

## Conclusions

~The slavery influence~The internal improvements influence~The political image influence~The worldview influence~The rite-of-passage influence~The mythological influence~

What shall we make of Lincoln's flatboat journeys to New Orleans?

Set in the context of Western river commerce and antebellum New Orleans, the two expeditions constitute worthwhile history regardless of the Lincoln connection. They warrant attention today for no other reason than having formed part of the young man adventure. That the early life of Abraham Lincoln ranks among the best documented of that era and region, and generally represents the lives of thousands of others who flatboated to New Orleans, further justifies historical interest. It's a Mississippi River story, a New Orleans story, an American story.

But Lincoln, of course, was no ordinary individual. He would later lead a nation, fight to save it, and emancipate millions of its people. Researchers ever since have scoured Lincoln's earlier life for insights and clues toward understanding how such a towering figure could emerge from such ordinary circumstance. The flatboat journey to New Orleans thus rises to (potentially) greater significance, on *biographical* grounds. This chapter explores how those experiences affected the man so readily identified by Americans as their greatest president, by posing five specific influences: on the matter of slavery, on the issue of internal improvements, on Lincoln's political image during the 1860 presidential campaign, on his personal worldview, and as a folk rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. We conclude with reflections on how the historical narratives of the flatboat journeys have influenced Americans' interpretations of that president.

Innumerable histories and biographies have deduced one core narrative from Lincoln's flatboat journeys: that the sight of slavery in New Orleans—specifically slave trading, on a large scale and in all its brutal vulgarity—helped convince the young man of the institution's moral bankruptcy, and planted in him the seeds of opposition that would eventually lead into its destruction. So prevalent is that narrative that it is literally written into stone. Proclaims the plaque on the limestone monument at the Rock-

port launch spot,

IN A VERY REAL SENSE OF THE WORD IT MIGHT BE SAID THAT THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION, WHICH LINCOLN ISSUED IN 1863, OWES ITS ORIGINS TO THIS FLATBOAT TRIP.

That interpretation owes *its* origins to a quotation recited further down on the page:

[HERE] IN 1831 . . . ABRAHAM LINCOLN WITH ABEL GENTRY MADE HIS FIRST FLATBOAT TRIP TO NEW ORLEANS. HE SAW SLAVES SOLD AND SAID "IF I EVER GET A CHANCE TO HIT THAT THING, I'LL HIT IT HARD."

Because that oft-cited "hit it hard" quotation plays such a fundamental role in interpretations, it warrants thorough investigation here.

The quote arrived to the historical record courtesy John Hanks, the cousin of Lincoln's biological mother who joined Lincoln on the second trip departing from Illinois in 1831. Hanks claimed he heard Lincoln say it at the New Orleans slave market, and reported it to William H. Herndon during a circa-1865 interview. Strangely, Herndon did not jot down that specific quote in his notes, despite its striking cadence and incredible precience. Here is what Herndon scribed as Hanks spoke:

[I]n May [1831] we landed in New Orleans. There it was we saw Negroes chained—maltreated—whipped & scourged. Lincoln saw it—his heart bled—said nothing much—was silent from feeling—was sad—looked badly—felt badly—was thoughtful & abstracted—I can say knowingly that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery: it was iron in him then & there—May 1831. I have heard him say—often & often. . .

Herndon generously shared his notes with Ward H. Lamon, whose 1872 book *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* repeated the above notes of Hanks' interview, with cleaned-up syntax. Lamon did not, however, mention the "hit it hard" line. Those words would not come to public attention until

1. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–83, 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), 457.

2. Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln; from His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), ii–iv and 82–83.

a decade later, when former Lincoln advisor and friend Isaac N. Arnold, while researching his own book about Lincoln, wrote to Herndon about a rumor alleging that Lincoln had visited in New Orleans “an old fortune teller, a Voodoo priestess” who “became very much excited” and predicted “You will be President, and all the negroes will be free.” Herndon, again displaying exceptional generosity to a competing author, wrote back on October 11, 1882, answering the fortune-telling question and offering additional information on slavery (italicized emphases appear in the original):

It seems to me just now that I only heard of the fortune-telling story, but can not state when I heard it, nor from whom I got it. It seems that John Hanks, who was with Lincoln at New Orleans in 1831, told me the story. At that time and place, Lincoln was made an anti-slavery man. He saw a slave, a beautiful mulatto girl, sold at auction. She was *fevered*, *pinched*, *trotted* around to show to bidders that said article was sound. As Lincoln walked away from the sad, inhumane scene with a deep feeling of *unbearable* hate. He said to John Hanks this: “By God! If I ever get a chance to hit the institution, I’ll hit it hard, John.” I got his chance, and *did hit it hard*. John Hanks, who was two or three times examined by me, told me the above facts about the negro girl and Lincoln’s declaration. There is no doubt about this. As to the fortune-telling story, I do not affirm anything or deny anything.<sup>3</sup>

Arnold reproduced Herndon’s words verbatim in a footnote to his *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, published posthumously in 1885. Apparently either Arnold or Herndon shared the letter’s content with another author, William D. Kelley, because Kelley quoted it in his 1885 book, *Lincoln and Stanton*. A few other writers picked up the line from these sources over the next few years.

It was not until 1889, however, that the “hit it hard” quote became culturally entrenched, when Herndon himself finally released his decades-in-the-making *Herndon’s Lincoln*. The reaction on New Orleans construed Hanks’ original recollections into the narration:

3. Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, & Company, 1885), 31.

4. William Darrah Kelley, *Lincoln and Stanton: A Study of the War Administration of 1861 and 1862* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1885), 86–87.

In New Orleans, for the first time Lincoln beheld the true horrors of human slavery. He saw “negroes in chains—whipped and scourged.” Against his inhumanity his sense of right and justice rebelled, and his mind and conscience were awakened to a realization of what he had often heard and read. No doubt, as one of his companions has said, “Slavery ran the iron into him then and there.” One morning in their rambles over the city the trio passed a slave auction. A vigorous and comely mulatto girl was being sold. She underwent a thorough examination at the hands of the bidders; they pinched her flesh and made her get up and down the room like a horse, to show how she moved and in order, as the auctioneer said, that “bidders might satisfy themselves” whether the article they were offering for sale was sound or not. The whole thing was so revolting that Lincoln moved away from the scene with a deep feeling of “unconquerable hate.” Telling his companions to follow him, he said, “By God, boys, let me get away from this. If ever I get a chance to hit that thing [meaning slavery], I’ll hit it hard.” This incident was furnished me in 1865, by John Hanks.

*Herndon’s Lincoln* came to be highly influential, cited in countless subsequent books, articles, plaques, performances and documentaries. Writers consistently exploited the dramatically witty “hit it hard” line (often weakening its exact wording for effect) as the encapsulation of everything people needed to take away from the Lincoln-in-New Orleans episode. In 1891, for example, a Chicago theater company staged a play in which an outraged Lincoln in a New Orleans auction house stammers, “If I ever get an opportunity to hit that institution of slavery, I will hit it, and hit it hard.”<sup>5</sup> In 1893, author Charles Carleton Coffin attributed the line to Herndon’s 1889 book, but nonetheless took liberties as he described the scene in the breathless present:

The boatman turns away with something rising in his throat and goes out with John Hanks into the sunshine. His lips quivering, for his soul is on fire, “John, if I ever get a chance to hit that institution, I’ll hit it hard for the Eternal God!”

5. William H. Herndon and Jesse William Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1889), 1:76.

6. “Is It In Good Taste? Public Opinion Divided as to the Play ‘Abraham Lincoln,’” *Chicago Daily*, September 13, 1891, p. 32.

Coffin concluded, “certainly no words ever spoken by the prophets of Israel have had a larger fulfillment than those uttered by Abraham Lincoln in the streets of New Orleans.”<sup>7</sup>

Other authors constructed, with increasing levels of literary license, melodramatic scenes of auction-block indignities unfurling before the silently outraged young page. More often than not, the one-paragraph chronicle climaxed with an angry Abraham stomping off, with “hit it hard” tumbling from his lips. Authors John George Nicolay and John Hay (1905) worked the quote into an alliterative drumbeat worthy of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”:

It is recorded how [Lincoln’s] soul burned with indignation . . . in the slave shambles of New Orleans . . . and that he then exclaimed, “If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard.” He “hit it hard” when as a member of the Illinois Legislature he protested that “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy. He “hit it hard” when as a member of Congress he ‘voted on the Wilmot Proviso as good as for nought.’ He “hit it hard” when he stumped his feet against the Kansas-Nebraska law . . . He “hit it hard” when he approved the law abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia . . . He “hit it hard” when he signed the acts abolishing slavery in all the Territories. . . .<sup>8</sup>

An 1895 article entitled “God in Lincoln” rode the quote into the theological realm, rhetorically pounding on the words “hit” and “it” (slavery) until climaxing:

[T]he very same hand that was lifted in solemn oath before God in the New Orleans slave mart took in the God-inspired pen of liberty, and dashed on the Emancipation Proclamation . . . That was an act worthy of Jesus Christ. It was the act of Jesus Christ; for it was the spirit of Jesus Christ that filled [Lincoln] with power. . . .<sup>9</sup>

7. Charles Carleton Coffin, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 109 (italics in original).

8. John George Nicolay and John Hay, eds., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, Francis D. Tandy Company, 1905), 5:xix–xx.

9. David Gregg, “God In Lincoln,” *The Independent, Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, April 4, 1895, p. 15.

The “hit it hard” quote, however, suffers from one fatal flaw: Lincoln took pains to explain in his 1860 campaign autobiography that John Hanks *never accompanied him to New Orleans in 1831*. Hanks disembarked in St. Louis and returned to Illinois on his own.<sup>10</sup> Given that Lincoln had absolutely nothing to gain in pointing out Hanks’ departure, and that Hanks theoretically had everything to gain by writing himself into history after the assassination, we are inclined to take Lincoln’s word over Hanks’ by a wide margin.

Some historians have cast John Hanks in unfavorable light because of this inconsistency, questioning not only his memory and reliability but also his honesty. Evidence suggests that John Hanks himself felt some discomfort with his “hit it hard” claim. In an 1887 letter written to Jesse Weik in response to a now-lost list of questions, the eighty-five-year-old Hanks cryptically answered, “It was his step Brother, he made that remark. His name was John Johnston [sic] I was not at the sail at the time[.]”<sup>11</sup> We cannot be certain what question Hanks addressed with that response. Historians Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis suggest that Weik had in fact asked Hanks about the “hit it hard” quote. Clues in the sentence certainly point in that direction. Also, the Hanks, with those words, seems to acknowledge finally that he did not accompany Lincoln to New Orleans, and that perhaps it was John D. Johnston who heard the future emancipator’s bold proclamation. In any case, Weik did not act on Hanks’ clarification, and when *Herndon’s Lincoln* came out in 1889, the “hit it hard” quote made its way into history.

(Incidentally, Weik later inquired about that far sanier rumor, unsurprisingly also traced to John Hanks: that a “Voo loo negress” in New Orleans predicted Lincoln would one day become president and emancipate the slaves. An irritated Hanks dissociated himself with that story too, saying, “I Don’t [k]Now whether he got his fortune told or Not.” Weik and Herndon omitted the Voo loo story from *Herndon’s Lincoln*.)

Twentieth-century Indiana researchers, Bess V. Ehrmann and Francis Marion Van Natter, claimed that the “hit it hard” line was not overheard by John Hanks in 1831, but rather by Allen Gentry during Lincoln’s first trip in 1828 (or 1829, as Ehrmann and Van Natter surmised).

10. Abraham Lincoln, “Autobiography,” Written for John L. Scripps,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:64.

11. John Hanks to Jesse Williams Weik, June 12, 1887, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 615 and footnote.

12. Hanks to Weik, April 19, 1888, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 656. See also Arnold, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 31.

Ehrmann obtained her information in a 1930s interview she conducted with Absolom Gentry, who recalled that his father Allen said years after the experience, “We stood and watched the slaves sold in New Orleans and Abraham was very angry . . . [.]”<sup>13</sup> Ehrmann obtained additional details from Absolom Gentry and built them into this narrative of that moment:

One day as [Lincoln and Gentry] were walking along the street a crowd attracted their attention and they drew near to see what was going on. A man was making a speech and offering for sale a young negro woman standing on a huge block used for the slave market. The two men were horrified and as the girl, with tears streaming down her face, was given to the highest bidder, young Abe, in a frenzy of anger, turned to his friend and said, “If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard.”<sup>14</sup>

Van Natter obtained similar information when he interviewed another Gentry family descendent. Seventy-two-year-old E. Grant Gentry recalled his grandmother Anna Gentry remembering her husband Allen speaking of his experience with Abraham in New Orleans in February 1829 and testified to those thrice-passed-down memories in a sworn affidavit notarized on September 5, 1936:

[A]s Gentry and Lincoln went up on the levee, their attention was attracted by a sale of negro slaves, except for hip-cluses, being sold on a raised platform on the levee; that the “yaller” girls, after being pushed by prospective buyers, brought a lot higher price than the black men and women slaves, that the actions of the buyers and auctioneers towards the “yaller” girls were disgusting to Allen Gentry and Abraham Lincoln, and that Lincoln said to Gentry: “Allen, that’s disgrace. If I ever get a look at that thing, I will hit it hard.”<sup>15</sup>

13. Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth: Infancy Years, Seven to Twenty-One, 1816–1830* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 1959, reprinted 2002), 185 and 261, endnote # 8.

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

15. Affidavit, E. Grant Gentry, September 5, 1936, Francis Marion Van Natter Papers-Regional History Collection, Number 136, Lewis Historical Library, Vincennes University (hereafter cited as Van Natter Papers). While E. Grant Gentry certainly felt this information accurately represented family tradition, it is replete with dubious details. Slaves were rarely auctioned directly on the flatboat docks, and “yaller” (mixed-race)

Van Natter wove these recollections (plus other information gleaned in interviews with Joe Wayne, Emma, Hannah, Rose, and Absalom Gentry) into his book *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years*, published posthumously in 1963. Write Van Natter,

Due to his height Lincoln could see over the crowd and what he saw angered him. For probably the first time in his life he was witnessing the scene he had heard discussed so often—people selling people. He doubled his fists tightly; his knuckles went white. He watched men wearing big white hats and long black coats buy field hands and household servants. Black and ugly, such Negroes sold for \$500 to \$800 each. The sale of “fine girls” began. Bids started at \$1500, or almost twice the top sale price for field hands. Bidding continued until some of the girls were knocked off at \$2500 a piece. Unable to stand any longer, Lincoln muttered to Gentry: “Allen, that’s a disgrace! I’ll never get a lick at that thing I’ll hit it hard.” Gentry: “Well better get out of here, Abe.”<sup>16</sup>

What to make of these 1823–29 versions? Given the nearly identical phraseology and the fact that the Hanks/Herndon 1831 version had been circulating for nearly half a century before the Gentry 1828–29 version started to surface, we may hypothesize that *Gentry family descendants interviewed in the 1800s had unknowingly—over the course of two generations—internalized the Hanks/Herndon version and mistakenly credited it to their own ancestor*. Van Natter and Ehrman, who worked tirelessly in researching Lincoln's Indiana boyhood and deserve ample credit for their contributions, may have erred in their methodology by over-relying on the testimony of people over a century removed from the fact, with no primary sources at their disposal. Van Natter may have also blundered methodologically when, according to his own notes, he asked what might be called a “binary leading question.” Informants are vulnerable to being “led” toward answering in a certain way, a risk that increases when the question is posed to yield a binary (yes or no) response. When Van

girls—who were often employed as domestics, would rarely sell for no more money than a productive young male field hand.

16. Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 145.

17. It should be noted that Ehrman and Van Natter strove to shine light on Lincoln's *Indiana* heritage. They were partisans in the battle with Illinois (and to a lesser degree Kentucky) regarding which state lays claim to “forming” the Great Emancipator. By dating the “hit it hard” line to 1828–29 rather than 1831, it becomes an Indiana story.



Natter asked a Gentry descendant, “At New Orleans slave market did Lincoln say to Albin Gentry, ‘If I ever get a chance to lick that thing, I’ll lick it hard?’” he intentionally fed the old Hanks/Herndon quote to his informant, who eagerly validated it.<sup>18</sup> Not all informants, however, answered affirmatively: When Van Natter asked the same question to granddaughters Anna, Hannah, and Rose Gentry on January 21, 1936, they responded, “Never heard it said.”<sup>19</sup> That inconvenient testimony did not make it into the book.

Ironically, Van Natter knew about Hanks’ claim that Lincoln said the “hit it hard” line in 1831, but he dismissed it because he realized Hanks did not accompany Lincoln to New Orleans.<sup>20</sup> What Van Natter failed to see was that the relationship between Hanks’ 1831 allegation and informant’s 1828–29 recollection was not merely coincidental; in fact, the former spawned the latter. Despite the Gentry family descendants’ honest intention and heartfelt testimonies, they simply passed on old stories gleaned unknowingly from multiple sources, including Hanks. In that manner, the “hit it hard”/“lick it hard” quotation spread virally throughout Lincoln literature and public perception.

The historical record nearly suffered a far more insidious infection in the 1920s, when a journalist named Wilma Frances Minor stunned the editors of the venerated *Atlantic Monthly* with a treasure trove of newly discovered Lincoln documents. Minor’s interpretation of the material, serialized by the magazine in 1928–29, validated long-held Lincoln theories and popular perceptions in a manner that seemed almost too good to be true. In contextualizing one particular document—a letter by Lincoln to county surveyor John Calhoun—Minor set up Lincoln’s visit to New Orleans with an obligatory local color (“lacy parasols . . . quaint cemeteries”), and reminded readers of the familiar record of the “hit it hard” line. Then she unveiled Lincoln’s amazing letter:

I never have forgotten a single instance of my memorable stay in New Orleans which was so marked by the atrocious cruelty practiced by many slave holders. . . . [Once] I had stopped to question an old man who appeared dejected at his task. I questioned him, are you happy in slavery? the old fellow un-

18. Note Card #1 of interview of Yvonne Gentry by Francis Marion Van Natter, December 30, 1935, Van Natter Papers.

19. Note Card #1 of interview of Anna, Hannah, and Rose Gentry by Francis Marion Van Natter, January 21, 1936, Van Natter Papers.

20. Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood*, 186.

bent his back as much as possible and raising a face of hopeless resignation—answered—“No—no Marse I never is happy no mo. whippin’ is things what black folks nevah can stop remem-brin about—they had to. . . .” I am not a ‘trigger lover’ by any [means, but] I shall pursue my wonted course [against slavery] though half the world disagrees with me. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Minor’s discoveries seemingly elevated the New Orleans trips to lofty historical significance. But shortly after publication, they were shown to be utterly fraudulent. The mendacious forger had concocted the whole collection, after doing ample background research, cleverly capturing Lincoln’s halting syntax, and replicating his penmanship upon dog-eared nineteenth-century paper stock. The incident is remembered today mostly for the misinformation it spread about Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Keledge in New Salem, but it did no favors for those seeking the truth about his relationship with New Orleans.

The dubious provenance of the “hit it hard” quote and the additional distraction of Minor’s fraud weakened the larger case for finding historical importance in Lincoln’s visit to New Orleans. The sense that modern scholars tend to shy away from ascribing as high a level of significance to the trips as their predecessors did, once they realize that the most famous piece of evidence upon which those predecessors relied is, in fact, faked. The case suffers additionally from the fact that Lincoln remained silent regarding impressions or lessons learned from New Orleans when he penned his autobiographical notes. The fleeting recollections he wrote in the Scripps autobiography mostly never mention the who-what-where-why trip details, yet still managed to leave many basic questions unanswered, not to mention deeper philosophical inquiries. Of great irony is the fact that Lincoln devoted over one-third of his account of the first trip—29 out of 102 words—to the attack of the “seven negroes,” an emphasis conveniently contingent to the black-victimhood narrative favored in the historiography.

But perhaps we ask for too much, expecting this famously private man to spell out such revelations publicly. One of Lincoln’s defining traits was his solemn reverence for discipline and rationality over emotion.<sup>22</sup> Painful personal memories he expressed only privately, if at all.

21. Wilma Frances Minor, “Lincoln the Lover: I. The Setting—New Salem,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1928, 844–846.

22. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 66–67, 80–83, 118.

It should also be remembered that Lincoln was running for president in a turbulent nation divided over slavery when he penned those flatboat memories. Waxing emotionally on the horrors he witnessed in the Queen City of the South would only needlessly exacerbate estrangement with Southerners—general, and with that important city in particular. Lincoln's emotional intrusion, coupled with his political savvy, may explain why the Script's autobiographical accounts in general are replete with inconsequential minutiae and frustratingly devoid of insight and substance—almost as if Lincoln was hiding something.

Lincoln may have alluded to that “something” in a private letter addressed to former Whig congressman and future Confederate vice-president Alexander Hamilton Stephens (with a similar version sent to Senator J. Crittenden). While the original letter has not been found, a duplicate made shortly after Lincoln first dictated its contents on January 19, 1860, found its way into the collection of Judd Stewart, who published it and associated missives in a 1909 booklet. The letter includes a heartfelt paragraph imploring Stephens to recognize the emerging national reassessment of human enslavement and embrace the preservation of the Union, in which Lincoln said,

[Y]ou say that slavery is the corner stone of the south and if separated, would be that of a new Republic; God forbid. *When a boy I went to New Orleans on a flat boat and there I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky, and I heard worse of the Red River plantations. I hoped and prayed that the gradual emancipation plan . . . or the Liberator's colonization [plan] might lead to its extinction in the United States. . . .*<sup>23</sup>

Here, finally, we have in Lincoln's own words a reliable citation of what he saw in New Orleans and how they impressed him, as well as an explicit yoking of that influence with his personal desire—through *hope* and *prayer*—to bring the troubling institution to some sort of peaceful end. That he “heard worse of the Red River plantations” corroborates the reputation of that central-Louisian region in its treatment of slaves, a reputation dramatized in the wildly popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and the subsequent autobiography *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. What Lincoln seemingly restrained him-

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

self from saying publicly in the Scripps autobiography and elsewhere, he said privately to Stephens—briefly, but clearly and passionately. Stephens himself later “certified as correct” the version that Julia Steward published in 1909, a certification that, combined with the letter’s perfectly credible content and context, leads Lincoln scholars to accept Steward’s letter collection as authentic Lincoln communiqués.<sup>24</sup> Their authenticity is further corroborated by the fact that the original version of another letter appearing in Julia Steward’s booklet, from Stephens to Lincoln dated December 14, 1860, fortuitously turned up in the Lincoln Papers released to the public by the Library of Congress in 1947—and matched Steward’s version word for word.<sup>25</sup> Because of the late arrival of the January 19 letter to scholarly attention, the New Orleans information concealed the evidence of many early Lincoln historians and remains infrequently cited today. How unfortunate that the unreliable but dramatic Hanks quote dominates the literature, while the reliable but somber Lincoln quotes all but forgotten.<sup>26</sup>

The Lincoln quote, coupled with the empirical evidence presented in this book that a veritable landscape of bondage existed in New Orleans, invites us to revisit Hanks’ “hit it hard” quote. We should not overcompensate for its *imprecise* wording by casting aside its overall *accurate* implication: that Lincoln witnessed in New Orleans the brutal realities of the slave trade and internalized them in his intellectual development. (*Precision* and *accuracy* are not synonymous; the former implies a level of detail, while the latter means overall correctness. Accuracy with precision is optimal; accuracy without precision is still acceptable if no better information exists. But *inaccuracy* is worthless, *regardless* of precision. What we have in the “hit it hard” quote may be regarded as a case of accuracy without precision.)

Support of that accuracy comes not only from the Stephens letter, but from the recollection of Illinois office boy Robert H. Browne, who clerked for Lincoln in the early 1850s and remembered him saying, “I saw [slavery] all myself when I was only a little older than you are now, and the horrid pictures are in my mind yet.” Lincoln apparently meant that he saw

24. Stephen’s certification is cited in *Some Lincoln Correspondence*, 5, 9, and 16.

25. Letter, Alexander H. Stephens to Abraham Lincoln, December 14, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and *Some Lincoln Correspondence*, 18.

26. State of Georgia—Executive Department, certification signed by Alexander H. Stephens, January 19, 1883, confirming authenticity of Lincoln’s letter to Stephens, in *Some Lincoln Correspondence*, 16.

those horrors in New Orleans, because Browne, born in 1835, would have been slightly younger in the early 1850s than Lincoln was during the 1828 New Orleans experience.<sup>27</sup> Support also comes from Lincoln's long-time friend and law partner William H. Herndon—"Bully," as Lincoln affectionately called him—who backed up the implications of the "hit it hard" quote by solemnly affirming, "I have also heard Mr. Lincoln refer to it himself."<sup>28</sup> Herndon's margin notes, scrawled next to where he documented his interviews, reiterate his conviction: "I can say that this testimony can be implicitly relied on. Mr. Lincoln loved this man [Hanks]—thought him truthful—honest and noble. Lincoln has stated this to me over and over again."<sup>29</sup>

John Hanks himself also warrants reconsideration. For countries where the art of communicating history—through embellished storytelling—clashed with the sophisticated standards of the educated upper-class men who took it upon themselves to write history. Because of those social-class differences, Hanks has suffered in the historical record. This researcher suggests we reconsider Hanks' contributions in their cultural context, and appreciate him for what he has brought to historical attention—in his earnest and endearing manner. Rather than dismissing him as a yarn-spinner, we should listen more closely to the man: "*I have heard [Lincoln] say—often for years,*" that slavery in New Orleans seared his memory.<sup>30</sup> Granted, we know Hanks did not hear Lincoln state the sentiment in New Orleans, but that is not the only place Lincoln could have said it. It is possible, as a *New York Times* article suggested in 1929, that while Hanks "did not go as far as New Orleans," the two men "talked [toward and] Lincoln told him of seeing in that city human beings sold on the auction block. Out of this Illinois conversation may have come the famous line, or, more importantly, the implication behind it."<sup>31</sup>

Beset as Lincoln might have been, however, the experience in New Orleans did not suddenly make the future president an abolitionist, nor

27. As recollected by Robert F. Browne, in John E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 61.

28. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 1:76.

29. As quoted by 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. Paludan found this marginal note to be overly defensive on the part of Herndon.

30. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 457 (emphasis added).

31. William E. Barton, "Lincoln's Two Cousins Who Swayed His Life," *New York Times*, September 22, 1929, p. 17, c. 4.

even a racial egalitarian. Recent scholarship has shed refreshing light on Lincoln's views on slavery, race, and black Americans. The mythological Lincoln—the deified icon, assassinated for America's racial sins on Good Friday and resurrected on Easter Sunday as the Great Emancipator—now appears more complicated, flawed, savvy, compromising, and paradoxical. Lincoln, it turns out, was human, and thus a product of his times. He used the same brusque and degrading language as those around him when speaking of black people. He believed those of African descent to be generally inferior to whites, if not biologically. He opposed slavery as an institution, offensive to American ideals of liberty and contrary to economic progress, more than as a force of suffering imposed daily on millions of individual human beings (whose personal anguish he rarely spoke of).<sup>32</sup> “It came into the Presidential chair upon one principle alone,” wrote Frederick Douglass, “namely, opposition to the extension of slavery, not the end of slavery.”<sup>33</sup> Lincoln envisioned sending African Americans back to Africa more so than emancipating them domestically, and generally favored a gradual fading-out of the institution rather than its swift and immediate destruction. His Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves in the Confederacy but not in the loyal border states or in federally controlled areas such as New Orleans, revealed its prioritization for military strategy over human liberation. Lincoln, in short, opposed slavery as a hypocritical and counterproductive blemish on his and his nation, and what Douglass famously called Lincoln's “children,” white Americans. He did not end slavery for the sake of his “step-children,” black Americans.<sup>34</sup>

We would be naive, then, to overinterpret the New Orleans experience as Lincoln's life-pivoting racial epiphany as the “hit it hard” line suggests. We would be guilty of oversimplification if we viewed the experience as the origin of the Emancipation Proclamation, as the Rockport plaque declares. Rather, the New Orleans trip implanted in the budding young in actual unforgettable eyewitness memories that would serve, subtly and episodically for a lifetime, to spark ethical contemplation, elucidate personal conviction, and embolden moral courage on the issue of slavery. Whatever his political expediencies, whatever his visceral feelings about race, whatever his “true” motivations might have been, the fact remains that Abraham Lincoln ended slavery in the United States of

32. Paludan, “Lincoln and Negro Slavery,” 1–23.

33. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: From 1817–1882*, edited by John Lobb (London, England: Christian Age Office, 1882), 372.

34. *Ibid.*, 373.

America, all the while drawing from the wellspring of signature mental imagery witnessed in New Orleans.

The two flatboat journeys exposed Lincoln, for weeks on end, to the vastness of the American landscape. No subsequent life travels would ever match the length of those journeys. They inculcated in him the relationship between transportation and economic development in the West, demonstrating personally just how much time, effort, and risk went into delivering hard-earned crops to market.

Efforts to reduce that risk, and speed that access to market, pulsated throughout the West of Abraham Lincoln's youth. He built his first flatboat at a time when circumventing the Great Falls at Louisville with a man-made canal was the talk of the Ohio Valley. (One intermarriage friend of Lincoln's helped excavate the ditch—the Louisville and Portland Canal—together with John D. Johnston, in 1827.<sup>35</sup>) He navigated the Father of Waters at a time when Capt. Henry Shreve's channel improvements were the talk of the Mississippi Valley. He cursed the Sangamon River's shallow water, wrestled with its obstacles, and hacked its overhanging vegetation. In the Illinois, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers he dodged sawyers, skirted around sandbars, evaded logjams, witnessed crossings, and suffered hours drifting around yawning meanders that could have been eliminated with short cut-offs. He traversed the Mississippi Valley at a time when railroad fever first swept the region, and visited New Orleans precisely as the first complete rail line west of the Appalachians commenced service there. The river experiences of 1826–32, and particularly the New Orleans trips of 1833 and 1831, introduced Abraham Lincoln to the problems of long-distance commerce and the problems of existing transportation. The solution was what Americans at the time called “internal improvements,” and what we now call “infrastructure”: navigable rivers, canals, railroads, roads, bridges, ferries, locks, and dams.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Lincoln's first public-address speech, delivered extemporaneously two years after the first New Orleans trip, promoted internal improvements for central Illinois. Nor should it seem unusual that, while running for Illinois state legislature nine months after his second New Orleans trip, Lincoln featured the improved navigability of the Sangamon River as a platform. He drew liberally from his

35. A. H. Chapman to William H. Herndon, September 8, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 100–101.

flatboating experience when announcing his candidacy, even citing the incident at the mill dam:

[F]or the last twelve months I have given a particular attention to the stage of the water in this river, and any other person in the country. In the month of March, 1831, in company with others, I commenced the building of a flat boat on the Sangamo [*sic*] and finished and took her out in the course of the spring. Since that time, I have been concerned in the mill at New Salem.

Cutting out “dotted timber,” “removing the turf,” “damming up the old channel,” “increasing the velocity of the current”: Lincoln unveiled a litany of proposals demonstrating both his economic vision and a boatman’s savvy toward making the Sangamon wide, deep, and straight enough for steamboat traffic. In a passage seemingly gleaned from Captain Henry Shreve’s channel-improvements advocacy on the lower Mississippi, Lincoln proposed excavating cut-offs on the Sangamon’s meander loops:

There are also many places above this where the river, in its zig zag course, forms (sic) complete peninsulas, as to be easier cut through at the necks than to remove the obstruction from the bends—which if done, would also lessen the distance.

Lincoln also paid homage to the other internal improvement ongoing in New Orleans—railroads. “A meeting has been held [regarding] constructing a rail road from . . . the Illinois river [through] Jacksonville [to] Springfield,” Lincoln reported during his 1831 political campaign. He then opined:

This is, indeed, a very desirable object. No other improvement . . . is equal in utility the rail road. It is a never failing source of communication, between places of business remotely situated from each other. Upon the rail road, the regular progress of commercial intercourse is not interrupted by either high or low water, or freezing weather, which . . . render our future hopes of water communication precarious and uncertain.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly Lincoln recognized the revolutionary promise of railroads. But the

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

37. *Ibid.*, 7.

38. *Ibid.*, 5–6.



budding politician had his priorities straight: a railroad connecting Jacksonville and Springfield with the Illinois River would bypass New Salem, regardless of improvements to the Sangamon. His primary constituents were not the people of Jacksonville or Springfield, but of New Salem. Bemoaning the “heart appalling shock accompanying [the railroad’s] cost,” which he estimated at \$290,000, Lincoln offered no further support for the railroad in the campaign.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after announcing his candidacy Lincoln demonstrated his commitment to navigation by successfully piloting the steamboat *Talisman* up the Sangamon for the first time. Dropping water levels, however, made the return trip hasty and risky, and the *Talisman* nearly ended up stranded on the same mill dam that bedeviled Lincoln’s flatboat the year prior. Lincoln proved two points with his dramatic demonstration: he was indeed a skilled river man, and the Sangamon River desperately needed state-funded improvement.

Lincoln lost that first election (despite overwhelming support in New Salem, in part because his April-through-July-1832 service in the Black Hawk War interrupted the campaign). The political experience nevertheless reinforced in him the internal improvement-ranked utterly fundamental for Illinois, a message he carried to the state legislature when he ran again and won in 1834. Unfortunately, those improvements never arrived to the Sangamon River, and, as if to prove once again Lincoln’s point, New Salem accordingly withered away and disappeared by 1840. Lincoln himself departed for Springfield in 1837. Except for his Washington years, he would call Springfield home for the rest of his life.

Drawing from his personal river experience, realizing the triumph of New York’s Erie Canal, and knowing firsthand the Louisville and Portland Canal’s success in bypassing the Great Falls of the Ohio River, Lincoln championed internal improvements throughout his 1830s–40s legislative career. By no means limited to waterways, he also recognized the power of the iron horse to revamp the economic geographies of a region hitherto tethered to the patterns of natural hydrology. He enthusiastically supported state subsidies for internal improvements and helped design Illinois’ ambitious plans for a network of canals, roads, bridges, and tracks, even after the Panic of 1837 derailed them. He cast the winning vote for funding the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which, when finally excavated, replaced the terrestrial Chicago Portage with a commercial waterway connecting the Great Lakes and Gulf of Mexico watersheds (setting the stage

39. *Ibid.*, 6.

for the twentieth-century ascendancy of Chicago).<sup>40</sup> In Lincoln's mind, such modernization—what we would call “infrastructure investment” or “capital improvement” today—delivered the promise of the American Dream to the common farmer and working man. Wrote historian G. S. Boritt, Lincoln “understood and preached that a better transportation system would quicken the pulse of Illinois economic life, raise living standards for all, enhance property values, and attract immigrants.”<sup>41</sup> Lincoln expressed little interest in core Whig social and cultural philosophies on matters such as temperance, religion, morality, and foreign immigration, which very much leaned toward the conservative. Rather, his Whig impulses expressed themselves mostly in the economic realm, and in this he was passionate, supporting protective tariffs, a national bank, and, not only of it, federal and state investment in transportation modernization.<sup>42</sup> As reflected long-time Lincoln friend Joshua Speed, “Mr Lincoln [viewed] internal improvements [as] the best interest and advancement of this State. . . . [H]is highest ambition was to become the Wittichinton of Ill[inois].”<sup>43</sup>

Even the tinkerer, Lincoln engaged personally in solving the nation's transportation problems. Inspired by a steamboat trip across Lake Erie as well as his flatboat experiences, Lincoln designed a device to levitate steamboats lodged on sand bars. It involved air chambers that were lowered by vertical poles into the water on both sides of the vessel, like giant buoyant crutches. Once inflated, the bellows would then lift up the hull enough to slip the entire operation off the obstacle and into safer waters. In 1849, Lincoln secured Patent No. 6467 for his invention, the only American president to be so distinguished. Although I regarded the thing as impractical I said nothing,” confided William Herndon to his readers, “probably out of respect for Lincoln's well-known reputation as a boatman.” The *Scientific American* was a bit kinder when it pointed out in 1850 “there are thousands of mechanics who would devise a better apparatus for buoying steamboats over bars, but how many of them would be able to compete successfully in the race for the Presidency?” “A. Lincoln's Improved Manner of Buoying Vessels,” as Abraham called his

40. Donald, *Lincoln*, 58–59.

41. G. S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1977), 9.

42. *Ibid.*; Eric Froner, “A New Abraham Lincoln?,” *Reviews in American History* 7, no. 3 (September 1979): 375–379.

43. Interview, Joshua F. Speed, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 476.

contraption, never went into production, but did demonstrate a creative mind grappling constantly with ways to improve the nation's transportation system.<sup>44</sup>

Amid years as a clerk, notman, surveyor, and country lawyer on central Illinois' fourteenth Circuit (dubbed "the mud circuit" for its bad roads), Lincoln also served four terms in the Illinois state legislature and one term in the U.S. House of Representatives between 1834 and 1849. By the early 1850s he shifted professionally from making law to practicing law. With new tracks now crisscrossing the state, railroads became a mainstay of Lincoln's increasingly successful legal practice, in cases involving rights-of-way, eminent domain, and tax liability. Perhaps his most influential case involving the Rock Island Railroad, legally cleared the way for construction of railroad bridges over navigable waterways—a flashpoint in the war between boatmen and railroad men, and a turning point for the latter's enormous progress in the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Lincoln in this era also represented clients *suing* railroad companies. Like most lawyers, he "accepted whatever promising cases came his way" and did not pursue some political or philosophical agenda through litigation.<sup>46</sup>

Lincoln's rising stature in the legal profession, based largely on railroad cases, enabled him to return to national-level politics by decade's end. Less than a year separated Lincoln the railroad attorney from Lincoln the president. As chief executive, he signed into law the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, for the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. By decade's end, iron tracks and iron horses united the nation.

Circumstantial evidence and explicit words connect Lincoln's Whig commitment to internal improvements with the river experiences of his early adulthood, most prominently his flatboat journeys to New Orleans. The voyages offered firsthand justification for his brand of economic Whiggery. Volumes have been written on the emergence of Lincoln's political philosophies, but at least one informant who was present at their

44. Louis A. Warren, ed., "Lincoln's Invention of Buoying Vessels," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 1439, January 1958. Quotations are from Abraham Lincoln: An Extraordinary Life, exhibition at National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, until April 14, 2009.

45. Louis A. Warren, ed., "The Right of Way and the Railroad," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 484, July 18, 1938.

46. James W. Ely Jr., "Abraham Lincoln as a Railroad Attorney," 2005 Railroad Symposium Essays, Indiana Historical Society Press, available <http://www.indianahistory.org>.

birth specifically recalled Lincoln switching allegiances from that of a “Jackson Democrat” to “whig or whiggish”—around 1828, the year of his first New Orleans trip.<sup>47</sup> In the same way that slavery in New Orleans instilled in Lincoln’s mind signature imagery demonstrating the evils of that institution—the transportation trials and tribulations of his flatboat journeys, and possibly the demonstrative experiences of Shreve’s channel improvements, the New Orleans steam locomotive exhibit, and the Pontchartrain Railroad, provided evidence and rationale for Lincoln’s lifelong advocacy of internal improvements.

“I am not ashamed to confess,” presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln told a New Haven audience in 1860, “that twenty five years ago I was a hard laborer mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat.”<sup>48</sup> In doing so, Lincoln linked his flatboating to what would soon become his most famous symbolic image, that of the rail-splitter.

Illinois state politician and Lincoln advocate Richard James Oglesby gets credit for shaping that triumph of political iconography. Aware of the power of folksy slogans—“Old Hickory,” “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too,” etc.—that were *de rigueur* in nineteenth-century American politics, Oglesby sought an accessible symbol that would portray Abraham Lincoln as a frontier commoner with mythical properties of strength and moral fiber. At the 1860 Republican Party state nominating convention, Oglesby erected an enormous temporary meeting house in downtown Decatur and dubbed it a “wigwam” as a metaphor (widely recognized at the time) of citizen participation in the political arena.<sup>49</sup> A faux wigwam, however, spoke nothing of Lincoln himself seeking better ideas from those who knew the candidate well. Oglesby looked a garrulous curmudgeon who, he had known for years, what sort of work Lincoln excelled at in his youth. “Well, not much of any kind but dreaming,” the informant

47. This information comes from Dennis Hanks, who at one point recalled “1828–9” as the time when Lincoln changed his politics, and later revised it to “1827–8.” Others disagreed; John Hanks claimed Abe “was never a Democrat, he was always a Whig; so was his father before him.” Interview, Dennis Hanks, by William H. Herndon, September 8, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 107–8; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth*, 189.

48. Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at New Haven, Connecticut, March 6, 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:24.

49. A drawing of the Republican Wigwam appears in “The Republican Standard,” broadside published by Rufus Blanchard, Chicago, Illinois, 1860. Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Stern Collection).

responded, “but he could help me split a lot of rails when we made a clearing twelve miles west of here.” Next day the two men rode out to the spot and retrieved two weathered fence rails deemed to be ones Lincoln mauled thirty years earlier.<sup>50</sup> They hauled them back to Decatur, and at the right moment during the convention inside the wigwam, Oglesby’s informant dramatically marched in bearing the wooden rails with an affixed sign reading “Abraham Lincoln, the Rail Candidate, For President in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3000 made in 1830. . . .” The informant’s name: John Hanks, the same irrepressible spirit who gave us the “bit & har” quote, the Woodcock tale, and so many other colorful details (of table and otherwise) about Lincoln’s youth. Newspapers picked up on “Lincoln the Rail Splitter,” the campaign encouraged it with words and images, supporters responded enthusiastically, and political history was made. So effective was the symbol that farmers in the Northeast complained that souvenir buyers were making out with their fence rails.

Hanks could have just as easily mentioned to Oglesby Lincoln’s flat-boating experience. Had he done so, “Lincoln the Boatman” might have emerged as the candidate’s premier symbol of rural appeal. At least one deflationist article dubbed Lincoln “The Flatboat Man.”<sup>51</sup> That image, however, had problems. Flatting a flatboat—a group activity involving a bulky vessel—did not pictographically hold a candle to the individualized heroism of a tall, powerful frontiersman swinging an ax in a wilderness forest. Additionally, flatboatmen in general suffered poor reputations. The politically savvy Oglesby might have thumbed-down “Lincoln the Boatman” had Hanks or others suggested it.<sup>54</sup>

50. A document dated June 1, 1860, signed by John Hanks with an X and attested by R. J. Oglesby, certifies that the rails were “from a lot of 30,000 made by Abraham Lincoln and myself thirty years ago in this county. . . .” The figure was later reduced to a more reasonable 3000. Hanks Family Papers, Manuscript Collection, SC 64, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

51. J. McCan Davis, “Origin of the Lincoln Rail, As Related by Governor Oglesby,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 60, no. 2 (Jan. 1890): 271; Mark A. Plummer, *Lincoln’s Rail Splitter: Governor Richard J. Oglesby* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 41–43.

52. “Political Intelligence—Complaint Among the Farmers,” *New York Herald*, June 25, 1860, p. 5, c. C.

53. “The Republican Nominees,” article originally appearing in the *Boston Journal*, picked up by the *St. Albans Daily Messenger* (St. Albans, VT), May 31, 1860, p. 1.

54. Lincoln himself gave equal weight to rail-mauling and flatboating in his speech at New Haven—which, incidentally, occurred two months before the Decatur convention and the birth of the Rail-Splitter.

Flatboating instead assumed a secondary but nonetheless significant role in symbolizing Lincoln the candidate. A famous campaign painting by an unknown artist, for example, prominently featured the Rail-Splitter mauling logs in a bankside forest overlooking an Ohio-like river in the distance—and a tiny flatboat drifts downriver behind Lincoln's figure. Envelopes used in mail campaign fliers featured the famous split-rail fence, but also graphically incorporated "Old Abe in his flatboat" or "Honest Abe Lincoln and His Flat Boat" into the design.<sup>55</sup> One campaign item deployed flatboating as its primary iconography: a broadside entitled *The Republican Standard* featured a colored wood engraving of Lincoln poling a flatboat down the Mississippi, surrounded by a border of split-rail fences anchored by two log cabins and two flatboats. Its caption read,

LINCOLN AS A FLATBOATMAN ON THE  
MISSISSIPPI RIVER  
QUINCY IN THE DISTANCE

Peter the Great, to whose genius Russia owes her fame, served an apprenticeship to ship building. Abraham Lincoln has served an apprenticeship to flatboating, and may he yet guide the Ship of State with his own inherent honesty of purpose.<sup>56</sup>

No documented evidence indicates that Lincoln flatboated past Quincy, Illinois, which abuts the Mississippi well *upriver* from its confluence with the Illinois River. (Flatboats could not navigate against the current). The broadside's biographical text read,

At twenty-one he removed to Illinois, and passed the first year . . . in active labor on a farm, where he and a fellow laborer (named Banks) SPLIT THREE THOUSAND RAILS, in the year 1830. It will be interesting to the millions before whom he is now placed as a candidate for the highest office in the gift of three people, to know that he once *managed a flatboat* on the Ohio River. The anecdote, which he sometimes related to his friends of his maritime experience before the introduction of steam on the western rivers, is undeniably laughable.<sup>57</sup>

Note that New Orleans and the entire southern leg of his journeys go unmentioned. Quincy, on the other hand, gets prominent treatment. Would shining light on Lincoln's experiences in the South's premier slave mart

55. "Winnowings," *New York Times*, November 5, 1888, p. 4.

56. "Republican Standard," Stern Collection.

57. Ibid. (emphasis in original)

invite potentially distracting questions, at a time when any further national divisiveness might prompt secession? Or might it allude to the suspicions of ardent abolitionists that Kentucky-born Lincoln cabbled all too much in the South and his slaveholding economy—his first laws were prominent slave-owners—and lacked the passion to destroy the institution? The omission corresponds with Lincoln's own 1860 autobiographical notes, which, as I pointed out earlier, remain conspicuously silent on slave trading in New Orleans compared to what he wrote and said in private. The campaign, like Lincoln, seemed to be hiding something.

In another example of political symbolism, composer Charles Grobe parlayed the candidate's metaphors into song and dance. His 1860 "Lincoln Quick Step" featured frontier drawings on the cover, matched with lyrics inside:

"HONEST OLD ABE" has split many a rail  
He's up to his work, and he'll surely not fail,  
He has guided his FLAT-BOAT thro' many a strait,  
And watchful he'll prove at the HELM of the State.<sup>58</sup>

Musically inclined Lincoln supporters also published *The Wide-Awake Vocalist or, Rail Splitters' Song Book*, which invoked flatboat themes in ditties such as "Lincoln Boat Horn":

I shall go for Abraham Lincoln, the one-hand, the flat-boat-  
man . . .  
Lincoln, the Boatman of the Sangamon!  
Lincoln, the Boatman, is the people's Friend,  
Lincoln, the Boatman, lead to victory!<sup>59</sup>

Supporters also used the flatboat icon in material culture. Republicans in Cassopolis, Michigan, built "a Lincoln Flat Boat Cabin, or Wigwag, for their use during the campaign." The tens of thousands of wild and enthusiastic supporters who descended on Springfield in August 1860 pulled along "a mammoth flatboat on wheels" to their mile-and-a-half-long procession. Other rallies later that month featured floats depicting all three

58. Charles Grobe, "Lincoln Quick Step, Dedicated to the Hon. Abraham Lincoln," sheet music (Philadelphia: L. B. & Wall, 1860), 2. Stern Collection.

59. *The Wide-Awake Vocalist or, Rail Splitters' Song Book* (New York: E. A. Daggett, 1860), 29, 58.

60. "Summary of News," *The Constitution* (Washington, DC), June 2, 1860, p. 3.

61. "Lincoln at Home: Seventy-Five Thousand Republicans Call on Him—Imposing Demonstration," *Chicago Press and Tribune*, August 9, 1860, p. 1.

symbols: the splitting of rails, the log cabin, and “the flatboat on which smoke exuded from a stove pipe and roosters crowed in their coops.”<sup>62</sup> Some supporters saw deeper symbolism in the flatboat—of the poverty imposed on good Americans like Lincoln via the evils of slavery, from which Lincoln sought personal liberation:

Slavery, by depriving [Lincoln’s] youth of all advantages, launched and set him on a flat boat. From that flat boat, bearing him across the Ohio to free soil, freedom supplied what slavery denied, and bore him steadily upward to the Presidency.  
Abraham Lincoln . . . —from *the flat-boat to the Presidential Chair*.

Skeptics and enemies saw through the manipulative political imagery, emphasizing instead Lincoln’s neo-bucolic ascendancy into the comfortable professional class. Others disdained the man in *account* of his rustic riverine roots. “They hate Lincoln,” wrote a Lincoln sympathizer in reference to this group; “They are refined and educated men; not a vulgar jester, *volent of the flat-boat and the backwoods*.”<sup>63</sup> One elite New York newspaper, suspicious of the rural Western “Cottons and Yancals” whom the president-elect might appoint to federal positions, turned the imagery into insults by describing Lincoln’s men as “rail splitters” who “have been on board the same flatboat, and taken whiskey out of the same tin cup with [Lincoln].”<sup>64</sup> A Cleveland editorialist poked fun at candidate Lincoln by cackling in an exaggerated rural Western dialect, “He split some rails in Illinoy and board a roarin’ flat-boat. Them is his only qualifications, aside from [*sic*] his personal beauty, for President of the United States. The editorials also derided the aforementioned *Republican Standard* broadside heralding the former flatboat captain rising to guide the Ship of State:

Make Linkin Captain of the Ship of State, and in less than a year she’ll be without rudder, compass, or anchor. Witho-

62. *Canton Regular*, August 28, 1860, as interpreted by H. Preston James, “Political Pageantry in the Campaign of 1860 in Illinois,” *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 4, no. 7 (September 1947): 332.

63. “Our Representative Men,” *Columbo Tribune*, June 11, 1864, p. 2 (emphasis added).

64. “The Light-Haired to the Front,” *Daily Ohio Statesman* (Columbus), 31, no. 291, June 2, 1864, p. 2 (emphasis added).

65. “A Raid Upon Washington,” *New York Herald*, March 2, 1861, p. 6, c. C.



wants to see the Ship of State degenerate into a rickety old flat-boat?<sup>66</sup>

Other opponents threw in the hapless John Hanks, disdained as an inarticulate yokel, as they lampooned Lincoln's provincial biography:

Old Abe is born. He suffers from teething and a bad "nuss." He asserts . . . his home with an axe on his shoulder for Illinois and becomes shipman on a flat boat. . . . He deserts the service, flings his commission to the wind, again shoulders his axe, and commences his career as a rail splitter. He cast his oar with ones celebrated as himself named Hanks. He feels the inspiration of his talent, spits upon rail splitting, tears himself from Hanks, and turns lawyer. . . . An extraordinary convulsion of nature casts him into the State Legislature. A still more extraordinary convulsion lands him in Congress where he denounces the Mexican War, opposes the American soldiers and gets his mileage. He goes home and is driven into obscurity by an indignant constituency. He is picked out to run at the head of the abolition machine for President, and anxiously awaits the result.<sup>67</sup>

A particularly scurrilous satirical pamphlet released in 1864 by the Copperheads (Northern and Western anti-war Democrats who viewed Lincoln as a despot) mocked the images and questioned their veracity. "Now gentlemen," says the Lincoln figure in one vignette, "people are very fond of calling me a flat boatman, a rail splitter, and so forth. I assure you I never made but one voyage on a flat boat and never split but one rail and that's the rail with." "Really, Lincoln," responded a disgusted citizen, "you are the meanest liar," only to stop mid-sentence as he watched Lincoln guzzle cheap whiskey.<sup>68</sup>

Republicans used the attacks on Lincoln's rusticity to their advantage—and deftly so, for they knew that the log cabin, the split rails, and the flatboat not only humanized their candidate but successfully undercut Democrats' depiction of Whigs and the new Republican as the party

66. "A Political Sermon—by the Rev. Hardshell Pike," originally published in the *Cleveland Plaindealer* and reprinted by the *Wisconsin Patriot* (Madison, WI), August 18, 1860, p. 7.

67. "Life of Lincoln" pamphlet circulating at Chicago nominating convention, as reported by *Weekly Wisconsin Patriot* (Madison, WI), June 30, 1860, p. 6.

68. *Abraham Africanus I: His Secret Life, as Revealed Under the Mesmeric Influence* (New York: J. F. Feeks, 1864), 31 (emphasis in original).

of the entrenched wealthy aristocracy. Members of the passionately pro-Lincoln “Wide Awake” explicitly co-opted their opponents’ tactics by singing,

Let them prate about rail-splitting, splitting, splitting, Flat-  
boating, too;  
We’llaving the maul, and drive the wedge, For Lincoln, the  
true. . .<sup>69</sup>

Later, those same symbolizing symbols helped endear the assassinated president to the ages.<sup>70</sup> Most Americans to this day can recite at least one of them: the U.S. Mint featured two of them (the log cabin and the rail splitter) on its Lincoln Bicentennial designs of the penny. All three icons share a common theme: the rendering of the wilderness (represented by timber) into domesticity (log cabins), agriculture, pasture (split-rail fence), and commerce (flatboats), through individual strength, determination, and hard work. While the flatboat lagged in press references and popular imagination, it may well be the case that of the three symbols, flatboating proved to be the most genuinely influential in Lincoln’s life.

*Weltanschauung* refers to an individual’s comprehensive conceptualization of humanity and life on earth. Its loan translation from German in the late nineteenth century produced the convenient and self-defining English word “worldview.” Flatboatmen saw their worldviews change as a result of their journeys, and they broadened the perspectives of folks back home in recounting their experiences. “These river-men . . . brought us strange accounts of the countries in the far South,” recalled one old Hoosier;

They told us of the magnolia, the cypress, the live-oak, of  
the fields of cane and cotton, and of the large and populous

69. *The Wide-Awake Vocalist or Rail Splitter Song Book* (New York: C. Daggett, 1860), 7.

70. The flatboat symbol, however, retained a certain stigma for decades. One admirer of the former president declared in 1895 that, although Lincoln had guided flatboats, Lincoln was never in any sense of the word a ‘flatboatman.’ Viele denied that word not as an occupation, but as a character: flatboatmen were “a distinct class of men . . . rough and lawless, [and] a terror to [steamboat] passengers by their wrongs. . . . To say, or suppose, that Abraham Lincoln was . . . one of these men is simply absurd.” Gen. Egbert L. Viele, “Lincoln Not a Flatboatman: His Trip Down the Mississippi to New Orleans to Sell a Barrel of Whiskey and a Case of Tobacco,” *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), March 12, 1895, p. 12.

plantations . . . where the overseer would buy almost a whole boat-load of supplies. I saw had seen also the negro slaves, men and women working on the plantations, and the guards armed with guns and whips. . . . They told us, in an undertone, that this was very hard to look at; that it was all wrong, but that the law allowed these things.<sup>71</sup>

“The tremendous part the river life played in developing the ambitions and intelligence of the western settlers can never be estimated,” contended a journalist later in the nineteenth century. “To them it brought all they knew of the civilized world. By it alone they toughened men and progress.”<sup>72</sup> Lincoln himself alluded to the notion of *Weltanschauung* when recalling his first dollar earned on the Ohio River. “The world seemed broader and fairer before me. I was a more hopeful and confident being from that time.”<sup>73</sup> The experience broadened his worldview.

Geographically, environmentally, culturally, racially, religiously, linguistically, and economically, Lincoln’s trips to New Orleans informed and expanded his worldview.

The trips placed Lincoln in a subtropical zone for the first and only time in his life. Magnolias and a few palms he would have seen during his Washington years, but the luxuriant flora and distinctive fauna associated with a nine-month growing season and five to six feet of annual rainfall met his eyes only during the trips to New Orleans. Portions of the voyages, particularly through the floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers between Memphis and Vicksburg, exposed Lincoln to one of the last vast bottomland wildernesses of the eastern half of the continent. Had he visited Lake Pontchartrain while in New Orleans—and with a new road in 1828 and a new railroad in 1831, he certainly would have—Lincoln would have gained his one and only view of gulf waters. According to one recollection, the trips to New Orleans also impressed upon Lincoln the dynamism of the untamed Mississippi River. “Examining a large military map hanging against the wall,” remembered Kentucky Congressman George Yeaman after a visit to the Lincoln White House, the president

pointed out where the Mississippi river once made a horse-

71. As quoted by Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and his World: The Early Years, Birth to Illinois Legislature* (Mechanicville, MA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 83.

72. “The Mississippi Valley Fleet,” *Lake Herald*, July 12, 1876, p. 10, c. 3 (emphasis added).

73. As quoted by J. Edward Murr, “Lincoln in Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (March 1918): 149 (emphasis added).

shoe bend, nearly a complete circuit, around which he went on a flatboat in descending the river, and pointed out where the river broke through the narrow peninsula. While he was at New Orleans, making a new channel through which the pilot, on the up-journey, guided the steamer, where it was dry land on the down trip.

That geographical education informed Lincoln's advocacy for improved navigation and conceivably his role as military commander in chief.

Floating into the subtropics, Lincoln would have seen for the first time extensive cultivations of two non-native species upon which the Southern economy rested: cotton and sugar cane. By no means would the field slaves working those plantations have been the first Lincoln ever saw; he spent one-third of his youth in the South and often witnessed enslaved men, women, and children in transit or toil. The trips to New Orleans did, however, present his first and only penetration deep into the slave South (indeed, across the entire region) and into places where enslaved African Americans not only abounded but predominated overwhelmingly.

New Orleans ranked as the largest city the young Lincoln had ever seen, and would remain so until he stepped upon the national stage as a newly elected congressman in 1848. It also formed the most ethnically diverse and culturally foreign city in the United States. We cannot say that Lincoln's visits to the Southern entrepôt were the closest the future president ever came to setting foot in another country, because he day-tripped into Niagara Falls, Canada, in 1857. No man would the city first exposed Lincoln to French- or Spanish-speaking immigrants, or Catholics and Catholicism, as he occasionally encountered such peoples and their cultural ways in Indiana, Illinois, or on the Ohio River.<sup>74</sup> But we can say that Lincoln immersed himself in different culture—in terms of ethnicity, ancestry, religion, language, race, caste, class, foodways, architecture, and sheer urban magnitude—more so in New Orleans than in any other place of mine of his life. “New Orleans” stated scholar Louis A. Warren, “gave [Lincoln] an opportunity to visualize a typical foreign city.”<sup>75</sup> It would also expose him to the nation's largest concentration of free people

74. As quoted in Louis A. Warren, ed., “Lincoln's Return Trip from New Orleans,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 472, April 25, 1938.

75. For a discussion on Lincoln and Catholicism, see Louis A. Warren, ed., “President Lincoln's Interest in Catholic Institutions,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 790, May 29, 1944.

76. Louis A. Warren, ed., “Lincoln in New Orleans,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 333, August 26, 1935.

of color, among them some of the wealthiest and best educated people of African ancestry in the world. Lincoln never specifically commented on the city's diversity, but came close when he personally hand-edited biographical words on the topic penned by W. D. Howells in 1860. After marveling at "the many-negroed planter of the sugar-coast, and the patriarchal creole of Louisiana," without edits from Lincoln, Howells saluted

that cosmopolitan port, where the French voyageur and the  
 the race hunter met trapped the beaver, the Osage and Miami  
 Missouri, met a polished old-world style, and the tongue of  
 France, Spain, and England made babel in the streets. . . .

Lincoln explicitly embraced the sort of pluralism he first witnessed in the large Catholic and foreign-born population of New Orleans, in an 1855 letter to friend Joshua Speed, he wrote forcefully against the nativist political movement gaining popularity at that time: "I am not a Know-Nothing," he declared.

What is certain. How could I be? How can any one who  
 honors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading masses  
 of white people? . . . As a nation, we began by declaring that  
 "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men  
 are created equal, *except negroes.*" When the Know-Nothings  
 get control, it will read "all men are created equal, *except negroes,*  
 and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this  
 I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make  
 no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where  
 despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of  
 hypocrisy [*sic*].<sup>78</sup>

One other worldview influence warrants mention, one that paralyzed conveniently military strategizing. Lincoln later in life regularly traveled Western rivers while on legal and political circuits. But only during the New Orleans voyages did he ever traverse the main lower trade channel of the Mississippi River system. During the Civil War, that artery became vital to the Union's strategy—as his commander in chief put it—"bisect

77. William Dean Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, facsimile edition of campaign biography corrected by the hand of Abraham Lincoln (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 25.

78. Abraham Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, August 24, 1855, in *Collected Works*, 2:323 (emphasis in original).

the Confederacy and have the Mississippi flow unvexed to the sea.”<sup>79</sup> The bluff-top cities that Lincoln looked up to in 1828 and 1831 now, in 1861, aimed artillery down on his troops. As Lincoln met with his generals and devised strategy, the only personal mental imagery he could possibly have drawn upon—envisioning places like Memphis, Vicksburg, Grand Gulf, Natchez, Port Hudson, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans all traced back to his decade-old flatboat memories. When, after each of those places fell to Union troops, Lincoln beamed optimistically, “The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.”<sup>80</sup>

Nearly all cultures commemorate milestones in the cycle of life. Passage from childhood to adulthood gets special treatment, marked in the Western world through religious rites such as Christianity’s confirmation and Judaism’s Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and in modern secular culture with graduations, debuts, sweet sixteens, and *quinceañeras*. Such formal rites are usually pegged to a certain age, in the expectation that adulthood is forthcoming.

*Demonstrating* adulthood, rather than declaring it, occurs more informally and variously. In rural America, a boy’s first hunt is often viewed as a coming-of-age experience. Service in the armed forces is a passage expected of young men growing up in families with military traditions. Proselytizing missions are a prerequisite for nineteen-year-olds before they gain full standing in the Mormon Church. Studying a semester abroad, working a summer in the Rockies, or joining the Peace Corps are regularly pitched to college students as personal-development opportunities of special significance. What each example has in common is a long trip, taken alone or without parents (usually for the first time), requiring responsibility and resourcefulness, involving discomfort and risk, and promising a transformative experience. Figuratively speaking, they may be thought of as “rite of passage.” Accepting the “rite” and “passing” satisfactorily earns social approval and professional advancement for the youth; declining or failing to garner disappointment and consternation, particularly from elders who may view it as a rejection of their tutelage and way of life.

For young white males in the trans-Appalachian West of the early

79. As recollected by James F. Kennedy, in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 388.

80. Abraham Lincoln to James C. Conkling, August 26, 1863, in *Collected Works*, 6:409.

1800s, flatboating to New Orleans informally validated the passage from boyhood to manhood. Farming families, merchants, and those who made a living off river transportation expected such service from their sons. In return, local society viewed what might be called “flatboat credentials”—piloting skills, commercial savvy, knowledge of the Mississippi River and New Orleans—as a litmus test for who could opine about certain topics, who could be trusted with certain tasks, who might make a good hire, who could tell a good story—who, in sum, had proven his manhood. “No young man could count himself among the elite young bucks of the community,” stated one Indiana county historian, “without having [be at least] one [flatboat] trip.”<sup>81</sup> Even if the youth earned no profit in the venture, “What matter! It had been to ‘Orleans and ever after life want a thousand new things.”<sup>82</sup> Lincoln’s father Thomas performed the flatboat rite of passage in 1806 and perhaps afterward; his close friend Peter Sibert Jr. would later become a famous Mississippi River navigator.<sup>83</sup> Thomas’ son Abraham followed his father’s path to New Orleans two decades later, as did Abraham’s relatives on both his mother’s and stepmother’s sides (John Hanks, Dennis Hanks, and John D. Johnston), all of whom came of age under Thomas’ custody. Abraham’s paternal-side cousin Elijah Lincoln also performed the rite—and had a similar experience in New Orleans, as reported in this 1907 interview:

I was like “Abe” [when he went to New Orleans on a flatboat]. I could not stand that infernal slavery. I saw “niggers” killed by their masters. I jes’ couldn’t stand it.

Lincoln’s employers flatboated to New Orleans and directed the young men under their charge to do the same. One James Gentry of Spencer County, performed the rite regularly, as did his son Allen, his brothers, and their sons. Another, Denton Offutt, used Lincoln with a flatboat job before hiring him to run his New Salem store. The rite dominated the business of the Todd family of Lexington, Kentucky, whose daughter

<sup>81</sup> As quoted in Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763–1861: Ohio and Mississippi Men and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>82</sup> “The Mississippi Valley Fleet,” *St. Luke Herald*, July 12, 1831, p. 10, c. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Louis A. Warren, ed., “A River to the Lincoln Memorial,” *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 553, November 13, 1931.

<sup>84</sup> “Abraham Lincoln’s First Cousin Still Living, Gives Recollections of the Great Emancipator.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 10, 1907, 116.

Mary would one day marry Abraham.<sup>85</sup> “I had resolved when a small boy,” declared one Hood, “to go to New Orleans on a flatboat. . . .”<sup>86</sup> Lincoln and his peers would have expressed the same sentiment.<sup>87</sup>

The flatboat journeys do not stand alone in making Lincoln a man, but rather perpetuate a four-year passage (1828–32) from the impetuosity and semi-dependence of late adolescence to the responsibilities and independence of adulthood.<sup>88</sup> That journey began, as readers will recall, with the unexpected death of his beloved sister during childbirth in January 1828, a tragedy that also deprived Lincoln of ever being a blood uncle. Three months later, and partly because of that trauma, came the first flatboat trip and all its influences. After returning, the already-changing Abraham started finding more and more fault with his sinner but sinner father. He also alienated village peers and burned social bridges in a manner that revealed he was outgrowing the people of his childhood. Menial farm work, bloody hog-slaughtering, and wearisome rail-splitting convinced him that the life of those around him would not be the one for him. Then, on February 12, 1830, Lincoln turned twenty-one and gained legal independence from his father, including the right to vote and keep his own wages. A few weeks later, the Lincoln family left Indiana, ending for Abraham fourteen years of familiarity and community affiliations. Settling into Illinois in summer 1830 meant more manual labor—but also new associations, opportunities, and challenges, from which spawned the second flatboat trip in spring 1831. Upon returning that summer, Lincoln for the first time established permanent residence apart from his parents,

85. Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 25, 33–34.

86. Isaac Naylor, “Judge Isaac Naylor, 1796–1873: An Autobiography,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 4, no. 3 (September 1902): 156.

87. It is interesting to note that Robert T. Lincoln (1843–1926), Abraham’s only child to reach adulthood, also visited New Orleans, in 1893. Unlike his father, the Lincoln was welcomed by local leaders and given a private sight-seeing tour of the city, including forays to Metairie Cemetery, the Soldiers’ Home, and the French Corner House on Bourbon Street. Whether the party toured in memory of the old flatboat wharf, or discussed his father’s famous visit, is unknown. “I am pleased with my visit to New Orleans,” Robert told a reporter, “which I have found to be a hospitable city full of intelligent and progressive people.” He felt that New Orleanians “had now fully realized the uselessness and absurdity of doting on the unpleasantness of the past.” “Pleased with New Orleans: Hon. Robert T. Lincoln Visits the Soldiers’ Home and the Opera,” *Daily Picayune*, November 8, 1893, p. 8, c. E

88. See Joseph Kett’s discussion of semi-dependence as a stage of life in nineteenth-century America. Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1977), 29–36.



and earned his own wages clerking in Offutt's New Salem store. The following spring he served in the Black Hawk War, an experience that, while not involving combat, posed danger, required leadership and responsibility, and involved long trips into new regions.<sup>89</sup> Upon returning from military service in summer 1832, Lincoln campaigned for a seat in the state legislature. He would eventually lose, but by then he was a man by any measure, tested by four years of tragedy, travel, responsibility, independence—and two lengthy flatboat journeys.

Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's seminal work *The Rite of Passage* (1960) identified three interconnected stages common to such practices worldwide. First comes separation from the familiar world of one's youth, followed by a liminal era of transition, ordeal, and ambiguity. Finally, after the passage, the youth re-incorporates into society and assumes his or her newly earned higher status. Lincoln's flatboat years map out well to Van Gennep's stages: the 1828 trip marks the initial separation; the alienation and discord of 1828–31 represent the ambiguous transitional era, which culminates with the second trip to New Orleans and subsequent Black Hawk War experience. Afterward—in deed, immediately upon returning from New Orleans—Lincoln re-incorporates into New Salem society with full manhood status, living alone, supporting himself, and aspiring to lead by running for office.

Evidence of this passage into adulthood comes from a rare personal recollection of Lincoln as a flatboat captain guiding cargo from New Salem to St. Louis around 1835. "One noticeable trait about Lincoln was that he never insisted [*sic*] to anybody what he considered his work," recalled crewmate Stephen W. Garrison: "The boat was in his charge and we addressed him as 'Cap' or 'Captain.'" Accompanying Lincoln's deep, held sense of responsibility and seriousness of purpose was "a sad look" on his face, as if he was "in a deep study" or "had just a friend or relative." Introversion and thoughtfulness occupied whatever moments navigation did not: "When the boat was on smooth water and needed but little attention, he read some and talked some . . . He never had anything to say about himself. The crewmates took no offense at Lincoln's emotional distance,

<sup>89</sup> Fighting Indians, like flatboating to New Orleans, also formed something of a rite of passage for young wildernesses of the time and place, as evidenced by the previously cited Isaac Naylor (quoted here in full): "I had resolved when a small boy to accomplish two objects if I had the opportunity, to go so. I had determined to go to New Orleans on a flatboat, and to go on a campaign against the Indians. Having accomplished the former object, I had an opportunity of accomplishing the latter." Naylor, "Judge Isaac Naylor," 136.

regarding him instead as “a good friend and master and we all liked him.” That was in 1835. In 1860, Garrison saw Lincoln again in Cincinnati en route to Washington to assume the presidency. “I could still detect the same expression of sadness on his face that I first saw a quarter of a century previously when we floated down the Illinois together.”<sup>90</sup>

A related life-passing phenomenon relevant to Lincoln’s flatboat experience is that of the “sea change.” Today this overused expression implies any significant shift in thinking caused by nearly any agency. The original expression, traceable to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, suggests that sailing across open ocean profoundly transformed first-time travelers. Passengers on the theory were forged new survival strategies, created social alliances, and formulated spiritual awareness as they sailed across the threatened unknown, and disembarked at their destination with new perspectives and outlooks on life. No doubt there is truth in the “sea change;” human beings transform slightly every day, thus it seems reasonable that significant shifts occur over the course of lengthy, risky, first-time trans-oceanic travel.

But what about rivers? Travel on rivers, with the visible safety of their nearby banks, imparts less mystery and risk than open sea. Yet Lincoln’s flatboating experience arguably may be viewed as forming a “river change” of sorts. Evidence presented in this book shows that Lincoln the flatboatman saw new conditions and geography, experienced peril, witnessed poignant spectacle, gained skills, built confidence, and came home changed. Others saw the change in Lincoln, even prior to the intense microanalysis Lincoln’s life received after the assassination. An admiring congressman, speaking in 1864, traced Lincoln’s intellectual, social, and moral development to his river journeys:

[T]hat one trading trip on the flatboat to New-Orleans was worth a whole college course. The youth . . . passed, day after day, down the mighty Father of Waters, saw its tributaries, and in aught of the vast continent it deeded, observed and took advantage of its currents and shores, conversed and traded with its people, and fought with midnight robbers, gained an enlargement of soul and intellect, variety of information, a fact and independence of character that no learned professors could have imparted. He did even the lowest duties he undertook

90. “Garrison’s Prediction: Death of Abraham Lincoln’s Friend Recalls a Prophecy Made by the Old Man That Came True,” *Omaha World Herald*, September 30, 1899, p. 4.

honestly and well, yet his ever-expanding mind called him to higher duties in life . . .

Four years later, in aging Horace Greeley drew a similar interpretation of the river trips as intrinsically life-changing, going so far as to analogize them to a college diploma inscribed on sheepskin.

How far his two flatboat voyages to New Orleans are to be regarded as educational exercises [like a freshman's year in college, I will not say. . . . [Lincoln's] first introduction to the outside world from the deck of a "bread-horn" must have been wonderfully interesting and suggestive. To one whose most experience of civilization had been a county town[,] there must have been a marvelous spectacle which glowed in his eyes from the banks of the Ohio and the lower Mississippi. Though Cairo was then but a desolate swamp, Memphis a wood-landing and Vicksburgh [*sic*] a timbered bridge with a few stores at its base, even these were in striking contrast to the somber monotony of the great woods. The rivers were enlivened by countless swift-speeding steamboats, dispensing smoke by day and flame by night; while New Orleans, though scarcely one-fourth the city she now is, was the focus of a vast commerce and of a civilization which (for America) might be deemed antique. I doubt not that our tall and green young bread-winners needed only a piece of well-tanned sheepskin suit-case . . . inscribed to have rendered these two boat trips memorable as his degrees in capacity to do well his part on that stage which he mankind for its audience.<sup>92</sup>

We should be skeptical, however, of ascribing agency to inanimate natural forces. The Mississippi did nothing but flow to the Gulf; it was the human constructs exploiting its current and lining its banks—the rail of navigation, the commerce, the plantations, the people, the metropolis, the bondage—that influenced travelers like Lincoln.

Lincoln himself alluded to the role that his flatboat experiences played in personal development. According to the recollection, he referenced his river days while lecturing a group of Sunday school students, explain-

91. "Character of President Lincoln—Remarks by Hon. A. Wakeman," *New York Times*, November 27, 1864, p. 5.

92. Horace Greeley, "Greeley's Estimate of Lincoln: An Unpublished Address," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 42, no. 3 (July 1891): 372. Greeley originally wrote this address circa 1868.

ing that “the only assurance of successful navigation . . . on the Mississippi . . . depended on the manner in which [the flatboat] was started.” Concluded Lincoln, “So it is with you young folks. . . . Be sure you get started right as you begin to, and you’ll make a good voyage to a happy harbour.”<sup>93</sup> While on the campaign trail in 1843, Lincoln cast his 1831 flatboat voyage as an authenticating, dues-paying experience, assuring his political supporters that his presently rising stature made him no less a man of the people:

It would astonish . . . the older citizens of [Menard] County, who twelve years ago knew me a strange[r], friendless, uneducated, penniless boy, working on a flat boat—at ten dollars per month—to learn that I have been set down here as the candidate of peace, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction [*sic*].<sup>94</sup>

In 1860, while speaking in New Haven on the presidential campaign trail, Lincoln invoked his flatboat toils as evidence of his personal passage out of the poverty of his youth—a passage, he went on to say, that could be replicated by the free black man:

[F]ree society is such that [a poor man] knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor, for his whole life. *I am not ashamed to confess that twenty five years ago I was a hired laborer, shoveling rail at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man’s son!* I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him!<sup>95</sup>

Observers noticed how the river experiences affected Lincoln’s way of communicating. A journalist writing in January 1865 detected “flat-boat lingo” in the president’s diction, such as his promise upon accepting the presidency to “run the machine as he found it.”<sup>96</sup> After the assassination,

93. “As In Years Gone By,” *Chicago Daily*, February 13, 1895, p. 5.

94. Abraham Lincoln to Martin S. May, March 26, 1843, in *Collected Works*, 1:319–320 (emphasis added).

95. Lincoln, “Speech at New Haven,” March 6, 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:24–25 (emphasis added).

96. “Latest News from the South,” *Sun* (Baltimore, MD) January 21, 1865, p. 1, citing other Southern newspapers.

a New York City politician, reflecting on the late president's mannerisms, wrote:

[T]he young man who was to become President . . . made several voyages as a boat-hand, and apparently, not without impressing some of the peculiarities of that location upon his character; for, with the thoughtful and somewhat reticent nature of Mr. Lincoln's mind, was always blended the free and easy manner of the voyageur. The tales of wit and aptness of anecdote with which the tedium of the boatman's life was varied, remained a characteristic of Mr. Lincoln's conversation. . . . A distinguished statesman and intimate friend of the deceased President [stated that] many of the most important discussions . . . of State politics received point and illustration from the application of an apt anecdote, drawn from the stores of a memory which seemed fully supplied with them.<sup>97</sup>

Lincoln explicitly found inspiration in the boatman's patient ability to focus on the challenges of the moment. "The pilots on our Western rivers steer from *point to point*," he remarked, "setting the course of the boat no farther than they can see . . ."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the notion of river travel as a metaphor for life occupied a special place in Lincoln's world—literally. On the wall of his Springfield dining room hung a framed print of the second of Thomas Cole's four famous *Voyage of Life* paintings, respectively subtitled *Birth, Youth, Manhood*, and *Old Age*. It features a robust lad departing on a gilded vessel down a lush river, toward a sublimely sublime landscape of majestic mountains and celestial clouds.

*Voyage of Life: Youth* hangs in the Lincoln home to this day.<sup>99</sup>

This study finds that Lincoln's trailboat journeys to New Orleans influenced the man in meaningful ways. We conclude by contemplating how the historical narrative of these journeys has influenced our never-ending quest to understand the enigmatic man we so readily identify as our greatest president. For better or worse, rightly or wrongly, we have mythologized

97. David Thomas Valentine, *Obsequies: Abraham Lincoln, in the City of New York, Under the Auspices of the Common Council* (New York: E. Jones & Company, 1866), xvi–xvii.

98. Abraham Lincoln, as quoted in Donald, *Lincoln*, 15 (emphasis added). Lincoln used this river analogy to explain his Reconstruction plan to Gen. G. Blaine.

99. A U.S. Park Service ranger attested to the author that the Cole print indeed belonged to the Lincolns and hung in their dining room at the time of their occupancy.

gized Lincoln, and therein lies the clue in understanding the role the flatboat journeys played in Lincoln's literature.

In his revolutionary 1948 book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell analyzed myriad legends across human history and found consistencies among their storylines, characters, and lessons. From these patterns Campbell extracted what he termed the "monomyth," the core stage through which the mythological hero passes. First, the hero is born anonymously in ordinary circumstances. He then receives a call to adventure. Reluctant at first, he is encouraged by wise elders and eventually sets out. The hero then embarks on his adventure, which usually takes the form of a long trip into the unknown. He encounters tests and battles and finally crosses the threshold into a dangerous, exotic place. There, he engages in an epic ordeal and suffers brushes with mortality—only to battle back heroically, "seize the sword," and emerge victorious. The return trip confronts additional threats, but the hero now enlightened, thrillingly overcomes adversaries with ever-mounting ease. He finally returns to his ordinary world, but no longer is he ordinary, for he has brought back an elixir—a power, a treasure, or a lesson learned—from the great adventure. The hero has transformed himself, and, so empowered, the hero is now destined for greatness: the saving of his people. The basic form of the monomyth recurs in countless stories, from Greek mythology and the Bible to *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby-Dick*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter*.

Lincoln's New Orleans trips, as depicted in historical literature over the past 150 years, align well with the elements of Campbell's monomyth. A man emerges from the most ordinary of circumstances. Like most of his peers, he heeds the call for adventure to set sail down the Mississippi, something encouraged and expected by his elders. Off he goes on the long trip to a dangerous and exotic destination, New Orleans. He encounters risk (in river navigation, as all flatboatmen did), engages in battles (with the several black men in Louisiana) and struggles with an ordeal (witnessing slavery and slave trading). He triumphs in each case, evading navigation hazards, resisting bandits, and extracting a lesson of moral outrage—*If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard*—from what he saw at the slave auction. He returns transformed; the seeds of greatness are planted. One day he will use them to save his people.

Problems emerge, of course, when we investigate the New Orleans trips critically. The seemingly seamless alignment of traditional Lincoln literature with the monomyth starts to show some gaps. For example, the trips did not stand alone in Lincoln's passage to adulthood, but rather

punctuated a four-year-long maturation. He probably never said the “hit it hard” line, although he certainly gained moral education in witnessing New Orleans-style slavery. Even then, the experience did not make him a racial egalitarian, nor even an abolitionist. And, resisting supernatural impulses, we may rationally maintain that Lincoln was never “destined” for greatness as the hero-myth projects; he was merely a good man who arrived, rather serenely, at the right time and place in American history to achieve greatness, and did.

Nevertheless, the New Orleans flatboat journeys retain remarkable parallels with the hero-myth. This is especially the case when we remember that we are contemplating a true story with documented details, and not an imaginary construct implied by the word “myth.” The parallels explain the appeal of the flatboat story, and why it features prominently in nearly every book written about Abraham Lincoln, from children’s readers to scholarly tomes. It speaks to the archetype we have heard before—one that profoundly resonates in the human mind, given that, as Joseph Campbell discovered, we have been telling it since time immemorial.

