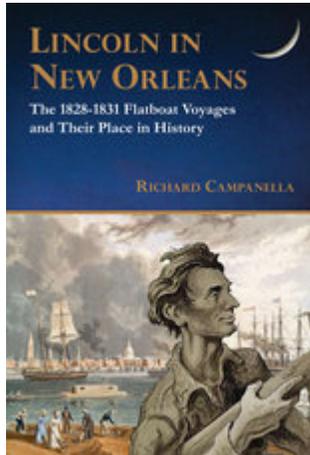


Lincoln's New Orleans

Review of Richard Campanella's "Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828-1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History," by Mike Scott, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, February 12, 2011



About a quarter of the way through Seth Grahame-Smith's guilty-pleasure horror-history mash-up "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter," the future U.S. president boats down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where he makes a horrific discovery at a French Quarter slave auction.

Turns out, these slaves, being snapped up by the dozen and marched to plantations in the city's hinterlands, are being bought for a sole purpose: to quench the thirst of vampires. "So long as this country is cursed with slavery," the fictional Lincoln writes in his journal, "so too will it be cursed with vampires."

As surprisingly well-researched as Grahame-Smith's book is, and as lively as his writing is, this is decidedly quirky, oddball stuff. Which explains why Tim Burton is coming to town to produce a big-budget, 3-D movie version of it this spring for 20th Century Fox.

But as with any good work of fiction, there's a kernel of truth behind it, and Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella explains all in his fascinating and exhaustively researched new book "Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828-1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History."

Spoiler alert: no vampires.

Released through the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, Campanella's book sheds light on Lincoln's two often-cited but little-studied visits to New Orleans, both of them made on flatboats he helped build, and both aimed at selling goods in the teeming New Orleans marketplace. Along the way, the book places Lincoln's visits into historical context, illustrating their likely impact -- and that of Lincoln's first up-close look at the brutal realities of slavery -- had on the future president.

A particularly telling graphic in the book charts the places Lincoln visited in his lifetime. His trips to New Orleans stand out not only as the longest journeys of his life, but also as his only first-hand exposure to the depths to which slavery pervaded Southern society. These trips, it's no exaggeration to say, were significant.

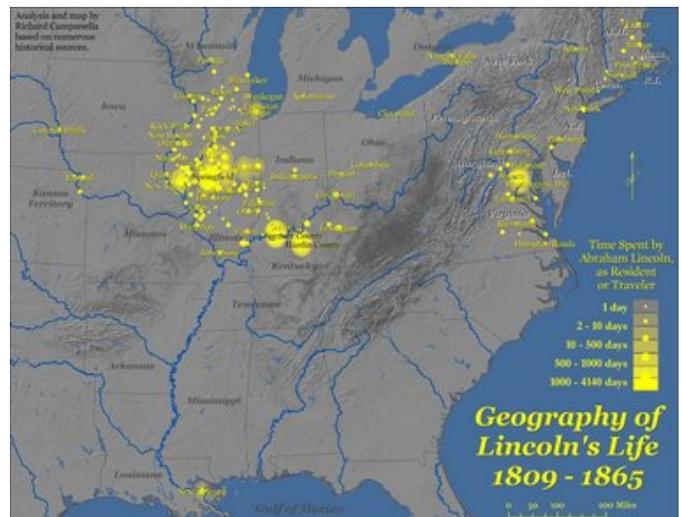
At the same time, though -- through his compelling narrative and accessible writing style -- Campanella presents a vivid snapshot of life on the river and in New Orleans at the time.

"What the book does is use Lincoln as a history docent, to guide us through how that river economy worked via the flatboat trade, and how New Orleans figured into it," Campanella said.

"(The goal was) to re-create city life as experienced at the pedestrian level, because that's what Lincoln was at that point. He was a curious, eyes-wide-open pedestrian, a visitor."

That angle was familiar to Campanella, the author of such books as "Geographies of New Orleans" and "Bienville's Dilemma," which focus on "charting and explaining the geographies, both human and physical" in yesterday's New Orleans. The hook for this book, however -- that alluring Lincoln angle, particularly timely given April's 150th anniversary of the onset of the Civil War -- put the author in uncharted waters.

Not only was he not a Lincoln scholar, but as he discovered early on, there is a good reason why such a dearth of full-length, scholarly writings exist on the flatboat voyages: As well-documented as Lincoln's life is, and as often as the story of his visits to New Orleans have been recounted -- in history books, in children's books, by French Quarter carriage drivers -- the few verifiable facts that historians know about them wouldn't fill a stovepipe hat.



And so Campanella's book, which took three years to research and write, emerges as an impressive bit of historical forensics. "It was quite the detective project," Campanella said.

Historians know the trips happened, of course -- Lincoln himself spoke of them. But he didn't do so extensively, and he wasn't a diary keeper, so he provided precious few first-hand details. Unfortunately, as Campanella explains, the historical record follows suit.

We know Lincoln was about 19 at the time of his first voyage. We know, for the most part, who accompanied him. We know that, on one of his trips, he was attacked in the middle of the night, likely by runaway slaves, while moored just south of Baton Rouge. And we know that the 1828 trip brought him his first in-person look at the Southern slave trade. That's not insignificant, since he would become the man to quash the institution some 35 years later.



Beyond that, Campanella had a lot of blanks to fill in. He does so thoroughly and methodically in "Lincoln in New Orleans," building in the process day-by-day reconstructions of Lincoln's river voyages as well as a riveting look at what he would have seen upon arriving in the city.

To accomplish that, Campanella undertook an impressive and well-footnoted bit of research, tapping into a multitude of sources to tell the story -- some firsthand, some secondhand, some dubious and some pure conjecture. In each case, though, Campanella characterizes the credibility of each source, then gives the resulting information the weight it deserves.

Among his most vital research tools were the notes of William Herndon. Herndon was Lincoln's law partner, but almost immediately after the 1865 assassination, he also became Lincoln's biographer, setting out to interview as many people who knew the man as possible. The notes from those interviews, Campanella said, were invaluable.

Campanella next set out to gather everything he could about river life and New Orleans life of the time, including from such sources as the old Bee and Argus newspapers in New Orleans. The result functions as a street-level tour of 1828 life here. (He goes so far to include 14-step instructions for building a floatboat like the one Lincoln would have used.)

For example, as it would turn out, Campanella posits Lincoln probably didn't head for the lawless, back-of-town vice district known at the time as "The Swamp" as most flatboatmen did. Rather, as an intellectual sort who tended toward temperance and shyness in the company of women -- but with a documented appetite for reading newspapers -- he probably reveled in the number and variety of publications suddenly at his disposal.

"New Orleans in the red-hot political year of 1828 might well have given Abraham Lincoln his first massive daily dosage of passionate political opinion, via newspapers, broadsides, bills, orations, and overheard conversations," Campanella writes.

At the time Campanella puts Lincoln in New Orleans, one of the local newspapers, The Louisiana Courier, carried a story about a slave ship from the coast of Africa that - being chased by a war ship - lightened its load by pitching 200 of its 600 captive slaves overboard.

For many readers, the linchpin will be the slave auction the impressionable young Lincoln is often said to have witnessed while in town. Newspaper ads show there was ample opportunity for him to stumble across just such an event, likely at Hewlett's Exchange at the corner of St. Louis and Chartres streets. Not only was the renowned auction house viewed as a must-see on the list of things to do when visiting New Orleans, but during the period Campanella puts Lincoln in New Orleans, Hewlett's hosted at least one slave auction per day. (At one point, seven were sold in the space of 40 minutes.)

Campanella's book leaves a number of questions unanswered -- an inevitability, really, given what little is known about the flatboat voyages -- but he also offers a great deal of illumination on Lincoln's river life and on 1828 New Orleans. And he does it in such an absorbing and accessible way that "Lincoln in New Orleans" is bound to strike a chord with readers, both in the Crescent City and beyond.

"It's a Lincoln story," Campanella said, "but it's also a Mississippi River story, a New Orleans story -- and an American story."