

**Lincoln in New Orleans**

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by Richard Campanella**

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Lincoln in  
New Orleans

The 1828–1831 Flatboat Voyages  
and Their Place in History

Richard Campanella

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*Dedicated  
to the hoosiers,  
the suckers, the pukes,  
the buckeyes, the mudheads,  
and the corn crackers  
of history*

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## Introduction

On an April morning in 1865, Pres. Abraham Lincoln, rejuvenated by the dawn of peace after four years of unspeakable violence, gathered his cabinet to discuss matters of the day. In a moment of reflection, the president shared with colleagues his previous night's dream. "He seemed to be . . . in a singular and indescribable vessel," recalled one attendee, "moving with great rapidity towards a dark and indefinite shore. . . . It was a recurring vision, Lincoln pointed out, and one that seemed to precede stunning news—battles, for example, at Antietam . . . Gettysburg, and Vicksburg."<sup>1</sup>

That evening, he was assassinated. Thirty-seven Aprils earlier, a young Abraham Lincoln floated in a singular vessel down the indefinite banks of the Mississippi River. The voyage culminated in a stunning spectacle—New Orleans, the largest city he would see for decades, the most exotic metropolis in the country, the nation's largest slave marketplace. It also exposed him to a violent and potentially murderous attack. That trip, and a second one in 1831, would form the two longest journeys of Lincoln's life, his only visit to the Deep South, and the closest he ever came to immersing himself in a foreign culture. The two voyages form key experiences in the least-known era of Lincoln's otherwise thoroughly examined adult life.

Perhaps the hypnotic sensation of descending that deceptively placid current, through fog and mist for days and weeks, instilled in the future president's slumbering mind the source imagery from which that recurring riverine dream arose. We can say with greater confidence that the two flatboat voyages to New Orleans informed Lincoln's intellectual and moral development in many ways, some likely profound. We can say with certainty that Lincoln's journeys typified the experience of tens of thousands of Western rivermen who guided cargo down the Ohio and Mississippi during the early nineteenth century, and thus tell an important story about Western river commerce and New Orleans. It is also true that nearly every book ever written about Lincoln, from children's readers to scholarly tomes, briefly recount the Mississippi flatboat story and ascribes importance to what the man experienced in New Orleans.

1. Men in Lincoln's administration—including Gideon Welles, recalled slightly differing versions of the dream. This one comes from John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "Abraham Lincoln: A History—The Fourteenth of April—The Fate of the Assassins—The Mourning Pageant," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, January 1890, 430.

Shedding new light on these and other aspects of his story, with detailed documentation, contextualization, and critical analysis, is the goal of *Lincoln in New Orleans*. The book begins by tracing two American families—the Lincolns and the Hanks, typical of so many others—over the Appalachian Mountains at the turn of the nineteenth century. We then delve into the childhood and adolescence of one of their progeny, Abraham, and his early exposure to rivers and river commerce. Next we reconstruct in detail Abraham Lincoln's first voyage to New Orleans in 1828, followed by his return to Indiana, his family's move to Illinois, and his second experience in 1831. Much effort is devoted to nailing down the timing of each day, because that chronology determines the time and place in which we may reconstruct the street life in New Orleans to which Lincoln was exposed. We then explore the various interactions Lincoln had with New Orleans after 1831—and particularly after 1862, when the great metropolis that once utterly ignored the poor upcountry boatman fell under his command. We conclude by positing certain influences of the 1828–31 journeys upon Lincoln in his philosophical, moral, and intellectual development. Two detailed appendices situate the story in the broader context of early nineteenth-century Western river commerce and New Orleans as the major Southern node in that system. The appendices' length attests to my conviction that Lincoln's flatboat voyages are important not solely as chapters in the biography of a major historical figure, but also as exemplars of the experiences of thousands of common men who, like Lincoln, worked the Western rivers and ended up, anonymous and marginalized, on New Orleans's flatboat wharves. This is their story too, because, as exceptional as Lincoln later came to be, he was entirely archetypal of the Western rivermen of his youth.

No one has attempted a full-length scholarly study of this topic before, and for good reason: Lincoln did not scribble a journal during the voyages and spoke only fleetingly of them later in life, depriving historians of detailed first-person accounts.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, numerous other fonts of

2. Some scholarly journal articles, cited later in this volume, have been written about Lincoln's New Orleans trips. A few fictionalized books have also been published on the topic, generally for juvenile readers. Virginia L. S. Eifert's *Three Rivers South: The Story of Young Abe Lincoln* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1953)—featuring drawings by Thomas Hart Benton, begins with the disclaimer: "The general situation and many of the events described in this book are based upon historical facts. However, the fictional characters are wholly imaginative. . . ." Imaginative indeed were Eifert's accounts—mostly about the 1831 journey—but she nonetheless did her homework in structuring the fiction around a skeleton of historical and geographical facts. A similar book by Meridel

information, ranging from solid primary and reliable secondary sources, to first-person recollections recorded later in life, to family memories and folk knowledge. Reams of geographical data on 1820–31 river conditions, landscapes, and cityscape, plus scores of journals written by other river travelers and New Orleans visitors, also await investigation. The task of evaluating and synthesizing these myriad sources yields a vast array of facts, contexts, estimations, and clues—as well as fair allotment of the dubious and the apocryphal. Triangulating off the reliable information produces a patchwork of solid facts, likely scenarios, and trajectories of best fit, which must then be carefully guided into a reconstruction of the journeys. This, of course, entails constant evaluation, weighing of evidence, and calls of judgment, each of which is documented and explained so that readers may critique and challenge my reasoning. The principle of Occam's razor—of embracing the simplest explanation based on the fewest assumptions and supported by the best evidence—guided my reasoning. No literary license is taken; there is zero invented dialogue.

I acknowledge the following institutions for access to archival documents, research materials, artifacts, original maps, datasets, and analytical tools used in this volume: Louisiana Collection of the New Orleans Public Library; The Historic New Orleans Collection; Williams Research Center; U.S. Library of Congress; Howard-Tilton Library at Tulane University; Louisiana State Museum; U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Geological Survey; Port of New Orleans; New Orleans Notarial Archives; University of Arkansas Library Special Collections; Lewis Historical Library at Vincennes University; Genealogy Room of the Spencer County Library, Rockport, Indiana; Center for Bioenvironmental Research at Tulane and Xavier Universities; Louisiana Collection and Special Collections of the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans; U.S. National

Let me be framed at the same readership, *The River Road: A Story of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), came out the next year, and has been recently republished. Laveen Anderson's *Abe Lincoln and the River Robbers* (Champaign, IL: Gaard Publishing Company, 1971) and Neil Waldman's *Voyages: Reminiscences of Young Abe Lincoln* (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek Books, 2009) also pertain to this genre. In 2009, Rae Katherine Eighmey self-published a book entitled *Abraham Lincoln in New Orleans: A Novel Based on the True Events of March–June 1831*, which, like the aforementioned, embellishes an underlying foundation of facts with fictionalized incidents and dialogue. While not of interest to the historian, these and similar works are nonetheless significant because they help instill lasting popular perceptions about Lincoln's youth and life narrative.

Park Service's Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site, Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, and Lincoln Home National Historic Site; the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield; and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park, Lincoln New Salem State Historic Site, and Lincoln-Herndon Law Office State Historic Site.

Appreciation also goes to the hundreds of informants, diarists, reporters, and researchers cited herein, whose findings and testimonies made this analysis possible. The invaluable work of Lincoln scholar Douglas L. Wilson, particularly his effort (with Rodney O. Davis) to transcribe and edit William M. Herndon's circa 1865 interviews with the people of Lincoln's youth, proved critical to this project.

I am also indebted to Jane Gaultinghouse and Barbara Dillon of Brookport, Indiana (both direct descendants of Lincoln's 1828 flatboat captain father, Gentry), as well as Robert Grose (the only person to participate in two full Lincoln flatboat reenactments, in 1958 and 2008), for sharing their knowledge, family memories, and photographs with me. Melissa Miller of the Spencer County Visitors Bureau kindly provided photographs of the 2008 *Journey of Remembrance*, as did the staff of Lincoln New Salem State Historic Site for its 2006 flatboat reenactment. Gratitude also goes to Jonathan B. Pritchett and Lawrence Powell of Tulane University; Louisiana National Guard State Historian Lieut. Col. (Ret.) Thomas M. Moran; Naomi Homison of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Irene Wainwright of the New Orleans Public Library; Norman Vickers of Marion, Arkansas; Thomas Dillard and Andrea Cantrell of the University of Arkansas Library Special Collections; Jill Larson of the Lewis Historical Library at Vincennes, Indiana; Jeff Miller, Lee Goldsmith, and Roger Anderson from the musical *Abe!*; Greg Lambousy of the Louisiana State Museum; Georgia Chadwick of the Louisiana Supreme Court Library; Eric Strobel and colleagues at the Spencer County Public Library in Rockport, Indiana; Sister Mary Pat White and Sister Mary Louise Gavett of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; architect Jay Manning and geographer Julie Bernabe for their interest and words of encouragement; Dorothy Bass for her keen editorial review and insightful comments; and others for various ideas and access.

Deep gratitude goes to James D. Wilson Jr., Carl A. Brasseaux, Jessica C. Hornbuckle, Melissa Gruntsch, and the staff of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, for their steadfast support of my work.

As a six-year-old growing up in Brooklyn, New York, in the early

1970s, I read with my parents' help Barbara Cary's *Meet Abraham Lincoln*. That children's reader represented my first introduction to Lincoln, to slavery, and to New Orleans. Cary's characterization of that city as a remote and exotic place, "at the very end of the Mississippi River," captured my imagination and planted a seed of fascination in my mind that would blossom twenty years later.

I eventually devoted my career to researching the history and geography of New Orleans, an interest that has produced numerous books, articles, lectures, and classes over the past two decades. *Lincoln in New Orleans*, my sixth book, unites all three topics first introduced to me nearly forty years ago. My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Mario and Rose Campanella, for their tireless efforts in raising and educating me. I still have *Meet Abraham Lincoln* to this day, one of my most cherished possessions.

Finally, my thanks go to my wife, Marina Campanella, brother Thomas J. Campanella, and uncle John Tambasco for their many years of love, support, and guidance.

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