cold months allowed for the selling or packing of possessions and the assemblage of oxen, horses, and wagons. On February 20, 1830, Grigsby closed on the Lincoln land for \$125, finally detaching the family from Indiana soil. With the worst winter weather over and planting season still weeks away, it was the perfect time to roll.

While regional- and national-scale issues (regular land titles and slavery) explain Thomas' decision to move his family from Kentucky to Indiana in 1816, personal matters mostly drove his decision to leave Indiana for Illinois in 1830. Or perhaps you should say his family's decision: historian Louis A. Warren noted that "some pressure must have been brought to bear (principally by Sally) to convince a fifty-four-year-old man who toiled for fourteen years to carve a homestead out of virgin forest—and earned respect as a family man, farmer, and carpenter—to start life over again on a new frontier."<sup>329</sup>

Much changed for Abraham Lincoln during the month of February 1830. On the twelfth, he reached his "majority"—his twenty-first birthday—officially making him an eligible voter, a keeper of his own wages, and an independent man. On the last day of that month, the Lincolns closed their door on their Pigeon Creek home and boarded with the Gentry family for one final evening. Next day they bade farewell and departed to the northwest. In doing so, Lincoln left behind all he had known since age seven—the friends, the memories, the dreams of working on the Ohio.

329. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 204–208; Sandburg, *Prairie Years and The War Years*, 47–48.

He would also leave behind the graves of his birth mother and full-blood sister. How things had changed since he moved in Indiana: in December 1816, the Lincoln family comprised a nuclear unit of four; by February 1830, it formed an extended clan of thirteen with a confusing array of relatives named Johnston, Hanks, or Hall—sans the two closest women of his life. Years later, Lincoln wrote about the move in the stilted, emotionally overwrought, and cautiously restrained tone typical of his autobiographical writings:

March 1st, 1830—[Abraham] had just completed his first year, his father and family, with the families of the two daughters and sons-in-law, of his step-mother, left the old homestead in Indiana, and came to Illinois. Their mode of conveyance was wagons drawn by ox-teams. . . . [Abraham] drove one of the teams.<sup>330</sup>

Toward the village of Decatur in Illinois' Macon County, the slow-moving party made its way. Two weeks of grueling passage along half-frozen muddy roads and across icy streams brought the emigrants through towns such as Tipton, Dale, Jasper, and Petersburg, in a landscape that grew increasingly rural as they distanced themselves from the Ohio River artery. That sense of remoteness changed when they arrived at Vincennes, a century-old former French colonial outpost that had recently served as capital of the Territory of Indiana. The town's position on the Wabash River, a major tributary of the Ohio, connected it with a grander realm and gave it a more worldly feel. Many Vincennes residents spoke French, practiced Catholicism, and lived in French Creole-style houses with double-pitched and hipped roofs. Vincennes even boasted a college, founded in 1801. Tradition holds that the Lincoln party stopped here for the night, Abraham taking time to view the printing press at the offices of the *Western Sun*.

Thomas Lincoln had been to Vincennes before and thus led the way. After the party ferried across the Wabash into Illinois around March 6, Dennis Hanks took the lead. Setting foot on Illinois soil, Abraham ended his fourteen years in Indiana. It would take another fourteen years before he returned, under very different circumstances.

Illinois' landscape comprised intermittent prairie and forest, with a late-winter climate little different from that of southern Indiana. The party bore north into the flat alluvial valley of the Wabash, through settlements that were in some cases larger in 1830 than they are today—

330. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:63.

Palestine, York, Dawson—and then turned northwestwardly toward the center of the state. Finally, in Lincoln's words,

[We] reached the county of Macon, and stopped there some time [to meet John Hanks, who provided temporary shelter] within the same month of March. [My] father and family settled in a new place on the North side of the Sangamon river, at the junction of the timber-land and prairie, about ten miles westerly from Decatur.<sup>332</sup>

The 225-mile journey took two weeks. Now came the grueling toil of homestead building. Lincoln continued:

Here [we] built a log-cabin, into which [we] removed, and made sufficient of rails to fence ten acres of ground, fenced and broke the ground, and raised a crop of sowing corn upon it the same year.<sup>333</sup>

John Hanks, proud of his role in enticing the Lincolns into Illinois, recalled the new homestead. It was located

10 M west of Decatur—& about 100 Steps from the North] Fork of Sangamon River & on the North side of it on a Kind of bluff—The house[s] logs . . . I cut myself in 1829 & gave them to old man Lincoln: The house on East & west—fronted South—chimney as west End. . . .<sup>334</sup>

By summer, that bluff hosted a log cabin, a smelter house, a barn, fifteen acres of planted corn, split-rail fencing, and thirty nearby acres cleared for John Hanks' brother Charles.<sup>335</sup>

Despite the hard labor, Abraham found time for intellectual engagement. One day that summer, a candidate for political office came to town and made a campaign speech on internal improvements. "[I]t was a bad

332. See William Weik, *The Real Lincoln: A Portrait* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 49.

333. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:63.

334. Lincoln went on to explain that "these are, or are supposed to be, the rails about which so much is being said, at present, which they are far from being the first, or only rails ever made by [me]," a reference to his famous campaign image as "the rail-splitter." Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:63.

335. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865-1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 456.

336. Sandburg, *Prairie Years and The War Years*, 49.



one and I Said Abe could beat it." John Hanks recalled:

I turned down a box of Keg and Abe made his speech. . . . Abe beat [the candidate] by death—his subject being the navigation of the Sangamon River. The man . . . took Abe aside and asked him where he had learned so much and what he did so well. Abe explained, stating his manner or method of reading and what he had read: the man encouraged Lincoln to . . . were.<sup>336</sup>

We do not know if Abraham specifically mentioned his 1828 flatboat voyage to New Orleans, but because this job represented virtually all of his navigational experience and what he learned on that journey related directly to irrigation improvements, it must have at least informed what he said. Many historians identify this incident as Abraham Lincoln's first political speech.

The progress enjoyed in the summer of 1830 did not last. "In the autumn all hands were greatly afflicted with augue and fever, to which they had not been used," remembered Lincoln, "and by which they were greatly discouraged—so much so that they determined on leaving the county." But weather intervened with a vengeance. It was "the winter of the very celebrated 'deep snow' of Illinois," recalled Lincoln, with blizzards, sub-zero temperatures, sickness, and limited food beginning the prairie settlers and claiming the lives of new neighbors. Three feet of snow blanketed the region between Christmas and New Year's, followed by freezing rain, more snow, and two weeks of temperatures in the teens. For employment Abraham manded a thousand fence rails for a local landowner who lived three miles away. During one commute he nearly suffered permanent incapacitation, having broken through ice and nearly freezing his feet.<sup>337</sup>

Thomas' reluctance to leave Indiana proved well founded. Illinois had indeed set the family's circumstances backward. The Lincolns plotted to relocate again once spring arrived in the wintry confinement, the dreary

<sup>336</sup> Interview, John Hanks, with William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 456.

<sup>337</sup> Lincoln, "Autobiography," Jan. 1860, in *Collected Works*, 33; Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 456; Harry E. Pratt, *Lincoln: 1809–1839, Being the Day-to-Day Activities of Abraham Lincoln from February 12, 1809 to December 31, 1839* (Springfield, IL: The Abraham Lincoln Association), 9, 220.

prospect of another move, and another cycle of land clearing and cabin building compelled the newly independent Abraham to cast his eyes to the wider world he first experienced two years earlier. His outlet was the little river flowing below the bluff, the Sangamon. Though no Ohio, the wildly sinuous tributary offered (barely) navigable passage into the Illinois River, which joined the Mississippi near the confluence of the Missouri, which lay about two days' travel from the confluence of the Ohio. Unlike the place on Pigeon Creek, this new home had offered access to the entire riverine West, just a few steps below the bluff. The only thing he lacked was an opportunity.

Abraham's salvation came in the form of a local man named Denton Offutt. In some ways, Offutt was to Illinois' Mac and Sam as many counties what James Gentry was to Indiana's Spencer County—farmer, store owner, river merchant, “a brisk and venturesome business man, whose operations extended for many miles”<sup>338</sup> by other accounts, however, Offutt “was a wild—reck[less]—careless man, not to mention a hard drinker, but nevertheless, “Enthusiastic[,] intuitive and prophetic.”<sup>339</sup> Nearly all agree he was a perennial dreamer, striving to strike rich with his most nutty scheme—the Colonel Sellers of the Line in drama,” as one historian put it.<sup>340</sup> Offutt crossed paths with John Hanks, who had settled here over two years earlier, and thought Hanks could be of use to his enterprise. “Offutt came to my house in Feb’y 1831,” Hanks recalled, “and wanted to hire me to run a flat boat for him—saying that he heard that I was quite a flat boatman in Ky: he wanted me to go badly.” Hesitant to commit until he recruited boat hands, Hanks returned to the Lincoln homestead and spoke with his two young unmarried relatives, Abraham and his stepbrother John D. Johnston. Both jumped at the opportunity. “We made an Engagement with Offutt at 50 [cents] per day and \$60 to make the trip to N Orleans,” Hanks remembered.<sup>341</sup> Divided three ways, this compensation amounts to somewhat more than the eight dollars per month plus return fare that James Gentry paid the inexperienced youth three years earlier. Lincoln's own recollection, penned in an 1843 letter, was that his experience “working on a flat boat” paid “ten dollars per

338. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 1:72.

339. Interview, William G. Greene, by William H. Herndon, May 30, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 18.

340. Logan Hay, “Introduction,” *Abraham Lincoln Association Papers* (Springfield, IL: Abraham Lincoln Association, 1931), 15.

341. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 456.

month.”<sup>342</sup> Lincoln may have envisioned an additional employment possibility upon landing at New Orleans: according to one hazy recollection, Lincoln had “the intention of staying [in New Orleans] through the winter to Cut Corn Wood.”<sup>343</sup> But first came the commitment to Mr. Offutt. Lincoln, writing in the third person years later, filled in the details:

[Abraham] together with his step-mother's son, John D. Johnston, and John Planks . . . hired themselves to one Denton Offutt, to take a flat boat from Beardstown Illinois to New Orleans; and for that purpose, went to join him—Offutt at Springfield, Ills so soon as the snow should go off.<sup>344</sup>

<sup>342</sup>. Abraham Lincoln to Martin S. Morris, March 26, 1843, in *Collected Works*, 3:319–320.

<sup>343</sup>. This particular recollection, while not unbelievable, suffers from a number of surrounding factual errors and lacks substantiation in other sources. Letters, J. Rowan Herndon to William H. Herndon, May 28 and June 11, 1851, in *Herndon's Informants*, 6 and 34.

<sup>344</sup>. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:63.