

Losing Lincoln: A Call to Commemorative Action

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Four score and seven years ago, our Indiana fathers brought forth, within this state, a new rivalry, conceived in necessity, and dedicated to the proposition that neighboring states—specifically Kentucky and Illinois—were not treating Hoosiers as equal. For nearly a century and a half, Hoosiers have generally lost the struggle to claim Lincoln as a representative of their state. Some of the triumphs are described in this issue of the *IMH*—the timely work of Indiana lawyer Jesse Weik, the Lincoln Boyhood Home National Park in southern Indiana, a scattering of impressive statues across the state, and the recent acquisition of an important archival collection. However, in this introductory essay, I hope to demonstrate that Hoosiers are in the midst of a war over Lincoln's memory, to chronicle Indiana's string of failures, and to propose a new strategy for the battles ahead. I take Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as my outline for this call to commemorative action.

Now, during the two-year bicentennial celebration of Lincoln's birth, Americans are engaged in a great war. During February 2009, commemoration of the two hundredth birthday of Abraham Lincoln

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received coverage on C-SPAN, PBS, and a host of national and local news outlets. Newly-inaugurated President “A-Barack” Obama, who, during his campaign, drew parallels between himself and Lincoln, received the lion’s share of the Lincolnian limelight by appearing with celebrities at the reopening of Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C.; with Congress in the Capitol Rotunda; and with midwesterners in Springfield, Illinois. On Lincoln’s birthday, the sale of a document he had signed set an auction record of 3.44 million dollars. A new poll of historians joined a public poll in ranking Lincoln the greatest president in American history.¹

But while all of those events appeared to be celebrating Lincoln, I assert that they were equally engaged in the act of claiming him. Take first the exception which proves the rule. Early this year, the U.S. Postal Service unveiled a set of four stamps commemorating Lincoln’s birth (no matter that he already appeared on fifty previous stamps, more than any other person). The new stamps depict Lincoln as rail-splitter, lawyer, politician, and president. Contrast these to the four new pennies authorized by Congress and prepared by the U.S. Mint. The pennies appear to celebrate Lincoln, but actually memorialize the places that wish to claim him: Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. The “Lincoln States” and the nation’s capitol are the biggest—but not the only—players in this war as several other states also made noise this year. Idaho unleashed a major publicity campaign on the basis that Lincoln named the territory in 1863, and Hawaii has loudly trumpeted their possession of an 1862 letter from Lincoln to King Kamehameha V. Arizona, Wyoming, Louisiana, and even Alabama joined the throng, though Virginia placidly refused to celebrate.²

Only the Lincoln States and the capitol really possess a chance of winning this war, and their struggle maps over the very calendar of commemorative events planned by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission—a group of fifteen congressmen, scholars, and significant

¹John O’Connor, “From Kids to Obama, Nation Marks Lincoln’s 200th,” Associated Press, February 12, 2009; Ula Ilnytzky, “Lincoln 1864 Manuscript sets Record at NYC Auction,” Associated Press, February 12, 2009.

²Kristen Wyatt, “Western States Remembering Abe Lincoln, too,” Associated Press, February 7, 2009; “Virginia Won’t Celebrate Lincoln Bicentennial,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 15, 2007. A North Carolina group recycles a long-discredited claim that Lincoln was born in the Tarheel State, “N.C. County Laying Claim to Lincoln’s Birthplace,” *Fort Mill [South Carolina] Times*, April 28, 2008.

Lincolnianians appointed by President Clinton to lead the national celebration.³ The festivities were scheduled to kick off in Kentucky in February 2008. President George W. Bush initially accepted the invitation to speak, then backed out, offering his wife Laura as his replacement. However, a severe ice storm prevented the First Lady and all of the other distinguished guests from dropping in for the day. The celebration's handlers gamely tried to spin the failed inauguration into a dramatic historical reenactment of the cold February of 1809 when Lincoln was born, but however similar the sleet, one parallel cannot be drawn—unlike modern fair-weather commemorators, Mother Lincoln did not yield in the face of Mother Nature. The Commonwealth of Kentucky raised ten million dollars—far more than any other state or even the national commission—and sponsored a Lincoln-themed “History Mobile” in a 45-foot tractor-trailer, a 14-minute DVD for schools, and a heroic new statue on the Louisville waterfront.⁴

In May 2008, the spotlight shifted to Indiana for a Mother's Day ceremony near the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Thick in a re-election campaign fight, Governor Mitch Daniels was a late addition to the program. Two weeks before the ceremony, the governor agreed to attend and made a brief appearance in southern Indiana. Judging from coverage on the state's official website, his **words were little noted and not long remembered**. However, he did redeem himself earlier this year by explaining to readers of *Newsweek* magazine that Lincoln indeed lived in a log cabin in Indiana (though he avoided the fact that the state has since lost it).⁵ The Hoosier state overall made a splash in the national news in February, as reporters noted the formation of a new Lincoln association, a state commission, gatherings at the statehouse and at Lincoln's boyhood home, a scout camp, a tree planting, the visits of five hundred lawyers and judges to school classrooms, the reenactment of Lincoln's 1828 flatboat trip, and the recipe to Lincoln's favorite cake.⁶

³The commission's official website is www.lincoln200.gov.

⁴See www.kylincoln.org.

⁵Mitch Daniels, “Where Lincoln Really Slept,” *Newsweek*, February 9, 2009, responded to Christopher Hitchens, “The Man Who Made Us Whole,” *Newsweek*, January 19, 2009, where Hitchens claimed that Lincoln “never really lived” in a log cabin. Daniels said he went “back to the books for a triple check,” and confirmed that scholars and Lincoln himself called his Indiana home a “log cabin.”

⁶See <http://www.in.gov/lincoln/>.

By placing Kentucky and Indiana on the calendar in 2008, the national commission ensured that they would be out of the way in 2009, when the attention could rightfully settle on Illinois and Washington, D.C. In Springfield, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library hosted a string of events, schoolchildren worked to set a record for the largest number of people simultaneously reading the Gettysburg Address, and President Obama spoke at the Abraham Lincoln Association dinner. In the capitol, the commission joined with the History Channel to host a National Teach-In on Lincoln, a tribute to Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial, various exhibits, and commemorative events.⁷ The commission then released Lincoln to his global admirers at an international conference in Oxford, England, in July 2009.

Having sketched in some detail the current developments in the conflict, I want now to show that the war has been long underway. Indeed, the very state of Indiana forms a **great battlefield of that war**. Since the late nineteenth century, the Hoosier State has participated in numerous engagements and come away with a record less than glorious.

Almost immediately after Lincoln's death biographers took up the task of writing his life. Two rhetorical devices conspired to leave Indiana behind from the beginning. First, in the aftermath of the Civil War, biographers saw Lincoln as a symbol of reconciliation and emphasized the fact that the Illinois lawyer had been born in Kentucky. In the Great Emancipator, the Savior of the Union, and the charitable chief, biographers found a human link between North and South, silently omitting Lincoln's Indiana intermission. Second, and even more damaging to Indiana, biographers also employed the rhetorical device of contrast to emphasize Lincoln's presidential greatness in spite of his humble origins. As Lincoln rose in public estimation over the years, his youth sunk from the "extreme humility of border life" noted in an 1866 biography to the "stagnant, putrid pool" of William Herndon and Jesse Weik's 1889 characterization. Another writer distinguished Lincoln from his Hoosier neighbors with an unsavory metaphor designed to touch both the eyes and nose: Lincoln was a "diamond glowing on the [Indiana] dunghill."⁸

⁷See <http://www.lincoln200.net/>.

⁸Josiah Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Mass., 1866); William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana, Ill., 2006), 4; Chauncey Black to Ward Hill Lamon, cited in Benjamin Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1947), 36-37.

Within a decade after Lincoln's death, the monumental phase of the war began. In 1874, as Indiana sat by the wayside, a private group acting with state funds erected a large monument over Lincoln's grave in Springfield. Two years later, Washington, D.C. entered the fray by dedicating the Freedman's Monument. Contemporaneous Hoosiers complained that no one had marked or maintained the grave of Lincoln's mother, but few in the nineteenth century showed any inclination to act or to spend money.

Collectors soon began to horde Lincoln manuscripts, artifacts, and print materials. In time, big money players entered the game and the "Big 5" plus one out-purchased all the rest. Upon the deaths of the collectors in the early twentieth century, institutions scrambled to pick up the prized pieces. Two collections—those of William H. Lambert and John E. Burton—were sold at auction. The Huntington Library snatched up Judd Stewart's collection and Brown University obtained that of Charles W. McClellan. In perhaps Indiana's best performance, two of the state's institutions came up big when it really mattered. The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, headquartered in Fort Wayne, had long used Lincoln's name and in the 1920s decided to give something back to the legacy. The directors hired preacher Louis Warren to oversee a new research library. Warren, whose role in promoting Lincoln statuary is described later in this issue, successfully wooed Judge Daniel Fish and landed his substantial collection. At the same time, the Lilly Library out-schmoozed and out-solicited Illinois libraries to win the collection of Joseph B. Oakleaf.⁹

Though seen as a grand coup in the 1930s, both collections have generally suffered in Indiana. The Lilly Library presently has no Lincoln curator and has not actively sought to expand its Lincoln holdings. Warren and his successors developed the Fort Wayne collection until the parent company decided to close first the library and finally the museum. In an unscheduled part of Lincoln's bicentennial celebration,

⁹On the day the collection opened, library officials offered an olive branch to Paul Angle, a man highly involved in Illinois history institutions. For the most part Angle played the role of gracious loser, commenting that "in Indiana University, a great institution of learning, the Oakleaf collection has found as appropriate a home as anyone could wish." However, he added at the very end of his talk, "Only with my own state was Abraham Lincoln more intimately associated than with Indiana," and his final words point out that Oakleaf, too, was also a resident of Illinois. Paul Angle, "The Lincoln Collector," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 39 (June 1943), 133-38.

the collection came up for grabs last year. As a result of a process outlined by a roundtable in this issue, the collection will stay in Indiana. The decision was announced last December, but only time will tell what Hoosiers will do with this victory.¹⁰

The inter-state competition that grew among collectors also developed among historic preservationists. By 1909, having grown more Confederate than in wartime, Kentucky wanted nothing to do with Lincoln's birthplace so a national Lincoln Farm Association—with folks like Mark Twain, Ida Tarbell, and Cardinal James Gibbons on the board of directors—purchased the property. Acting in the spirit of the age, the association commissioned a Greek temple to encase what the National Park Service now calls a “symbolic cabin” (NPS jargon for “fake”). In Washington, D.C., another Greek temple, erected in 1922, placed Lincoln on a throne in the new Lincoln Memorial, and Lincoln's only surviving son donated the president's personal papers to the Library of Congress. In Illinois a new generation of collectors formed a commemorative Abraham Lincoln Association, the Lincoln Home in Springfield became a museum, and the state marked a Heritage Trail during World War I and, in the 1930s, began to reconstruct Lincoln's New Salem.

Indiana remained in a state of general malaise. In 1879, one of the Studebaker brothers placed a tombstone somewhere near the spot where Lincoln's mother must have been buried, but the property remained subject to confused titles and a lack of maintenance. Southern Indiana residents created a historical society and began marking local points of interest, but the state remained officially uninterested until the Klan forced its hand. After the state had purged Klansmen from state offices, Hoosiers looked around for something—anything—to help polish the state's image and the governor discovered Lincoln. Following the model used nationally to save Lincoln's birthplace, Governor Ed Jackson pulled together an all-star fundraising team that included the Ball family of Muncie, former senator Albert Beveridge, Will Hays of Hollywood fame, Indiana University president William Bryan and Paul McNutt from Bloomington, and writers George Ade, Meredith Nicholson, and Booth Tarkington. In the 1920s, this was the equivalent of tapping Mitch Daniels, Evan Bayh, Peyton Manning, the Lilly family, Milan basketball star Bobby Plump, and possibly even Michael Jackson. Any Hoosier who

¹⁰“State Museum Wins Lincoln Artifacts,” *WISH-TV*, December 12, 2008.

was any Hoosier got involved—and they failed to raise the two million dollars necessary to purchase and mark the place of Lincoln's boyhood. The state transferred the project to the Department of Conservation where director Richard Lieber maintained it along with Turkey Run and other state parks.¹¹ In perhaps the greatest of Indiana's Lincolnian ironies, the Hoosier conservator replanted all of the trees that Lincoln had cut down during his fourteen years in Indiana. An article by Mike Capps, found later in this issue, traces the development of the site before and after its transfer to the National Park Service in 1962.

Finally, the war shifted to the field of tourism. In the 1920s, petroleum companies created road maps to Lincoln sites and their own gas stations. *National Geographic* ran a cover story of the emerging "Lincoln Route" through Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois in the 1930s. Beginning in 1954, Illinois included the slogan "Land of Lincoln" on its license plates and generally sealed the victory, leaving Indiana as the "forgotten stepchild of the Trail."¹² In April 2008, Johnny-come-lately Indiana announced a Lincoln license plate. Like the "In God We Trust" plate, the Lincoln plate was free; it has not, however, generated anywhere near the ruckus as the apparently widespread fear of Christian conspiracy. In fact, few Hoosiers even noticed. In February 2009, a letter to the editor in the *Indianapolis Star* actually called for a Lincoln plate—so at least one Hoosier and the state's largest newspaper remain unaware of Indiana's Lincoln license plate.¹³

Thus, for the past one hundred years, Indiana has been late to collect, to commemorate, and to cash in on Lincoln. The state has been beaten by Illinois, out-manuevered by Kentucky, and largely ignored by the nation. As one writer in the *Chicago Tribune* put it on the eve of Lincoln's birthday, "Indiana gets no respect when it comes to Abraham Lincoln."¹⁴

¹¹See Jill York O'Bright, *There I Grew Up: A History of the Administration of Abraham Lincoln's Boyhood Home* ([Washington, D.C.], 1987), <http://www.nps.gov/libo/adhi/adhi.htm>.

¹²Andrew Ferguson, *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America* (New York, 2007), 232.

¹³See Rita Hupp, "New Idea, Old Verity; Lincoln as Plate Fixture," *Indianapolis Star*, February 12, 2009. What makes the situation even sadder is that the paper had promoted the plates less than a year earlier, "New Plate Touts Ties to Lincoln," *Indianapolis Star*, March 5, 2008. For a photographic history of Illinois license plates see http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/special/plate_history/start_history.html.

¹⁴Rick Callahan, "Indiana Working to Bolster its Lincoln Legacy," *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 2009.

My closing assertion is that the fault for this predicament lies with Hoosiers themselves. For over a century we have failed to make a solid case. We can chant “Lincoln was a Hoosier” and “Indiana made Lincoln and Lincoln made Illinois!” all we want.¹⁵ But until we provide the data to back it up, our greatest defenders of Indiana’s Lincoln—the head of our state bicentennial commission, our representative on the national bicentennial commission, the NPS staff in southern Indiana, and Scott Sander of WISH-TV—are left to make only pallid, vague claims about Indiana being “formative,” “significant,” or “critical.”¹⁶ I have no personal stake in this fight—I sit on no state advisory boards or commissions and I earn no money from state tourism—but I have grown fond of watching the commemorative fracas. And the battle will only continue with the upcoming celebrations of the Civil War Sesquicentennial (2011-2015) and the Indiana statehood bicentennial (2016). So in closing, I will offer my own plea for Hoosiers to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they have, thus far, somewhat half-heartedly and often too-tardily carried on.

Prior efforts to claim Lincoln for Indiana have focused on linking external elements of Lincoln’s adulthood with items in his Indiana youth. For example, Indiana was significant, many argued, because future lawyer Lincoln read a law book while he lived there (the very book is owned by the Lilly Library). To take another: when the future emancipator made a flatboat trip from Rockport to New Orleans in 1828, he witnessed slavery firsthand and promised to end it given the chance. But such claims simply do not hold weight. The supposed Lincoln promise to end slavery traces to a witness not even present and has been discredited for over a century. The book-reading argument falls

¹⁵Chief Justice Randall Shepard reported that this was a favorite phrase of former Indiana Governor Otis Bowen, reported in *ibid.*

¹⁶Connie Nass (head of Indiana’s bicentennial commission and former state auditor): “Those are the formative years when your moral character and values are established, so we certainly have a lot to be proud of in this wonderful man,” quoted in *ibid.* Darrell Bigham (University of Southern Indiana professor and a member of the National Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission): “Those are arguably the formative years,” quoted in Seth Grundhoefer, “Lincoln Lands Celebrating,” *Evansville Courier & Press*, February 7, 2009; Scott Sander: “he spent many of his most critical years in Indiana,” in “Lincoln’s Boyhood years Spent in Ind.,” *WISH-TV*, February 11, 2009. In his speech before the Senate on February 12, 2008, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) made no mention of Indiana and claimed the time spent in Kentucky as Lincoln’s “formative years,” <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/record.xpd?id=110-s20080212-8>.

flat because Lincoln also read the Bible in Indiana, but never became a preacher (or even a practicing Christian); and he read the *Kentucky Preceptor* (also in the Lilly Library), too, but no right-thinking Hoosier would call him a Kentuckian.

I call on Hoosiers to enact a new strategy focusing on Lincoln's internal experiences in Indiana; both history and modern scholarship will back us up. Such a move toward the inner Lincoln will pull away from artifact-based logic and into a more sophisticated and nuanced world of historical ambiguity. Here are a few ideas, in no particular order:

- *Race and slavery*: Instead of looking for the earliest roots of his abolitionism, we should begin a discussion about the amazing transformation in young Lincoln. Just how does a boy, living in a transplanted Kentucky neighborhood in a state that, in its 1851 constitution, prohibited blacks from even entering, come to reject slavery while still a youth?
- *Religiosity*: We have seen too much of the Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church roll book and its signatures of all the Lincoln family save Abraham. It is time for us to note that Lincoln's great religious contradiction—though he joined no Christian church, he still brought the Bible dramatically and effectively into his speeches and policy—began in Indiana. Here he read the Bible but did not join the Baptist church; here he mocked organized religion by satirizing circuit preachers; and here too, in the recent words of historian Stewart Winger, he laid the core of his “romantic cultural politics.”¹⁷
- *Political strategy*: It is time to point out that while the reading of the laws of Indiana did not inspire Lincoln to become a lawyer, his interest in the law resurfaced after his arrival in Illinois in his first political platform.¹⁸
- *Political expediency*: It is time to chop down all the trees at Lincoln Boyhood Home and embrace the fact that the ax of the rail-splitter—so important in Lincoln's 1860 campaign for the presidency—was placed in his hand on Hoosier land.

¹⁷Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, Ill., 2003), 159.

¹⁸Abraham Lincoln, “Communication to the People of Sangamo County,” March 9, 1832, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), 1:5-9, online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

- *Photogeneity*: It is time to proudly claim that Lincoln’s floating left eye was produced when a Hoosier horse kicked him in the head here on Indiana soil when Lincoln was 10 years old.¹⁹
- *Typicality*: It is time to note that Lincoln was not superhuman, merely a “typical” frontier boy. His mother died, but one in every four children on the frontier lost a parent before age 15, and half of all America’s sitting nineteenth-century presidents had lost one or both parents.²⁰ We should stop claiming extraordinary things from the Hoosier Lincoln and instead hold a sophisticated conversation about the fact that though he was typical, he was also “odd”—rejecting such pastimes as hunting and tobacco, becoming a Whig, and desiring all of his life to put his Indiana past behind him.²¹

I hereby call on all Hoosiers—wherever they may live—to be here dedicated to the great task before us of rightfully and respectably claiming Lincoln for Indiana.



¹⁹The kick, and its impact, form a significant part of the analysis of Lincoln’s face at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.

²⁰Kenneth J. Winkle, *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln* (Dallas, Tex., 2001), 1-9.

²¹Mark E. Neely, Jr., *Escape from the Frontier: Lincoln’s Peculiar Relationship with Indiana* (Fort Wayne, undated); William Lee Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York, 2002), 30-35.