



If Walls Could Talk, New Starbucks Would Speak of Lincoln

By Richard Campanella
Tulane School of Architecture

READERS WHO RESIDE IN NEW ORLEANS may have noticed the spacious new Starbucks coffee shop recently opened in the Pickwick Club on the corner of Canal Street at St. Charles Avenue. Though it's hard to tell from the interior, this prominent edifice retains structural elements dating as early as 1826, the year of its original construction. It was remodeled into a hotel in 1858 and a billiard hall in 1865, and all but reconstructed in 1875 as the Crescent City Billiard Hall according to grand designs by architect Henry Howard. Thomas Sully finished off the interior in 1886, and since then, the splendid building has become known to generations of New Orleanians for its Carnival viewing stands and for the sundry retailers renting its street-grade spaces.

When I bike past the Pickwick Club each morning en route to work, I think not so much of Starbucks coffee, nor of its architectural history, but of a little-known incident involving Abraham Lincoln, on the eve of this nation's greatest drama.

Lincoln never set foot in the building, although he may well have walked past its original design during his 1828 and 1831 perambulations as an upcountry flatboatman. Rather, the incident occurred in the 1850s, at a time when Lincoln was as a country lawyer working the "mud circuit" around Springfield, Illinois, and when New Orleans, which reveled at the peak of its mercantilist power, roiled over the mounting sectional tensions regarding slavery.

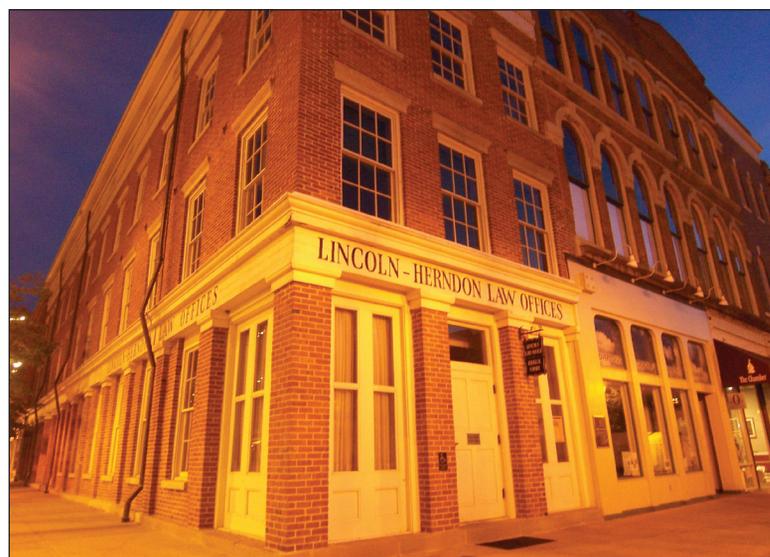
Springfield at that time was home to 27 free African American families. Among them was a woman named Polly Mack, who had arrived years earlier courtesy her Kentucky master, who freed her after arriving on Northern soil. Polly raised her son John Shelby in Springfield, and as the lad reached manhood, he yearned to stretch his legs, make some money, and see the world. In this time and place, that usually meant working the rivers, the arteries of Western commerce.

In late 1856, Shelby ventured to St. Louis and took a deckhand job aboard a Mississippi steamboat bound for New Orleans. Upon arriving at the Crescent City, Shelby, like any country chap, eagerly stepped ashore to explore the enticing metropolis. What Shelby did not realize was that New Orleans, finding itself increasingly on the defensive regarding slavery, had become progressively more resistant to free blacks. To be sure, the city since colonial times had been known as something of a haven for native-born free people of color, who had enjoyed legal rights, attained skills and education, and prospered to degrees unimaginable in the interior South. But times were changing, and the white establishment by the 1850s endeavored to curtail their rights, proscribe their influx into the city, and expel those recently arrived. A contemporaneous *Picayune* editorial angrily described "free negroes" as an "evil," a "plague and a pest" responsible for "mischief to the slave population," and recommended deporting them to Liberia and cracking down on further emancipations. Authorities viewed out-of-state free black males in particular as potential subversives whose very existence threatened the institution of slavery. Those in the city unsupervised and undocumented were routinely arrested and jailed.

Shelby set out into the streets of New Orleans blissfully ignorant of all this, not even having procured a pass from his captain. In short time he found himself detained by the police, tossed in jail, tried, and fined. Because his steamboat by then had left, he had no way to pay his penalty. Shelby was "thrown [back] into prison," according to an 1866 letter between involved parties, and "as no one was especially interested in him, he was forgotten. After a certain length of time, established by law," the writer explained, "he would inevitably have been sold into slavery to defray prison expenses."

Months passed, and Shelby languished in prison. Somehow, in early 1857, he managed to establish contact with a sympathetic young New Orleans attorney named Benjamin F. Jonas, who, like Shelby, had been raised in Springfield. Jonas visited Shelby in his cell, and the two furtively discussed that a particularly capable lawyer back home, a man by the name of Abe Lincoln, might adopt his case and arrange for his liberation.

Shelby may have known Lincoln courtesy William "Billy" Florville, a Haitian of mixed Franco-African ancestry who himself had escaped possible enslavement in New Orleans decades early, before settling in Springfield. Florville became Lincoln's barber, as well as a pillar of the local black community, and likely knew both Shelby and his mother. Jonas knew Lincoln better; Abe was a close



Richard Campanella

In 1857, a black Illinoisan named John Shelby was imprisoned in New Orleans. Abraham Lincoln, working from his Springfield law office (pictured above), negotiated with New Orleans lawyer B. F. Jonas (whose law office, pictured top, operated in the ground-floor space now occupied by this St. Charles Avenue / Canal Street building, formerly Crescent Hall) to pay Shelby's fine and spare him enslavement. Shelby ranks as among the first African Americans, if not the first, ever freed by Abraham Lincoln.

friend of his father Abraham Jonas, a leading citizen of Springfield and one of the first Jewish settlers in the region. Everyone thought highly of Lincoln, and the two agreed to get him involved.

Jonas sent word of John Shelby's precarious situation upriver to Polly Mack and to Lincoln. An 1866 historical narrative by Josiah Gilbert Holland described the latter's response:

Mr. Lincoln was very much moved, and requested [his law partner] Mr. Herndon to...inquire of Governor Bissell if there was not something that he could do to obtain possession of the negro. [T]he Governor regretted to say that he had no legal or constitutional right to [act]. Mr. Lincoln rose to his feet in great excitement, and exclaimed, "By the Almighty, I'll have that negro back soon, or I'll have a twenty years' agitation in Illinois, until the Governor does have a legal and constitutional right..."

Lacking further recourse and all too aware that New Orleans had the law on its side, Lincoln and William Herndon drafted \$69.30 out of the Metropolitan Bank of New York and, on May 27, sent the funds from their law office at South 6th Street and East Adams in Springfield, to Benjamin Jonas at his law office in New Orleans. According to city directories of this era, that office was located at 3 St. Charles Street, or 103 St. Charles Avenue on today's house-numbering system — within the space of the new Starbucks in the Pickwick Building. There, Jonas would have received Lincoln's paperwork and arranged to pay the fine.

Within days, Shelby won his release and returned as swiftly as possible to Springfield. "[S]hould he come south again," Jonas warned Lincoln in a letter dated June 4, 1857 and probably written at the same office, "be sure [he has] his papers with him — and he must also be careful not to be away from the boat at night—without a pass [from] the captain..."

What makes the incident more curious is the situation in which the Jonases would find themselves when war broke out four years later, by which time Lincoln was president. The Illinois-based Jonas family had many relatives in New Orleans, some of whom served as Union spies who secretly informed patriarch Abraham Jonas of Confederate activities, who in turn passed the intelligence directly to President Lincoln. Others, however, sided with the Confederacy — including, paradoxically, the same Benjamin Jonas who helped liberate John Shelby in 1857.



Image courtesy Starbucks

Greatly altered since 1857, Jonas' office space was renovated again in 2012 and recently reopened as a Starbucks (interior shown above).

Despite the divided loyalties, President Lincoln maintained his affection for the Jonas family, unionists and rebels alike, demonstrating the better angels of his own nature. Benjamin once recalled that "Mr. Lincoln always asked after us when he saw any one from New Orleans during the war." The president even granted a three-week parole to Benjamin's imprisoned Confederate brother Charles so he could visit his dying father, and Lincoln's old friend, Abraham Jonas. Benjamin Jonas himself would later serve as a Louisiana senator.

As for John Shelby, we may justly view him as among the first African Americans, if not *the* first, ever freed by Abraham Lincoln — from a New Orleans imprisonment that would have led to forced labor, and quite possibly to permanent enslavement.

I think about this every time I pass that Starbucks.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bien-ville's Dilemma, Geographies of New Orleans, and the forthcoming Bourbon Street: A History. For more information and sources on the Shelby case, please see the author's 2010 book, Lincoln in New Orleans. Campanella may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, rcamp@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.

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