

An Honest Calling

The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln

By Mark E. Steiner

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 272. Notes, select bibliography, index of cases, general index. \$42.00.)

Traditionally, the study of Abraham Lincoln's legal career has been limited by two obstacles. One was the lack of accessible primary sources—historians assumed that few legal records had survived relating to cases in which Lincoln was involved, and that those few were scattered in courthouses and county offices throughout Illinois. The second was a lack of technical knowledge. The complexities of the law in general, and of nineteenth-century Illinois law in particular, have lain beyond the expertise of most professional historians, who left the subject to be addressed by lawyers with an interest in Lincoln. These writers, including John J. Duff, John P. Frank, and more recently Frank J. Williams, understood the law but in turn lacked historical training. In 2000, the first obstacle was overcome with the publication of *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln*, the culmination of a ten-year search that yielded over 100,000 pages of original documents relating to Lincoln's legal career. The appearance of *An Honest Calling*, written by a professional scholar of both law and history, suggests that the second obstacle is falling as well.

This is good news, and not just for Lincoln aficionados. Steiner addresses the central issues in Lincoln's legal career in ways that

enhance our understanding of the role of lawyers and the law throughout antebellum America. In particular, Steiner devotes a chapter to the troublesome Matson case, in which Lincoln represented a slaveholder trying to retain possession of Jane Matson and her family, who claimed that they were freed when their master moved them to Illinois. How could the Great Emancipator do this? Steiner uses this case to illustrate his central thesis: that Lincoln was a Whig lawyer, devoted to the process of law as the source of social order. Lincoln, Steiner argues, was not an ideologue like Salmon Chase who saw the law as an instrument for social justice. Neither, however, was he the "railroad lawyer" portrayed in Gore Vidal's novel, using the law as a means of advancing business interests at the expense of workers. Lincoln, and by implication many other Whig lawyers, saw themselves primarily as agents of order, representing any client who came to them (slave or slaveholder, railroad corporation or injured worker), and using mediation as much as litigation to maintain social order and uphold the shared values of the community.

The chapters of *An Honest Calling* address the historiography of Lincoln's legal career, his legal self-education, the influence upon his

practice of his Whig values, and the range of cases he handled, with particular focus on the Matson case and on his legal work for and against the Illinois Central Railroad. A provocative final chapter suggests that the rise of corporate capitalism and the impersonal market economy in the 1850s was rendering obsolete Lincoln's community-oriented style of lawyering. The diversity of the chapters gives the book something of the feeling of a collection of articles rather than a cohesive whole, an impression amplified by "Conclusion" sections at the end of four of the chapters,

instead of a concluding chapter to pull everything together. The book is heavily footnoted, in the style of a law review article, with citations to cases found in *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln*, which may prove distracting to lay readers. These minor points aside, *An Honest Calling* is an auspicious start to the new era of Lincoln legal studies.

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Packing Them In
An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954
 By Sylvia Hood Washington

(Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005. Pp. 215. Illustrations, index. Clothbound, \$66.00; paperbound, \$21.95.)

Chicago is one of the most notorious sites of racial violence and segregation in the United States. Historically, most of this tension has centered on housing and on the maintenance of neighborhood racial boundaries by whites. Thus it is no surprise that the practice of relegating people of color to areas crowded with polluting factories and other locally unwanted land uses—environmental racism—is also widespread in that city. Sylvia Washington's *Packing Them In* provides strong, sometimes startling evidence of environmental racism in Chicago, and offers a historical expla-

nation for how this social ill developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge, as well as from biopolitics and theories of racial formation, Washington argues that non-whites are constructed outside of the parameters of the body politic. Since racialization is a socio-historical process, many groups previously defined as non-white (e.g., Irish, European Jews, and other immigrants) were later reclassified as white, in the process becoming less vulnerable to environmental racism.