

JOURNAL OF THE

Abraham Lincoln

ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 33 : NUMBER 1 : WINTER 2012



Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association

Volume 33, Number 1

Winter 2012

Does Lincoln Still Belong to the Ages? <i>Allen C. Guelzo</i>	1
The Lost Cause of the North: A Reflection on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural <i>James L. Huston</i>	14
Abraham Lincoln's Religion: The Case for His Ultimate Belief in a Personal, Sovereign God <i>Samuel W. Calhoun and Lucas E. Morel</i>	38
Review Essay Lincoln and His Books <i>Reading with Lincoln</i> , by Robert Bray <i>Allen C. Guelzo</i>	75
Review <i>Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828–1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History</i> , by Richard Campanella <i>Richard Slotkin</i>	85
Abraham Lincoln Association 2011 Members	88

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

SAMUEL W. CALHOUN is Professor of Law at Washington and Lee University School of Law. He is the author of many law review articles and other works, including *Lincoln As A Lawyer*, a set of materials prepared for use during orientation for first-year law students.

ALLEN C. GUELZO is the Henry R. Luce Professor of Civil War Era Studies at Gettysburg College and two-time winner of the Lincoln Prize for *Abraham Lincoln, Redeemer President* (1999) and *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (2004).

JAMES L. HUSTON is Regents Professor of History at Oklahoma State University. His books include *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemma of Democratic Equality* (2006) and *Calculating the Value of the Union: Property Rights, Slavery, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (2003).

LUCAS E. MOREL is the Lewis G. John Term Professor of Politics at Washington and Lee University. He is the author of *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government* (2000). His current project is a book, *Abraham Lincoln, Race, and the Fragile American Republic*.

RICHARD SLOTKIN is Olin Professor of American Studies Emeritus at Wesleyan University. He is the author of a prize-winning trilogy that explores how each generation of Americans has viewed America's frontier myth. His historical novels include *Abe: A Novel of the Young Lincoln* (2000).

Review

RICHARD SLOTKIN

Richard Campanella. *Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828–1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History*. Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2010. Pp. 380.

A decade ago I published *Abe*, a novel about Abraham Lincoln's youth that centered on the flatboat voyages he made to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831. I wish I had had the benefit of Richard Campanella's detailed and comprehensive research on Mississippi River flatboating in general and on Lincoln's two voyages in particular.

Most biographers treat Lincoln's flatboat journeys as important episodes in his early development. The first voyage, made when Lincoln was nineteen, marked a significant change in his working life, which hitherto had been spent as a hired laborer, largely on his father's account. As "bow hand" on a two-man vessel owned and captained by Allen Gentry, Lincoln earned \$8 a month, and the work took him far beyond his father's world. That voyage was also Lincoln's first real experience of the American nation—the large and varied society beyond the narrow backwoods world of Pigeon Creek, Indiana. It is worth noting that the experience chiefly engaged him with the slave-state region of the lower Mississippi Valley. By his own account his lifelong hatred of the institution of slavery was born in his firsthand experience with slavery—especially at the slave-market in New Orleans—on these voyages.

However, beyond acknowledging these general effects, Lincoln's biographers offer little detail about the voyages themselves and few specifics about what Lincoln actually might have seen and done on the river and in New Orleans in 1828 and 1831. David Donald's Pulitzer Prize winning *Lincoln* (1995) has almost nothing to say on the subject beyond stating that Lincoln made the voyages. Lack of attention to the real terms of Lincoln's experience makes it impossible to appreciate the qualitative effect of the two journeys on the development of his character and understanding of the world.

Campanella's book largely remedies that omission. Careful research provides the material for a detailed account of how the two voyages

were organized and how they played out. Enriching the study is Campanella's comprehensive knowledge of river commerce and the flatboating trade, especially that of New Orleans and the Louisiana "Sugar Coast," during the period 1820 to 1835. For farmers in the Ohio Valley, flatboat voyages were both a normal and recurrent aspect of economic life and an extraordinary adventure that carried them beyond the bounds of provincial culture. The best market for the surplus product of their farms—corn and hogs, salt pork and butter, hoop poles and ginseng, and other commodities—were the cities and plantations of the lower river. Slavery made for denser population even in rural districts, and the concentration on cotton and sugar culture put a premium on northern produce. Flatboats could be easily and cheaply constructed using local timber and the ordinary skills of the log-cabin frontiersman accustomed to working with ax and adze. Campanella provides a clear and accurate account of just how this was done. The river itself provided the motive power, and it took minimal skill to keep the flatboat in the current. Once the cargo had been traded away along the river or delivered to the city, even the boat could be broken up and its timbers sold since northern hardwood was in demand for house construction.

The river journey required a solid vernacular understanding of hydrographics. It was important to know when the rivers would be high enough to minimize the danger that shoals and submerged hazards presented to a loaded flatboat—yet not so high as to be dangerously swift or liable to produce levee breaks. Voyages had to be timed to allow for the fall harvesting and (if needed) preserving of the cargo, as well as to bring the boat down to the plantations at just the right time for trading—when the planters' stocks of foodstuffs were most likely to be depleted. Campanella's systematic discussion of the various considerations that shaped these voyages opens a window into the minds of these pioneers, allowing us to appreciate the quality of their engagement with both the natural world and the dynamics of the marketplace.

Campanella also provides a thorough account of the kind of commerce in which the flatboatmen engaged. Some traded their way downstream from landing to landing through Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana; others ran straight for the big city. Lincoln's first trip was a trading voyage that brought him in contact with a series of plantations in southern Mississippi and Louisiana. Campanella provides a clear picture of how life on these plantations was organized, and through diligent historical detective work he clarifies the most notorious incident of the voyage: an attack on Gentry's boat by rogue

slaves on a plantation said to have been owned by a man named "Bushan" or a "Madame Duchesne." An examination of holdings in the region indicates that there was indeed a property owned by Madame Duchesne near the place they were attacked, but it was a convent and girls' school, not a plantation.

The book is especially rich in its account of life in New Orleans during the years Lincoln saw the city. Although what Lincoln saw is conjectural, Campanella's account of what there was for him to see is vividly described. And his conjectures about where in the city Lincoln was likely to have gone are based on a thorough knowledge of the districts and establishments that catered to flatboatmen and on the accounts of other sojourners from the Ohio Valley. The accumulation of detail allows us to appreciate just how surprising and eye-opening such voyages were for farm boys from the backwoods settlements of the North—the stunning difference between their own family farms and the vast slave plantations of the lower river, the relative grandeur of the New Orleans metropolis, and the exotic culture of the Creole city. Even without the Lincoln connection to give it focus, Campanella's book is a valuable resource for those interested in the history of American life and economic development.