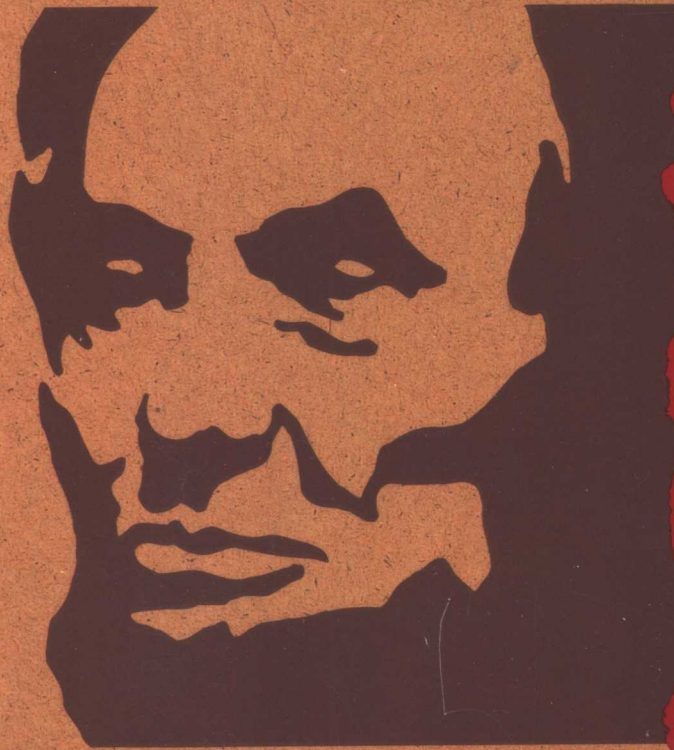


**THE LAST BEST  
HOPE OF EARTH.**

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
AND  
THE PROMISE OF AMERICA**





# THE LAST BEST HOPE OF EARTH:

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**ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

**AND**

**THE PROMISE OF AMERICA**

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*By*

JOHN H. RHODEHAMEL

*and*

THOMAS F. SCHWARTZ

*with a foreword by*

JAMES M. MCPHERSON

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*Catalogue of an Exhibition at*

*the Huntington Library*

*October 1993 to August 1994*

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HUNTINGTON LIBRARY

*San Marino, California*

## A Note on Contributors

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Sections I, II, III, and VI, were written by Thomas F. Schwartz, curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln Collection at the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois. Sections IV, V, VII, and VIII were written by John Rhodehamel, curator of American history at the Huntington Library. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian James M. McPherson is George Henry Davis professor of American history at Princeton University.

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*frontispiece:* Alexander Hesler, albumen print photograph signed by Abraham Lincoln from a lost original negative made June 3, 1860. (Taper Collection)

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## Foreword

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On December 1, 1862, Abraham Lincoln delivered his second Annual Message to Congress. Today we would call it the State of the Union Address. The state of the Union at the end of 1862 was perilous—the Confederate States of America stood proud and defiant as an independent nation whose existence flouted the pretense of Union. Northern armies were experiencing frustration and defeat on all fronts. Political opposition in Washington menaced the Lincoln administration's ability to carry on the war to restore the Union. That opposition focused particularly on the Emancipation Proclamation, announced the previous September and scheduled to go into effect on January 1, 1863. Lincoln had embraced emancipation both as a way to weaken the Confederate war effort by depriving it of slave labor and as a sweeping expansion of Union war aims. No longer would the North fight merely for restoration of the old Union—a Union with slavery to mock American ideals of liberty. Now it would fight to give that Union “a new birth of freedom,” as Lincoln put it almost a year later at Gettysburg.

By then the prospects of Northern victory appeared much brighter than they did in December 1862. Nevertheless, Lincoln's eloquence at this dark time shone through as brightly as it did at Gettysburg. “Fellow-citizens, *we cannot escape history*,” he told Congress and through them, the American people, in an appeal for support of his emancipation policy: “The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the *latest* generation. . . . We know how to save the Union. . . . *In giving* freedom

to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorably alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth.”

What did Lincoln mean? Why did he consider the Union—by which he meant the United States as one nation indivisible—to be the last best hope of earth? The last best hope for what? The answers lie in the letters, speeches, and other documents that are part of this exhibit—one of the largest and richest collections of Lincoln's writings ever gathered for public display. The central vision that guided Lincoln through the trauma of sectional conflict was the preservation of the United States as a republic governed by popular suffrage, majority rule, and the Constitution. If the Confederate States succeeded in their effort to sever the United States in twain, they would destroy the whole idea of a republican government. The next time a disaffected minority lost a presidential election, as Southern-Rights Democrats had lost in 1860, that minority might invoke the Confederate precedent to proclaim secession. The United States would fragment into a dozen squabbling autocracies, the laughing stock of the world. Monarchists and aristocrats and reactionaries in Europe would be proved right in their contention that this upstart republic launched in 1776 would come crashing down. The hopes of liberals and the oppressed everywhere for the success of the American experiment in democracy would be smashed. “The central idea pervading this struggle,” Lincoln told his private secretary early in the war, “is the necessity that is upon us, of proving that popular government is not

an absurdity. We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves.”

Lincoln believed the Civil War to be a critical turning point in history. The trend in western societies during the nineteenth century was toward greater rights and opportunity for the common people. But that trend could be turned back toward despotism, as it had been after the short-lived revolutions of 1848 in Europe. If the United States suffered a similar relapse, the dark night of tyranny might return. That was why, Lincoln said, “this is essentially a People’s contest . . . a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders . . . to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life.” Nor was this struggle “altogether for today—it is for a vast future also.” It “embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question whether,” as

Lincoln expressed it in the Gettysburg Address, a nation “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . . shall not perish from the earth.”

Slavery had always been the canker in this republican ideal, the “monstrous injustice,” as Lincoln put it in 1854, that “deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.” The story of how slavery drove a wedge in the Union and of how, under Lincoln’s guiding hand, the war for the Union became a war for a new birth of freedom, is beautifully told in this exhibit. The viewer will come away with a new birth of understanding of how, in giving freedom to the slave, Lincoln nobly saved the last best hope of earth.

James M. McPherson  
*George Henry Davis Professor of American History  
at Princeton University*



## Introduction

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In mounting what is arguably the largest and most comprehensive exhibit of original Lincoln materials ever, the Library provokes thoughtful contemplation of the Lincoln legacy, especially his vision of America as a land of opportunity and a government based on democratic ideals. His experience, and his message, speak directly to our own time. Although the great American experiment survived the tests of Civil War and the assassination of our sixteenth president, succeeding generations have had to contend with new threats to freedom, and even today the fundamental goal of social justice remains elusive. We still wrestle with the consequences of slavery; we are still called upon to rededicate ourselves to the "unfinished work" of those who fell at Gettysburg; we are still called upon to work for a "new birth of freedom." Lincoln's words still resonate.

The exhibit represents an unprecedented collaboration between the Huntington Library and the Illinois State Historical Library, and draws as well upon the extensive private collection of Lincolniana amassed by Louise and Barry Taper. It is co-curated by

Thomas F. Schwartz, curator of the Illinois State Historical Library's Henry Horner Lincoln Collection, and John Rhodehamel, curator of American history at the Huntington; and they have been advised by James M. McPherson, the Henry George Davis professor of history at Princeton University, who has served as our chief scholarly consultant.

The entire undertaking, which includes an extensive educational program for area young people and a major scholarly symposium, was made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, with additional support from Nestlé USA which assured the publication of this catalog, and from Bank of America, ARCO Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Seaver Institute, Union Bank of Switzerland, and the H. Russell Smith Foundation. We are grateful for their support, and to Harvard University Press for co-publishing a superb companion biography of Lincoln by Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Mark Neely, Jr.

William A. Moffett  
*Director of the Huntington Library*

A. LINCOLN

# ATTENTION! THE PEOPLE!!

**A. LINCOLN, ESQ'R.,**  
OF Sangamon County, one of the *Electoral Candidates*, will ADDRESS the PEOPLE

## This Evening !!

At Early Candlelighting, at the **OLD COURT ROOM,** (Riley's Building.)

By request of

**MANY CITIZENS.**

Thursday, April 9th, 1840.

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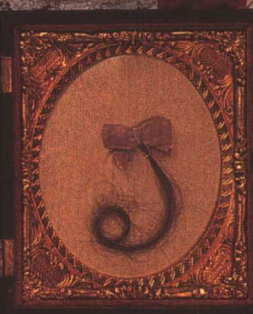
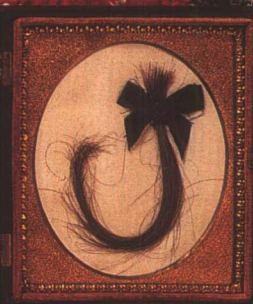
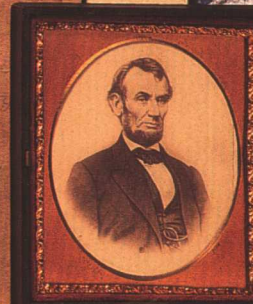
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THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS.

To any Minister of the Gospel, or other authorised Person—GREETING.

THESE do to License and permit you to join in the holy bands of matrimony *Abraham Lincoln* and *Mary Todd* of the County of Sangamon and State of Illinois, and for so doing, this shall be your sufficient warrant.

Given under my hand and seal of office, at Springfield, in said County this *9th* day of *April* 1842

*M. M. Montgomery* Clerk.

Blundered on the same *6th* day Nov. 1842 *Charles Dupon*

# I

## Frontier Beginnings

*“A fair chance  
in the race of life”*

More than any other American, Abraham Lincoln embodies the powerful elements that have come to stand for the American Dream. With less than a year of formal schooling, he was largely self-taught, and yet is revered worldwide for his elegant prose in explicating the strengths of self-government. His early endeavors as a store clerk, postmaster, captain of the state militia, surveyor, and lawyer were always characterized by wit, honesty, and ambition to succeed. He became one of Illinois' leading lawyers, earning himself a comfortable income that allowed him to pursue his true interest—politics. Even in political life, Lincoln accomplished what few others can claim: he went from a lowly birth in a log cabin to the presidency, the republic's highest elective office. Lincoln believed that “the legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, *at all*, or can not, *so well do*, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities.” Lincoln's driving ambition to succeed stood witness to the right to rise in America as well as the importance of a system of government that made his success possible. It was the twin challenges of slavery and secession that threatened to undermine Lincoln's vision of America.

With an allusion to Gray's *Elegy*, Lincoln dismissed his childhood and his early life in Kentucky and Indiana as “the short and simple annals of the poor.” The Lincolns left Kentucky for Indiana in 1816, in part because of their opposition to slavery, but mostly because his father, Thomas Lincoln, found it difficult to secure clear title to his land. Two years later Lincoln's mother died. Thomas Lincoln married an old sweetheart in 1819, providing Abraham and his sister Sarah with a stepmother, two stepsisters and a stepbrother. Lincoln's childhood was characterized not so much by poverty as by hard work. When the family moved to Illinois in 1830, Lincoln, having reached manhood, ventured off on his own after building his parents' homestead. A merchant named Denton Offutt offered the young Lincoln a job taking a flatboat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Offutt was impressed with Lincoln and offered him a job clerking in a store in New Salem, Illinois. The New Salem years gave definition to Lincoln's life. It was in this frontier boomtown that Lincoln dreamed of his future. He worked hard to win the admiration and trust of his fellow townspeople, to find a vocation, and to establish financial security.

center: Abraham Lincoln, autograph manuscript signed, sum book page, 1824. (Taper Collection)

This leaf from a school exercise book is the earliest surviving manuscript written by Abraham Lincoln.

clockwise from upper left: Door plate and key from the front door of the Lincoln home in Springfield. (Illinois State Historical Library)

*Attention the People!! . . . April 9th, 1840.* (Huntington Library)

Abraham Lincoln, a 31-year-old member of the state legislature, was the featured speaker at this Whig party rally in Alton, Illinois.

Two cased albumen print photographs of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, with locks of hair. (Taper Collection)

Marriage license of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd, November 4, 1842. (Illinois State Historical Library)

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## The Right to Rise

*“Every man has his peculiar ambition”*

Lincoln’s first bid for public office came in 1832, when he ran for the Illinois House of Representatives. His platform called for the improvement of navigation on the Sangamon River, changes in banking laws, and the establishment of universal education. Lincoln had been a resident of New Salem for only seven months prior to the election, but carried his local precinct by 277 votes to 7. When added to the total votes from the district, Lincoln lost. His attempt in 1834, however, was successful. He served four consecutive terms in the state legislature.

Lincoln’s early political philosophy emphasized his “right to rise” beliefs. Lincoln belonged to the Whig party, one of the two major American political parties of the day. The Whigs favored internal improvements like roads and canals to link the goods and produce of the interior with urban markets. They called for a strong banking system to provide sound currency and emphasized the importance of public education as the basis for good citizenship and individual achievement. For many years, Abraham Lincoln believed that the Whig party and its programs offered Americans the best hope for improving their lives. In both Illinois and in the national government, however, the Whigs often found themselves in the role of loyal opposition to

the more powerful Democratic party.

Lincoln’s legal training comported well with his political ambitions. His early mentors were men who were both outstanding legal thinkers and leading political figures in central Illinois. The law offered Lincoln, who had moved from New Salem to Springfield in 1837, an opportunity to travel throughout Illinois, building a network of political associates while earning a living. He became an expert in the emerging field of corporate law, especially in cases that involved railroads. In 1846 Lincoln was elected to the United States Congress, serving one term in the House of Representatives. He tried without success to introduce a bill outlawing slavery in the District of Columbia and in 1848 was a vocal critic of President Polk’s war policy against Mexico. Lincoln campaigned vigorously on behalf of the Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor in 1848. His efforts were rewarded by Taylor, who offered the Illinois lawyer the governorship of Oregon. But Lincoln felt that a territorial governorship would isolate him from friends and political events. Financial and family concerns turned Lincoln away from politics and back to his legal practice. From 1849 to 1854, Lincoln followed political developments with intense interest but found little reason to seek office.

---

## The Lincoln Family

*“In this troublesome world, we are never quite satisfied”*

On November 4, 1842, Abraham Lincoln married Mary Todd, a vivacious, wellborn Kentucky woman nine years his junior. Their relationship was one of love as well as ambition. Mary helped and encouraged her husband’s political strivings. They brought four sons into the world—Robert, Edward, William and Thomas. Only the eldest, Robert Todd Lincoln (1843-1926), would live beyond his eighteenth birthday. Lincoln’s law practice required him to travel the Eighth Judicial Circuit three months in the spring and three months in the fall. During an election year, Lincoln might be absent from home for even

longer periods. Because of his absences, most of the child-rearing, as well as the burden of housekeeping, fell on Mary. She continued to expand the house as the family and her husband’s finances grew. It was not difficult to keep up with the latest home-decorating trends since many Springfield stores could obtain goods from St. Louis. Abraham Lincoln earned a substantial living as a lawyer, and Mary used this income to provide a comfortable middle-class life for their family.

The Lincoln children were indulged by their parents. Friends and neighbors complained that Abraham failed to discipline them

for their bad behavior. Law partner William Herndon often found the law office turned upside down by Lincoln's sons. "I have felt many and many a time that I wanted to wring their little necks," wrote Herndon of the Lincoln boys, "and yet out of respect for Lincoln I kept my mouth shut." Mary read her children

the classics and taught them social graces, even if the boys did not always practice them. The Lincolns placed great importance on their sons' education. Robert was sent to Harvard University. Abraham and Mary Lincoln worked tirelessly to create for their children a better life than they themselves had experienced.

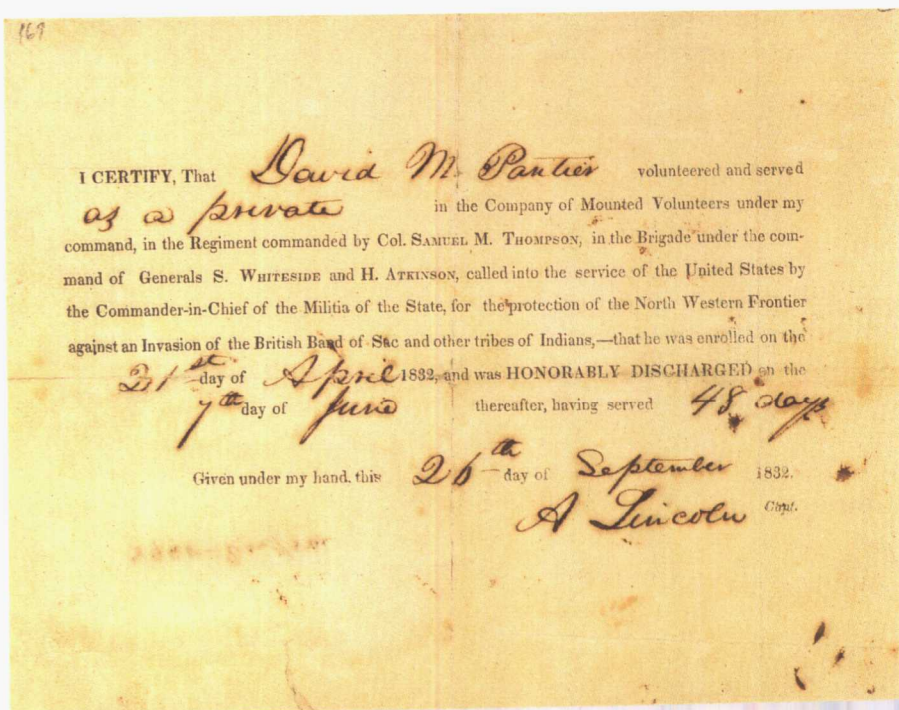


Leonard Wells Volk, casts of Lincoln's hands in 1860, bronze. (Taper Collection)

Abraham Lincoln's big hands were toughened by toil. People remembered the young Lincoln as one of the strongest men in the county. These casts of his hands were made in 1860.

Abraham Lincoln, document filled out and signed, September 26, 1832. Illinois militia discharge, Black Hawk War. (Huntington Library)

Abraham Lincoln's only firsthand military experience was his service in the Illinois militia in a minor Indian war in 1832. Lincoln was elected captain of his company, "a success that gave me more pleasure than any I have had since," he recalled in 1859. Captain Lincoln saw no fighting and soon returned to civilian life. Yet during the Civil War the former militia soldier was commander in chief of the largest army and navy in the world.



I hereby certify that the annexed is a correct map of the town of Huron, and that the propriety of the statutes in such cases made and provided, have been complied with.

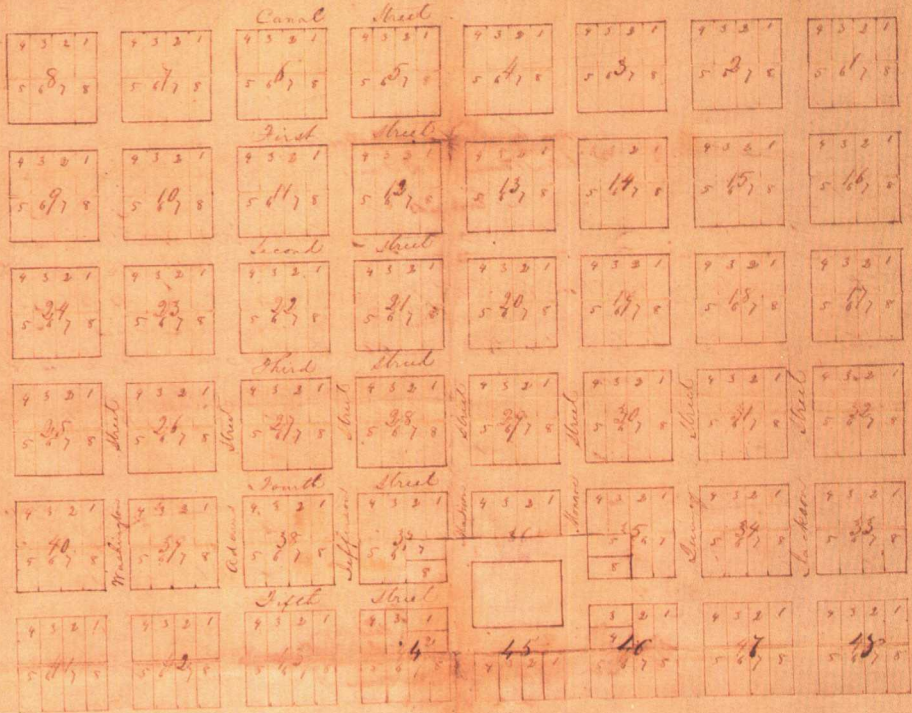
May 21. 1836.

A. Sweetser  
for Thomas M. Swan  
Clerk of Huron  
County.

Explanation  
Width of Streets 70 feet  
Do. " Alleys 16 "  
Depth of Lots 112 "  
Front " 60 "  
Start at the S.W. corner of the  
Public Square  
Scale of the map 300 feet to the inch

Proposed Canal

SLOUGH



# MAP OF HURON.

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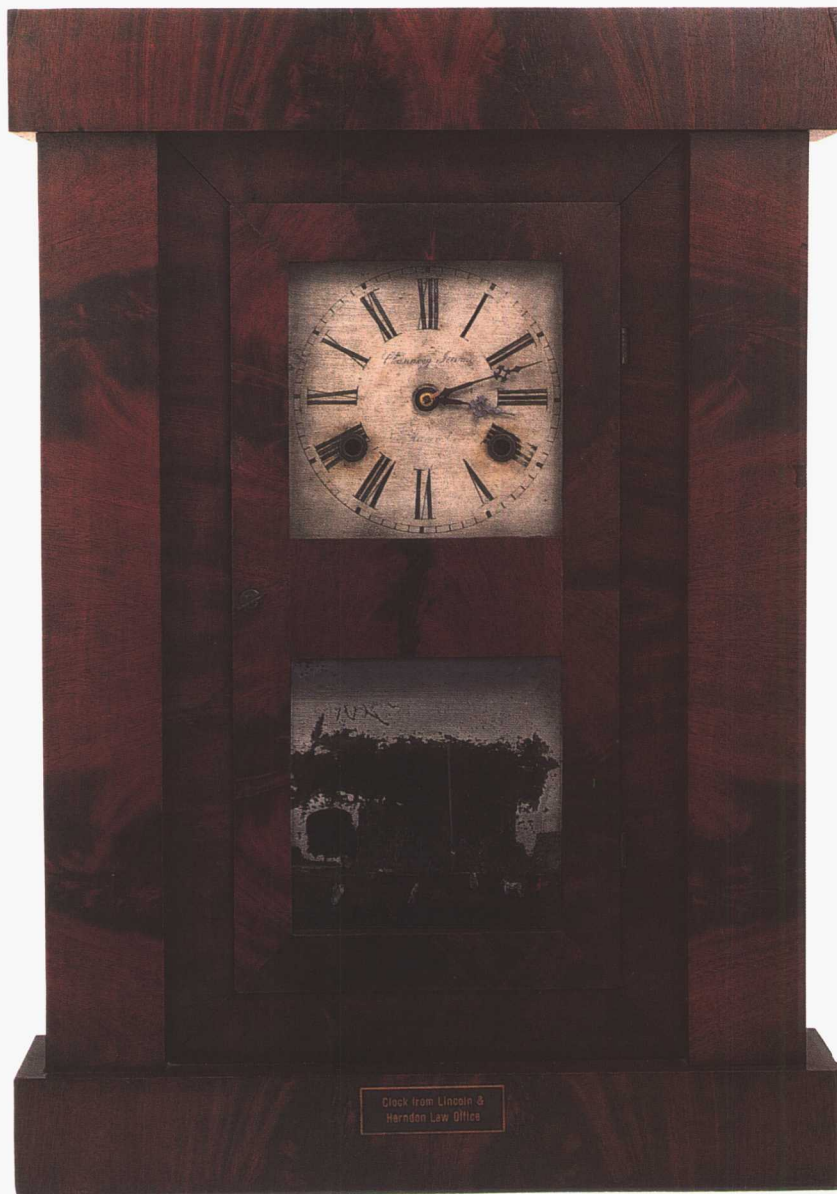
Abraham Lincoln, autograph document signed, May 21, 1836. Town plat, survey of Huron, Illinois. (Illinois State Historical Library)

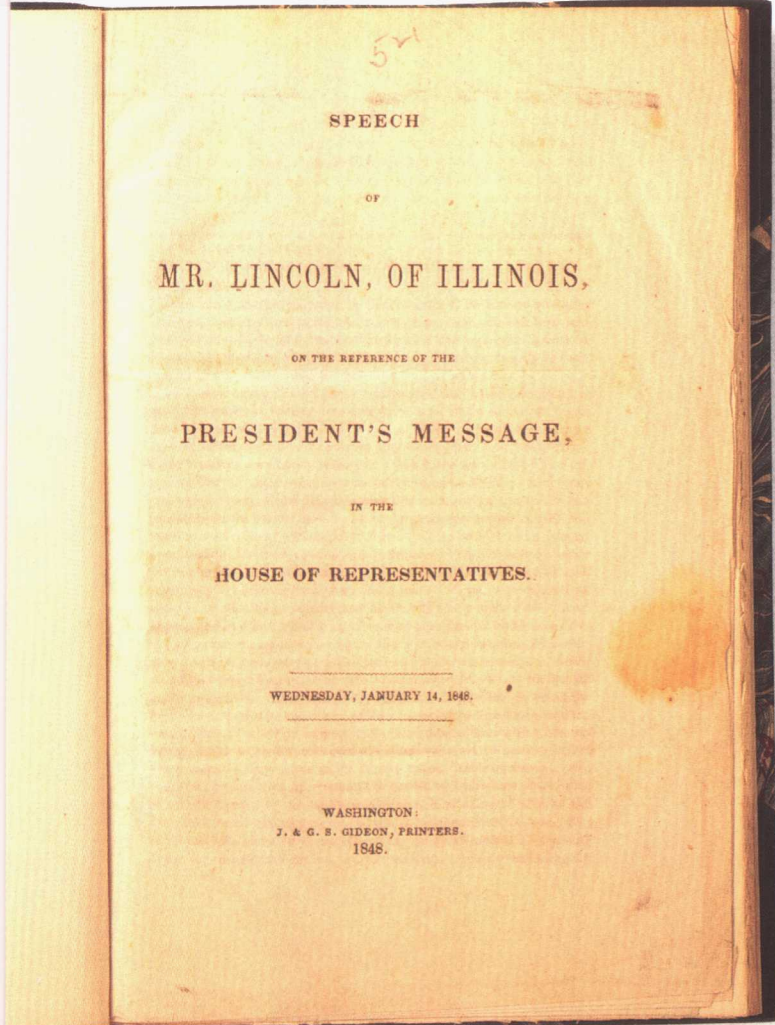
Lincoln took up surveying as a possible career as well as a way to pay the many creditors from his failed store. Though most of his surveys were of roads or individual pieces of property, Lincoln also surveyed six towns. Huron was one. But people did not settle in Huron; the town existed only on paper. Huron's history was typical of the fluid democratic society in which Abraham Lincoln came of age.

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Wall clock from the Lincoln-Herndon law office, Springfield, Illinois. (Taper Collection)

The practice of law provided Abraham Lincoln with a good income. This handsome wall clock from the law office of Lincoln and his partner William Herndon reflected his successful practice.





Abraham Lincoln, *Speech of Mr. Lincoln, of Illinois, on the reference of the President's Message in the House of Representatives, Wednesday, January 14 [i.e. 12] 1848.* (Washington, 1848). (Huntington Library)

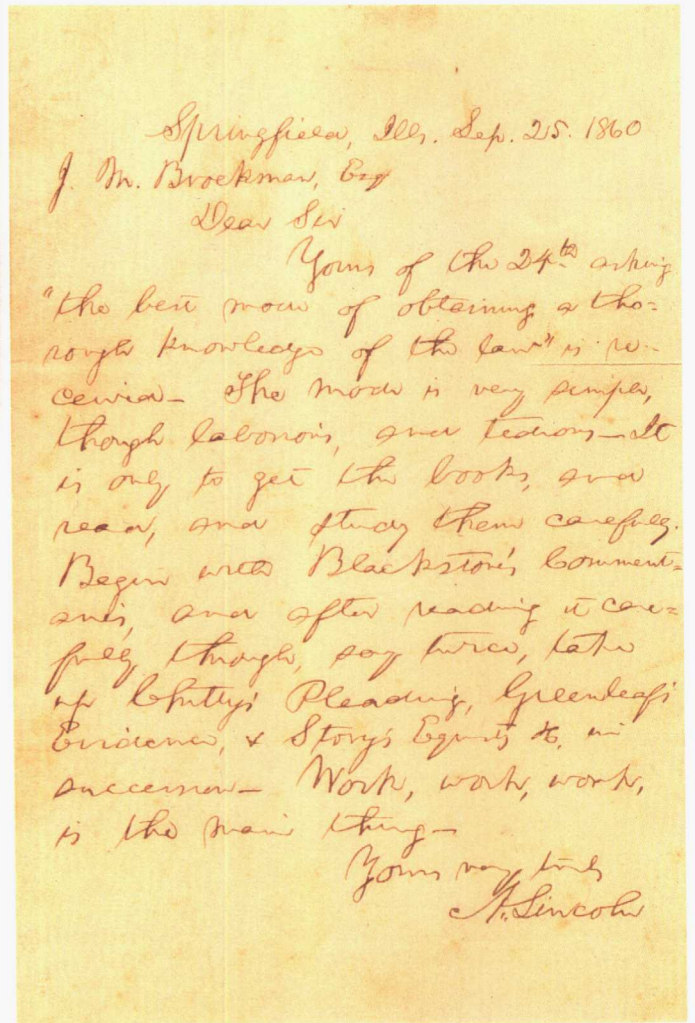
Lincoln's Whig party opposed Democratic President Polk's Mexican War. As a freshman Congressman Lincoln delivered this speech attacking the American invasion of Mexico as an unjustified war of conquest. Lincoln feared that seizing new territories might "aggravate the distracting questions of slavery." But the war was popular with most Americans. Lincoln served only one term in Congress. His enemies later charged that his stand on the Mexican War had made him too unpopular to run again.

opposite, top: Abraham Lincoln, document signed, August 24, 1860. (Taper collection)

Lincoln wrote this check to get \$30 cash for his eldest son "Bob." Robert Todd Lincoln (1843-1926) was the only one of the four Lincoln boys to reach adulthood.

Abraham Lincoln, autograph letter signed to John M. Brockman, September 25, 1860. (Illinois State Historical Library)

When a young man named John Brockman asked Lincoln how to train to be a lawyer, Lincoln indicated the basic texts to study. This alone would not achieve success however; for "work, work, work, is the main thing."







No. Springfield, Aug. 24. 1860.

Springfield Marine & Fire Insurance Company,

Pay to Self for Bob. or Bearer,

Thirty <sup>00</sup>/<sub>100</sub> Dollars,

IN CURRENT BANK NOTES.

\$30<sup>00</sup>.

A. Lincoln

Central R.R. Company  
County of McLean

Until the expiration of six years, ~~the~~ whole property of the Company, is held in trust for the State, and, as state property, was rightfully exempted from taxation.

In Massachusetts & Pennsylvania, the necessary property of Railroads is, in absence of statutory provision, exempted from taxation, by the courts, on the ground that it is public property.

1 American R.R. cases 350-4. Note 1

In Kentucky & Maryland, the contrary is held same note.

Until the Central route shall be completed, its property, is public property, in a peculiar and far superior sense, to what was in the case of the railroads of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Const. Art. 10. § 1. Repealed.

See Charter, Sec. 15. latter clause.

The right of the counties, to tax the property is incompatible, with the right secured to the State.

- 4. Leon. 466-484
- 1. Leon.
- 2. Peter 449.

In the Supreme Court

Abraham Lincoln, autograph document, February 1854, legal brief, Illinois Central Railroad v. McLean County. (Huntington Library)

Lincoln was a highly successful lawyer. The \$5,000 he charged in this case of the Illinois Central Railroad vs. McLean County in 1854 was the largest legal fee he ever collected. Lincoln won a settlement that exempted the railroad from county taxes. The big fee was small in comparison to the millions of dollars the railroad saved in taxes, but Lincoln had to sue the client to get his \$5,000.