

The 1831 Experience

~ Construction launch ~ Mill dam incident ~ Secondary voyage to New Orleans ~ A change of crew at St. Louis ~ Southbound ~ Making an acquaintance ~ Arriving at New Orleans ~ In the streets, circa 1831 ~ 170 people ~ Elijah ~ Pontchartrain Railroad, the task of the town ~ The final departure ~

Exactly one year after the Lincolns departed for Illinois—Tuesday, March 1, 1831—John Hanks and Abraham Lincoln set off to meet with Daniel Offutt in Springfield to take charge of their already loaded flatboat and guide it to New Orleans. The melting of the winter's heavy snowpack made the roads impassable, so the men “purchased a large cannon,” put it directly in front of their home, “and came down the Sangamon river in it.” The departure marked the very beginning of the longest single journey in Abraham Lincoln’s life.

Paddling downstream, the men stopped at Judy’s Ferry east of Springfield to meet their third crew member, John D. Johnston, then walked into town to track down their employer. Recalled Lincoln years later, “This is the time and the manner of [my] first entrance into Sangamon County,” where he would later make his home, family, and career.¹

They found Offutt all right—at the Washburn Inn, a favorite Springfield watering hole, overly negligent of his end of the bargain. Offutt had cargo for New Orleans, and every intention of paying the men to guide it there. He just forgot to arrange the flatboat.² Grateful and probably embarrassed, Offutt negotiated on the spot to pay the threesome twelve dollars per month to build a flatboat from scratch. The unexpected complication wreaked havoc on their springtime plans, throwing off everything by six weeks. But it was paying work—and it got them away from the family. They took the deal.

A day or so later, Lincoln, Hanks, and Johnston departed for a site

1. Abraham Lincoln, “Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps,” June 1860, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:63.

2. Ever respectful of his old friend, Lincoln described Offutt’s negligence in this manner: “[We] found Offutt at Springfield but learned from him that he had failed in getting a boat at Beardstown.” Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:63. See also interview of John Hanks by William H. Herndon, 1855–1866, 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), 456.

four miles north of Springfield, at the confluence of Spring Creek and the Sangamon River. It was “Congress land,” a parcel of old-growth forest “with innumerable flat-boats growing up in their primal timber.” The men felled appropriately sized trees, hewed the logs, and floated them downriver where they could be cut into lumber. We know for certain how they cut the wood because Lincoln himself in 1860 crossed out a biographer’s assumption that they used “a whip-saw” and corrected it to “a country saw-mill,” a reference to Charles Boardwell’s steam-driven upright sawmill in the flourishing little river port called Sangamo Town.³ Timber felling and preparation probably took the men around two weeks starting the first days of March. (As work progressed—specifically on March 11—Lincoln took time to visit the Sangamon County courthouse and sign his name, as well as those of Hanks and Johnston, on a petition to fill “a vacancy in the office of constable in the Springfield district.”⁴ Although unrelated to the flatboats, this petition represents the only surviving Lincoln-signed document dating around the time of either flatboat trip. But he took the time to sign the petition, for himself as well as for Hanks and Johnston, reflecting his exceptionalism even in his consent.)

Once settled at the Sangamo Town construction site, about 7 miles north-west of the City of Springfield⁵ and a few meandering river miles below the timber-cutting site,⁵ the threesome erected “a saw-tee-shed . . . about 90 feet from the river” and “Camp . . . a Camp on the Sangamon River—done our own Looking—mending & washing.” Lincoln boarded some nights with the members of the Carman family, who operated a nearby sawmill, gristmill, and tavern. Offutt’s other employees occasionally lent a hand, among them village carpenter Walter Carman, John Seaman, a man named Cananis, and seventeen-year-old John E. Roll.⁶ Six decades

3. William Dean Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (facsimile edition of campaign biography corrected by the hand of Abraham Lincoln) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 26; Interviews, Caleb Carman and John Hanks, October 12, 1866 and 1865–1866, by William H. Herndon, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 373 and 401–57.

4. Abraham Lincoln, “Petition to Sangamon County Commissioners’ Court for Appointment of a Constable,” March 11, 1860, in *Collected Works*, 1:3.

5. Lincoln campaign biographer John Locke Scripps estimated the location of the construction site as being “near where the Chicago, Alton, and St. Louis Railroad now [1860] crosses the Sangamon River.” John Locke Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler and Lloyd A. Dunlap (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961 reprint of 1860 original), 53.

6. Interviews with William G. Greene (May 29–30, 1865), Caleb Carman (March 1887), and John Hanks (June 13, 1865), by William H. Herndon, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 11, 17, 43–44, 607.

later, Roll remembered the sight of Lincoln toiling in Sangamo Town during March–April 1831:

He had on a suit of blue jeans—if it could be called a suit. It seemed that everything was too short for him. His pantaloons lacked four or five inches of reaching the ground, and when the legs were not stuffed into his rawhide boots they were held down by leather straps which extended under his boots. He wore an old roundabout [that was a collar too short for him] and when he stooped over he showed four or five inches of his suspenders. . . . He wore a drab-colored wool hat, pretty well worn, small-crowned and broad-brimmed. . . . He was the rawest, most primitive looking specimen of humanity I ever saw. . . . tall, lanky, and as homely as he has ever been pictured.⁷

Roll's 1892 description of Lincoln's appearance complements the recollection of Caleb Carman (recorded in 1866) remarkably well. Carman also remembered Lincoln acting "funny—joky—humorous—full of yarns—stories . . . frequently quoting poetry—reciting prose like oration. . . ." Abe also cooked and "played seven up in the Camp after dark."⁸ John E. Roll concurred, saying how local folks would seat themselves on a log bench (which became known as "Abe's log" outside Shepherd's gristmill) during mornings, noon, and evening breaks, to hear Lincoln's jokes and stories.⁹ This being but days before the journey began, we have every reason to believe Abraham looked and acted this way while traveling to and within New Orleans. In a separate interview, Carman offered his impressions of Lincoln just before departure:

. . . a very intelligent [*sic*] young man[.] His conversation very often was a bout Books—such as Shakspear & other histories. . . . He Talked about politics Considerable. . . . he was a John Q Adams man. . . . He was opposed to Slavery & said he thought it a curse to the world. . . .¹⁰

Built for a substantial load by an experienced crew of four, the flatboat

7. "Lincoln's Flatboat: Story of the Craft Told by One of Its Builders," *Daily Inter-Ocean* (Chicago), May 15, 1892, p. 2.

8. Interview, Caleb Carman, by William H. Herndon, October 11, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 373.

9. "Lincoln's Flatboat," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, May 15, 1892, p. 2.

10. Interview, Caleb Carman, by William H. Herndon, November 30, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 429.

measured larger—"80 feet long 8 to 18 feet wide," recalled Hanks—than the one Lincoln helped Allen Gentry build three years earlier. Otherwise it followed the standard flatboat typology and construction procedure. *Lay down the transverse girders . . . lay girders across and join them . . . lay and join two end-girders at bow and stern . . . lay and join streamers across the girders . . . lay plank across the streamers and pin them down to form the floor . . . caulk all seams.*

While this labor progressed, Lincoln directed some co-workers to excavate a dugout canoe from a sizeable log. Many flatboats carried along such ancillary craft, handy to run small excursions and bank-side errands without committing the entire flatboat. Once the canoe was completed, two workers—John Gaman and Walter Carman—jumped into the unstable craft a bit too enthusiastically, causing it to shoot out from beneath them and sending both into the turbulent early-spring waters of the Sangamon River. Lincoln urged them to swim toward the overhanging branches of an old elm tree—such vegetation encroached the Sangamon—into which they clung, shivering and straining against the current. The gathering crowd instinctively conceded [to] Lincoln . . . the leadership in the effort to save the perishing men. Abraham instructed a looker to seize a log and tie a rope to it. A youth named Jim Dorrer mounted the improvised lifeboat as the group slackened the rope and eased Dorrer and the log into the current. He too fell in, adding another victim to the stretched elm branches. Once the log was retracted, Abraham himself mounted it and drifted out toward the elm tree. His legs submerged in freezing water, Lincoln grasped the men and secured them to the log, then signaled the villagers to haul the foursome to shore. All arrived safely. "The incident," recalled John C. Roll, "made a hero of Abe all along the Sangamon and the inhabitants never tired of telling of the daring exploit."¹¹ Oddly, this incident, although recollected by Roll in compelling detail, goes unmentioned in numerous interviews with other people involved in the construction. Whether the dugout canoe ever made it to New Orleans (where it would have been called a "prolog") is unknown.

Once everyone dried off and warmed up, work continued on the flatboat. The frame was now ready to be flipped into the water, probably with the same ropes used in the rescue. After the splash into the Sangamon came the detail work: *Cut studs and insert them into the gunwales . . . build walls over the studs . . . insert longer studs into the girders . . . build raf-*

11. "Lincoln's Flatboat," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, May 15, 1862, p. 2.

ters atop the studs . . . cover the rafters with roofing planks.¹² One difference between this vessel and Lincoln's Rockport flatboat was the cargo hold: this trip would carry livestock to New Orleans, necessitating corrals and troughs. We also have some design details recollected by John Hanks:

[We] went down by a kind of ladder through a scuttle hole [into the sleeping quarters]; We used planks as Sails—& Cloth— . . . sometimes— . . . people Came out & laughed at us. . . .¹³

"When the boat was completed," recalled John E. Roll, "it was shoved into the river, [which] created something of a stir in the town."¹⁴ The men next loaded sacks of corn, sides of bacon, barrels of pork, and their personal supplies—and possibly Offutt's live hogs, which would be joined by others farther downriver.¹⁵ The men enjoyed one last night in Sargano town (either Sunday or Monday), entertained by an itinerant juggler and magician. By Tuesday, April 19, 1831, Offutt, Lincoln, Hanks, Johnston, and some hitchhikers were poling down the winding Sangamon River—"as a sort of flo[ating Driftwood]," Lincoln later described, "on the great freshet produced in the thawing of that snow."¹⁶ Teen-aged Philip Clark, in the vicinity at the time, recalled many years later that he and his father "were embarking in the business of flat-boating," which was a sort of craze [at the time], when one day in the midst of our work we observed a tall, lank, lean stranger coming . . . toward us . . . He did not smile; he was so earnest all the while that his very earnestness impressed me. . . . [H]e was the saddest and most earnest man I ever knew. . . . I . . . never have forgotten the impression of sorrow he made on me then."¹⁷

The first town on their journey was New Salem, about sixteen miles

12. John Calvin Gilkeson, "Flatboat Bundeing on Little Raccoon Creek, Park County, Indiana," ed. Donald F. Carmony and Sam K. Swop, *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 4 (December 1964): 309–322.

13. Interview, John Hanks, with William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 457.

14. "Lincoln's Flatboat," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, May 15, 1892, p. 2.

15. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, June 13, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 43–44.

16. As recollected by William G. Greene from a June 1864 conversation with President Lincoln, in an interview with William H. Herndon, May 29, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 12. A "fresh" (or "freshet," as Lincoln wrote it) referred to the high late-winter or springtime waters that flushed out the tributaries, often the only time when flatboats could navigate them down to the main channel.

17. "Stories of Lincoln's Youth by Uncle Philip Clarke," *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), April 4, 1897, p. 9, as originally reported by the *Chicago Times-Herald*.

downriver. This tiny bluff-top settlement had been formed only two years prior, when the state legislature granted James Rutledge and John M. Camron permission to build a mill dam there. The dam comprised two elongated wooden trough-like structures built across the Sangamon slightly above normal river height, which were then filled with rocks to withstand the current. The obstacle slowed the water velocity, raised the height (the partially or completely obscuring the dam), increased the head, and diverted a focused outlet of water off to the side. Thus, Rutledge and Camron positioned their water wheel, using the energy to run a sawmill and a gristmill. The successful project attracted woodcutting and corn- and wheat-grinding business from the adjacent countryside, which motivated a storekeeper, a saloonkeeper, a grocer, a cooper, and other seasonal shopkeepers. Houses followed, and by the time Lincoln and crew approached on April 19, New Salem constituted an identifiable village.¹⁸

Less identifiable were New Salem's navigational hazards. With the winter snowpack entirely melted away and river levels dropping, hidden obstacles such as sandbars, debris, and other impediments drew closer to the surface. Around early afternoon on April 19, Lincoln's flatboat suddenly halted to a stop with a sickening thud. Bad news: it was the Rutledge-Camron dam. Getting stuck on a soft sandbar brought a flatboat to a dead stop, but at least did not threaten the vessel and freight. Getting lodged on a hard, linear feature could crack the hull, soak the cargo, bankrupt the enterprise, and damage the dam.

Bow raised, stern lowered, and gunwales landing dangerously, Lincoln's flatboat resisted initial efforts to pry it off the obstruction. Water, meanwhile, seeped into the lower flanks, and cargo slid toward it. River levels continued to drop, leaving the flatboat fast on the mill dam and the end over the dam being lowest. The water ran to that end.¹⁹ The eighty-foot, multi-ton vessel, six weeks in the making and barely ten miles into its journey, threatened to come to pieces. Boss Denton Offutt did not know what to do. Townspeople came to say.

Finally a leader emerged. Village William G. Green recalled see-

18. Benjamin P. Thomas, *Lincoln's New Salem* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974 reprint of 1954 original), 6–9.

19. Statement, Mentor Graham, as recorded by James C. Howard, "Biographical Notes," May 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Lincoln Papers).

ing a striking six-foot-four stranger take charge over his well-known but befuddled employe. Lincoln commandeered an empty flatboat and poled it into alignment with the incapacitated vessel. The men then swiftly transferred the cargo, a grueling chore under any circumstances. Once they sufficiently lightened the load, the partially inundated “boat sprang upwards.”²⁰ Water sloshed to the bow end, where Lincoln had augured a hole in the floorboards. The water drained out, the load lightened, and with further prying and coaxing from the crew, the flatboat finally slipped past the dam and safely into the river.²¹ The men gingerly poled both vessels a short distance downriver, and after inspecting their craft’s river-worthiness, reloaded the cargo.

Lincoln’s decisiveness and ingenuity saved the expedition. The incident set the voyage back by one full day, but serendipitously introduced Lincoln to New Salem in a way that would influence the next six years of his life. It also provoked his thinking about how to improve navigation on Illinois’ innumerable secondary waterways. Many New Salem residents, for their part, were suitably impressed by the singular young man and his cleverness. Offutt, for one, knew he had found one of the employes. Greene, for another, would develop a lifelong personal and professional friendship with that stranger.²² Lincoln himself focused on only one thing: getting this thrice-delayed flatboat out of the wretched Sangamon into the broad Illinois and capacious Mississippi, and on to New Orleans.

One final stop remained, incurring further delay and also comic relief. Offutt, ever scattered in his affairs, “bought thirty odd large fat live hogs, but found difficulty in driving them from where they purchased them to the boat.” Lincoln himself ruefully recalled what he termed “the ludicrous incident,” in which Offutt

thereupon conceived the whim that he could sew up their eyes and drive them where he pleased. No sooner thought of than decided, he put his [his] hands, including [me], at the job which [we] completed—all but the driving. In their blindness and confusion they could not be driven out of the lot or field they were

²⁰ Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, June 13, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 44.

²¹ William G. Greene’s account of the mill-dam incident differs on one point. “The boring the hole in the boat,” Greene said, “is a story made out of whole cloth—Offutt suggested it and Lincoln said he could not see it [working].” Interview, William G. Greene, by William H. Herndon, May 30, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 21.

²² Interview, William G. Greene, by William H. Herndon, May 30, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 17; see also 751.

in. This experiment failing, they were tied and hoisted on carts to the boat.

The “hogs Eye a fair” demonstrates what can go wrong when a “rattled brained” employer makes hasty decisions and level-headed employees are obliged to follow them. Needless to say, Lincoln resisted. He frowned on the unnecessary suffering of animals, and knew all too well how cranky hogs became when frightened. By Hanks’ account, “Abe said I can’t sew the Eyes up [but instead] held the head of hogs whilst Offutt did [sew] up their Eyes.”²⁴ By another account, a local offered to spare Lincoln his eye-sewing chore in exchange for plowing his fields.²⁵ The hog seller seems to have been a man named “Onstott” (presumably Henry Onstott, New Salem’s cooper), indicating that the incident happened in town shortly past the mill dam.²⁶

The nitpickers who boated down from Sangamo Town departed at New Salem. This is also the point at which the numerous eyewitness reports of Lincoln’s flatboat experience come to an end. From this point on, the 1831 Illinois trip to New Orleans is nearly as poorly documented as the 1828 Indiana trip, in which we had to triangulate off at the clues and set them against contextual evidence to establish the trip’s chronology. Accounting for the various delays and the distance traveled so far, this researcher judges that the crew finally set out from New Salem in earnest for New Orleans on Thursday morning, April 21, 1831. Lincoln himself recollected the departure as occurring “in the last days of April.”²⁷

Unlike the 1827 trip, in which Lincoln clearly stated that he and Allen Gentry journeyed alone to New Orleans, we are less confident about the composition of the 1831 crew. The words in the Lincoln-edited William Dean Howells biography read,

23. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:64.

24. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, June 13, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 44.

25. Coleman Smoot to William H. Herndon, May 7, 1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*,

254. Villager Mentor Gentry described Anton Offutt as “rattle brained” in a letter to William H. Herndon, May 29, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 9.

26. Interview, Coleman Smoot, by William H. Herndon, May 7, 1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 254.

27. Abraham Lincoln, “Communication to the People of Sangamo County,” *Sangamo Journal*, March 9, 1832, in *Collected Works*, 1:6.

Denton Offutt . . . took Lincoln into his employment. [Offutt] was now about sending another flat-boat to New Orleans, and he engaged Lincoln, and the husband of one of Lincoln's sisters, *in his step brother John D. Johnston*, together with their comrade, John Hanks, to take charge of his craft. . . .²⁸

Lincoln, Hanks, Johnston—but what about Offutt? As owner of the boat and cargo, and he captain the vessel? Howells' three pages on the subject fall short of confirming whether Offutt joined his employees, but do suggest that this was *his* operation. For example, the opening paragraph introduces Offutt as “a backwoods Ulysses . . . ruling the boatmen who manned his craft, and defying the steamboat captain that swept by the slow, broad-horn. . . .” This imagery positions Offutt as captain of the flatboat, at least figuratively. Later sentences refer to “Denton’s ark” and “the flat boat for Offutt,” and even refers to the dam incident as “the [Offutt’s] disaster.” Lincoln himself confirmed Hanks and Johnston’s participation, but remained ambiguous regarding Offutt’s involvement in the voyage. During this boat-eraze acquaintance with Offutt, who was previously an entire stranger, he conceived a liking for [m]²⁹ One recent secondary history holds that Offutt “traveled south more comfortably on a river steamer [and] met Abe, John Hanks and the Johnston boy in New Orleans to oversee the sale of his cargo” but does not cite evidence for this rather illogical arrangement.³⁰ We do, however, have ample clues from relatives and voyagers along the Sangamon River that suggest Offutt indeed joined the flatboat crew to New Orleans. New Salem resident John McNamar hazily recalled that “[Lincoln] went down to New Orleans with Offut [Offutt].”³¹ Another New Salemite, James Short, clearly recalled that Lincoln “went to New Orleans with Denton Offut in a flat boat, in 1831” and that “Offut came back from N.O. in 1831. . . .”³² Robert B. Rutledge, also of New Salem, remembered he first met Lincoln in 1831, the latter having just returned with Offutt from New Orleans with whom

28. Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 26.

29. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:64.

30. Thomas Keneally, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Lipper/Viking, 2003), 13. What makes this information dubious, as we will see later, is the inclusion of John Hanks among the crewmates in New Orleans.

31. John McNamar to William H. Herndon, June 4, 1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 259.

32. James Short to William H. Herndon, July 7, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 72–73.

he had gone on a flat boat as bound to that city.”³³ Biographer William Herndon, who communicated extensively with these and other eyewitnesses, positioned Offutt as a full participant in the trip.³⁴ This researcher concurs, viewing Denton Offutt, Abraham Lincoln, John Hanks, and John Johnston as the original crewmembers of the 1831 journey. We presume that Offutt, as owner and employer, captained the vessel, and, if experience bore any influence on the pecking order, Hanks probably ranked second, Lincoln third, and Johnston last. Lincoln’s actions on the Sangamon, however, may have raised his rank in Offutt’s eye at Hanks’ expense. In fact, at least one informant specifically considered Lincoln as “Capt. of Flat boat [that] belonged to Denton Offutt. . . .”³⁵ We should remember, of course, that rank and pecking order among crewmembers existed mostly in an informal sense on an expedition like this one.

“We then proceeded down the Sangamon,” recalled Hanks. The river flowed northward through undulating terrain for about fourteen miles before joining with the Salt Creek—where, according to Hanks, the men loaded the final drove of hogs (presumably with eyes wide open). The Sangamon then veered straight west through a narrow valley, whose flatlands allowed the enlarged waterway to meander wildly in a “zig zag course, form[ing] complete peninsulas,” as Lincoln described it.³⁶ In fact, the little river wended for over sixty sinuous miles within its thirty-mile-long valley.³⁷ Weakening current, logs, and snags slowed the expedition to speeds barely faster than a brisk walk. Overhanging canopy made nighttime too dark for safe travel. “[T]he water was lower than it had been since the breaking of winter in February,” recalled Lincoln, which made “drifted timber a constant obstruction.”³⁸ The aforementioned Philip

33. Robert B. Rutledge to William H. Herndon, November 1, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 371.

34. William H. Herndon and Jesse William Veihl, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Belford, Clarke, & Company, 1889), 76.

35. Statement, William G. Greene, as recorded by James Q. Howard, “Biographical Notes,” May 1860, Lincoln Papers.

36. Lincoln, “People of Sangamo County,” *Sangamo Journal*, March 9, 1832, in *Collected Works*, 1:7.

37. Most of the Sangamon’s natural meanders were eliminated many years later through channel straightening and levee construction. They are preserved, however, in the Mason, Cass, and Menard county lines, which follow the old channel perfectly. I used these boundaries to map and measure the river as it flowed during Lincoln’s day.

38. Lincoln, “People of Sangamo County,” *Sangamo Journal*, March 9, 1832, in *Collected Works*, 1:6.

Clark, who flatboarded down the Sangamon alongside Lincoln's vessel, recounted interesting details from the shared experience:

[M]y father, myself, and William McLeane, with the boat steerer Sam McKee, joined [Lincoln and Clark's operation]. There was danger of the snags and we all tied up at night and built a fire and enjoyed ourselves socially. Lincoln told me he thought he could better his situation, as he had no liking for the flatboat business. He thought seriously of settling in Walnut hills, a place not far from Beardstown. But . . . Lincoln abandoned this idea. . . .

During this trip I became a well acquainted with Lincoln as one young man well could with another. His conversation was just as to draw out information from his companions. He was at all times, even in the cheerless times, aspiring to better knowledge and better position.³⁹

Traveling at a tedious pace of about twenty-five miles per day, the crew probably reached the labyrinth of lakes and marshes littering the floodplain of the Illinois River three full travel-days later, in the late afternoon or early evening of Saturday April 23. Hanks: "[w]e] got to the Ills"—then eight miles downstream, “passed Beardstown,” a one-year-old but nevertheless bustling river port that served as a popular flatboat stop.⁴⁰ Philip Clark claimed the trip to Beardstown took seven days, but he started out farther upriver and included numerous delays in that estimate.⁴¹

Reconstructing the trip from here requires an estimation of speed. Unlike the memorable river conditions of 1828, the Mississippi in 1831 flowed at rates only somewhat above that of a typical springtime high. Reports at New Orleans on March 26 held that “the Mississippi has risen six inches” but “was yesterday eighteen inches below high water mark” (presumably set in 1828). The river stabilized at that level at least until April 18. By May 14, it had risen only six inches, remaining or not below the high water mark.⁴² These levels equate to roughly 4.2–5.2 miles-per-hour surface velocities with peaks in the 5.5 to 6.7 mph range.⁴³

³⁹ “Stories of Lincoln's Youth,” *Springfield Republican*, April 4, 1897, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, June 13, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 44.

⁴¹ “Stories of Lincoln's Youth,” *Springfield Republican*, April 4, 1897, p. 9.

⁴² *New Orleans Price Current*, as reported in *City Gazette & Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), April 7, 1831, p. 2 and April 14, 1831, p. 2, and in *Baltimore Patriot*, May 4, 1831, p. 2 and May 27, 1831, p. 2.

⁴³ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “River Velocities at New Orleans, LA. Related

Given this information and lacking any clues to the contrary, this study views the flatboat drifting downriver at an average speed of 4.75 m.p.h., compared to 5.5 m.p.h. in 1828. As argued previously, nocturnal flatboat travel presented more risk than reward, and most (though not all) flatboatmen responded accordingly. However, because the crew constituted four veteran navigators, this study assumes an additional two hours of total travel time per day on top of the twelve hours allotted for the two-man rookie expedition of 1828. This is not to suggest that Offutt, Banks, Lincoln, and Johnson set out regularly at 6 a.m. and docked at 3 p.m. rather, to account for all stops, delays, port calls, pre-dawn starts, late night stops, and perhaps even an entire day of stoppage or entire night of travel—all averaging out to fourteen hours of 4.75-mile-per-hour movement totaling to 66.5 river miles daily.

This study also assumes that the 1831 expedition spent less time “wintering” and more time traveling straight to New Orleans than the 1828 voyage. That earlier trip was a small amateur enterprise with two very young men traveling alone; the 1831 trip, on the other hand, constituted a large and more professional operation, including a captain who owned the cargo and paid the employees. They also had a longer trip ahead of them and some had families waiting back home. All four had already sunk more time into this job than they originally planned. The fact that squealing hogs were on board meant that they extra day cost extra feed and incurred additional risk. This flatboat expedition had every reason to get to market swiftly.

Setting out from Beardstown on Sunday morning, April 24, Lincoln might have rejoiced at the Illinois’ wide and straight channel, compared to the tortuous Sagamon. By next morning, the river’s alluvial valley narrowed from about ten miles to under three in width, while the adjacent bluffs rose in elevation. Some towered nearly four hundred feet above the river; others presented dramatic white cliffs topped with full-canopy hardwood forests. A dozen or so tiny villages, their houses numbering in the single or double digits and their populations barely reaching three digits lined the scenic banks, each dipping into the riverine lifeline with a dock or landing. In floating down the Illinois River, Lincoln at this point followed the exact route of French Canadian René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle. One hundred forty-nine years earlier, La Salle confirmed the Mississippi’s relationship with the Gulf of Mexico and claimed the river

to the Carrollton Gage,” http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/eng/cuhd/velo_no.asp (visited February 14, 2009).

basin in the name of King Louis XIV of France, initiating a colonialization process that eventually led to the founding of New Orleans in 1718.

Sometime on Monday afternoon, 84 miles downriver from Beardstown and 160 total river miles since New Salem, the crew would have noticed a particularly spectacular alignment of south-facing cliffs. The topographic landmark—the most rugged terrain Lincoln had seen to date—signaled the approaching Mississippi River fork. The confluence doubled the water volume but did not radically alter the nature of the river. The valley then broadened, as if in expectation of another tributary. On their left was the free North and nearby Alton, Illinois; on their right lay Missouri, Lincoln's first exposure to a slave society in what over a year. Eighteen miles downriver, that next tributary arrived: the Missouri River, slightly smaller in volume than the Mississippi but amazingly muddy, almost opaque, bearing the topsoil of the unmapped far western frontier. The contrast struck travelers on the river. "The Mississippi is remarkable for the clearness of its waters, which are of a light blue," went a typical account of the era;

The Missouri, on the other hand, is described as being nearly as thick as pea soup, and of a dirty muddy whitish color. . . . The surface of the Mississippi, above the junction, is generally clear of driftwood, while that of the Missouri is all covered with half-burnt logs, trees with their branches torn off, and great rafts of floating islands of timber . . . sweeping and whirling along at a furious rate.⁴⁴

Mud meant sediment, and sediment meant sand bars and islands. Together with logs and debris, the now-enlarged Mississippi grew potentially dangerous. We have no record of Lincoln's navigation skills from either the 1828 or 1831 trips, but we do have a recollection of "Captain Abe" piloting a flatboat down this same stretch of river around 1835. It comes from an old friend named Stephen W. Carrison of Sullivan, Indiana:

I went down with him [to St. Louis] twice, and the first time we found the Mississippi an angry flood. We tied up for the night just after entering the big stream. We had intended to float awhile in the evening, but the torrent of waters made us land-lubbers feel a little nervous and Mr. Lincoln decided to take no chance. He directed us to steer for a certain safe place,

44. "The River Missouri, in North America," citing Basil Hall and others, *Saturday Magazine* (London) 7, no. 206 (September 19, 1835): 108.

and just as the craft rubbed against the bank, rope in hand, he jumped ashore to make the boat fast. He never would let anyone else do this. When it was necessary to tie up, he was always the first ashore. The boat was heavy and he wanted to be the judge of how much slack the cable should have to prevent an accident.⁴⁵

The incident evinces Lincoln's sense of judgment and responsibility.

The surrounding landscape at this point—April 24–25, 1833—constituted prairie land [intermixed with] forest, in which there were many plantations. In the midst of it there was a Catholic chapel, this being a former French colonial region. Another visitor described the scenery as pretty fully, [with] green-leaved timber, oaks, and various nut-bearing trees [with] climbing plants mounted over them, wild vines, and ivy. Tiny outposts of French origin, sprinkled with structures with double-pitched hip roofs and airy Louisiana-style galleries, appeared here and there. Chief among the old French towns was nearby St. Charles, with one thousand inhabitants, who nearly all belong to the Catholic faith.⁴⁶ Indian mounds peeped up elsewhere along the riverbank. The plume of smoke began to appear on the horizon, accompanied by the reverberating din and clatter of a big city. It was St. Louis, Missouri, marking the 211th river mile from New Salem. They were halfway to the Ohio River confluence and roughly one-eighth of their way to New Orleans.

St. Louis in this era served the trans-Mississippi frontier in the same manner that Pittsburgh a generation earlier served the trans-Appalachian frontier: as an intermediary destination, as supply center, as jumping-off point. With nearly 8,000 residents in a county of more than 14,000 (including 3,000 blacks, mostly enslaved), St. Louis formed the largest population center in the region. Its urban footprint constituted “one long main street, running parallel with the river” for nearly two miles, “from which several side streets run to the height behind the city.” Two-story houses of brick,

45. “Garrison’s Prediction: Death of Abraham Lincoln’s Friend Recalls a Prophecy Made by the Old Man of the Lake,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 30, 1899, p. 4.

46. James Stuart, *Three Years in Iowa, America*, (Edinburgh and London: Robert Cadell and Whittaker and Company, 1833), 2:356.

47. Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, *Travels Through North America, During in the Years 1825 and 1826* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1828), 2:98–99.

stone, or wood and clay “in the Spanish taste, resembling the old houses of New Orleans,” lined the main street, each with terraced gardens extending toward the river.⁴⁸ There, along the riverfront, docked a respectable fleet of flatboats and steamer boats, transporting standard Western produce as well as iron, lead, and fur coming out of the Missouri backcountry and the Rocky Mountains. *This looks familiar*, Lincoln might have thought. Others would have agreed: St. Louis reminded many visitors of another Mississippi River city. One traveler spelled it out:

St. Louis is a sort of New Orleans on a smaller scale; in the same places are to be found a number of coffeehouses [saloons] and dancing rooms. The French are seen engaged in the same amusements and passions that formerly characterized the creole of Louisiana. . . . The majority of the inhabitants of [St. Louis] consists of people descended from the French, of Pennsylvanians, and foreigners of every description—Germans, Spaniards, Italians, Irish, &c.⁴⁹

Whether Lincoln and crew took a few hours to explore this interesting urban environment is unknown. We do know for certain that they stopped at least briefly, but not necessarily to explore. Relating one of the few particulars of the second New Orleans trip, Lincoln himself wrote:

Hanks had no wife or children, but having a family, and being likely to be detained from home longer than at first expected, had returned back from St. Louis.⁵⁰

What happened en route between New Salem and St. Louis that suddenly convinced John Hanks that he should return home to his family? Certainly the entire gambit with Offutt had cost Lincoln, Johnston, and Hanks more time than expected; if Offutt had reached the flatboat on March 1 as originally planned, all four would be well on their way *back* from New Orleans by this time. But each employee had numerous opportunities to quit earlier and closer to home. Lincoln might have treated Hanks generously in the above recollection, perhaps forgiving his cousin a case of workplace embezzlement, after all, knew Offutt the longest and personally introduced Lincoln and Johnston to him, positioning himself second in the expedi-

48. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:342; Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 2:97.

49. Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are Described in a Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1828), 84.

50. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works* 4:63–64.

tion's hierarchy. But Lincoln's mill-dam acumen and heroism helping the three men in the logjam elevated Abraham in Offutt's eyes, possibly displacing Hanks to a tertiary position in the pecking order. Hanks, in this speculative scenario, may have grown sullen and disenchanted with the expedition and asked to disembark at the next major steamboat stop under the guise of family matters.

Alternatively, perhaps Hanks departed for health reasons. One informant recalled that "Part of the Company got Sick which Caused us and their Return Back again," although the corrupted memory is tainted by factual errors.⁵¹ Where precisely the crew dropped off Hanks is unknown, if the St. Louis riverfront were anything like other Western river cities, flatboats docked upriver from steamboats, which generally monopolized the wharves in the heart of town. Given the size of St. Louis in 1831, flatboats probably landed in the vicinity of today's Eads and Martin Luther King bridges.

Hanks' St. Louis departure left a crew of three to navigate a fairly large steamboat for another 1,400 miles. His exit adds confidence to our argument that Offutt indeed participated in the expedition, because if he had not, the enterprise would have been left with a skeleton crew of two. More significantly, the departure prevents Hanks—our most loquacious informant about Lincoln's second voyage—from having anything more to experience on the trip, and nothing to remember about it decades later when Lincoln became famous and Herndon arrived in 1865 for his interviews. *Yet Hanks had plenty to say about the remainder of the trip, including some of the most striking and influential statements about what Lincoln saw in New Orleans.* More on this important matter later; for now, we take Lincoln's word that Hanks indeed waved farewell at the St. Louis dock around April 25–26 and never accompanied Lincoln in New Orleans. Hanks headed back to Illinois and would not see Lincoln again for two or three years.

Whatever the reason for Hanks' departure, Lincoln loved his cousin and thought him an honest and good man all his life.⁵² He also genuinely liked Denton Offutt, the captain, as evidenced by their lifelong association. Lincoln's relationship with the other crewmember, stepbrother John

51. J. Rowan Herndon to William C. Herndon, May 28 and June 11, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 6 and 34.

52. This is Herndon's view on the relationship between Lincoln and Hanks. Phillip Shaw Paludan, "Lincoln and Negro Slavery: I Haven't Got Time for the Pain," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 27, no. 2 (2006): 11.

D. Johnston, was less congenial. Twenty years old at the time of the 1831 journey, Johnston first came into Abraham's life in 1820, when Thomas Lincoln guided his new wife Sally Johnston and her three children, including nine-year-old John, from Kentucky to Indiana. The two step-brothers grew up in close proximity but were never particularly close. By some accounts, Thomas favored his new stepson over his biological son; by other accounts, Johnston demonstrated laziness and unreliability. Lincoln himself later reprimanded him for "uselessly wasting time" and being "an idler;" Johnston accused Abraham of neglecting his aging parents. The two step-brothers shortly thereafter suffered a fairly serious falling-out.⁵³ Nevertheless, in their early adulthood they got along well enough to work together frequently, culminating with this flatboat trip.

The Mississippi below St. Louis flowed in a fairly straight channel running through a narrow bluff-lined valley. The sturdy stone edifices of Jefferson Barracks, the premier military outpost in the region, formed the first landmark below the city. Some miles downriver, through an "alluvial bottom, environed by high bluffs," came the town of Merculaneum, known for its nearby lead mines. Veterans of his country might have pointed out to a first timer like Lincoln the odd structures protruding from the summits of the bluffs. They were shot towers, from which molten lead was dropped to form ammunition for artillery. Other protrusions were natural, such as a famous Tower Rock, a limestone island long used as a landmark by river travelers. Subsequent towns like Ste. Genevieve and Cape Girardeau might have struck Lincoln as dead-ringers for Louisiana's sugar coasts with their "very singular appearance, from the unusual structure of the houses, they being chiefly of wood, low, and almost surrounded with porches"—typical French Creole gallery houses.⁵⁴ People of

53. One relative described Abe and John's relationship in guarded terms: "I think Abe did not love John more than he deserved," he wrote. "John thought that Abe did not Do a Nuff for the old people [and therefore] they Be some Enimes for awhile. . . . I Dont want to tell all the thing that I [know] it would Not Look well in history I say this Abe treated John well. . ." Dennis F. Hanks to William H. Herndon, January 26, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 176. See also David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 33, 152–153, 622, and Louis G. Warren, ed., "A. Lincoln and J. D. Johnston—Step-Brothers," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 964, September 29, 1947.

54. Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Emigrant's and Traveller's Guide to the West* (Philadelphia: H. S. Tanner, 1834), 243.

French Canadian ancestry, as well as German Redemptioners and American emigrants, predominated.

On the fourth day after departing St. Louis, adjacent bluffs briefly drew close to the channel, then suddenly yawned open to a wide alluvial expanse, allowing the Mississippi to meander lazily. Offutt would have recognized the changing terrain: ahead lay the Ohio River confluence. Three years earlier Lincoln negotiated this great fork from the opposite branch; today he sailed on the muddier, over-volume Mississippi as it joined the clearer, higher-volume Ohio. After the flatboat shot through the torrent and into the greatly enlarged lower Mississippi River, all three crew members found themselves in familiar terrain, over 400 miles from home and 1,200 miles from New Orleans. The date was Monday, April 29, 1831.

Temperatures turned unseasonably cold in May, even to the threesome penetrated deeper into Southern latitudes.⁵⁵ Another change materialized subtly, as they cruised silently along the bank. Eddies that normally accumulated treacherous tree trunks were free of debris. Logjams numbered fewer. Less vegetation hung over the banks. What they were witnessing was one of the first major human interventions in the nature and flow of the Mississippi River. Since the previous autumn, Superintendent of Western River Improvements Capt. Henry Miller Shreve—longtime riverman and navigation advocate, oversaw the specially equipped steamboats *Helopolis* and *Libimedes* in removing 2,000 logs, planters, and sawyers from the 1,000 river miles between the Ohio River confluence and the Louisiana deltaic plain. Along an overlapping 500-mile portion, Shreve's men cut overhanging trees to prevent them from becoming future navigation obstacles. The captain pointed out numerous advantages to this work, among them the following:

Flatboats navigating the Mississippi river, from the mouth of the Missouri to New Orleans, now float at night with as much safety as they do in the Ohio river, which means their average is now made in one half the time it was three years ago.

55. The *New Orleans Price Current* reported on May 14, "The weather has been, for a length of time, very cool, and unusual for the season." *New Orleans Price Current*, as reported in *Baltimore Patriot*, May 27, 1831, p. 2.

56. Henry M. Shreve, "Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: Annual report of work done in improving the navigation of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers for the present year, ending 30th September 1831," as reproduced in *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), December 17, 1831, p. 2.

Perhaps Lincoln and crew did exactly that—travel at night—upon encountering Shreve's cleared river below the Ohio confluence. Lacking hard evidence, however, this researcher leans toward a more conservative adjustment of increasing their daily travel time to sixteen hours from the originally presumed fourteen. This equates to 76 miles' progress per day. The remaining reconstructed chronology reflects this velocity adjustment.

Beyond the cleared debris, Lincoln would have experienced only incremental differences between the river scapes of 1828 and 1831. *April 30: New Madrid, Missouri*. The river flowed at lower levels this spring, opening up more bankside vegetation and sandbars. Landings that were inundated three years ago would have functioned normally now. *May 6: Cahasaw Bay, north of Memphis, Tennessee*. Populations would have been slightly higher in this region; forests would have been further cleared, new plantations would have sprouted in their place.

An interesting meeting occurred at one of these plantations. As Lincoln and crew tied up near Crenock in the Arkansas Territory, across the river from Memphis, the owner of the adjacent plantation inquired if they would chop some wood. "Abe, the supercargo [the crew member in charge of the freight], sprang in and helped," earning some extra money and apparently impressing the planter sufficiently to gain his acquaintance. The planter was Col. William D. Ferguson (1800–61), allegedly once a boy-soldier in the Battle of New Orleans, next a sheriff of Crittenden County and later a state legislator. Years afterward, then came Colonel Ferguson, while in Washington, sought out Congressman Lincoln and later president-elect Lincoln and "renewed the old acquaintance," at which time "they had a chat about old times and the present price of cordwood."⁵⁷ This little-known incident, if accurate, sheds light on the nature of social relations Lincoln established with locals during his flatboat voyages. It challenges the general impression that he traveled anonymously through the South, and invites speculation about other relationships and friend-

57. As reported in the *Memphis Appeal* and carried by the *Sun* (Baltimore, MD), March 18, 1861, p. 4; see also Margaret Elizabeth Woolfolk, *History of Crittenden County, Arkansas* (Marion, AR: Margaret Elizabeth Woolfolk, 1991), 140–141. Embellished versions of the incident appear in two twentieth-century articles, "Abe Lincoln Once Lived in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette*, July 4, 1927, and "Lincoln's Visit to Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette*, Magazine Section, February 7, 1931.

ships he might have formed. What makes the story credible is that Ferguson, a Southern planter who owned forty slaves and presumably did not idolize Lincoln as a presidential candidate, spoke of the encounter before Lincoln settled into the presidency (specifically in March 1861) and well before his post-assassination immortalization.⁵⁸ That chronology allays suspicions that Ferguson, like other acquaintances of Lincoln's youth, concocted the story to write himself into history. Details on the encounter, however, are murky: it could have occurred during the first trip in 1828, or on the return leg of either trip. This researcher judges that it most likely occurred during his downriver 1831 trip, because an 1861 article relating this story specifically mentions a flatboat (rather than an overboard steamboat) and uses language that implies the flatboat's crew comprised more than two men, with Lincoln as "supercargo," higher in the crew's pecking order than in the 1828 trip.

The river poled out of Greenville, passed Memphis within an hour, and continued downriver into the winds of the Mississippi. A zoo of plain. *May 5: Arkansas River confluence.* After two days, the topography on the eastern horizon that dissipated after Memphis started to reappear. *May 7: Vicksburg, first of the Mississippi bluff communities.* Cities in this prospering region showed the most marked change since 1828, having spread their hilltop footprints, erected higher structures, and extended their riverine landings by noticeable degrees. The river had shifted slightly, meandering more broadly in some areas, cutting off meanders in others. "The pilots on our Western rivers steer from *point to point* as they call it," Lincoln explained many years later, "settling the course of the boat no farther than they can see . . ." ⁵⁹ So too steered he, arriving to Natchez, Mississippi, around May 8. It was here that, according to Leonard Swett (whose personal recollections of Lincoln were published in 1889), "a negro came very near smashing the head of the future emancipator of his race." Swett explained

The boat one night was tied up to the shore and the crew asleep below. A noise being heard Captain Lincoln came up, and as his head emerged through the hatchway, a negro, who was pilfering, struck him a blow with a heavy stick, but the point of the stick reached over his head, and struck the floor beyond

58. 1850 Federal Census, State of Arkansas, County of Crittenden, Schedule 2—Slave Inhabitants, listed under slave owner William Ferguson.

59. Abraham Lincoln, as quoted by Donald, *Lincoln*, 15. Lincoln used this river analogy to explain his Reconstruction plan to James G. Blaine.

... thus lightening the load on his head, but making a scar which he wears always, and which he showed me at the time of telling this story.⁶⁰

This Natchez story, which lacks substantiation in any other source, probably represents a faulty recollection of the Louisiana attack upon Lincoln and Gentry in 1828. Nevertheless, Swett's first-person memory of Lincoln personally pointing out his scar and explaining its origin is worthy of note.

The next day found the crew near the confluence of the Red River. Here the Mississippi wended quite differently than in 1828. Capt. Henry Shreve was part of his charge to improve Western river navigation, had for a few months earlier cut through a meander loop known as Burch's Bend. "It will be the main channel of the river next spring," Shreve predicted (meaning spring 1832), "and shorten the distance [from 24 to 28 miles]."⁶¹ We cannot say whether the cut-off was sufficiently passable in May 1831 for Lincoln and crew to use it, but we do know that complex hydrological processes in the Red, Blue, Atchafalaya, and Mississippi rivers were already being transformed by Shreve's actions. Over the next eight years, Shreve's meander-cutting and logjam-clearing successes, while greatly beneficial to navigation interests, would enable the Atchafalaya to gain gradually more and more of the Mississippi's water volume over the next century. It would take a Herculean engineering effort, completed a century after Lincoln's presidency, to prevent the Atchafalaya from seizing so much of the Mississippi's water as to leave New Orleans on an elongated, useless, undrinkable-brackish-water bay. Lincoln in 1831 would have been an eyewitness to Shreve's work in progress.

May 10: pass Baton Rouge, the U.S. Barracks, and into the Louisiana sugar coast. Growth of this season's sugar cane would have lagged about one month behind what Lincoln witnessed in 1828, on account of the same severe winter that brought deep snow to his home in Illinois.⁶² There is no direct evidence suggesting that Officer Lincoln, and Johnston "lingered and traded along the sugar coast." Gentry and Lincoln did three years earlier, although their barrels bore cargo—which was sold regularly

60. As recollected by Edward Swett, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, ed. Allen Thorndike Rice (New York: Great American Review, 1889), 461–462.

61. Shreve, "Ohio and Mississippi Rivers," in *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 17, 1831, p. 2.

62. "Sugar Crops," *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 5, 1831, p. 1, c. 4.

to planters as food for slaves—raises the possibility. Likewise, some live hogs may have been sold along the rural sugar coast where they could be husbanded and fattened up more easily than in an urban environment.

A flatboatman's diary described later in the 1830s offers an idea of how Lincoln might have demarcated his progress downriver from Baton Rouge: "Patrick's Sugar Farm . . . Bayou Place Mine . . . Mr. Laws Sugar Farm . . . Bayou Gou Landing [near present-day White Castle] . . . Bayou La Fourche and Donaldsonville . . . Hamptons Plantation . . ." Shortly below the Hampton property, Lincoln surely would have recalled and perhaps strived to identify his attack site from the 1830 trip with Allen Gentry. Forward: "Bonnet Quay [Carre] Church . . . Destrehan Point . . . the Red Church . . . Landed at the fair famed City of New Orleans [sic.] Here at last[!]"⁶³

We consult flatboat-docking statistics to help narrow down the likely date of Lincoln's second landing in New Orleans. Whatinger reports, as previously discussed, have been lost for this era. So we must look instead to the *Maritime News* columns in the only three newspapers fully retrievable today (on microfilm), the *New Orleans Bee*, *Louisiana Courier*, and *Mercantile Advertiser*. While the competing dailies do not report identical data, all three clearly depicted a surge in flatboat arrivals during the second week in May, specifically May 7–16, with a mutually reported peak of thirty-one flatboats on May 11 (see graph, "Flatboat Arrivals to New Orleans May 1831").⁶⁴ Figures for the first week of May are half the daily rate of the second week, while daily arrivals for the last two weeks of the month drop mostly to zero. In total, the *Bee* reported 223 flatboats and one barge arriving to New Orleans in May 1831, of which 91 percent arrived before May 16. The *Courier* in the same period enumerated 147 flatboats and one barge, with 99 percent arriving before mid-month. The *Advertiser* counted 159 flatboats and one barge, of which 94 percent arrived before mid-month. This good news brings confidence to our hypothesis that Lincoln arrived around May 12, 1831, coincidentally close to the third anniversary

63. William S. Ward, *Diary [of Flatboat Trip from New Albany, Indiana, to New Orleans, Louisiana, 1839]*, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 2009.0139, p. 64–69 (hereafter cited as THNOC).

64. These dates reflect when the information was posted in newspapers; they usually postdate the actual arrival dates by one to two days.

of his initial arrival in New Orleans.⁶⁵ Total river distance from New Salem, Illinois, to New Orleans, Louisiana, amounted to at least 1,627 and up to 1,700 river miles, depending on hydrological conditions.

Unfortunately there is bad news. All three newspapers identified Tennessee, Kentucky, and Alabama as the flatboats' exclusive origins, and listed only cotton and/or tobacco as their freight. The sole exception was that one source, which came from Opelousas, Louisiana, bearing cotton. We see no arrivals specifically from Illinois or generally from "the Western country," nor any with cargoes of corn, ham, and hogs. This information does not undercut our argument. The very fact that the three newspapers reported differing data suggests that this was not an exact science. The absence of flatboat registrations originating from rapidly developing states such as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi suggests that whoever tabulated these data might have engaged in overly presumptuous or sloppy aggregations. Likewise, it is almost unthinkable that only cotton and tobacco arrived by flatboat the entire month (although it is possible that some flatboats traded their Western securities for those standard commodities while en route to New Orleans).

With abundant and reliable evidence that Lincoln departed New Salem around April 21, this researcher feels confident that the second-week-in-May surge in flatboat arrivals, as reported by three New Orleans newspapers, indeed includes Abraham Lincoln's expedition. The vessel's origin and cargo may have been simply missed or ignored in the brief and generalized maritime reports published in those newspapers.

What went through Lincoln's mind upon landing? Second visits to impressive places generally yield more subdued and sophisticated responses than initial encounters. Familiarity replaces mystery; expectations are already set; mental narratives are established; new stimuli and observations are processed with respect to those antecedents. Giddiness and naïveté give way to nonchalance and savvy; that which surprised and shocked now hardly raises an eyebrow. Lincoln had already "seen the elephant," and, as Offutt was that much more of a regular visitor, the crew knew where to go, how to dock, how to handle the wharfmaster and dockside characters, and what to expect in the streets beyond. Lincoln may well have viewed this experience as the second of many to come like the Gentry and Offutts of his world: respectable farmer-merchants who commercially interacted with New Orleans annually.

65. Research by author, "Maritime News" columns, *New Orleans Bee* and *Louisiana Courier*, late April through early June, 1831.

The location and nature of flatboat docking in May 1831 did not differ markedly from Lincoln's 1828 experience. A few minor aspects, however, deviated. The significantly lower river stage would have opened up more sandy patches along the uptown flatboat wharf. The wharf itself, and the urbanization behind it, would have expanded upriver by a number of blocks, practically fusing with new development in the Jefferson Parish faubourg of Lafayette across Felicite Street. Had the crew unloaded pork, they would have dealt with a meat inspector as well as the dues collector before receiving permission to sell. We do not know the fate of the live hogs (victims of the eye-sewing incident on the Sangamon). Either they were sold or exchanged en route, or ended up at any one of New Orleans' numerous *abatiments*.

Given Offutt's impetuosity, Lincoln's judiciousness, and Johnston's relative obscurity, we can imagine the three manifesting their respective traits in executing wharf-side tasks: Offutt seemingly in command and calling the shots, Lincoln patiently offering counsel and eventually doing the heavy lifting, Johnston quietly lending a hand in unloading, selling, cleaning up, and dismantling the vessel. Apparently other boatmen lingered in cleaning up the wharf space, because that very week, Mayor Poirson announced that anything left unattended on the levee or batture (except iron and stone ballast) would be sold at public auction.⁶⁶

During the third week in May, the threesome completed their job and were now footloose in the big city. Temperatures remained unseasonably cool, and strong winds swept in from the north. One crewmate recalled thrilling details of Lincoln's actions "the first time we arrived in New Orleans:"

As we had attended to our business and our first purchases made by Lincoln were books and surveyor instruments, and, instead of running around town to see the sights, he would remain in his boarding-house engaged in reading or telling stories to the boarders, who pronounced him to be remarkably gifted in that direction.⁶⁸

66. *Louisiana Courier*, May 12, 1831, c. 4, c. 2.

67. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 19, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

68. "Lincoln's Friend, John Hanks: A Garrulous Old Man's Reminiscences," *New York Times*, June 7, 1881, p. 2.

Unfortunately, we must dismiss this interesting information because its source, the verboten John Hanks, was not present to witness it. Hanks' propensity to embellish is addressed in an upcoming discussion.

The same chilly weather that forced Lincoln, Offutt, and Johnston to bundle up at higher latitudes now spared them the discomforting heat and humidity of the subtropics, with "temperatures being nearer that of *March than May*." It was perfect weather for walking. Initial steps toward the head of the port would have presented the Illinois men with an awe-inspiring sight of 67 ocean-going ships of three masts or more, 63 barks, 42 schooners, 22 steamboats, 4 sloops, and probably around 200 flatboats. During May 20-22 alone, 31 ocean-going vessels arrived, roughly a third of which came from Liverpool; the remainder came from northeastern, Caribbean, European, and African ports. "[P]robably at any other period," declared a local newspaper, "such a great number of vessels has never been seen in New Orleans."

Banter circulating among boatmen that week told of the upside of port bustle. Last week, for example, the well-known steamboats *Posa* and *Hunter* collided and exploded upriver; five of the thirteen missing were deckhands—returning flatboatmen.⁶⁹ More recently, right here in New Orleans, occurred another violent boating incident. A sheriff positioned at the lighthouse on Lake Pontchartrain spotted a small boat rowing away from the shore. He called out to its crew to return for inspection, but for whatever reason, they continued to sail away. Deputies headed a craft to pursue them, but the sheriff had a different resolution in mind. He leveled a musket at the men and fired, yielding "a very melancholy occurrence." The incident represents the many dangers lurking behind the outward magnificence and seemingly smooth operation of what was, all too often, a rough, tough, violent port city.

Just past the flatboat wharves were two traveling exhibits drawing much attention. On Tchoupitoulas between Boydras and Girod operated a mechanical puppet show of "seventy-five splendid figures which have the motion of life," enacting an event of the recent past relevant to New Orleans: the 1814 signing of the Treaty of Ghent.⁷⁰ One block away, at Girod

69. *New Orleans Bee*, May 23, 1831, p. 3, c. 2.

70. "Lamentable Catastrophe!" *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 23, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

71. *Louisiana Courier*, May 12, 1831, p. 3, c. 1 and May 14, 1831, p. 3, c. 1. The May 14 article indicated that the youth was gravely wounded, possibly mortally.

72. "Mechanism," *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 23, 1831 and afterwards, p. 1, c. 3. The Treaty of Ghent aspired to end the War of 1812, two weeks before the Battle of New Orleans truly ended it.

and Commerce near the steamboat levee, ran a display of a future technology relevant to the city, name, and Lincoln himself: “EXHIBITION. RAIL ROAD STEAM CARRIAGE,” blared a local newspaper:

This locomotive steam carriage is [built] upon the same principle which will eventually be adopted [on] the numerous rail roads now in progress [across the] country. . . . It has been built for the purpose of dispelling the doubts which have existed as to the practicability of propelling a carriage by steam. . . .⁷³

The steam locomotive exhibit ran throughout spring 1831, increasing the likelihood that an intellectually curious and mechanically inclined visitor like Lincoln would have made the twenty-five-cent investment to inspect the marvel. He would see and learn more of railroads later in his New Orleans journal.

A walk inland brought visitors to the commercial crossroads of the city, namely the intersection of Chartres and St. Louis streets. Standing prominently, on the lakeside/dw river corner was Hewlett’s Exchange, busier than ever as the city’s premier auction house during an era—the early 1830s—when the reported “largest slave market in the South . . . was particularly active.”⁷⁴ Transactions in John Hewlett’s gaudy saloon, which was also a saloon, brought a steady stream of two valued resources to the attention of bidders: land and human labor, both of which were legally categorized as real estate. Within steps were twelve of the city’s fourteen notaries public, ready to notarize whatever deals emerged from the Exchange.⁷⁵ One diagonal block away were clustered most of the city’s largest banks, eager to offer financing. Around the corner was the office of the influential *New Orleans Bee*, which granted extensive coverage to the proceedings at Hewlett’s and profited from the ad revenue. A glance at any May newspaper would have given Lincoln a schedule of auctions slated clear into July—always at Hewlett’s, always at noon, never on Sundays.

Slaves imported from the Upper South and West arrived into the

73. “Exhibition. Rail Road Steam Carriage,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 17, 1831 and afterwards, p. 4, c. 2.

74. Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan B. Pritchett, “The Domestic United States Slave Trade: New Evidence,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 459.

75. “Notaries Public for N. Orleans,” *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (New Orleans: John Adems Paxton, 1830), unpaginated.

city's slave market at an average price of ninety-two per month in 1831 (in addition to local and regional slaves), and at much higher rates during the springtime busy season.⁷⁶ Many, if not most, ended up before Hewlett's auctioneers. As soon as the city of Lincoln arrived, thirty-two-year-old Lucy went to the block, her master assuring suspicious bidders that she was being sold "only because her present owner has not use for her services." Retta, "good seamstress, pastry and plain cook," came with similar assurances.⁷⁷ Subsequent days saw twenty-six-year-old Charles and twenty-three-year-old Rosa and her son, "guaranteed against all vices and diseases provided against by law," endure the ritual. Bidders were assured that the "colored girl Jane . . . can be had on trial before the sale," as if to convince potential masters that she qualified for her own enslavement.⁷⁹ The parade of auctions at Hewlett's Exchange picked up right around the time Lincoln commenced to explore the city. *May 17*: "a quartered man named Adeline . . . creole, good cook and house servant," with his child Thira.⁸⁰ *May 18*: Louisa, who "has had the small pox."⁸¹ *May 20*: Patsy, her infant boy, and twenty-five-year-old Mary.⁸² *May 21*: Ned and Jane.⁸³ *May 24*: Mary, on terms of one fourth cash down and four months credit;⁸⁴ *May 25*: Matilda, "a milkmaid and humble disposition," and Juliana, "active, intelligent . . . and fully guaranteed."⁸⁵ *May 26*: "[T]he negro wench Julie, Cecile, a mulatto, with her five-year-old child; Louisa with her two sons; and teenaged Gabriel."⁸⁶ *May 28*: Henry, Louisa, Tom, and Lydia, "first rate American cook."⁸⁷ *May 31*: "[L]adies dresses and plaiters [braiders], seamstresses, cooks, carpenters, painters and blacksmiths."⁸⁸ *June 1*: Dafney and "Ali, an African negro woman, about 30 yrs. of age, with

76. A local newspaper reported that 1,011 new slaves arrived between October 17, 1830, and November 17, 1831. The importations undoubtedly were concentrated during the winter and spring months. *New Orleans Bee*, November 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

77. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 14, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

78. *Louisiana Courier*, May 11, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

79. *Ibid.*, May 13, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

80. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1831, p. 4, c. 4.

81. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1831, p. 3, c. 4.

82. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1831, p. 3, c. 4.

83. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1831, p. 3, c. 7 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 20, 1831, p. 5, c. 6.

84. *Louisiana Courier*, May 21, 1831, p. 3, c. 4.

85. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1831, p. 3, c. 7 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 24, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

86. *Louisiana Courier*, May 11, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

87. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1831, p. 3, c. 7 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 28, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

88. *New Orleans Bee*, May 31, 1831, p. 2, c. 4. These skillful slaves were not offered at Hewlett's but at the operation of "R. Salaun, Broker and Exchange Broker," located on "Royale, between Hospital and Barracks streets."

her two children Juliette 9 years of age, and Matilda 2 years of age. . . .”⁸⁹ Also on June 1: “a one-year-old child, a ‘black girl called Aimeé, 24 years of age, a cook and laundress. She has been 7 years in the country.—Another black wench, Louisa, 10 years of age, Houseservant and somewhat of a washerwoman.”⁹¹ June 2: George, Abram, Carey, Sarah, Horton, Emily, and her two toddlers Nancy and Mary.⁹² June 3: a mulatto named Hammond and a cook named Celia.⁹³ June 3: Francis, Jacques, Philip, Augustus, Venus, Heloise, another Heloise, Caroline, Polly, and Bellony (“not honest”). “Almost all these slaves are creoles” explained the master, “and are, with the exception of [Bellony], good negroes. . . .”⁹⁴ June 4: Honoré, Cimée, and Louise. June 6: “negro wench named LOUISIE, aged about 50 years” and “Another negress named Mary.”⁹⁵ June 6: “Two male—two valuable female servants, aged 18 and 24 years . . . sold in consequence of the owner having no use for them this summer. . . .”⁹⁶ June 7: “Sophie, a Congo negress, aged about 37 yrs.; Fide, a creole negress . . . Pognon, a creole negress . . . with her two children and ‘Pau’ negro, aged about 76 years.”⁹⁷ Also auctioned on this day were Micah, John, Zenon, Charlot, Pauline, Desire, Manon, and Tené ranging in age from fifteen to thirty-five and described variously as “an american negro,” “a mulatto,” a “creole negro,” a “creole girl,” a “black boy,” a “black girl,” “an African negress,” and “an american wench.”⁹⁸ Harriette, a baby, and the African negro woman Aline with her children Juliette and Matilda (who apparently had not drawn an acceptable bid when they were initially offered on June 1).⁹⁹ Also on June 7: Fifty-five slaves from a St. Charles Parish plantation, ages ten to sixty, described in the same taxonomy as above but with the additional categories of “a creole mulatto,” “an african negro,” “a creole sambo,” “a sambo creole (inferior).” They included Tom, Louis, Jesse, Ned, Azle, Maximin, Robert, Bob, Adie, James, George, Dick,

89. *Louisiana Courier*, May 31, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

90. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

91. *New Orleans Bee*, May 31, 1831, p. 2, c. 6.

92. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 31, 1831, p. 6.

93. *Louisiana Courier*, May 31, 1831, p. 3, c. 7 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 31, 1831, p. 6.

94. *Louisiana Courier*, May 18, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

95. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

96. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1831, p. 3, c. 4. The ad represented a for-sale by-owner offer rather than an auction at Hewlett’s Exchange.

97. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1831, p. 4, c. 6.

98. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 1, c. 2.

99. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1831, p. 2, c. 6 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, June 1, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

Sam, William Chien, Laurine, Henry, Gros John, Joe, Baptiste, Prosper, John, Raphael, Jean Baptiste, John Trot, Victoria, William Johnson, Daniel, Valentine, Alexander, Peter Hall, Pierre, Yoke, Prudent, Gautier, George, Gabriel, Mina, C. C. L., Helene, Rose, Azein, Michel, Jean Baptiste, Carisse, Hannah, Nancy, Henriette, Caroline, Josephine, Georgette, Adamine, Marie, Sophie, Francoise, Old Sophie, and Ester. Most were field hands and cart drivers, reflecting their plantation (rather than urban) origin, and presumably their destiny.¹⁰⁰ *June 8*: Charles and “about 10 SERVANTS, amongst whom are house servants and field hands. . . .”¹⁰¹ *June 9*: Sally and child Peter,¹⁰² along with Julien, Tom, Foa (well acquainted with the business of a [sugar] refinery), Pierre, Tom, Gregoire, Solomon, Thomas, Daniel, and Francois. “All of the above are intelligent and handy at all sorts of work.”¹⁰³ *June 11*: Henry.¹⁰⁴ *June 14*: “A negroess named Sophia, aged about 50 years, sickly and various.”¹⁰⁵

In all more than 170 people—seven per day, six days a week—were sold at Hewlett’s Exchange during the span of Lincoln’s visit. Sellers were vended privately in nearby commercial offices. Brokers Doyle & Brown, for example, offered (along with land and lottery tickets) three women and two children for sale from their Conti Street office. A few steps away, P. F. Dange’s firm retailed a teenager, while James Saul of the Bank of the United States offered a man and two women along with furniture, horses, and a riding harness. Slaves who failed to sell in such private venues usually ended up on the public auction block at Hewlett’s.

For every six unique auction advertisements that ran in local newspapers, one runaway-slave notice appeared—and appeared, day after day, for weeks. While auction ads boasted slaves’ physical strengths and capabilities, runaway notices emphasized their irregularities and abnormalities. Irritated masters yoked together anatomical and behavioral descriptions in unexpected, often times jarring, and consistently dehumanizing ways. What results is a lexicon of degradation, a parlance that rejects black membership in humanity in terms of deformity, disability, ugliness,

100. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 2–3.

101. *Louisiana Courier*, June 6–7, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

102. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

103. *New Orleans Bee*, May 16, 1831, p. 1, c. 2.

104. *Louisiana Courier*, June 9, 1831, p. 3, c. 7.

105. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1831, p. 4, c. 1.

106. “For Sale—A black girl,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 11, 1831, p. 3, c. 3; “Negroes for Sale,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 14, 1831, p. 3, c. 1; “Servants, Furniture, Horses & Gig,” *ibid.*, May 23, 1831, p. 3, c. 5.

misogyny) while paradoxically praising the writers' observations to the contrary (acknowledging slave intelligence, attractiveness, even beauty). One woman, for example, was described as

an American [bl]ack French, called GRACE or GRACEY. . . . She has goagle-eyes; has a scar behind her neck, another on her left ear, and a deformity of the thumb nail. . . . She is very intelligent and may probably pass herself off as free. . . .¹⁰⁷

Another, a "mulatto French," had, according to her master, a "light complexion, [a] good looking countenance, [and] a burn on her breast."¹⁰⁸ Celeste, something of a free spirit, was described as "a good looking young woman . . . light complexion . . . a little inclined to be fleshy . . . wears ear-rings . . . is fond of dress and has many fine clothes . . ."¹⁰⁹ George was "a light mulatto, rather a decent appearance [except for] a piece of skin later on his nose."¹¹⁰ Sally was "good looking" but "lost one of her upper front teeth . . ."¹¹¹ Thurington "talks a great deal and matters a little." Celestine, who ran away from a Chartres Street hairdresser, was only "two years of age."¹¹² Narcisse, who was confined by her owner to bear a "sambo complexion," measured only "4 feet six inches," presumably pre-adolescent.¹¹³ The master seeking "Bingo Willie" described his runaway in terms that hinted at the sexual: "a good looking fellow [with] beautiful eye-brows [who] wore a fine clean roundabout and cottonmade pantaloons. . . ."¹¹⁴ Owners of the Planters & Merchants Hotel described their twenty-one-year-old slave-waiter Wesley as "a light mulatto . . . very handsome . . . good feel in his appearance" (adding with audacious perversité, that the misguided youth "disappeared without any cause or reason whatever").¹¹⁵ Dick, on the other hand, was nothing more than "a black";¹¹⁶ Caronne had "an ugly face, spoke foul," "absconded . . . and is lurking about town. . . ."¹¹⁷ Readers were asked to keep an eye out for other

107. *New Orleans Bee*, May 28, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

108. *Louisiana Courier*, May 17, 1831, p. 3, c. 6.

109. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 13, 1831, and afterwards, p. 4, c. 6.

110. *Louisiana Courier*, May 12, 1831, p. 4, c. 7.

111. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 13, 1831, p. 4, c. 6.

112. *Louisiana Courier*, May 13, 1831, p. 4, c. 7.

113. *New Orleans Bee*, May 26, 1831, p. 3, c. 3.

114. *Louisiana Courier*, May 30, 1831, p. 3, c. 5.

115. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 3.

116. *Mercantile Advertiser*, June 6, 1831, p. 3, c. 4.

117. *Louisiana Courier*, May 12, 1831, p. 4, c. 7.

118. *Ibid.*, June 10, 1831, p. 3, c. 3.

runaways' "high cheek bones. . . . pug nose . . . scar on the right breast . . . two smallest toes on each foot . . . great deal shorter than the rest . . . flat nose, and a little turned up . . . pretty thick lips, lively look . . . black, thick lips . . . very black complexion . . . thick red lips . . . very wild look."¹¹⁹

Other runaways were distinguished by their broken shackles. Frank had "a small chain round his neck, fastened with a padlock"; Jerry "had an iron ring round his neck."¹²⁰ One especially tragic case involved John, who escaped while Lincoln was in town. Found sixty years old, John "stoops considerably when walking, feet somewhat swelled from having been frost bitten, *has every appearance of being worn down by years*." A victim of the Middle Passage, the old man was "a native of Africa, has the Congo dialect, speaks French and English. . . ." John's master died, and one might have expected that the executors of his estate would have freed the elderly man to live out his tormented life in peace. No such luck: John was publicly auctioned in April by U.S. Marshal. His new master S. Blossman suspected the elderly disabled runaway was "skulking about the upper suburbs."¹²¹ A more oppressed life can hardly be imagined, but they indeed abounded. During Lincoln's visit, white New Orleanians were also asked to look out for John, Kelsy, Chloe, Sarah, Beauchamps, Nelson, Louis, Sally, Celestine, Grace, Surprise, Elling, Sophie, Madison, Melinda, Ben, Mary, George, Dick, Nathan, George Smith, Maryann, Henry Ben, Benjamin, Narcisse, Caroline, and Jesus.

Evidence of the commodification of humanity extended beyond auction and runaway notices. Some ads offered to the marketplace the very breast milk of nursing black women, to nourish white infants for the financial benefit of white masters or mistresses. "To be hired," stated one such ad during Lincoln's visit,

A nurse, a black young girl, has a child about 15 days old; she is very sound, and has a great quantity of milk. Apply Bourbon street, no. 276.¹²²

Another wet nurse for hire was described as a "mulatto woman, very healthy . . . very handy . . . faithful, &c. . . ."¹²³ Similar ads ran on the

119. These descriptions are called from *Louisiana Courier*, May 30, 1831, p. 3, c. 5 and *Mercantile Advertiser*, June 10, 1831, p. 4, c. 5.

120. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 13, 1831 and afterwards, p. 4, c. 5 and June 10, 1831, p. 4, c. 5.

121. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1831, p. 3, c. 1 (emphasis added).

122. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

123. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1831, p. 2, c. 5.

demand side:

Wet nurse wanted—A young woman with a new breast of milk is wanted immediately to nurse a young child. Apply at 119, Royal street, corner of St. Louis street.¹²⁴

The eternal threat of violence in maintaining the institution of slavery occasionally met with resistance. One day while Lincoln explored the city, a trader sold two slave boys to a local master. The youths established a friendship and, five days later, escaped together. A neighbor helped capture one boy, named Elisha, and guarded him while the master pursued the other. In the meantime, Elisha stabbed the neighbor eleven times, nearly killing him. Police arrested Elisha and brought him to court. A noteworthy name presided in the case: Hon. J. Pitot served as judge, Gustavus and Charles Gayarré as prosecutors, and A. Pichon as attorney for the defense. A “jury of six freeholders” needed only a “short deliberation” before returning a verdict of *guilty*; and sentence of death.¹²⁵ Four days later, Elisha was brought before the gallows, most likely at the Parish Prison in the Faubourg Toussé. Word spread; a crowd of morbid spectators assembled in late afternoon. Among them was the same slave boy who befriended and escaped with Elisha, who himself had been recaptured but nevertheless managed to arrive at the scene. As the trap door sent Elisha to his death, the friend “fell into sudden convulsions” and shortly thereafter “died in violent spasms.” The newspaper acknowledged that the simultaneous demise of two friends at society’s bottom rung “almost bears the stamp of romance,” but guided readers away from such sentimentality. “This occurrence would seem very singular,” justified the *Bee*,

was not its causes to be traced to another source than that of sympathy in the fate of the culprit. It appears that the boy had been sick for a few weeks previous to his physical debility; the oppressive heat of the weather, added, perhaps, to the impression of the awful scene, brought on fatal convulsions.¹²⁶

Another newspaper saw the story as an opportunity to protest “these wretches imported into our state by wanton men . . . who seek and ransack

124. *Louisiana Courier*, May 12, 1831, p. 4, c. 7.

125. *New Orleans Bee*, May 31, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

126. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

for the vilest of slaves—and then place them among us, either to run away to be repurchased, acknowledging them capable of murder, and guaranteeing them against vices.¹²⁷ The incident encapsulated the tense framework of greed, exploitation, oppression, and violence that yoked masters, traders, and slaves together in New Orleans society.

Did Lincoln learn of the incident? The verdict was announced in the newspapers on May 31 and the execution occurred on June 4, while Lincoln was most likely still in the city. Public executions in this era occurred occasionally in the rural West, but were a fairly common event in vice-ridden New Orleans. Rural rivermen, visiting the city, with time on their hands and curiosity in their veins, would have gravitated to such a spectacle. A flatboatman visiting Natchez a few years later wrote matter-of-factly of going out of his way to witness the hanging of a black man.¹²⁸ Perhaps Lincoln heard about the incident from fellow boatmen, or read the *Bee* article—in which the journalist, with unintentional poignancy, spelled the slave's name not as *Ensha*, but *Elijah*.¹²⁹

Hearing, watching, and reading about daily life in New Orleans in the late spring of 1831 would have informed a visitor like Lincoln of a much larger talk-of-the-town topic. Conversations at a popular exhibit at Gift and Commerce Streets would have dropped additional hints. More subtle clues abounded at Hewlett's Exchange, where, between the auctions for slaves and steamboats and sugar mills, were biddings for "114 Valuable Lots . . . 250 lots[,] delightful situation . . . 19 VALUABLE LOTS. . . ." They signaled a veritable real estate boom in other, more déclassé Creole and immigrant neighborhoods.¹³⁰ Fueling the chatter and the speculation was an exciting new transportation technology, coming out of England and via the Northeast and executed successfully for the first time west of the Appalachians, right here in New Orleans' own Faubourg Marigny—it was the railroad.

Plans for this revolutionary development commenced a month after Lincoln's first visit to New Orleans, when, on July 28, 1830, "friends of

127. "Trial of Slave Ensha," *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 31, 1831, p. 2, c. 4; "Execution of Slave Elijah," *ibid.*, June 6, 1831, p. 2, c. 5.

128. Asbury C. Jacquess, "The journals of the Davy Crockett, commencing December 20th, 1834," *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 1 (March 2006): 20–21.

129. *New Orleans Bee*, June 7, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

130. *Ibid.*, May 13 and 14, 1831, p. 2, c. 6; May 26, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

internal improvements” met at Hewlett’s Exchange and resolved to re-search “the construction of a RAIL ROAD, from the Mississippi to Lake Pontchartrain.”¹³¹ Among the attendees was a Baltimorean named Maurice W. Hoffman, an enthusiastic protégé of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad who sought to launch similar projects in new markets. The next three years saw the chartering of the enterprise, the surveying of the route, the purchasing of supplies, the hiring (and paying) of labor, the preparation of the deed, and the construction of the straight-as-an-arrow, five-mile track from river front to lakeshore (today’s Elysian Fields Avenue). On April 23, 1831—just as Lincoln left Illinois on his second trip to New Orleans—the horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad made its inaugural run. Six stagecoach-like cars bearing state and local dignitaries, a band, and company stockholders

moved in the most imposing manner to the summit of music against a large concourse of admiring spectators who lined each side of the road, and reached the lake by happy coincidence at the moment the Mobile steamboat arrived for the first time at Port Pontchartrain with the mail. The mail and passengers were immediately forwarded to the city, and reached the head of the road in half an hour.¹³²

Efficient transportation to the lake meant new business opportunities with the resource-rich Florida parishes as well as the passenger-rich cities of Biloxi, Mobile, Pensacola, and points east. The tiny rail depot on the lake won designation as Port Pontchartrain, an official port-of-entry into the United States. “That the system of Rail-roads now clearly demonstrated to the public, will be of exceeding advantage to the mercantile community, is beyond a doubt,” proclaimed one newspaper a month after the inauguration, while Lincoln explored the city.¹³³

Indeed, the project proved to be an immediate success, and occasioned a real estate boom at the railroad’s riverside and lakeside termini. Every advertisement boasted of its respective land’s proximity to the artery, with phrases like “fronting the railroad,” “NEAR THE RAILROAD,” “[SHORT] DISTANCE from the Rail Road,” and “most agreeably situated . . . on the east side of the Rail Road.”¹³⁴ The most dramatic conse-

131. “Rail Road,” *Louisiana Courier*, July 27, 1828, p. 3, c. 3; July 31, 1828, p. 3, c. 1.

132. *Louisiana Advertiser*, “Opening of the Rail Road,” April 23, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

133. “Rail Road,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 20, 1831, p. 2, c. 5.

134. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 6; *ibid.*, May 14, 1831, p. 2, c. 6; *ibid.*, May 19, 1831, p. 2, c. 6.

quence, in terms of urban development, was the subdivision of lots along the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Dubbed Milneburg, for landowner Alexander Milne, the subdivision represented New Orleans' first effort to develop this tidal and saline marsh, a process that would not come to completion for well over a century. Milne's advertisement extolled the area's amenities:

This town delightfully situated on the border of Lake Pontchartrain, (later to become a port of entry by a law of the United States, under the denomination of New Pontchartrain,) the road from the city of New Orleans passing through the center of it, (. . . only a ten minutes ride on a locomotive carriage . . .). The site of this town is beautiful in the extreme, and it possesses many and great advantages, as the whole of the commerce of the lakes with a great part of the coasting trade, must soon center there . . . [It is also] a watering place for health and recreation. . . .¹³⁵

Milne's lots sold well, netting \$259,247 at the May 20 auction at Hewitt's (at which three slaves were sold as well).¹³⁶ A lakeside hotel opened in Milneburg right on schedule, eager to accommodate day-trippers and passengers in transit:

To the Visitors of the Lake: [The] Pontchartrain Hotel, will be opened on Sunday the 29th [of May] and visitors will find every species of refection and refreshments, at all hours of the day and evening. . . .¹³⁷

Land parcels in the Faubourg Marigny along the railroad sold even better, due to their proximity to the urban core and the fact that "[t]hese lots are among the most elevated in that part of the city."¹³⁸

Behind the local real estate boom was an international fever among the business class for railroad, railroads, railroads. The *Bee* of May 17

135. *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 6. What Milne failed to mention was that his town lay practically at sea level, supremely vulnerable to gulf storms. Only twelve weeks after this ad ran and ten weeks after Lincoln departed, a hurricane struck New Orleans, causing great damage to the ships in port, "literally carr[ying] away" the new lakefront structures, and damaging many of the adjacent "Rail-Road establishments." *New Orleans Bee*, August 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1–2.

136. *New Orleans Bee*, May 21, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

137. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1831, p. 2, c. 3.

138. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1831, p. 2, c. 6.

published railroad news from New Orleans, Mobile, and England.¹³⁹ The next day, a Baltimore railcar salesman lauded the superiority of horse-drawn trains over now-fangled steam locomotives. In the same column ran this story:

[A] project is on foot to make a rail-way across the isthmus of Suez, and carrying over it vessels of the heaviest burden from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. . . . *Thus the rail-way in Suez—cannot yet bring ourselves to look at it in any other light—is discussing itself all over the world, and seems likely to spread until it shall have cured itself by some sudden and irreparable explosion.*

"Railway mania" indeed: the same newspaper contained railroad news in English, French, and—alacrity—Spanish, in which the technology was introduced as "Camino de Corredera llanada *Rail Road*." Local businessmen caught the mania as well. On May 2, stockholders of the New Orleans Locomotive Steam Engine Company met in the Globe Coffee House on Chartres Street. "Punctual attendance is required," ordered the president, "as business of importance to be done before the meeting."¹⁴¹ A block away, the previously mentioned Conti Street brokers Deane & Brown (who also traded slaves) offered for sale "a beautiful little Locomotive Carriage and Railroad, suitable for exhibition . . . the purchaser will be instructed gratis how to put in operation."¹⁴²

By this time, entrepreneur Maurice Hoffman was off evangelizing on railroads in the cotton country near Woodville, Mississippi. Leaders of that area, which was slated to be connected with Bayou Sara by a railroad chartered by the Louisiana Legislature just two months earlier, eagerly sought advice on the new infrastructure.¹⁴³ *The Woodville Republican* Hoffman released his trade secrets—everything potential investors needed to know to bring railroads to their region, from the purchasing of cedar logs for ties and iron for rails, to grading the soil and laying the track.¹⁴⁴ The editors of the *Louisiana Courier* acquired the piece and ran it in their New Orleans paper on Monday, May 30. Five days earlier a similar article

139. *Ibid.*, May 17, 1831, p. 2, c. 2.

140. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1 (emphasis added).

141. "Notice," *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 21, 1831, p. 3, c. 2.

142. "For Sale," *ibid.*, May 30, 1831, p. 3, c. 3.

143. Exhibit, "West Feliciana Railroad," Ferdinand Street, St. Francisville, Louisiana.

144. *Louisiana Courier*, May 30, 1831, p. 3, c. 1–2.

ran in the *Mercantile Advertiser*, in which a South Carolina railroad company detailed all its experience and expenditures.¹⁴⁵

That all this activity coincided perfectly with Lincoln's visit raises interesting historical possibilities. Did he read about, witness, visit, or ride the railroad while in town? If so, did the experience inspire him? In light of Lincoln's intellectual curiosity, mechanical skills, and appreciation of Western transportation needs, it seems highly plausible that he took special note of New Orleans' spring 1831 bout with "rail-way mania." Evidence for his inquisitive mind regarding all things mechanical comes from various sources, including an 1850s traveling companion who collected how Lincoln would find

some naming implement, machine or tool, and . . . carefully examined it all over, first generally and then critically. He would "rough" it to determine if it was straight or warp, if he could not make a practical test of it, he would do that; he would turn it over or around and stoop down . . . to look under it. . . . [He] could shake it, lift it, roll it about, up-end it, upset it, and thus ascertain every quality and utility which entered in it, so far as acute and patient investigation could do it.¹⁴⁶

As we shall see, only ten months after the trip, railroads would figure into Lincoln's first year in public office. He later rose to professional prominence as a railroad lawyer, and came to national attention in part for his advocacy of the nation's railway system.¹⁴⁷ We will contemplate the influence of the New Orleans visit on Lincoln's railroading career later; for now, we can say with confidence that the brand new Pontchartrain Railroad (departing from its easy-to-find Elysian Fields Avenue station only two blocks below the already-famous French Market) formed something of a must-see attraction for visitors, many of whom rode it out to the lake. Likewise the well-advertised, long-running locomotive exhibit at Girod and Commerce streets, just blocks from the flatboat wharf, must have garnered the attention of nearly everyone circulating in that area.

145. "Annual Report of the Rail-Road," *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 25, 1831, p. 2, c. 4-5.

146. Henry C. Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892), 109.

147. Legal issues involving landowners versus railroads appeared at least once in the local press during May 1831. *New Orleans Bee*, May 16, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

We can estimate when Lincoln ended his visit to New Orleans by working off his return time as remembered by Illinois villagers. James Short, for example, recalled “fresh in his memory” meeting his future friend Abraham for the first time “in July or June 1831 at New Salem.”¹⁴⁸ Another villager, Royce Clary, remembered knowing “Abe Lincoln in June 1831.”¹⁴⁹ Lincoln himself stated that he had settled in New Salem during July.¹⁵⁰ County records indicate that Denton Offutt received a retailing license on July 8, which later enabled him to open a store and hire Lincoln to clerk.¹⁵¹ From these insights we may surmise that Lincoln, Offutt, and Johnston returned to New Salem in late June or early July.

When they left New Orleans, they may be hindered by assuming the same 90- to 100-mile-per-day steamboat travel speed we estimated for the 1,028 return trip over the 1,588-mile trip up the lower Mississippi, the upper Mississippi, and the Illinois River to Beardstown. This amounts to sixteen to seventeen days of travel. Because a change of boats would have been required at least at St. Louis, we extend this time span to eighteen days. Next came the 138-river-mile trip up the winding Sangamon, impassable by steamboats and barely navigable by flatboats. Lincoln and company may well have traversed the much-shorter terrestrial distance between Beardstown and New Salem on foot, requiring about three to four days. The entire return trip thus consuming approximately three weeks and ending in late June or early July, we estimate Lincoln departing New Orleans sometime between June 4 and June 12. The *Mercantile Advertiser* announced around ten upcoming steamboat departures per day during that week. Some were destined for Southern river cities; others were slated to veer eastward to Ohio River cities; any one of them could have taken the men partway home. It would have been more logical, however, for them to choose a steamboat heading up the upper Mississippi, closer to their central Illinois home. That narrowed the options down to the few steamboats destined for St. Louis. They included the *Walter Scott* (departing June 4–6), the *North America* (June 13) and the *Oregon* (June 14). Lincoln’s last view of New Orleans, from the steamboat deck, would have been a spectacular one: “All vessels docked at the levee, “more

148. Short to Herndon, July 7, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 72.

149. Interview, Royce Clary, by William H. Herndon, October 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 370.

150. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” July 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:84.

151. Sangamon County Commissioners’ Record C, 256, copied in *The Lincoln Log: A Daily Chronology of the Life of Abraham Lincoln*, entry for April 8, 1831 – July 8, 1831. Available <http://www.thelincolnlog.org/view/1831/4>, visited February 26, 2009.

... than there has been ... at any former period."¹⁵²

John Hanks, whose testimony for events occurring after April 25–26 must be handled judiciously because Lincoln stated Hanks was not present to observe them, nevertheless managed to provide details about the return trip. They are worth reporting here because they may contain some kernels of truth. “Offutt—Johnson [*sic*]—Abe & myself left NO in June 1831,” Hanks claimed:

We Came to New Louis on the Steam Boat together walked to Edwardsville 25 [miles] N.E. of New Louis—Abe, Johnson & myself, [and then] Abe & Johnson went to Coles Co. & I to Springfield.¹⁵³

Herndon built his return-from-New-Orleans narrative around Hanks’ testimony, and many subsequent biographers and historians based their accounts upon Herndon’s. We cannot verify Hanks’ story, but we can say confidently that the month of June began with Lincoln in New Orleans and ended with him in or approaching New Salem, Illinois.

We have some secondary accounts of Lincoln’s 1831 return trip. One entails the alternate version of the previously recounted incident with Capt. William D. Ferguson in Arkansas. Readers will recall that Ferguson, owner of a plantation across the river from Memphis, claimed to have employed Lincoln to chop wood, and he remembered the tall youth well enough to reunite with him during his congressional and presidential years. That primary version, reported in 1861, placed Lincoln on a flatboat and thus implied that the employment occurred on the downriver leg of the journey. The alternate version, described in an 1873 history of Memphis, holds that it occurred on the return trip, as Lincoln’s steamboat stopped at Wappanocha “to wood up at Ferguson’s landing. Lincoln disembarked to help load the wood—a task regularly performed by returning flatboatmen to defray the cost of their passage. He struck up a conversation with Ferguson and revealed that he had been robbed on board and left penniless. Ferguson responded by employing Lincoln for a few days to cut firewood and allowing him to stay at his house until he earned enough money to board another northbound steamer.”¹⁵⁴ While this 1873

152. *Mercantile Advertiser*, June 3–7, 1831, p. 2, c. 1; “The Shipping,” *ibid.*, June 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 4. Many steamboats did not depart at specific times, but rather when they were fully loaded.

153. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 458.

154. James D. Davis, *The History of the City of Memphis* (Memphis, TN: Hite, Crump-

version fails to identify a primary source, it succeeds in explaining how Ferguson might have remembered Lincoln so many years later because it situates Lincoln as Ferguson's houseguest, during which time the two might have become well acquainted. If true, this scenario would add a few days to Lincoln's return time to New Salem, add a second criminal attack to Lincoln's Southern experience (the first in Louisiana in 1828), and position Lincoln as traveling home alone for the remainder of the trip. This researcher views the 1873 version as problematic: Lincoln, who made ample reference to the 1828 Louisiana attack, never once mentioned being attacked a second time. Besides, the 1861 version (explained earlier) was recorded directly from Ferguson's account, while both he and Lincoln were alive. The 1873 version is secondary, appearing in a book about Memphis history.

Another story of Lincoln's return trip comes from an 1899 narrative history of Illinois' early years. Without citing a source, author Harvey Lee Ross contends that

Instead of paying \$40 for a passage and spending his time drinking, smoking and playing cards as the other young men did, [Lincoln] went to the captain and asked him if he wanted another hand on the boat. The captain [obliged], so he got his passage free and made a nice little sum of money besides. When he got to St. Louis he found the Illinois river steamboat had just left and that there would not be another one going for several days. He left his baggage with his partner and went across the country to Coles county to visit his parents, but did not staying, as he was anxious to return to New Salem and turn over the money to the man who had shipped the produce.

This anecdote, incompatible with the Ferguson story, suggests—contrary to other sources—that Denton Coffutt remained in Illinois, leaving Lincoln to travel to New Orleans with only one partner. Ross also erroneously states that Lincoln was twenty-one at the time.

to Kelly, 1873), 176–177. *Sun*, March 18, 1861, p. 4. Louis A. Warren heard a third variation of this story from an informant in 1939, who held that the Ferguson employment occurred on the 1830 return trip, lasted for weeks. Warren could not verify that version. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, Seven to Twenty One, 1816–1830* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 1959, reprinted 2002), 261, endnote #53.

155. Harvey Lee Ross, *The Early Pioneers and Pioneer Era of the State of Illinois: Including Personal Recollections of the Writer; of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, and Peter Cartwright . . .* (Chicago: Eastman Brothers, 1899), 110–111.

One final story of the return trip, traced to Lincoln himself, ranks as the most plausible. The *New York Daily Tribune*, reporting the candidate's autobiographical details for the upcoming 1860 presidential election, wrote that "[i]n this trip up the river [from New Orleans], Mr. Lincoln states that he first met the Hon. Jesse R. Du Bois, the present State Auditor of Illinois and a candidate on the Republican ticket for re-election, who was then discharging the duties of deckhand."¹⁵⁶ Despite some factual errors elsewhere in the article and a lack of substantiating sources, this information seems credible. Jesse Kilgore Dubois, a descendent of French colonials who settled in Vincennes in the eighteenth century, was born in Illinois in 1811 and, by his own account, knew Lincoln since "the two were young men."¹⁵⁷ He would have been twenty years old—probably floating age—at the time of the alleged meeting on the Mississippi. Du Bois later became "Uncle Jesse" to the Lincoln family and enjoyed a close (but occasionally contentious) friendship with Lincoln from his earliest political years through the presidency. If the two indeed first met as deckhands on the same New Orleans steamboat in 1831, the encounter further demonstrates that Lincoln established lasting social relationships during his New Orleans trips. One problem exists: Lincoln once wrote that his "acquaintance first began with [Dubois] in 1836" during their state legislature terms.¹⁵⁸ This does not necessarily rule out an initial introduction in 1831.

Lincoln would still the tiny village of New Salem, site of the mill dam incident, his home for the next six years. Effective immediately upon returning from New Orleans, he permanently moved away from his family and commenced living on his own. Lincoln during 1831–32 clerked for Offutt, served in the Black Hawk War, and ran (unsuccessfully) for state legislature. He also continued captaining flatboats, guiding cargo to St. Louis at least twice in 1834–35 and probably to numerous local destinations.¹⁵⁹ Also during the New Salem years Lincoln surveyed new towns, studied law, and won a seat in the state legislature, before moving

156. "Lincoln's Early Days," *New York Daily Tribune* (*New York Herald-Tribune*), July 9, 1860, p. 6.

157. Jesse K. Dubois, interview with William H. Herndon (written down December 1, 1888, but carried out years earlier, Dubois having died in 1876), in *Herndon's Informants*, 719; Helen L. Allen, "A Sketch of the Dubois Family, Pioneers of Indiana and Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society*, no. 1 (April 1912): 61–62.

158. Abraham Lincoln, undated letter of recommendation to Jesse K. Dubois, *Collected Works*, 8:422.

159. "Garrison's Prediction," *Omaha World Herald*, September 30, 1899, p. 4.

to Springfield to practice law and politics.

Lincoln came to travel routinely on steamboats and, later, railroads, expanding his personal geography until it spanned longitudinally from Boston to Council Bluffs, and latitudinally from Niagara Falls in Canada to Hampton Roads in Virginia. But never again would he sail down the lower Mississippi, never again would he set foot in the Deep South—and never again would he see New Orleans.

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