



Lincoln, Slavery and Springfield: How Public Opinion in Central Illinois Influenced Abraham Lincoln's Positions on Slavery

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Lincoln, Slavery and Springfield: How Popular Opinion in Central Illinois Influenced
Abraham Lincoln's Views on Slavery

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Abstract

Abraham Lincoln won the Republican nomination in 1860 because he was seen as less radical on the slavery than his rivals William Seward and Salmon P. Chase, and less conservative than Edward Bates. This thesis explores how his career as a politician in Central Illinois – a region that contained a mix of settlers from both New England and the South – required him to navigate between the extremes of the slavery question, and enabled him to present himself as a moderate candidate who could win the swing states of the Lower North.

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Chapter I.

“At Twenty One, I Came to Illinois”

“At twenty one, I came to Illinois,” Abraham Lincoln wrote in an autobiographical sketch as he prepared to run for president. Arriving in the new state in 1830, the young man “passed the first year in Macon County,” living with his father on a homestead along the Sangamon River, between Decatur and Springfield. The following year, leaving home and striking out on his own, “I got to New Salem, at that time in Sangamon, now in Menard county, where I remained a year, as a sort of clerk in a store.”¹

As a native Kentuckian, the young Lincoln was typical of the migrants drifting into Central Illinois during its earliest days of settlement. Almost without exception, the region’s pioneers were Southerners. The *History of Sangamon County, Illinois*, lists the county’s first two settlers as Robert Pulliam, who had been born in Virginia, then passed through Kentucky, and Henry Funderburk, of South Carolina. A roster of those who followed soon after is people almost exclusively with Kentuckians, Virginians, and Carolinians.²

Despite their origins, these early Central Illinoisans were opposed to slavery – or at least to living among Negroes. Like Lincoln’s father, Thomas, who moved the family

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “To Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography,” December 20, 1859.

² John Carroll Power, *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Springfield, IL: Edwin A. Wilson, 1876).

from Kentucky to Indiana in 1816, many were small farmers who had fled the South because they felt they could not compete economically with wealthy plantation owners, who were amassing vast land holdings they worked with slave labor.

The first test of Central Illinois's attitudes toward slavery came in 1824, when the state held a plebiscite on a constitutional convention. Illinois was nominally a free state, having been paired for entry into the union with Mississippi, but its constitution allowed the old French settlers along the Mississippi River keep their slaves, did not ban existing indentures, and allowed slave labor in the salt mines of the state's southeastern corner. The custom of slaveholding pre-dated English-speaking rule of the Illinois Country. Despite the Northwest Ordinance's ban on slavery, territorial governors Arthur St. Clair and Charles Byrd had tolerated the practice.³ The 1820 census found 917 slaves and indentured servants living in Illinois.⁴

That wasn't enough for the inhabitants of Southern Illinois, an area of the state that would come to be known as Little Egypt. Allowing slavery, they believed, would attract planters who would bring money into a state then suffering an economic downturn. If the ban on slavery persisted, rich planters would bypass the state for Missouri. And only slave labor was sufficient to cultivate the alluvial plains along the Mississippi.⁵ The Southerners called for a vote on a constitutional convention, with the

³ Christopher P. Lehman, *Slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1787-1865* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 27.

⁴ Arthur C. Boggess, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1908), 187.

⁵ Roger Biles, *Illinois: A History of the Land and Its People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 51.

aim of legalizing slavery. The Northwest Ordinance, which had governed Illinois when it was territory, had prohibited slavery. Now that Illinois was a state, though, it was free to determine its own institutions.

The governor, Edward Coles, was a Virginia plantation owner who had brought 17 slaves to Illinois for the purpose of freeing them. On a diplomatic mission to Russia, Coles had observed that the serfs were not treated nearly as harshly as American slaves. Coles was elected on an anti-slavery platform, but he could not prevent the legislature from putting a constitutional convention on the ballot. Southern legislators struck a deal with northern legislators: they would vote for a canal linking Lake Michigan with the Illinois River, and Northern legislators would vote for a convention.

The “non-conventionists,” as opponents of bringing slavery to Illinois were called, portrayed the measure as a plot to bring the frontier state under the heel of plantation aristocrats, as well as to introduce an unsavory Negro element to the almost all-white state. Morris Birkbeck, an English immigrant who had founded the town of Albion in the Wabash River Valley, wrote a series of anti-convention articles for the *Illinois Gazette*, under the pen name “Jonathan Freeman.” Birkbeck, who had campaigned for abolitionism in his native England, appealed to the economic insecurity of small farmers struggling to achieve prosperity and respectability on their frontier homesteads.

“Where, Sir, in the Union, would you look for white men in a state of the lowest civil degradation?,” Birkbeck wrote. “Let the question be referred to any emigrant of common sense who has removed from a slave state. Ask him why he removed, and he will tell you it was because it was impossible for freemen to thrive by honest labor among

slaveholders and slaves.”

Birkbeck also contended, as Lincoln would three decades later, that a man who could declare a Negro his slave could declare anyone a slave: “What security remains to you or me, if a majority have the power of fixing a brand of slavery on any portion of the community?”⁶

Another anti-slavery polemicist, who called himself “Spartacus,” argued that “a poor man in a slave state is not as much respected as in a free one.” Spartacus went on to predict that introducing slaves to Illinois would cause “our children to contract bad habits by the vulgar pronunciation or vicious habits of the *negroes*.”⁷

Non-conventionists organized meetings and dinners throughout the midsection of Illinois: in Madison, Monroe, Edgar, Greene, Lawrence and Morgan counties. In Belleville, they went so far as to found the St. Clair Anti-Slavery Society, which resolved only to support non-conventionists for public office.

The constitution of Morgan County’s non-conventionist Morganian Society declared that “as man is naturally prone to abuse power, it is rendered necessary for the security of the whole that this dangerous propensity should be guarded against.”⁸

Whether the arguments against aristocrats or the arguments Negroes were more persuasive is unknown, but the convention referendum failed, by a vote of 6,640 against to 4,972 for. The measure took a beating in Sangamon County, which voted 722

⁶ Morris Birkbeck writing as Jonathan Freeman, *Illinois Gazette*, October 11, 1823.

⁷ “Spartacus,” *Illinois Intelligencer*, June 25, 1824.

⁸ James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 298.

to 153 against holding a convention.⁹ The following census, in 1830 – the first census since the county’s formation in 1821 – would find 34 free Negroes and 13 slaves in Sangamon County. The census after that, in 1840, found 160 free Negroes, and six slaves. By 1850, there were no slaves.¹⁰ Lincoln’s home county demonstrated his belief that if slavery were not allowed to spread, it would eventually dwindle away.

Central Illinois’s opposition to slavery, however, was by no means an endorsement of abolitionism – as Yankees learned when they attempted to introduce this radical philosophy to the state. Illinois was first settled by Southerners because, in the early 19th Century, the main pathways into the state were the Mississippi, Ohio and Illinois rivers, and the National Road, which ran from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois. In 1825, the Erie Canal opened, providing New Yorkers and New Englanders with a convenient westward migration route.

Although most Yankees settled in northern Illinois, where the Great Lakes terminated at Chicago, a significant number found their way to the rich prairie farmland in the middle of the state. The Southern-born pioneers were immediately suspicious of their new neighbors. The Yankees, they believed, were sharp, dishonest traders, and meddling social reformers. Being “Yankeed” meant being swindled.

“People used the term ‘Yankee’ to refer to anyone east of Ohio, but Southerners knew southern New England (especially Massachusetts and Connecticut) was the hearth of “Yankeedom,” wrote James E. Davis in *Frontier Illinois*. “Yankees, they maintained,

⁹ *History of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Chicago: Inter-State Publishing, 1881), 268.

¹⁰ SangamonLink, “Population Changes, 1830-2010.” <https://sangamoncountyhistory.org/wp/?p=4948>.

were grasping, scheming, smug, sanctimonious, and hypocritical, and whenever Yankees got together – which they did far too often – they compounded each other’s vices. Displays of unified Yankee purpose, including settlements and reform movements, disconcerted Southern neighbors in Illinois.”¹¹

Two of Sangamon County’s first Yankee settlers were Simeon and Josiah Francis, brothers from Connecticut who in 1831 founded the *Sangamo Journal*, a newspaper that would strongly support Lincoln’s political ambitions. At first, the Francis brothers had difficulty finding subscribers, due to anti-Yankee sentiment.

“The new paper was edited by Connecticut ‘Yankees’,” according to the *History of Sangamon County, Illinois*. “Even in those days a Yankee was distasteful to people from South of the Ohio. Certain persons at once raised a cry against the paper, and went so far as to say there [were] some people in the county who would not give the Francis brothers a place to be buried, if it was known where they were from.”

Initially, the *Sangamo Journal* had only 150 subscribers, but “[e]ach person for his two dollars and a half received fifty-two papers filled with good reading. They were pleased, subscribed again, and told their friends to do likewise. The storm was thus weathered and the prosperous future of the Journal established.”¹²

Simeon Francis went on to become a pillar of Springfield, elected state representative, sheriff and mayor.

However, 34 miles west of Springfield, in Jacksonville, settled a group of Yankees whose strident abolitionism put them much more at odds with popular sentiment

¹¹ Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 255.

¹² *History of Sangamon County*, 214-215.

in Central Illinois. In 1829, seven students at Yale Theological Seminary resolved to “go out to one of the new western states or territories and there establish an institution of learning.” In true Yankee fashion, they were “deeply impressed...with the destitute condition of the western section of country and the urgent claims of its inhabitants on the benevolent of the East.”¹³

The “Yale Band,” as these seven young men became known, were the founders of Illinois College, a private liberal arts college which still exists today. Almost immediately, they recruited as president Edward Beecher – son of temperance advocate Lyman Beecher, brother of future *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* author Harriet Beecher Stowe – luring him from the pulpit of Boston’s Congregationalist Park Street Church. As a college history notes, “Although situated in a community where a large proportion of the inhabitants were opposed to the abolition of slavery, the College, on account of the views of its professors, soon became identified with the anti-slavery movement.”¹⁴

In Illinois, Beecher became an intimate of the doomed abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy. Lovejoy, the son and grandson Congregational ministers in Maine, was a restless young New Englander. After graduating from Waterville College, Lovejoy spent a year teaching, but found the work so unsatisfying he walked 1,200 miles from Boston to Hillsboro, Illinois, seeking a new life in a new state. He ended up teaching in St. Louis, then found his calling as a journalist, becoming editor of the *St. Louis Times*, a Whig newspaper. The *Times* ran ads for slaves, and Lovejoy disapproved of abolitionism. He

¹³ Charles Henry Rammelkamp, *Illinois College: A Centennial History, 1829-1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), 23.

¹⁴ *Illinois College: A Centennial History*, 102.

was a supporter of the American Colonization Society, which sought a middle ground between slavery and abolitionism by proposing to return the Negroes to Africa.

In 1832, at the age of 30, Lovejoy attended a Presbyterian revival meeting where the preacher condemned the sale of human as a sin as great as adultery or murder. Lovejoy sold the newspaper and enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary. After graduation, a group of Protestant businessmen in St. Louis hired him to edit the *Observer*, a newspaper that would promote religion, morality and education. At first, Lovejoy stuck to attacks on Catholicism and such sinful amusements as tobacco, lotteries, drinking and public hangings. But gradually, he began to condemn slavery – defending a Sunday school for slaves, calling for a state constitutional amendment to prohibit future ownership of slaves, publishing an article about a slave who was separated from his wife, and flogged when he escaped to rejoin her. Nonetheless, he called abolitionists “unwise, inconsiderate and headstrong.”¹⁵

On April 28, 1836, a free Negro who worked as a porter on a steamboat docked in St. Louis was arrested for public drunkenness. Terrified he would be sold into slavery, he stabbed an arresting officer to death. A mob of 5,000 men broke into the jail and burned him alive.

Lovejoy wrote an editorial calling the lynching “savage barbarity.” Soon, his composing sticks were stolen and the completed type for his newspaper was destroyed by pro-slavery vandals. Fearing violence against his wife and son, Lovejoy moved his newspaper across the river to Alton. As soon as the printing press arrived, a mob from

¹⁵ Paul Simon, *Freedom's Champion: Elijah Lovejoy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 31.

Missouri smashed it and threw it into the river. After Lovejoy organized the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society, and began editorializing in favor of abolition, his press was again smashed. Alton was in a free state, but most of its residents were Southern in outlook and origin, and unsympathetic to the views of a moralistic New Englander.

When Lovejoy's third press arrived from Cincinnati, it was transported to a warehouse by a dozen armed men. When word spread through the taverns, a mob surrounded the building and began throwing stones and firing shots. A member of the mob was wounded by a shot from the warehouse. Attempting to set the roof on fire, men raised a ladder against the walls. Running outside to push it over, Lovejoy was shot five times. His killers were tried, but found not guilty.

Despite his friendship with Lovejoy, and his private belief that all slaves should be emancipated immediately, Beecher declined to join the Anti-Slavery Society, out of fear that it would associate Illinois College too closely with abolitionism: "I felt that more was to be hoped from deep and thorough discussion in a cool and dispassionate style, than from popular appeals and excitement," he wrote in *Narrative of Riots at Alton*, a book on Lovejoy's lynching.¹⁶

Lovejoy's murder outraged anti-slavery American. It was the greatest boost to their movement until the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But there was barely a word of condemnation in Illinois – except from Lincoln. In a speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Lincoln defended the abolitionist – not for his views, which neither he nor the great majority of his neighbors shared, but for his right to express them.

¹⁶ Edward Beecher, *Narrative of Riots at Alton: In Connection with the Death of Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy* (Alton, IL: George Holton, 1838).

“There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law,” Lincoln said. “In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.”¹⁷

The speech was an early example of Lincoln’s ability to couch his opposition to slavery not in abolitionist terms, but as a defense against the tyranny, violence and intolerance of the “slave power,” and to ally himself with abolitionists without endorsing or associating himself with their movement. Many Central Illinoisans considered slave ownership and abolitionism equally radical and undesirable, but in his Lyceum Speech Lincoln was clearly arguing that slave owners and their allies were a greater threat to public order.

Beecher may have attempted to be circumspect on slavery, but some of his more outspoken faculty members and students caused the college to become with the abolitionist movement. Professor Jonathan B. Turner was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. In 1843, a Louisiana woman brought her Negro nurse Jacksonville. Convincing the nurse that she was free as a result of setting foot on Illinois soil, two students helped her to escape. The party was overtaken, and the slave was sent to St. Louis, to reunite with her mistress. In response to the incident, a group of anti-abolitionist locals gathered at the Morgan County Courthouse, where they passed a

¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,” January 27, 1838.

resolution declaring that “the citizens of Jacksonville will at all times extend the hand of friendship and hospitality to their acquaintances in the South.... And to that end, having reasons to believe that there are regular bands of abolitionists...in this town, we will form an anti-Negro Stealing Society.”¹⁸

The college’s history asserts that the faculty’s abolitionism “tended to check the growth and prosperity of the institution. Indeed, there are those who assert that had it not been for the anti-slavery position of the College, it would have grown into one of the largest colleges in the state.”¹⁹

As an example of this, Lincoln’s future law partner, William Herndon, was briefly a student at Illinois College, until his pro-slavery father pulled him out, “believing that the College was too strongly permeated with the virus of abolitionism.” By then, though, Herndon had already been converted to his professors’ cause: “[I]t was too late. My soul had absorbed too much of what my father believed was rank poison.”²⁰

Illinois’s tripartite nature – Yankee North, Midland Center, Dixie South – was best reflected in Sangamon County, where elements of every migrant strain settled. By 1850, when the Census Bureau began asking respondents where they were born, Sangamon contained 1,100 Kentuckians, more than any county in the state. But 2,500 residents had been born in New England – 13 percent of the county’s population.

In Making the Heartland Quilt: A Geographical History of Settlement and

¹⁸ *History of Illinois College*, 114-115.

¹⁹ *History of Illinois College*, 102.

²⁰ William Henry Herndon and Jesse William Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1889), 178-179.

Migration in Early-Nineteenth-Century Illinois, demographer Douglas K. Meyer identified counties as “core,” “domain,” “sphere” and “avoidance” areas, ranking in intensity the prevalence of various strains of settlement. Sangamon, Meyer writes, was unique in not being the core area of a particular migrant group.

“Sangamon County emerged as the only magnetic settlement area that failed to unravel as a core area of any cultural region. Instead, its counties originated as domain counties of the Upland South and Midland-Midwest culture regions and sphere counties of the New England culture region. Representing a quintessential settlement platform, Sangamon County personifies midwestern cultural mixing.”²¹

Improved roads and steamboats on the Illinois River had enabled and encouraged Yankees to penetrate to the state’s midsection from their disembarkation point in Chicago. The Illinois river settlement of Peoria was attractive to New Yorkers and New Englanders because of its fertile agriculture and manufacturing industries. An early visitor declared that “the place wears a New England aspect; its schools and churches are prosperous.”²² Peoria also attracted significant populations of Protestant Germans, who would come to associate with the anti-slavery Republicans, and Irish Catholics, who would join the Democratic Party. A colony of Massachusetts migrants settled in Tremont, Tazewell County, in 1836, leading a commentator to write “[t]he character of the place is

²¹ Douglas C. Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt: A Geographical History of Settlement and Migration in Early-Nineteenth-Century Illinois* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 194-195.

²² Daniel S. Curtiss, *Western Portraiture and Emigrants’s Guide* (New York: J. H. Colton, 1852), 317.

New England.”²³ (Both towns would later be part of Lincoln’s congressional district.)

As Illinois best reflected the nation’s demographic divisions (and still does today), Sangamon and its nearby counties best reflected Illinois. Central Illinois, wrote James Krohe Jr. in *Corn Kings and One-Horse Thieves: A Plain-Spoken History of Mid-Illinois*, was “what demographers call a mixing zone and what political analysts call a swing district...Because mid-Illinois as a whole was a cross-section of Illinois in its makeup and its partisan inclinations, any politician who appealed to this region always stood a good chance of doing well statewide.”²⁴

Abraham Lincoln almost immediately involved himself in the political life of his new hometown of New Salem, running (unsuccessfully) for a seat in the legislature in 1832, the year after he arrived. At the time, of course, slavery was not an issue. Illinois believed it had settled the question – at least locally – by rejecting the 1824 constitutional convention. It would not again play a major role in the state’s politics until the 1850s, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision threatened to bring slavery into a state that had declared itself free. Once that moment came, and the slavery debate engulfed not just Illinois, but the entire nation, there was no better training ground for a politician who aimed to solve it than Central Illinois.

²³ Asher B. Jones, *Illinois and the West* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, 1838), 72-73.

²⁴ James Krohe Jr., *Corn Kings and One-Horse Thieves: A Plain-Spoken History of Mid-Illinois* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), 197.

Chapter II.

The Whig Politician

Central Illinois was the most Whiggish section of the state, part of a “Whig belt” that ran across the entire midsection of the Midwest, from Ohio to Illinois. It contained the most fertile farmland in the region, and therefore produced the most prosperous citizens. As John C. Hudson observed in *Making the Corn Belt*, “Many of the Corn Belt pioneers of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois had been Jacksonian Democrats but voted Whig beginning with that party’s formation in the mid-1830s...Poorer lands and frontiers of settlement, whether in southern Michigan and Wisconsin, northern and western Missouri, or extreme western Kentucky mostly voted for the Democrats.”²⁵

The Whig Party, which arose out of opposition to Andrew Jackson’s presidency, sought to modernize the nation through the building of “internal improvements” such as roads and canals, and the establishment of a National Bank. Although most opponents of slavery affiliated with the Whigs, the party included members from both the North and the South, and opposition to slavery was never part of its platform. The Democrats were a pro-slavery party, and saw the Whigs’ advocacy of government initiatives as empowering the federal government, which could then use that power to interfere with slavery in the states. Reflecting eternal divides in American politics, the Whigs were modern and reformist, the Democrats traditional and agrarian.

Lincoln began his political career in 1832, as a Whig candidate for the Illinois

²⁵ Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 127.

House of Representatives from Sangamon County. He lost his first election, because Sangamon County voted for Andrew Jackson that year, but ran again two years later, on a platform that was a distillation of all the Whigs stood for.

“My politics are short and sweet, like an old woman’s dance,” Lincoln said during that campaign. “I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal improvement system and a high protective tariff.”²⁶

This time, Lincoln won, and from then on, Sangamon County was a Whig stronghold, voting Whig in every presidential election from 1836 until the party’s last stand in 1852.²⁷ (This put it out of sync with the rest of Illinois, which voted Democratic in every presidential election until Lincoln himself ran.) Lincoln’s political hero was Henry Clay, the Kentuckian who received the Whig nomination for president in 1844, and sought it on several other occasions.

As a legislator, Lincoln was anti-slavery, but he was also anti-Negro. He voted in favor of an amendment to a voting bill which called for denying Negroes the franchise. It passed, 35-16. He also voted for a resolution asserting “that the elective franchise should be kept pure from contamination by the admission of colored voters.”²⁸ During his first re-election campaign, Lincoln wrote a letter to the *Sangamo Journal* stating that he favored “admitting all whites to the right of suffrage who pay taxes or bear arms, (by no

²⁶ *History of Sangamon County, Illinois*, 250.

²⁷ *History of Sangamon County, Illinois*, 272-77.

²⁸ Paul Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 130.

means excluding females.)”²⁹ (Lincoln’s inclusion of women, argued biographer Michael Burlingame, was no jest, but rather a “proto-feminist endorsement of women’s suffrage” – and advance that he more than once told his law partner, William Herndon, “was only a matter of time.”³⁰)

In *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years*, then-state legislator and future U.S. Senator Paul Simon speculated that Lincoln may have taken a stand against Negro suffrage “because one of his legislative colleagues, William Carpenter, was receiving public criticism for suggesting that free Negroes should be permitted to vote.”³¹ The same issue of the *Sangamo Journal* that contained Lincoln’s statement on suffrage also contained this letter, from a reader named Andrew McCormick: “Some of the supporters of Van Buren have declared themselves in favor of extending the right of suffrage to free blacks. I am opposed to this doctrine.”³²

However, during a debate on a resolution against banning slavery in the District of Columbia, Lincoln tried to insert the words, “unless the people of the said district petition for the same.” His motion failed, and he was one of only six representatives to vote no on the resolution, which asserted that “[w]e highly disapprove of the formation of abolition societies,” and that “[t]he right of property in slaves is sacred to the slave-holding states by the Federal Constitution.”³³ Lincoln and his Sangamon County

²⁹ *Sangamo Journal*, June 13, 1836.

³⁰ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1: 103.

³¹ Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness*, 130.

³² Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness*, 130.

³³ Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness*, 132-133.

colleague Dan Stone filed a protest that declared them against both slavery and abolitionism.

“They believe that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy; but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends to increase rather than to abate its evils.

“They believe that the Congress of the United States has the power, under the Constitution, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia; but that power ought not to be exercised unless at the request of the people of said district.”³⁴

This was a middle course that Lincoln would follow right up to his election as president. While Lincoln was anti-slavery, he never objected to the Illinois Black Laws, which stated that no Negro could settle in the state unless he produced a certificate of freedom; that anyone bringing a slave into the state for the purpose of freeing him must produce a \$1,000 bond; and that harboring slaves was a felony punishable by a fine of double the slave’s value and up to thirty lashes. When black abolitionist H. Ford Douglas asked Lincoln to sign a petition in favor of repealing the Black Laws, Lincoln declined.³⁵ As Thomas Ford, who served as governor from 1842 to 1846, wrote in his memoirs, it would have been “dangerous” for an Illinois politician of that era to be seen as pro-Negro.³⁶ Lincoln was anti-slavery, but he was not an abolitionist. He did not favor the immediate emancipation of Negroes, but believed that if slavery were prohibited from

³⁴ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 1: 75.

³⁵ Eric Foner, “Lincoln and Colonization,” in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

³⁶ Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs, 1854), 34.

spreading, it would eventually wither away, at some unspecified date in the future. As Don E. Fehrenbacher would write, Lincoln “favored slow, firm progress toward a revolutionary goal.”³⁷

Although more progressive on the slavery question than most legislators, Lincoln was not above using the race card when he thought it would advance his political goals. During the 1840 presidential campaign, Lincoln and his fellow Whigs edited a newspaper, the *Old Soldier*, which supported William Henry Harrison. In the July 28 issue, they wrote that President Van Buren “is in favor of allowing free Negroes and slaves to swear in courts against white men!” And during a campaign speech, Lincoln pointed out that Van Buren had voted for Negro suffrage as a member of the New York constitutional convention.³⁸

When Lincoln was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1846, he was the only Whig in Illinois’s seven-member congressional delegation.

As a Whig, Lincoln’s chief political concern had always been economic development. The Whigs favored a Bank of the United States, high tariffs that would protect American industry, and federal spending on railroads and canals that would develop frontier states, such as Illinois. During his years in the General Assembly, and in Congress, Lincoln saw slavery as an issue that threatened to cause dissension among Northerners and Southerners, preventing them from cooperating on the Whig platform. Lincoln didn’t want slavery in Illinois, because it would have competed with free labor.

³⁷ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 148.

³⁸ Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness*, 136.

As a representative of the new industrial middle class, Lincoln believed in free markets, and the right of every man to improve his lot through his own labor. But he was no abolitionist. As a politician, Lincoln was unwilling to antagonize Southerners by suggesting they give up their peculiar institution.

During his term in Congress, from 1847 to 1849, Lincoln tried to thread that needle. He consistently voted in favor of the Wilmot Proviso, an unsuccessful bill sponsored by Rep. David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, which would have prohibited slavery in territory captured from Mexico. This measure had the support of Whigs back in Illinois. In an 1850 editorial, the *Quincy Whig* would call itself “just as much in favor of the principles of the Wilmot Proviso, viz., opposed to the extension of territory now free, as we have ever been.”³⁹ Unlike some of his fellow Whigs, however, he did not accuse President Polk of invading Mexico specifically to acquire territory in which to expand slavery. But he was opposed to the Mexican War, a partisan position highly unpopular in Central Illinois, which is full of small towns named after American victories in that conflict: Cerro Gordo, San Jose, Eldorado, Sandoval. And he feared that the newly conquered territory would be filled with slaves. To Williamson Durley, an abolitionist from Putnam County, in the northern reaches of his congressional district, Lincoln wrote this letter:

“I think annexation an evil. I hold it to be a paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the Union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem) to let the slavery of the other states alone; while, on the other hand, I hold it to be equally clear, that we should never knowingly lend ourselves directly or indirectly, to

³⁹ *Quincy Whig*, February 19, 1850.

prevent that slavery from dying a natural death – to find new places for it to live in, when it can no longer exist in the old.”⁴⁰

Lincoln was one of only 10 northern Whigs to vote against a bill for a plebiscite on slavery in the District of Columbia (the very same proposal he had tried to pass in the Illinois legislature). He was one of only three to vote against abolishing the slave trade there.

Lincoln came up with his own bill to end slavery in the District of Columbia. It provided that all children born there after January 1, 1850, would work as apprentices for their parents’ masters until they reached adulthood, at which point they would be free. All living slaves would remain slaves unless their masters freed them, with compensation from the government. The District’s law enforcement officials would cooperate in capturing fugitive slaves. The measures would not have taken effect until D.C. residents themselves voted for emancipation. Lincoln’s bill was obnoxious to both Northern abolitionists and Southern slaveholders. He never introduced it. The time had not yet arrived for the middle ground on slavery – neither expansion nor abolition – that Lincoln would craft in the 1850s.

Back home in Illinois, the events of 1848 were pulling the state’s anti-slavery movement in two directions. The United States victory in the Mexican War had added thousands of square miles of new territory to the nation, and the state’s Whigs – including Rep. Abraham Lincoln – unanimously agreed that it should be closed to slavery. The abolitionists supported Martin Van Buren, the Free Soil candidate for president, over the Whig, Zachary Taylor. Van Buren won 12.6 percent of the vote in Illinois, more than

⁴⁰ *Collected Works*, 1: 347-48.

enough to tip the state to Democrat Lewis Cass. Most of Van Buren's support was in the northeastern corner of the state: he carried several Chicago-area counties. (Van Buren's support in Central Illinois was negligible: he got 47 votes in Sangamon County, or 1.4 percent.)⁴¹ But in January 1849, for the first time, Free Soilers, Whigs, and Northern Democrats found a common cause – the General Assembly passed a resolution supporting the Wilmot Proviso, which Lincoln had voted for. These were the elements that would later unite to form the Republican Party.

The Liberty Party, which supported abolition, built a small following in Illinois throughout the 1840s. In 1840, James G. Birney appeared on the ballot as a presidential candidate. He received 160 votes. During the 1844 election, Ichabod Coddington, a Connecticut abolitionist, campaigned in Illinois with a free Negro who told the story of its servitude. That year, the Liberty Party elected the first abolitionist officeholder in Illinois: Ira Miltmore, a Chicago alderman who later served as a captain under Ulysses S. Grant.

The Liberty Party's stronghold was in the Yankee-settled counties of Northern Illinois. In Birney's second campaign for president, in 1844, he received 3,433 votes, or 3 percent of the statewide total. But in the six counties that would later make up the greater Chicago area, his percentages were significantly higher: 9 percent in Cook, 25 percent in DeKalb, 16 percent in DuPage, 14 percent in Kane, 12 percent in Lake and 14 percent in Will. Meanwhile, Birney's campaign was regarded with utter indifference in Central Illinois. He did not record a single vote in Sangamon County, nor in its neighbors Logan

⁴¹ *Illinois Election Returns, 1818-1848* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library, 1923).

or Macon.⁴²

In Lincoln's campaign for Congress, the Liberty Party fielded a candidate in the Seventh District. Elihu Walcott received 249 votes, only 2 percent of the total ballots cast. More than half his votes came from Putnam, the district's northernmost county. In Sangamon County, he received 14 votes. (That same year, Owen Lovejoy, brother of martyred abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, ran as the Liberty Party candidate in the Fourth District, which ran from Chicago to Bloomington. Lovejoy received 16 percent of the vote. Ten years later, he would be elected to Congress as a Republican.)⁴³

At the same time as the Liberty Party was vainly trying to build an abolitionist movement in Illinois, the state adopted a new constitution. Although the constitution explicitly banned slavery, it also included a "Negro Clause," which would codify the state's Black Laws, and make Negro settlement in Illinois nearly impossible. It read, "The General Assembly shall at its first session under the amended constitution pass such laws as will effectually prohibit free persons of color from immigrating to and settling in this state, and to effectively prevent the owners of slaves from bringing them into this state, for the purpose of setting them free." This was one of several clauses put before the voters for ratification on March 6, 1848. As expected, opposition to the Negro Clause was concentrated in Northern Illinois. In Cook County, it failed 77 percent to 23 percent. But the Negro Clause attracted 80 percent of the vote in Lincoln's congressional district, including 78 percent in Sangamon County.⁴⁴ In 1853, the General Assembly took up this

⁴² *Illinois Election Returns*, 149-151.

⁴³ *Illinois Election Returns*, 159.

⁴⁴ *Illinois Election Returns*, 176-181.

charge, passing laws that provided fines and imprisonment for whites who bought slaves into the state, and prohibiting free blacks, and allowing sheriffs to fine or sell free blacks who attempted to settle in their counties.⁴⁵ In the words of historian Elmer Gertz, “Most people of Illinois hated the very sight of the colored person.”⁴⁶

Given the sentiment against both abolitionists and blacks in his district, it seems natural that Lincoln would seek out a solution to the slavery question that excluded both. He found one in the Colonization Society, a movement to repatriate freed slaves to Africa. It was a movement whose supporters included some of the most honored names in American politics, both slave owners and abolitionists: Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Roger Taney, Harriet Beecher Stowe. On November 13, 1847, Lincoln was in the audience when his hero Henry Clay delivered an anti-Mexican War speech in Lexington, Kentucky. Clay was a prominent member of the American Colonization Society. The Society had purchased land on the west coast of Africa where slaves could be resettled, forming the basis of the nation of Liberia, to which it sent 11,000 blacks between 1816 and 1860. In his speech, Clay – a Kentucky slaveholder himself – called slavery “a great evil,” and opposed extending it to the territories, but he also opposed allowing blacks and whites to co-exist as equals, believing such race mixing would lead to miscegenation and lynching. The American Colonization Society, he declared, was an organization of “unmixed benevolence.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Elmer Gertz, “The Black Laws of Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56, no. 3 (1963): 454-473.

⁴⁶ Gertz, “The Black Laws of Illinois,” 466.

⁴⁷ Foner, “Lincoln and Colonization,” 139-140.

Springfield boasted an active Colonization movement. The Sangamo Colonization Society was organized in 1833; its members included John T. Stuart, who would become Lincoln's first law partner, and John Todd, Lincoln's future brother-in-law. When the Illinois State Colonization Society established a Springfield chapter in the 1840s, most of the officers were, like Lincoln, Whigs who opposed abolitionism. According to the state society's first annual report, in 1845, it had 35 auxiliary societies with 800 members, and had raised \$650 toward the goal of purchasing land in Africa. The society's goal, the report declared, was ending the slave trade at its source, in west Africa. "The principle of colonization is the most effectual and economical means of attaining this object." Lincoln would address the Illinois State Colonization Society's annual meeting in both 1853 and 1855, was elected to its board of managers in 1858.

"Before the Civil War, Lincoln lived in a world in which colonization was a significant presence," wrote Eric Foner in his essay "Lincoln and Colonization." "He grew up in Kentucky and southern Indiana and then lived in central Illinois among migrants from the Upper South. These were areas where colonization enjoyed considerable support." Added Foner: "For many white Americans, including Lincoln, colonization represented a middle ground between the radicalism of the abolitionists and the prospect of the United States existing permanently half slave and half free."⁴⁸

At this point, it is worth noting that Lincoln differed from the abolitionists because he considered slavery immoral on political and economic grounds, rather than religious grounds. Lincoln himself never belonged to any organized religion. To Lincoln, slavery was wrong because it violated the assertion in the Declaration of Independence

⁴⁸ Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," 144.

that “all men are created equal,” as well as the natural right of every man to profit from his own labor. Lincoln was not a religious man, and had not been raised in a culture that emphasized the brotherhood and equality of the races, so he was satisfied with politically possible solutions to the slavery question – incremental steps towards its eventual death as an institution. His law partner, William Herndon, whose education by the Yankee professors at Illinois College had turned him into a much more ardent opponent of slavery, made note of Lincoln’s dispassion.

“It is not surprising, I think, that Lincoln should have viewed this New England importation with mingled suspicion and alarm,” Herndon wrote in his biography of Lincoln. “Abstractly, and from the standpoint of conscience, he abhorred slavery. But born in Kentucky, and surrounded as he was by slaveholding influences, absorbing their prejudices and following in their line of thought, it is not strange, I repeat, that he should fail to estimate properly the righteous indignation and unrestrained zeal of a Yankee abolitionist.”⁴⁹

In 1850, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas guided through Congress a package of bills that held the promise of settling the conflict over slavery for at least a generation. The Compromise of 1850, as the measures were called, had been championed by Henry Clay, but passed on to Douglas’s stewardship as the elder statesman’s health failed. The entire package failed to pass Congress due to opposition from both Southern slaveholders and anti-slavery Whigs. But Douglas realized that there were majorities for each individual measure, and, in a masterful act of legislative craftsmanship, passed them each separately. They included a ban on the slave trade in the District of Columbia, a stronger

⁴⁹ Herndon and Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, 178.

Fugitive Slave Act, admission of California as a free state, and a popular vote to decide whether to allow slavery in the Utah and New Mexico territories.⁵⁰

The Compromise of 1850 was wildly popular with members of both parties in Central Illinois. Both of the region's Congressmen, Democrats W. A. Richardson and Thomas L. Harris, voted for all five measures. A pro-Compromise meeting was held in Springfield, attracting a crowd of prominent Whigs and Democrats, including Democratic governor A.C. French; the Whig convention of Sangamon County resolved that the proposals contained "the elements of a just and liberal adjustment," and asked for congressmen to "sustain Mr. Clay and his worthy co-laborers in their noble efforts to save the country from the evils of the ultraism of the South and the fanaticisms of the North."⁵¹

By this point, Lincoln was out of office, and had withdrawn from the political scene. It was the custom for congressmen from Lincoln's district to serve only one term, and he had hoped for a political appointment from a Whig president. In this, he was disappointed. President Taylor offered to make Lincoln governor of Oregon Territory, a job he didn't want, but refused to appoint him commissioner of the General Land Office, a job he did. So Lincoln returned home to Springfield, where he set aside politics for the next five years, focusing instead on the law practice he had neglected during his term in Congress. Like most Central Illinoisans, Lincoln approved of the Compromise of 1850; in a eulogy for Henry Clay, delivered after the senator's death in 1852, he expressed

⁵⁰ Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 294-303.

⁵¹ *Sangamo Journal*, August 2, 1850.

admiration for his hero's moderate course on slavery:

“Cast into life where slavery was already widely spread and deeply seated, he did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how it could be at once eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself. His feeling and his judgment, therefore, even led him to oppose both extremes of opinion on the subject. Those who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States; tear to tatters its now venerated constitution; and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue a single hour, together with all their more halting sympathisers, have received, and are receiving their just execration; and the name, and opinions, and influence of Mr. Clay, are fully, and, as I trust, effectually and enduringly, arrayed against them. But I would also, if I could, array his name, opinions, and influence against the opposite extreme – against a few, but an increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white man's charter of freedom – the declaration that ‘all men are created free and equal.’”⁵²

Lincoln was more outspokenly anti-slavery than most of his constituents. But since he carefully avoided being seen as favoring abolitionism and Negro equality, his views on the subject did not hurt him politically. This is because slavery simply wasn't an important issue to Central Illinoisans in the early decades of his political career. A search of the word “slavery” in the *Sangamo Journal* archives shows that it appeared 116 times in the 1830s, 454 times in the 1840s, and 4,261 times in the 1850s. Central Illinoisans were mostly concerned with preventing the extremes of abolitionism or the Slave Power – the overbearing Southern aristocracy that insisted on nationwide acceptance of slavery -

⁵² *Collected Works*, 2: 130.

-from destabilizing the Union. For that reason, Lincoln's association with the anti-slavery cause did not help him politically during that era. In the 1830s and 1840s, he was little more than a hack Whig politician. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in 1854, threatened to allow the slave power to expand its reach into free territory, and finally gave Lincoln the issue that propelled him to the presidency. Lincoln never changed to suit Central Illinois's mood; Central Illinois's mood changed to suit him.

Chapter III.

“An Anti-Nebraska Man”

The Compromise of 1850 had buried slavery as an issue in Central Illinois, whose voters were willing to tolerate the institution in the South if it would preserve the Union. As Patricia Lee Luthe wrote in “The Compromise of 1850 as Seen in Selected Illinois Newspapers,” “[the] *Central Illinois Times* of Bloomington spoke for Union as more important than the Universal freedom proclaimed by the fanatical abolitionists,”⁵³ and the *Prairie Beacon* “suggested that the basic problems of government were from the Northern and Southern ‘fanatics’ who were stubborn and unwilling to compromise even for the sake of their country.”⁵⁴ Even the Fugitive Slave Law, which extended the reach of slave catchers into the free states, was seen as an acceptable price for national unity. Illinois Supreme Court Justice Lyman Trumbull of Alton would declare in a speech that the Compromise was supported by “all parties, save a few abolitionists, too insignificant to command attention, determined to keep down slavery agitation, and it was kept down – Never was the country freer from abolition and slavery excitement than from 1850 to 1854.”⁵⁵ Significantly, Trumbull identified abolitionists, not proponents of slavery, as the most significant threats to the national consensus on slavery. His attitude, and the

⁵³ Patricia Lee Luthe, “The Compromise of 1850 as Seen in Selected Illinois Newspapers” (M.A. thesis, Illinois State University, 1968), 71.

⁵⁴ Luthe, “The Compromise of 1850,” 60.

⁵⁵ “A Fire in the Rear! Speech of Judge Trumbull, in Reply to Judge Douglas, at Springfield, Illinois,” *Missouri Democrat*, 1854.

attitudes of many Central Illinois politicians, would soon change.

The Compromise was supposed to have settled the slavery question for a generation; but less than three years after its passage, the national comity over slavery was blown up by Illinois's senior senator, Stephen Douglas. On January 4, 1854, Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a law to allow settlers in the territories to vote on whether to allow slavery, a principle he called "popular sovereignty." Douglas's political calculations were two-fold: by encouraging settlement in Nebraska, he hoped to hasten the construction of a transcontinental railroad, which would pass through his hometown of Chicago; and by potentially opening up new territory to slavery, he hoped to win favor with Southerners who could deliver him the Democratic presidential nomination.

Opponents of the bill saw it as a repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the 1820 measure which had banned slavery in the Louisiana Territory north of 36 degrees, 30 minutes. Less than two weeks after the bill was introduced, the *Illinois State Journal* editorialized, "We had hoped to gain a short respite from that old din of 'Slavery Agitation' and 'Slavery Extension' that has been warring in our country so often for the last twenty years, but it seems that it is about to be let in upon us again, more repulsive and disgusting than ever from having been so many times kicked out the door. We can't conceive of a greater piece of mischief than is here set on foot by our Senator."⁵⁶

Significantly, even moderates were outraged at Douglas's action, which they regarded as duplicitous and self-serving. Judge David Davis of Bloomington, a Whig politician who was later to serve as Lincoln's campaign manager at the 1860 Republican National Convention, was contemptuous of abolitionists. In an 1854 letter to his brother-

⁵⁶ *Illinois State Journal*, January 15, 1854.

in-law, Julius Rockwell, the newly appointed senator from Massachusetts, Davis first expressed his pleasure that Rockwell was more reasonable on the slavery question than his seatmate, Charles Sumner, who was “too much of an abolitionist.” Then he went on to condemn the Kansas-Nebraska Act as an even greater threat to national unity.

“There has never been, in my opinion, anything so ill timed or disastrous to the good feeling of this country as this disturbance of the Missouri Compromise,” Davis wrote.⁵⁷

Throughout 1854, Anti-Nebraska meetings were organized all over Illinois. A meeting in Peoria, on March 2, produced the following resolution, drafted by three Whigs and two Democrats:

“RESOLVED, That the ultimate passage of that bill, or any bill for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, would tend to disturb that harmony which has heretofore existed between the North and South, create sectional distrust and perpetual agitation of questions which have heretofore been regarded as settled by the unanimous voice of the nation.

“RESOLVED, That the position taken by the supporters of Mr. Douglas’s bill, in regard to the unconstitutionality of that part of the Missouri Compromise which prohibits slavery north of 36 30, is...a base perversion of the principles which guided the Fathers in forming the law of the land...this prohibition is in consonance with the spirit of the constitution, and ought to remain in force.

“RESOLVED, That we respectfully urge upon the Legislature of this State the necessity of immediately instructing our Senators and requesting our Representatives in

⁵⁷ David Davis to Julius Rockwell, July 15, 1854.

Congress, to vote against the clause in the Nebraska bill, or any bill having in view the repeal or modification of the prohibitions of the Missouri Compromise.”

Nonetheless, the next day, both of Illinois’s senators – Douglas and his fellow Democrat, James Shields – voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which passed the Senate, 37-14. While legislatures in ten states passed measures condemning the Act, the Illinois legislature, which was composed of a Democratic majority loyal to Douglas, supported it.

Into the political fray over the Kansas-Nebraska Act stepped Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had spent the years after leaving Congress tending to his law practice. As Trumbull’s speech noted, those were years during which his long-held anti-slavery convictions had little audience in his home region, which preferred compromise to the agitation of abolitionists. The Kansas-Nebraska Act changed Lincoln’s political fortunes, and set him on a course to the presidency. Now, he could argue that Douglas and his Democratic allies were the agitators, threatening the peace negotiated by sensible politicians such as Henry Clay, Lincoln’s political hero and the architect of the Compromise of 1850. Public opinion was finally coming around to Lincoln; he sensed that Douglas’s bill offered him an opportunity to return to his true passion. “I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again,” he would later write in a biographical sketch. The Missouri Compromise was essential to the anti-slavery movement’s long game. If slavery were banned in the territories, those territories would inevitably mature into free states. As most immigrants were settling in free states, because they did not want to compete with slave labor, eventually freedom would have the power to outvote slavery in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The slave states saw this happening, as well, and were looking for a

measure that would allow slavery to break out of its Southern heartland, by opening all the territories to slaveholders. Douglas gave it to them. In the critical year of 1854, Lincoln would make it his goal to eliminate Douglas's majority in the legislature, a task that would require uniting Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats and abolitionists under a baseline principle: opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories.

Lincoln, who like Davis was convinced that the majority of Illinoisans were anti-Nebraska, believed that the legislature had backed the Kansas-Nebraska Act more out of loyalty to the state's leading politician than actual support for the measure. As he would later write to his friend Joshua Speed, in a caucus of Democrats in the legislature, "it was thereby discovered that just three, and no more, were in favor of the measure. In a day or two Douglas' orders came on to have resolutions passed approving the bill; and they were passed by large majorities!!!"⁵⁸

On May 8, the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed the House of Representatives, 113-100, and was signed into law by President Pierce at the end of the month. That did nothing to stop the anti-Nebraska demonstrations in Illinois. "Anti-Nebraska" had begun as a campaign to stop a bill from passing Congress, but once that bill passed, it continued as a political movement dedicating to preventing the expansion of slavery into the territories, or to any part of the country where it was not at that moment legal. Lincoln referred to himself as "an anti-Nebraska man," suggesting that membership in the movement was becoming a political identity, that transcended, and was more important than, partisan labels such as Whig or Democrat.

As Owen Robert Marsh wrote in "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Eight Counties of

⁵⁸ Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855.

Central Illinois, 1850-1860”:

“The meetings were composed of Whigs, Democrats, Know-Nothings and abolitionists. Their purpose was to unite on a one plank platform – opposition to the extension of slavery.

A number of anti-Nebraska meetings were held in central Illinois. One of the first was in Scott County. At this meeting, held on June 9, 1854, resolutions were passed which denounced the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and sustained the course of Congressman Richard Yates in voting against the bill.”⁵⁹

Yates held Lincoln’s old seat in Congress, and was an outspoken opponent of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In a speech on the House floor, Yates would call the law “directly at war with the genius, objects, and mission of our Government” and conclude “the question now rises up before us – a present question, not to be avoided but to be met – whether slavery is to be nationalized; whether the spread of slavery is to be the chief concern and leading policy of this Government; whether it is to be the figure-head of the ship of State, and whether a trade of unequalled barbarity, shocking to the senses of mankind, is to be revived under the full sanction of our General Government.”⁶⁰

Lincoln entered the race for state representative from Sangamon County specifically to aid Yates’s re-election campaign. Throughout the election season of 1854, Lincoln became one of Illinois’s most prominent anti-Nebraska men, addressing audiences throughout the state. He wrote an editorial for the *Illinois State Journal* comparing the Kansas-Nebraska Act to a property agreement between “Abraham Lincoln” and “John Calhoun” – not coincidentally the name of the former vice president

⁵⁹ Owen Robert Marsh, “Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Eight Counties of Central Illinois, 1850-1860” (M.A. thesis, Illinois State Normal University, 1958), 47.

⁶⁰ Richard Yates, speech before the United States House of Representatives, February 28, 1855, cited in *The Congressional Globe*, Volume 31, Parts 1-2.

and South Carolina senator who had been an outspoken supporter of slavery. When Calhoun's cattle were starving on his land, he threw the fence between the properties down and allowed them to graze on Lincoln's land. The cattle were slaves, the fence was the Missouri Compromise, and the man who had committed the deed was "a knave and a fool."⁶¹

Throughout his speaking tour, Lincoln repeated his conviction that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was an offense to the voters of Illinois, the majority of whom, he believed, opposed it. In Bloomington, on September 12, he asserted that the bill "was done without the consent of the people, and against their wishes, for if the matter had been put to a vote before the people directly, whether that should be made a slave territory, they would have indignantly voted it down." Lincoln suggested that the voters "fill the lower House with anti-Nebraska members" who would instruct Douglas to vote for repeal of his own bill, which he would be obligated to do under the "doctrine of instruction," which allowed the legislature to dictate the votes of senators.⁶² In Springfield, on October 4, Lincoln spoke after an address by Douglas, arguing that the Constitution's three-fifths compromise gave whites in slave states more voting power than whites in free states; because of that, the inhabitants of Kansas and Nebraska should not be allowed to vote themselves this excess influence over the nation's affairs. At the same time, Lincoln dismissed doctrines that were "narrow, sectional and dangerous to the Union," and he promised to respect the

⁶¹ Cited in Roy Prentice Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 282.

⁶² "Speech at Bloomington, Illinois, September 12, 1854," *Collected Works 2*: 230-33.

Constitutional rights of Southern slaveholders “fully” and “fairly.”⁶³

The Springfield speech coincided with a state anti-Nebraska convention in that city, which confronted Lincoln with the challenge of separating his own convictions from those of the abolitionists. (Lincoln had been invited to the convention, but did not attend.) Among the convention’s organizers was Owen Lovejoy, brother of Elijah Lovejoy, the abolitionist publisher who had been lynched by a pro-slavery mob in Alton in 1837. The organizers attended Lincoln’s speech, and were eager to enlist him in their movement.

The delegates “immediately sought to capitalize on the concert between Lincoln’s position and their own,” wrote Graham A. Peck in “How Moderates Were The Moderates? Reconsidering the Origins of the Republican Party in Illinois.” “Desiring to recruit his support and that of other anti-Nebraskites throughout the state, the convention’s Committee on Resolutions immediately drafted a platform, which the convention delegates adopted enthusiastically the next day. The delegates extensively debated only one resolution, and in doing so concluded to form ‘a platform upon which the whole anti-slavery sentiment of the State could be united.’ As adopted, the resolutions maintained ‘the right and duty of the General Government to prohibit the extension, establishment or perpetuation of human slavery in any and every Territory of the United States, and in any territory, possession, and country, over which the Union has or may hereafter acquire exclusive jurisdiction.’”⁶⁴

The delegates called their new movement the Republican Party. They were so

⁶³ “Speech at Springfield, Illinois, October 4, 1854,” *Collected Works*, 2: 240-247.

⁶⁴ Graham A. Peck, “How Moderate Were the Moderates? Reconsidering the Origins of the Republican Party in Illinois,” *Journal of Illinois History* 17 (Autumn 2014): 173.

impressed Lincoln's Springfield speech that they elected him to the party's central committee, and invited him to its first meeting in Chicago. Still unwilling to abandon his identification with the Whigs, and also unwilling to associate with abolitionists, Lincoln declined the appointment, which had been extended by Ichabod Coddington, the New York-born, Vermont-educated abolitionist who had been barnstorming Illinois on an anti-Nebraska speaking tour even more extensive than Lincoln's.

"I have been perplexed some to understand why my name was placed on that committee," Lincoln replied to Coddington. "I was not consulted on the subject, not was I apprised of the appointment until I discovered it two or three weeks afterward. I suppose my opposition to the principle of slavery is as strong as that of any member of the Republican party; but I had also supposed that the *extent* to which I feel authorized to carry that opposition, practically, was not at all satisfactory to that party."⁶⁵

A member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Illinois Liberty Party, Coddington was viewed with suspicion in Central Illinois. When he spoke alongside Ohio's abolitionist congressman Joshua Giddings the following year, the anti-Nebraska *Illinois State Journal* called their views a "dangerous extreme. They are in favor of the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, and opposed to the admission of any more slave states into the Union on any terms – opinions which, if carried out would effectually abrogate the compromise measures of 1850."⁶⁶

The time had not yet come for all the anti-Nebraska elements to fuse into a single movement whose base principle was preventing the extension of slavery, while at the

⁶⁵ Abraham Lincoln to Ichabod Coddington, November 27, 1854. *Collected Works*, 2: 288.

⁶⁶ *Illinois State Journal*, September 26, 1855.

same time recognizing its constitutional right to exist. Lincoln was well acquainted with the fusion efforts, having attended a July 10 address in Springfield by Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Clay, a cousin of Henry Clay. As Victor B. Howard noted in his history of the Illinois Republican Party, the fusion movement was “extremely weak in central Illinois, and the old antislavery forces of northern Illinois were extremely weak in the region. Great pains were taken, therefore, to identify Clay’s effort in Springfield with the Whigs. Clay’s past Whig connections and the magic of the name Henry Clay were assets in this part of Illinois. When the speaker took the platform, he was accompanied by two of the leading Whigs of the state – O.H. Browning of Quincy and Judge Thomas Moffett of Springfield, formerly of Bath County, Kentucky.”⁶⁷

Lincoln stretched out in the grass and whittled sticks while listening to Clay’s plea for a union of “Free Soilers, Whigs and Democrats.” He even spoke with Clay after the speech, expressing his support for free labor with the parable that “those who hoed the corn should eat the corn.”⁶⁸ But Lincoln refused to join the fusion movement, an attitude typical of men of his party and region: “In northern Illinois [Clay and Coddington] were successful in winning the support of Whig politicians and journals. In central and southern Illinois, however, they found the Whigs less willing to cooperate.”⁶⁹

That fall, Lincoln’s chief political goal was sending Yates back to Congress. To accomplish this, he had to navigate among several political movements, trying to

⁶⁷ Victor B. Howard, *The Illinois Republican Party* (Springfield: Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, 1971), 131.

⁶⁸ Howard, *The Illinois Republican Party*, 132.

⁶⁹ Howard, *The Illinois Republican Party*, 134-35.

associate his candidate with Whiggery and anti-Nebraskatism, while at the same time making sure he was not linked to abolitionism or anti-immigrant Know Nothingism. Lincoln also attempted to encourage a schism among the Democrats over Nebraska. He wrote to John H. Palmer, an anti-Nebraska Democratic state senator from Macoupin County, and asked him not to endorse Thomas L. Harris, his party's pro-Nebraska nominee for Congress in the Seventh District.

"You know how anxious I am that this Nebraska measure shall be rebuked and condemned everywhere," Lincoln wrote. "You are, and always have been, *honestly*, and *sincerely*, a democrat; and I know how painful it must be to an honest and sincere man to be urged by his party to the support of a measure, which on his conscience he believes to be wrong...Had your party omitted to make Nebraska a test of party fidelity; you probably would have been the Democratic candidate for Congress in the district...In that case I should have quit, happy that Nebraska was to be rebuked at all events."⁷⁰

Whether or not Lincoln had correctly judged that the voters of Illinois were opposed to Douglas's new law would be revealed on Election Day. The results were encouraging, but far from everything he could have hoped for. Lincoln and his fellow Whig Stephen T. Logan won the two state representative's seat in Sangamon County, defeating their Democratic opponents by nearly 2-1 margins. The Douglas Democrats lost their majority in the General Assembly to a combination of Whigs and anti-Nebraska Democrats. Lincoln himself tallied up the allegiances of the winners. In the Senate, he determined there were 9 Whigs, 11 Douglas Democrats, and 5 Anti-Nebraska Democrats. In the House, 29 Whigs, 40 Douglas Democrats, 14 Anti-Nebraska Democrats, and one

⁷⁰ Lincoln to John M. Palmer, September 7, 1854, *Collected Works*, 2: 228-29.

Abolitionist (Owen Lovejoy).⁷¹ As well, five of Illinois's nine United States representatives were opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Unfortunately, Yates was not one of them, having lost his seat to Harris by 200 votes. Despite the statewide shift against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln's home turf had shifted in the opposite direction, politically. In spite of Lincoln's efforts, Yates's campaign had been damaged by insinuations, spread by the *Illinois Register*, which was published by Douglas's friend Charles Lanphier, that he was affiliated with abolitionists.⁷² This despite the fact that he had declared in a House speech that there was "much injustice in northern fanaticism towards the people of the South."⁷³ Yates and Lincoln were both aware that to succeed in Central Illinois politics, it was necessary to stake out a position between the Douglas Democrats and the abolitionists. As Lincoln himself put it, in his famous Peoria speech of October 16: "Stand WITH the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise, and stand AGAINST him when he attempts to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law."⁷⁴ Repealing either, believed the moderates of 1854, was to put the nation on the road to disunion.

Although Yates had never appeared on a platform with Coddington, the abolitionist had spoken in favor of his candidacy. "A man is known by the company he keeps – by his advocates and endorsers," wrote the *Register*.⁷⁵ After the election, it further declared that Whigs who had refused to become "allies of the abolitionists" had "withheld their

⁷¹ *Collected Works*, 2: 296-98.

⁷² Marsh, "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Eight Selected Counties," 54.

⁷³ Marsh, "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Eight Selected Counties," 55.

⁷⁴ *Collected Works*, 2: 273.

⁷⁵ *Illinois State Register*, October 3, 1854.

support from Yates.”⁷⁶

(Lincoln himself believed that an accusation that Yates had been seen in Know Nothing Lodge sank his campaign. Yates had also been endorsed by the *Capital Enterprise*, Springfield’s Know-Nothing newspaper. The week before the election, he wrote to Yates that “I heard in Jacksonville a story which may harm you if not averted – namely, that you have been a Know-Nothing. I suggest that you get a denial – something like the inclosed draft which I have made – into the hands of a safe man in each district.”⁷⁷)

Judging by the damage that linking Coddington’s name to Yates had done to his friend’s campaign, Lincoln had been shrewd to refuse the abolitionist’s entreaty to join the new Republican Party. In 1854, Central Illinois was not ready to endorse an alliance between opponents of slavery’s extension and opponents of the institution itself. However, he would eventually have nowhere else to go politically. He was about to make his last stand as a Whig, and it cost him a prize he wanted dearly. In the election results for the state legislature, Lincoln saw an opportunity to become a United States Senator. The anti-Nebraska majority in both houses meant that Senator James Shields, who had voted in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, would not be returned to Washington. (Lincoln and Shields were old enemies. In 1842, Lincoln had written a pseudonymous editorial in the *Sangamo Journal* calling Shields, then the state auditor, a “dunce” and a “fool” after his office ceased accepted notes issued by the state bank. Shields challenged Lincoln to a duel. As the challenged party, Lincoln chose cavalry broadswords as

⁷⁶ *Illinois State Register*, November 14, 1854.

⁷⁷ Lincoln to Richard Yates, October 31, 1854, *Collected Works*, 2: 284-85.

weapons, a decided advantage for a man eight inches taller than his opponent. The politicians met at a dueling ground in Missouri, but bloodshed was averted when Lincoln assured Shields he “had no intention of insulting your personal or private character.”⁷⁸)

“It has come round that a whig may...be elected to the U.S. Senate,” Lincoln wrote to his friend Thomas J. Henderson; “and I want the chance of being the man.”⁷⁹ Since a member of the legislature could not be elected to the Senate, Lincoln resigned his recently won seat in the House of Representatives to make himself eligible for the office. However, his persistent clinging to the Whig label cost him the seat. Lincoln was his party’s choice for Senate, and on early ballots, he received 45 votes – only five short of the total for victory. There were in the House five anti-Nebraska Democrats whose votes he needed, but who refused to vote for a Whig. As the balloting continued, Lincoln’s support slipped, and Governor Joel Matteson, a pro-Douglas Democrat who was, unlike Shields, untainted by a vote for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, took the lead. To prevent Matteson’s election, Lincoln threw his support to U.S. Rep. Lyman Trumbull, an anti-Nebraska Democrat from Alton, who won the Senate seat on the tenth ballot.

Within a few years, Lincoln the Whig and Trumbull the Anti-Nebraska Democrat would be members of the same party: the Republican Party.

⁷⁸ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 190-93.

⁷⁹ Lincoln to Thomas J. Henderson, November 27, 1854, *Collected Works*, 2: 288.

Chapter IV.

The Republican Party

In the aftermath of his unsuccessful campaign for the United States Senate, Lincoln was a man without a party, although he was not yet ready to admit it. The Whig Party was no longer a functional political operation, having been shattered by disagreements on slavery between its Northern and Southern factions. Yet in 1855, Lincoln was unwilling to join the newly coalescing Republican Party, still wary of its domination by abolitionists. In a letter that year to his old Springfield friend Joshua Speed, now a slaveholder in Kentucky, Lincoln wrote:

“You enquire now where I stand. That is a disputed point. I think I am a whig; but others say there are no whigs, and that I am an abolitionist. When I was at Washington, I voted for the Wilmot Proviso as good as forty times, and I never heard of any one attempting to unwhig me for that. I now do no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery.”⁸⁰

Some Central Illinois Whigs still imagined the party had a future, in the vanishing middle ground between abolitionism and slavery extension. In July 1854, David Davis had written to Julius Rockwell, expressing his desire to “save the Whig party” from “being abolitionized, although no one can be more opposed to admission Nebraska [sic] than I am.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855, *Collected Works*, 2: 320-23.

⁸¹ David Davis to Julius Rockwell, July 15, 1854, David Davis Family Papers.

Lincoln also continued to keep his distance from the abolitionists. On New Year's Day, 1855, Ichabod Coddington embarked on a statewide lecture on the "Principles of the Republican Party," visiting several Central Illinois counties, including Logan, McLean, Tazewell and DeWitt. His efforts culminated in five nights of lectures at Kendall's Hall in Quincy, in late July, which were followed by a convention to organize a fusion party along Republican lines. It was chaired by Archibald Williams, an unsuccessful Whig candidate for Congress the year before. The convention produced a resolution exactly in line with Lincoln's own views: it opposed extending slavery to the territories, but also opposed interfering with slavery where it already existed. To Coddington, the meeting was a triumph, because it demonstrated that fusion had a constituency outside abolitionist Northern Illinois. "This is the inauguration of the Republican movement in Middle and Southern Illinois, and mark my word, it will be responded to and followed up throughout the region in due time," Coddington wrote in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. He hoped to hold a second convention in Springfield that autumn.⁸² Yet Abraham Lincoln, whose attendance would have been essential to the success of a Springfield convention, continued to resist fusion. On August 7, Owen Lovejoy wrote to both Lincoln, the state's most prominent moderate Whig, and Sen. Lyman Trumbull, its most prominent anti-Nebraska Democrat, attempting to recruit both to the fusionist movement, and a fall convention. Lincoln wrote back four days later, rejecting Lovejoy's offer, on the grounds that the fusion movement was still tainted with the Know-Nothingism he believed had contributed to Richard Yates's defeat the previous autumn.

"I have no objection to 'fuse' with any body provided I can fuse on ground which

⁸² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 30, 1855.

I think is right; and I believe the opponents of slavery extension could now do this, if it were not for this K.N.ism,” Lincoln wrote to Lovejoy. “In many speeches last summer I advised those who did me the honor of a hearing to ‘stand with any body who stands right’ – and I am still quite willing to follow my own advice. I lately saw, in the Quincy Whig, the report of a preamble and resolutions, made by Mr. Williams, as chairman of a committee, to a public meeting and adopted by the meeting. I saw them but once, and have them not now at command; but so far as I can remember them, they occupy the ground I should be willing to ‘fuse’ upon.”⁸³

Trumbull also rejected Lovejoy’s overtures, writing that he would prefer to see a Democratic Party that was both anti-abolition and anti-extension – identical to David Davis’s wish for the Whigs.

“I see and feel the want of concerted action,” Trumbull wrote, “but whether it would be advisable at this time to call a state convention of all those opposed to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, irrespective of party, is very questionable.”

(Both Davis the Whig and Trumbull the Democrat would eventually become Republicans, once they realized it was the only viable political movement opposing the extension of slavery.)

In the autumn of 1855, respectable public opinion in Central Illinois was still suspicious of and hostile to the fusion movement. One issue was its abolitionist leadership: Coddington, Lovejoy, and Rep. Joshua Giddings of Ohio, who joined Coddington on a fall lecture tour of western Illinois. The *Illinois State Journal* was dismissive of their visit to Springfield:

⁸³ Abraham Lincoln to Owen Lovejoy, August 11, 1855. *Collected Works*, 2: 316-17.

“As we have already stated these two political missionaries will be in this city on to-morrow, for the purpose of discussing what is popularly called “fusion.” So far as we are advised, these gentlemen, like Senator Douglas, are out lecturing on their own hook, and like him, are as ultra on one extreme of political doctrine as Senator Douglas is on the other. They are for freedom everywhere, while he is avowedly for the extension of slavery. Of course both are impracticable and therefore wrong. If we deprecated the teachings of the one, we are equally opposed to the preaching of the others. The antecedents of neither Mr. Giddings nor Mr. Coddington are such as to recommend them to the conservative and compromise abiding portion of the community; and even if they had been invited here, they could not hope to do the Anti-Nebraska cause any service. The doctrines of these gentlemen, if we are rightly informed, extend to a most useless, if not dangerous extreme. They are in favor of the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, and opposed to the admission of any more slave States into the Union on any terms, opinions which, if carried out, would effectually abrogate the compromise measures of 1850, and therefore are not to be hearkened unto.”⁸⁴

In subsequent editorials, the *Journal* went even further in condemning Republicanism. On October 5, it wrote that the party “is based upon the single issue of slavery. Its platform ignores all other questions. It would have the north cut loose entirely from all political relations with the south, and form an organization of a purely geographical character. It would draw a black line, not a line of compromise, between the slave and the free States, and create a sectional animosity between the two which would end, in heaven only knows what. Its principles, as they are proclaimed by its leaders, know no mean, no point of compromise.”⁸⁵ After the Republicans fared poorly against the Know-Nothings in November elections in New York and Massachusetts, the *Journal* editorialized that “[t]he recent elections will, we think, save the North from sectionalism, and prepare it for uniting its full strength with the South on a National platform, at the

⁸⁴ *Illinois State Journal*, September 26, 1855.

⁸⁵ *Illinois State Journal*, October 5, 1855.

next Presidential Election. We shall be glad to see the good old Whig party again in the field, and present appearances indicate such a result.”⁸⁶

However, in the winter of 1856, Lincoln finally found a group of anti-Nebraska Illinoisans with whom he could fuse. Paul Selby, editor of the Whig-leaning *Jacksonville Journal*, organized a convention of like-minded newspaper editors, to be held on February 22 in Decatur. Conveniently, this meeting coincided with a national Republican convention in Pittsburgh. The Illinois delegation to the Pittsburgh convention would include Coddington and Lovejoy. That meant the abolitionists would be out of state, and unable to exert their radical influence on any platform the newspaper editors produced. Lincoln was one of twelve attendees at the Decatur convention, and the only non-journalist. Although Lincoln was not nominated to the Committee on Resolutions, he consulted with its members, who produced a manifesto that was as strident in its defense of slavery where it existed as it was in its determination to prevent it from entering territories where it had not heretofore been practiced. The entire document was reprinted in the *Peoria Weekly Republican*, under the headline “Anti-Nebraska Editorial Convention.”

“We recognize the legal rights of the Slave States to hold and enjoy their property in slaves under their State laws, and within the jurisdiction of these laws,” the resolution stated; “and we further recognize their constitutional right to an enumeration of three-fifths of their slaves in the apportionment of representation, and also their constitutional right to a return of such ‘persons owing service under the laws of a State’ as may escape beyond the jurisdiction of those laws under which said service is due.”

⁸⁶ *Illinois State Journal*, November 15, 1855.

Having thus declared themselves unsullied by abolitionism, the editors then went on to lay down the anti-Nebraska plank of their platform:

“Entertaining the foregoing views, and intending in good faith to abide by them, cheerfully according to the slave States all the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution, and disclaiming any intention of interfering, directly or indirectly, with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists, but being also determined firmly to maintain the rights of the non-slaveholding States, and to resist, by the Constitutional means at our command, all aggression by the principle and power of slavery upon it, be it

“RESOLVED, That the conditions which are demanded under plea of ‘rights,’ as being essential to the security of Slavery throughout its expanded and expanding area, are inconsistent with freedom, and invasion of our rights, oppressive and unjust, and must be resisted.

“RESOLVED, That we are in favor of the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, or in other words, that we will strive by all legal means, to restore to Kansas and Nebraska, a legal guarantee against Slavery, of which they were deprived at cost of the violation of the plighted faith of the nation.”⁸⁷

As the *Weekly Republican* observed, the platform would suit neither the “ultra-abolitionists” nor the “proslavery fanatics,” placing it in the middle ground on which Lincoln was trying to walk.⁸⁸ Lincoln was not nominated to the state central committee, which was given the task of organizing a State Delegate Convention in Bloomington on May 29. For the Sixth District, which contained Springfield, that post was given to William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s more radical law partner. However, the Seventh District nominee, Richard J. Oglesby of Decatur, who would go on to serve Illinois as governor and U.S. senator, toasted Lincoln as “the warm and consistent friend of Illinois, and our

⁸⁷ *Peoria Weekly Republican*, February 29, 1855.

⁸⁸ *Peoria Weekly Republican*, February 29, 1855.

next candidate for the U.S. Senate.” Afterwards, according to the Decatur *State Chronicle*, “he expressed his hearty concurrence in the resolutions adopted by the Convention, and his willingness to buckle on his armor for the approaching contest the Pierce party.”⁸⁹

The moderates had made their move to take control of the anti-Nebraska movement while the radicals were out of town. Now, they had to keep the movement under their control. The next step was the state anti-Nebraska convention in Bloomington. Although he still considered himself a Whig, Lincoln’s name appeared on a “Call for a Republican Convention” published in the *Illinois State Journal* on May 10. It had been placed there by Herndon while Lincoln was attending court in Pekin. When Lincoln’s fellow Whigs protested this move, Herndon telegraphed Lincoln for his approval. “All right,” Lincoln responded. “Go ahead. Will meet you. Radicals and all.” Lincoln understood that his presence, and that of other moderate Whigs, was necessary to prevent the anti-Nebraska movement from being dominated by the aforesaid radicals.

At the same time, though, fusion was becoming more respectable because of Northern outrage over the violence of the pro-slavery movement. The week before the Bloomington convention brought two of the most virulent occurrences of the pre-Civil War era. On May 21, a pro-slavery militia attacked Lawrence, Kansas, which had been founded by Massachusetts abolitionists, killing one settler and destroying a printing press used to publish two abolitionist newspapers. The next day, in Washington, D.C., South Carolina Rep. Preston Brooks delivered a savage caning to Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner, in retaliation for a speech decrying the violence in “Bleeding Kansas,” and

⁸⁹ *Decatur State Chronicle*, February 28, 1856.

calling for its admission as a free state. Both incidents were reported in the *Illinois State Journal*, which decried the “bloody deeds” of the “border ruffians” in Kansas⁹⁰, and the “cowardly assault” of Brooks, who was identified as “a member of the Douglas faction.”⁹¹

In *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, William E. Gienapp argued that the Sack of Lawrence and the caning of Sumner converted “thousands” of Northerners to the Republican Party in 1856.

“If these had been isolated incidents, it would have been impossible to convince Northern public opinion that a real threat existed,” Gienapp wrote. “What made the Republican view compelling was that these latest ‘outrages’ were part of a long series of what were considered to be attacks on northern civil liberties, beginning with the gag rule in the 1830s.... The symbols of Bleeding Sumner and Bleeding Kansas allowed Republicans to attack the South without attacking slavery directly. By appropriating the great abolitionist symbol of the Slave Power and linking it to northern rights, Republicans made a much more powerful appeal to northern sensibilities than they could otherwise have done.”⁹²

The *Journal*, which the year before been so skeptical of the fusion movement, reported approvingly on the Sangamon County Anti-Nebraska Convention, which chose Lincoln, Herndon and two other men as delegates to the state convention in Bloomington: “Old line Democrats united with old line Whigs in denouncing the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the dangerous agitation resulting therefrom; and, agreeing to lay aside minor differences, resolved to unite their efforts in order to allay the agitation, put down

⁹⁰ *Illinois State Journal*, May 26, 1856.

⁹¹ *Illinois State Journal*, May 26, 1856.

⁹² William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 362.

thro instruments who have been engaged in ‘ruthlessly’ disturbing the peace of the country, and to restore, the administration of the government to the policy of Washington and Jefferson.”⁹³

That all these articles appeared in the same issue indicates that May 1856 was a turning point, at least in the editorial policy of Sangamon County’s leading Whig journal of opinion.

Lincoln’s address to the anti-Nebraska convention in Bloomington is known as his “Lost Speech,” because no record of it exists, although it is known he concluded with this message to the South on his determination to preserve the United States: “We won’t go out of the Union, and you shant!” We have only newspaper reports of the speech, such as in the *Alton Weekly Courier*, which wrote that Lincoln “was here ready to fuse with anyone who would unite with him to oppose slave power; spoke of the bugbear disunion which was so vaguely threatened. It was to be remembered that the *Union must be preserved in the purity of its principles as well as in the integrity of its territorial parts*. It must be ‘Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.’”⁹⁴

Although Lovejoy and Coddington played prominent roles in the convention, it was dominated by conservative Whigs and anti-Nebraska Democrats. Orville Hickman Browning of Quincy, a former Whig legislator who had run unsuccessfully for Congress, had written to Sen. Lyman Trumbull that “[w]e wish, if possible, to keep the party in this State under the control of moderate men, and conservative influences, and if we do the Future destiny of the state is in our hands – victory will inevitably crown our exertions.”

⁹³ Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 362.

⁹⁴ *Alton Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1856 [italics in the original].

On the other hand, “if rash and ultra counsels prevail all is lost.”⁹⁵

Like Lincoln, Trumbull had finally indicated a willingness to fuse – but only on the narrow issue of preventing slavery in Kansas: “When I speak of the Republicans,” he wrote, “I do not mean such as have assumed that name in Illinois and who oppose the fugitive slave law, and the admission of any more slave states under any circumstances, but I mean all these who on the slavery question simply make this issue, opposition to its spread into free territory. The Republicans will I think be willing to abandon their altruisms and stand upon this one position so far as slavery is concerned, and on that issue with fair candidates it is my opinion that every Northern State can be carried.”⁹⁶

Trumbull – who would soon be calling himself a Republican – got his wish. On those two particular points, the 1856 Bloomington Anti-Nebraska convention adopted more conservative planks than the 1854 Springfield convention, which had been controlled by abolitionists, and shunned by moderates. The 1854 platform had called for banning slavery from anyplace it did not presently exist. The 1856 platform simply suggested that Congress’s “power should be exerted to prevent the extension of slavery into territories heretofore free.” The 1854 convention sought to weaken the Fugitive Slave Law, by allowing the citizens of free states to grant captured slaves “trial by jury and the writ of habeas corpus.” The 1856 convention avoided the issue of the Fugitive Slave Law by promising faithfulness to the Constitution “in all its provisions.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Orville Hickman Browning to Lyman Trumbull, May 19, 1856, Trumbull Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

⁹⁶ Lyman Trumbull to John M. Palmer, January 24, 1856, Trumbull Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

⁹⁷ Peck, “How Moderate Were the Moderates?” 158-182.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1856, Lincoln campaigned across Illinois for the Republican ticket of John C. Fremont and William Lewis Dayton, and for anti-Nebraska legislative candidates. Part of his campaign to defeat the Democratic nominee, James Buchanan involved dissuading Illinoisans from voting for former president Millard Fillmore. Fillmore had been nominated by the American Party, which was a vehicle for Know Nothing Whigs who had not yet settled in the Republican or Democratic parties. Fillmore presented himself as a moderate force between the Slave Power Democrats and the abolitionist Republicans, both of whom threatened to break up the country. Fillmore had signed the Compromise of 1850, which both the abolitionists and the pro-Nebraska Democrats were attempting to blow up – the abolitionists by trying to undermine the Fugitive Slave Act, while the Democrats were trying to expand slavery into the territories. The Compromise remained popular in Central Illinois, which made Fillmore an appealing candidate there.

“The Downstate Whigs strongly supported Fillmore, who had established his Unionist credentials as President by pushing the Compromise of 1850 through Congress, and who now sought to establish a Unionist alternative to political extremism,” wrote Graham A. Peck in *Politics and Ideology in a Free State Society*. “Moreover, many oldtime Whigs believed that he opposed slavery’s expansion, which brightened the lure of his Unionism.”⁹⁸

As an experienced political headcounter, Lincoln knew that Fillmore was likely to swing the state to Buchanan. In a letter attempting to persuade a Fillmore man to switch

⁹⁸ Graham A. Peck, “Politics and Ideology in a Free State Society” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2001), 498.

to Fremont, he wrote, “my opinion is that to-day, Buchanan has about 85,000 – Fremont 78,000, and Fillmore 21,000. This gives B. the state by 7000; and leaves him in the minority of the whole 14,000.” In other words, a vote for Fillmore was a vote for Buchanan – and Nebraska.⁹⁹

Wherever he spoke, and to whatever audience, Lincoln’s chief message was opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act – the grounds on which he had agreed to make common cause with Democrats and abolitionists. In a speech at Bloomington on September 12, Lincoln “pointed out in regular succession, the several steps taken by the Administration in regard to slavery in the Territories, from the repeal of the Missouri Compromise down to the latest Border Ruffian invasion of Kansas, and the inevitable tendency of each and all of them to effect the spread of slavery over that country.”¹⁰⁰ In other speeches, Lincoln tried to rebut the argument that the Republicans were a sectional party because they had nominated two free state candidates (and did not appear on the ballot in any slave state). Andrew Jackson and Richard Mentor Johnson had both come from slave states, and no one had considered that Democratic ticket a threat to the Union. In a September 6 speech in Jacksonville, Lincoln also attacked Fillmore’s “non-intervention” position on popular sovereignty, arguing that he would do nothing to prevent the inhabitants of Kansas and Nebraska from voting to permit slavery.¹⁰¹

When Democratic-leaning newspapers reported on Lincoln’s speeches, they called him an abolitionist – or worse. In an account published in the *Illinois State*

⁹⁹ Abraham Lincoln to John Bennett, August 4, 1856. *Collected Works*, 2: 358.

¹⁰⁰ *Collected Works*, 2: 375.

¹⁰¹ *Illinois Sentinel*, September 12, 1856.

Register, a Petersburg correspondent using the pen name “Manlius” wrote that “On Saturday last our town was honored by the presence of that great high-priest of abolitionism, Abram Lincoln.” After writing that Lincoln defended the “black republican” platform, Manlius concluded by calling the speaker “the *post mortem* candidate for the vice presidency of the abolition political cock-boat, the depot master of the underground railroad, the great Abram Lincoln.”¹⁰²

The *Journal*, however, had given up its sentimentality for the Whig Party, and was fully on board with the Republican ticket. Reporting on a Sangamon County Fremont rally, it wrote that “the meeting was opened by a most masterly speech from Abram Lincoln. He reviewed the whole action of the Government on the subject of slavery, from its earliest history down to the present time, and showed what has ever been the policy of the country, until Douglas and the present Administration attempted to inaugurate a new and dangerous theory. We have heard Mr. Lincoln many times before, but never was he so powerful, so strong in argument, so convincing in logic. It was a most masterly effort, and sent conviction to the heart of all who heard him...It has demonstrated the fact that there is a powerful Fremont sentiment pervading Sangamon and the region of country round about, which is growing and expanding every day. It has reassured the timid, confirmed the doubtful, and convinced many who before were undecided. Henceforth, the work of minute organization is comparatively easy. The canvass is progressing gloriously, and old Sangamon, on election day, will give a glorious account of herself for Fremont, Bissell, and the whole State and County Ticket.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Illinois State Register*, September 4, 1856.

¹⁰³ *Illinois State Journal*, September 26, 1856.

Lincoln, it turned out, was a better judge of public opinion than the boosters at the *Journal*. Just as he had predicted, Buchanan carried Illinois – though not with a majority. Buchanan won 44 percent, Fremont 40 percent, Fillmore 15 percent. The regional divisions were remarkable: Fremont won 64.3 percent of the vote in Northern Illinois, 27.2 percent in Central Illinois, and 13 percent in Southern Illinois.¹⁰⁴

In Sangamon County, Fremont was relegated to third place. The tally ran: Buchanan 2,475; Fillmore 1,612; Fremont 1,174. In elections for county offices, pro-Douglas Democrats defeated Republicans.

According to a *History of Sangamon County*: “The citizens of Sangamon County, being largely from the Southern States, did not spontaneously enter into the Republican Party. Many old Whigs at once drifted into the Democratic party, making up the loss of its members who had, on account of the slavery question and the foreign element, united with the newly-organized Republican and American parties.”¹⁰⁵

The only bright spot for the new party was the election of William Bissell, a former anti-Nebraska Democratic congressman, as governor. At the Bloomington convention, Lincoln had judged that a former Democrat would have the best chance of defeating Douglas’s candidate, U.S. Rep. W.A. Richardson. In Illinois – especially Central Illinois – the party system was still in flux, after the collapse of the Whigs, but the events of the next four years would drive voters toward either the Republicans or the Democrats.

¹⁰⁴ Peck, “Politics and Ideology in a Free Society,” 499.

¹⁰⁵ *History of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Chicago: Interstate Publishing, 1881), 261..

Chapter V.
The 1858 Senate Campaign

In July of 1857, a runaway slave was arrested in Logan County, which lies directly northeast of Sangamon. For the first time, a fugitive slave case was scheduled to be heard in Springfield, before the United States Commissioner there. Lincoln's law partner, the abolitionist William Herndon, took the slave's case.

In Boston, when a fugitive slave named Anthony Burns had been captured and put on trial in 1854, a mob stormed the courthouse, killing a U.S. marshal. Federal troops led Burns to the ship that carried him back to his master in Virginia, to prevent another attack by 50,000 demonstrators who lined the streets. The Burns case radicalized public opinion on slavery in New England. As Amos Adams Lawrence put it, "We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, compromise Union Whigs & waked up stark mad Abolitionists."¹⁰⁶ When slave catchers had attempted to capture a runaway in Chicago, "the populace had been vastly perturbed, and the federal authorities were unsuccessful in attempting to return the slave."¹⁰⁷

There was no such resistance – or conversion – in Springfield. Herndon lost the case, and the slave was returned to his Kentucky owner, without incident.

"The whole proceeding was conducted quietly and in good temper," reported the

¹⁰⁶ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 120.

¹⁰⁷ David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

Illinois State Journal. “During the examination the U.S. Court Room was crowded with spectators, witnessing the progress of the case, but however much many of them may have expressed their dissatisfaction at the oppression of some of the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law, so long as it remained upon the Statute Book, they exhibited a perfect willingness to see the law take its course.... Upon the announcement of the Commissioner’s decision, the crowd quietly dispersed, and the negro was delivered up to the claimant.”¹⁰⁸

Political scientist Daniel Elazar divided the United States into three political cultures: Moralistic, Individualistic, and Traditionalist. Both Boston and Chicago – which was settled by New Englanders – were Moralistic, seeing politics as “one of the great activities of man in his search for a good society” and endorsing “a general commitment to utilizing communal – preferably nongovernmental but governmental if necessary – power to intervene into the sphere of ‘private’ activities when it is considered necessary to do so for the public good or the well-being of the community.” Springfield, a part of the American Midlands which has always served as a buffer and moderator between the extreme opinions of the North and the South, was Individualistic, “[placing] a premium on limiting community intervention – whether governmental or nongovernmental – into private activities to the minimum necessary to keep the marketplace in good working order.”¹⁰⁹

In the Northern cities, slavery was seen as a moral abomination, and the Fugitive

¹⁰⁸ *Illinois State Journal*, August 1857.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972), 94-99.

Slave Law – which required local lawmen to assist in the capture of runaway slaves – was seen as the Slave Power forcing the North to participate in its immoral practice. In Central Illinois, the Fugitive Slave Law was seen as a mechanism for enforcing a right granted to slaveholders by the Constitution – adherence to which was the glue that held the Union together. In reporting the slave’s arrest, Springfield’s Democratic newspaper, the *Illinois State Register*, wrote that “[w]e have the pleasure to announce that there are still some parts of the United States where the laws of congress, and provisions of the constitution, are regarded as binding and held sacred...So long as we have a law on the statute books, let it be executed. If it is an oppressive law, let it be repealed in the only legitimate way prescribed by the constitution and the law; and not set at defiance, as in Chicago and Ohio.”¹¹⁰

Mindful of this, Lincoln had helped ensure that the 1856 Republican platform adopted in Bloomington did not question the Fugitive Slave Law. As long as slavery remained confined to the South, his neighbors were content to tolerate its existence, especially if challenging it provoked sectional dissension.

The Dred Scott decision, however, provoked a stronger response. In denying Scott the freedom he claimed as a result of being taken to the Minnesota territory and the state of Illinois, Chief Justice Roger Taney had declared that Congress had no authority to ban slavery from the territories, thereby rendering the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional. Taney further wrote that “if the Constitution recognises the right of property of the master in a slave, and makes no distinction between that description of property and other property owned by a citizen, no tribunal, acting under the authority of the United States,

¹¹⁰ *Illinois Register*, July 1857.

whether it be legislative, executive, or judicial, has a right to draw such a distinction or deny to it the benefit of the provisions and guarantees which have been provided for the protection of private property against the encroachments of the Government.”¹¹¹

Right away, Illinois’s Republican newspapers recognized Taney’s decision as a threat to free soil, and by extension, to the value and dignity of free white labor.

Immediately after the verdict was handed down, the *Alton Evening Journal* produced an editorial declaring that it “nowhere protects the existence of freedom, and though it never mentions the word ‘Slave,’ everywhere legalizes Slavery...in order to make what has heretofore been a local evil, hereafter a National Institution.” (The editorial was reprinted by the *Bloomington Pantagraph*.)¹¹² The *Quincy Daily Whig* ran an article quoting an “Old Line Whig” calling the decision “tyrannical” and “outrageous” and saying that it had turned him Republican.¹¹³

“Hundreds and thousands of men all over the country, who have hitherto opposed the Republican movement, are now impressed with the same sentiment, and thousands of votes will thus be added to the Republican ranks. There is a point beyond which the slave power cannot lead men.”¹¹⁴

A few weeks later, the same newspaper published an editorial attacking Democrats in the Ohio legislature for opposing Republican resolutions to ban slavery from the territories, and to resist the admission of new slave states.

¹¹¹ *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 1857.

¹¹² *Bloomington Pantagraph*, March 25, 1857.

¹¹³ *Quincy Daily Whig*, April 14, 1857.

¹¹⁴ *Quincy Daily Whig*, April 14, 1857.

“Once, the party claiming the title of Democracy, professed themselves opposed to the extension of the cruel system of human bondage,” the editorial read. “They dared pass resolutions expressive of such sentiments, and a determination to uphold the rights of the free white laborer against the crushing, dominant power of the Southern oligarchy.... The party is unblushingly the supporter of slavery. It places bounds to the progress of free principles and the rights of freemen, and endeavors to give omnipotence and ubiquity to slavery and all its attendant curses.”¹¹⁵

Lincoln could only hope that the Dred Scott decision had the same effect on old line Whigs in Illinois that the Fugitive Slave Law had on them in Massachusetts – that is, driving them towards a more strident anti-slavery position, and a vote for the Republican Party. President Buchanan had carried Illinois in 1856, despite receiving a minority of the vote, because old line Whigs who worried that the Republicans were a threat to national unity had cast their ballots for Fillmore. Lincoln had to bring them into the Republican fold in order to fulfill his ambition of becoming a United States Senator.

Lincoln made his first public response to the Dred Scott decision during a speech in Springfield on June 26, 1857. It was delivered two weeks after – and was a response to – a speech by Stephen A. Douglas in the same city. Douglas had defended the decision, but, in a precursor to his famous “Freeport Doctrine,” declared that the right to bring slaves into the territories would be “barren and...worthless” without local laws to protect it; but he also declared that if Negroes were covered by the promises of the Declaration of Independence, then both slavery and the Illinois Black Laws must be abolished, and black men allowed to marry white women. This outcome, he predicted, would be “stoutly

¹¹⁵ *Quincy Daily Whig*, April 27, 1857.

denied” in Central and Southern Illinois.¹¹⁶

(It was Lincoln’s great political fortune to live in Illinois, where he could confront Douglas, the prominent politician of the 1850s, directly and personally on the slavery question. Lincoln took every opportunity to do so, building a national reputation as an anti-slavery man in the process. As Douglas scholar Martin H. Quitt once commented, “No Douglas, no Lincoln.”¹¹⁷)

Speaking in Central Illinois, and fully aware of his home region’s prejudice against blacks, Lincoln did not take issue with Douglas’s revulsion at race mixing. Instead, he tried to do Douglas one better on it, devoting much of his address to arguing that the Dred Scott decision would increase the risk of miscegenation between the races, and that the Republicans’ platform would prevent race mixing better than the Democrats’.

“A separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation but as an immediate separation is impossible the next best thing is to *keep* them apart *where* they are not already together,” Lincoln said. “If white and black people never get together in Kansas, they will never mix blood in Kansas.”¹¹⁸

Lincoln recited statistics on the greater number of mulattoes in slave states versus free states. He pointed out that freeing Dred Scott’s daughters would have prevented them from being raped by a slaveowner – “the very state of case that produces nine tenths of all the mulattoes” – and ended with another endorsement of his old cause,

¹¹⁶ *Kansas, Utah, and the Dred Scott Decision. Remarks of Hon. Stephen A. Douglas, Delivered in the State House at Springfield, Illinois, on the 12th of June, 1857.*

¹¹⁷ Martin H. Quitt, *Stephen A. Douglas and Antebellum Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ix.

¹¹⁸ “Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857,” *Collected Works*, 2: 408.

colonization, as the only guaranteed method of preventing intercourse between the races.¹¹⁹

When Lincoln delivered his “House Divided” speech a year later, the Dred Scott decision was one element in his argument that Douglas and the Democrats were attempting to nationalize slavery. Another element was the accusation that Democrats were plotting to revive the African slave trade. In the late 1850s, a number of Illinois Republican newspapers raised this prospect, in response to calls by Southern politicians to resume importing slaves from Africa. South Carolina Gov. James Adams, for example, proposed “reopening the African slave-trade” as a way to bolster the South’s labor force and representation in Congress. Furthermore, they called it an inevitable result of Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act. More slave territory would require more slaves.¹²⁰

“A revival of the African Slave Trade is openly and boldly discussed by many of the Southern papers,” the *Illinois State Journal* wrote. “This is a legitimate result to the desire of enlarging slave territory. It would not be a matter of surprise to see an effort to this end made in Congress, and that very soon.”¹²¹

When he accepted the Republican Party’s nomination for Senate in 1858, Lincoln was confronted with a political problem: his opponent, Douglas, had won praise from anti-slavery advocates for breaking with the Buchanan Administration on the Lecompton Constitution, which would have admitted Kansas to the Union as a slave state. The

¹¹⁹ “Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857,” 409.

¹²⁰ Ronald Norman Batz, “Selected Republican Newspapers of Illinois and the African Slave Trade, 1856-1860” (Master’s thesis, Illinois State University, 1967), 38.

¹²¹ *Illinois State Journal*, November 26, 1856.

constitution had been written by an assembly chosen in an election boycotted by pro-slavery forces, and had not been submitted to the voters in a referendum. By opposing the Lecompton Constitution, Douglas could claim he was standing up for his principle of popular sovereignty, and he could impress Northern voters by putting space between himself and the Slave Power. Douglas's stand won him the support of *New York Tribune* newspaper editor Horace Greeley – to the annoyance of Lincoln and other Illinois Republicans.

“What does the New-York Tribune mean by it's constant eulogizing, and admiring, and magnifying Douglas?” Lincoln wrote to Sen. Lyman Trumbull. “As yet I have heard of no republican here going over to Douglas; but if the Tribune continues to din his praises into the ears of it's five or ten thousand republican readers in Illinois, it is more than can be hoped that all will stand firm.”¹²²

Lincoln, then, not only had to persuade Illinois voters that there was a conspiracy to nationalize slavery, he had to persuade them that Douglas was part of it – a Northern quisling for the Slave Power. His “House Divided” speech, which he delivered when accepting the Senate nomination, was the beginning of that effort. History remembers the speech for Lincoln's prediction that the nation could not endure “half-slave, half-free,” but the bulk of it was an insinuation that “Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James” (that is, Senator Douglas, President Pierce, Chief Justice Taney and President Buchanan) were working hand-in-hand to make slavery legal throughout the land, even in states heretofore free.¹²³

¹²² Abraham Lincoln to Lyman Trumbull, December 18, 1857.

¹²³ “‘A House Divided’: Speech at Springfield, Illinois,” *Collected Works*, 2: 465.

The Kansas-Nebraska bill, Lincoln argued, had regarded slavery as not a moral issue, but simply a Constitutional one. Its intent was to “mould public opinion, at least Northern public opinion, to not care whether slavery is voted down or voted up.” Douglas had voted against an amendment to the bill, sponsored by Sen. Salmon P. Chase, which would have specified that the voters of a territory had the right to exclude slavery.

“Why was the amendment, expressly declaring the right of the people to exclude slavery, voted down?” Lincoln asked. “Plainly enough now, the adoption of it would have spoiled the niche for the Dred Scott decision.”¹²⁴

In their decision, Lincoln argued, the justices had left the power of the states to prohibit slavery “an open question, precisely as the same question, as to the restraint on the power of the territories was left open in the Nebraska act. Put that and that together, and we have another nice little niche, which we may, ere long, see filled with another Supreme Court decision, declaring that the Constitution of the United States does not permit a state to exclude slavery from its limits.... Such a decision is all that slavery now lacks of being alike lawful in all the States.”¹²⁵

Having blamed Douglas for laying the groundwork for the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln then argued that his doctrine of popular sovereignty would legitimize a resumption of the African slave trade: “For years he has labored to prove it a *sacred right* of white men to take negro slaves into the new territories. Can he possibly show that it is *less* a sacred right to *buy* them where they can be bought cheapest? And, unquestionably,

¹²⁴ “‘A House Divided’: Speech at Springfield, Illinois,” 465.

¹²⁵ “‘A House Divided’: Speech at Springfield, Illinois,” 465.

they can be bought *cheaper in Africa* than in *Virginia*.”¹²⁶

In his analysis of the House Divided speech, historian Don E. Fehrenbacher wrote that the “Garrisonian” rhetoric of its opening passages “caused misgivings” among fellow Republicans, “because it seemed likely to alienate the very voters that Lincoln needed in order to unseat Douglas. With Illinois divided, like the nation, into Republican north and Democratic south, the senatorial contest would actually be decided in a belt of doubtful counties stretching across the middle of the state. The crucial zone was a stronghold of old-line Whig elements whose traditional hostility to locofoco [that is, Jacksonian] Democracy was balanced by a deep aversion for the excesses of abolitionism.”¹²⁷

However, Fehrenbacher concluded that the House Divided speech was provocative only in rhetoric, not substance: “Nowhere in these sentences does he reproach the South or suggest a program of aggressive action against slavery.”¹²⁸

Although Lincoln had appealed to fears of miscegenation in his 1857 Springfield speech, during the 1858 Senate campaign, he never argued that the spread of slavery would threaten the white population by degrading the value of its labor. Perhaps he regarded this as a self-evident fact, understood by all the voters. Or perhaps he was satisfied to let his surrogates make that argument, as Lyman Trumbull did when he spoke in Chicago that August 7: “We, the Republican Party, are the white man’s party. We are for free white men, and for making white labor respectable and honorable, which it never can be when negro slave labor is brought into competition with it. We wish to settle the

¹²⁶ “‘A House Divided’: Speech at Springfield, Illinois,” 468.

¹²⁷ Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 71-72.

¹²⁸ Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 74.

territories with free white men, and we are willing that this negro race should go anywhere that it can to better its condition, wishing them God speed wherever they go. We believe it is better for us that they should not be among us.”¹²⁹

At the outset of the Senate campaign, Lincoln employed his usual strategy of following Douglas from town to town, rebutting his speeches. It was cost effective, because it forced Douglas’s campaign to foot the cost of printing up flyers and entertaining a crowd. When Douglas returned to Chicago from Washington, Lincoln happened to be in town to argue a case in the U.S. District Court for Northern Illinois. So after Douglas spoke to 9,000 listeners from the balcony of the Tremont Hotel, Lincoln followed with a speech of his own. He then followed Douglas to Springfield, where he again rebutted the senator’s address.

Tagging along behind Douglas made Lincoln look like the junior participant in the campaign, so the Republican Central Committee summoned him back to Chicago, and asked him to participate in a series of debates with his opponent. Newspapers as far away as New York wanted to hear the two men mix it up. At first, Lincoln was reluctant. Douglas was “the idol of his party” and could pack crowds with supporters who would cheer “the imperious and emphatic style of his oratory.”¹³⁰

Douglas’s first response was refusal. His schedule was filled through late August, and there was nothing to gain by giving a platform to an obscurity.

“The whole country knows me,” he said. “Lincoln is comparatively unknown...If

¹²⁹ Lyman Trumbull, speech in Chicago, Illinois, August 7, 1858.

¹³⁰ Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 90.

he gets the best of this debate, I shall lose everything.”¹³¹

Goaded by Republican newspapers, which accused him of cowardice, Douglas finally gave in, agreeing to a debate in each of the state’s nine congressional districts. Since they had already spoken in Chicago and Springfield, debates were scheduled in Freeport, Ottawa, Galesburg, Quincy, Charleston, Alton and Jonesboro.

Reporters from all over the country descended on Illinois, and newspapers published complete transcripts of the debates. National interest was so great partly because of Douglas’s reputation – he was accustomed to seeing his speeches printed entire in the press – and partly because no state provided a better stage for debating slavery than Illinois: it was America in miniature, divided into tiers of Northerners, Borderers and Southerners.

Douglas was in a bind over the issue of slavery. He was running for re-election in a free state, but he also was seeking the goodwill of Southern Democrats who could deliver him the party’s presidential nomination in 1860. So he ran an all-out racist campaign, accusing Lincoln of plotting to free slaves all over the United States, and allowing them to settle in Illinois. The election would be decided by moderate ex-Whigs in the middle of the state. They hated slavery, but they hated blacks, too, and for the same reason: because both plantation owners and free blacks would undercut the prices for white labor.

During the debates, Douglas repeatedly charged that Lincoln favored Negro equality, which would lead to black citizenship and the repeal of Illinois’s Black Laws.

¹³¹ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1: 1342-44.

“Do you desire to strike out of our State Constitution that clause which keeps slaves and free negroes out of the state, and allow the free negroes to flow in and cover our prairies with his settlements?”¹³² Douglas asked during his Opening Statement at the first debate in Ottawa. Yet even in the face of such attacks, Lincoln never brought up the sanctity of free white labor or the merits of colonization, sticking instead to the line that slavery was immoral and that Douglas had no convictions as to whether it was right or wrong, and was content to allow slaves to go wherever their masters wanted to take them.

In the Ottawa debate, Lincoln denied Douglas’s accusations that he was an abolitionist or a proponent of lifting the Negro to the same social plane as the white man. He had no desire to interfere with slavery where it existed. He did not believe “in the political and social equality between the black and white races.” However, he did believe that blacks were entitled to the promises of the Declaration of Independence, which meant that “in the right to the bread which his own hand earns, he is my own equal and Judge Douglas’s equal, and the equal of every living man.”¹³³ Such equality would presumably have allowed free black labor to compete with free white labor.

In an editorial published during the debates, the *Peoria Weekly Transcript* acknowledged this, but contended that slavery was a greater threat to white labor than free blacks.

“The Democratic politicians take great pains to convince the dear white men that have votes to give that they are laboring for the good of the white race – to keep it uncontaminated by any mixture of black blood – to keep the white man from being crowded out of this favored land by the negro,

¹³² *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete, Unexpurgated Text*, ed. Harold Holzer (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 34.

¹³³ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 63.

and to save our race generally from being surpassed or damaged by competition with the 'inferior race.' Very good objects, we might all agree, yet the leaders and legislators of that party have a strange way of securing these objects practically. Not having ourselves so great a fear or dread of being surpassed by these 'inferior' beings as Senator Douglas seems to have, we have no objection to grant them the same rights of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' we ourselves enjoy.... The inalienable rights of any man cannot be denied him without committing robbery – but voting and citizenship we do not consider his 'inalienable right.'...the people of the free states have also a large self interest at stake in preserving the free soil of the territories, and to keep them unpolluted and unoccupied by the slave. While the democracy are doing all for the love of the white race, and for the benefit of the white man professedly, their policy, for the last few years, has been to open as wide as possible the door for negroes to get into the territories.”

If the Democrats succeeded in opening new lands to slavery, the newspaper predicted, the result would be that whites “would labor by the side of the slave, and become poor white trash.”¹³⁴

During the second debate, at Freeport, Lincoln retreated even further from abolitionism and Negro equality. Answering a series of questions Douglas had posed in Ottawa, Lincoln asserted that he did not favor repealing the Fugitive Slave Act; that he did not stand pledged against the admission of more slave states; that he was not pledged to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, or to prohibit the slave trade between states. He stood on the lowest common denominator of Republicanism, the platform agreed upon at the 1856 Bloomington convention: “I am impliedly, if not expressly pledged to the belief in the right and duty of Congress to prohibit slavery in all the United States territories.”¹³⁵

During the Jonesboro debate, Lincoln asserted that his position was consistent

¹³⁴ *Peoria Weekly Transcript*, September 24, 1858.

¹³⁵ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 92-93.

with that of the Founding Fathers. Washington, Jefferson and Madison were slave owners, but they believed the institution was doomed, and had placed it on a “course of extinction” by ending the slave trade in 1808, and barring slavery from the Northwest Territories. However, the invention of the cotton gin, in 1793, had made slavery too profitable for the South to surrender. Lincoln quoted Preston Brooks, the South Carolina congressman who had caned Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner. Brooks, Lincoln said, “declared that nobody had expected slavery to exist to this day, but that we have grown wiser than were our fathers, and he even went on to argue that the invention of the cotton gin made its perpetuation necessary.”¹³⁶

In Charleston, where Douglas supporters carried a banner depicting a white man standing with a black woman, under the motto “Negro Equality,” Lincoln made his strongest statement of the debates in favor of white supremacy.

“I am not nor have ever been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people,” Lincoln said;

“I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.... I will add to this I have never seen to my knowledge a man, woman or child who is in favor of producing a perfect equality, social and political, between Negroes and white men.... I will also add to the remarks I have made, (for I am not going to enter at large upon this subject), but I’ve never had the least apprehension that I or my friends would marry Negroes if there is no law to keep them from it but as Judge Douglas and his friends seem to be in great apprehension that they might, if there were no law to keep them from it, I give him the most solemn pledge that I will to the very last stand by the law of the state, which forbids the marrying of white people with

¹³⁶ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 157.

Negroes.”¹³⁷

This was, at least, an endorsement of the Black Laws. So was Lincoln’s statement that while he took issue with the Dred Scott decision’s assertion that blacks were not citizens, and believed that states had the right to make them so, but that “if the state of Illinois had that power I should be against the exercise of it.”¹³⁸

During the penultimate debate, in Quincy, Lincoln repeated his conviction that slavery was “a moral, social, and a political wrong,”¹³⁹ and that a failure to take a moral stand on the practice was tantamount to encouraging its expansion: “If Judge Douglas says that whatever community wants slaves has a right to have them, his logic is correct if he does not believe it a wrong.”¹⁴⁰ Douglas contended that Lincoln’s policy of confining slavery to its current limits would end slavery by starving the slaves to death, because their natural increase would make them so numerous “that they cannot live on the soil.”¹⁴¹ And he quoted a Chicago speech in which Lincoln had declared “all men are created equal,” in order to compare him to Ohio’s abolitionist congressman, Joshua Giddings, appealing to his Central Illinois audience’s suspicions of the big city in the northeastern corner of the state – a divide that persists to this day.

“Thus you see in addressing the Chicago Abolitionists he declared that all distinctions of race must be discarded – all distinctions of men must be blotted out,”

¹³⁷ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 189.

¹³⁸ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 226.

¹³⁹ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 290.

¹⁴⁰ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 292.

¹⁴¹ *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 302.

Douglas said. “Now let me ask you whether old Giddings when he was down here among you four years ago, ever preached more radical abolition than that?”¹⁴²

On Election Day, Douglas won the Senate seat – but Lincoln won the state. The Republicans won the most votes, as evidenced by the fact that their candidate for state treasurer defeated his Democratic opponent, 125,430 to 121,609,¹⁴³ but the Democrats won 46 of the 87 General Assembly seats up for election that year (because senate terms are staggered, 13 of the senators were holdovers, and eight of them Democrats). As expected, Republicans won most of the seats in the Northern part of the state, and Democrats won most of the seats in Egypt. The Senate seat was decided in Central Illinois – where Lincoln’s home county of Sangamon elected two Democratic representatives. James W. Barret and Daniel Short, the Democratic candidates, received 3,050 and 3,052 votes, respectively, while the Republicans, John Cook and James A. Brown, received 2,747 and 2,729. Sangamon’s senator, however, was a Republican holdover. (The district directly to the east, comprising Macon, DeWitt, Piatt and Champaign counties, elected a Republican. So did voters in Bloomington, Peoria and Charleston. However, Democrats won seats in a number of rural Central Illinois counties.)¹⁴⁴

Republican papers charged that Douglas had won despite losing the popular vote because the Democrats had drawn the legislative map to their advantage, and because that

¹⁴² *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 300.

¹⁴³ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 227.

¹⁴⁴ 1858 Election Returns – Illinois General Assembly, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

map was based on the Census of 1850. The map, according to the *Bloomington Pantagraph*, “had been framed by the Democratic Legislature with special reference to the strongholds of the party in the Southern and Middle portions of the state. Since then, the population of Illinois has increased much more rapidly in the Northern (Republican) half than in the Southern, and the advantage accruing to Mr. Douglas, by reason of these two facts, is equivalent to three Senators and nine members of the House.”¹⁴⁵

In spite of the fact that he had lost his second Senate bid in four years, the results of the election boosted Lincoln’s political prospects. Under his banner, the Republicans had won a popular majority in Illinois, a state that in its 40 years of existence had only given its electoral votes to Democrats. Illinois was one of three Midland states the Republicans would have to flip in 1860, along with Indiana and Pennsylvania. By garnering more votes there than Douglas, the likely Democratic nominee, Lincoln had made a case that he was the candidate who could do it.

¹⁴⁵ *Bloomington Pantagraph*, November 6, 1858.

Chapter VI.

The Nominee

As 1859 began, Lincoln was broke after the all-consuming campaign for the Senate. He planned to spend the year tending to his dormant law practice and replenishing his finances. “This year I must devote to my private business,” Lincoln vowed. “I have been on expenses so long without earning any thing that I am absolutely without money now for even household purposes.”¹⁴⁶ However, his Central Illinois friends and allies encouraged him to remain engaged in politics. They reminded him that his near-defeat of Douglas, the decade’s most prominent politician, had turned him into a national figure; and they saw him as the answer to a political problem for the Republican Party.

In order to win the presidency in 1860, the Republicans needed to carry four free states that had voted for Buchanan in 1856: New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois. All the states contained significant populations of conservative Whigs who had voted for Fillmore, because they were not yet comfortable with the anti-slavery, anti-Nebraska Republicans. In New Jersey, Fillmore had received 24 percent of the vote, in Pennsylvania 17 percent, in Indiana 9 percent, and in Illinois 15 percent. Bringing the Fillmore voters into the Republican Party was the key to victory. However, the two leading contenders for the nomination were Sen. William Seward of New York and Gov. Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, who were both far more associated with the causes of

¹⁴⁶ Donald, *Lincoln*, 230.

abolitionism and Negro equality than was Lincoln, and thus far more likely to look radical to conservative Whigs.

Seward was from Auburn, New York, in the heart of the state's Burned-Over District, a hotbed of religiously motivated crusades. One of the most fervently anti-slavery regions in the country, it was an outpost of the Moralistic political culture which had spread west from New England. (New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Indiana shared with Illinois an Individualistic culture.) In 1848, Seward had delivered a speech in Cleveland against Ohio's Black Codes, which prohibited Negroes from voting, sitting on juries, or holding office. "We are New York are guilty of slavery still, by withholding the right of suffrage from the race we have emancipated," he said.¹⁴⁷ Seward's maiden speech in the Senate had condemned two planks of Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850: he opposed the Fugitive Slave Act, and instead of abolishing the slave trade in the District of Columbia, he wanted to abolish slavery itself. "[A] higher law than the Constitution" demanded resistance to slavery, Seward asserted.

"I feel assured that slavery must give way, and will give way, to the salutary instructions of economy, and to the ripening influences of humanity; that emancipation is inevitable and is near...that all measures which fortify slavery or extend it, tend to the consummation of violence; all that check its extension and abate its strength, tend to its peaceful extirpation," he told the Senate.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ "The Election of 1848, Cleveland, Ohio, October 26, 1848," *The Works of William H. Seward*, 5 vols., ed. George E. Baker (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), 3: 291-302.

¹⁴⁸ "California, Union and Freedom. Speech of William H. Seward, of New York, in the Senate, March 11, 1850," Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 31st Congress, 1st session, 260-69.

While less fiery in his oratory, Chase was even more devoted to anti-slavery causes. As a young lawyer in Cincinnati, he often took the cases of fugitive slaves who had escaped across the Ohio River from Kentucky, earning himself the nickname “Attorney General for the Negro.” In 1841, he joined the abolitionist Liberty Party, and in 1849, he was elected to the Senate with the support of both Free Soilers and Democrats. He won the support of the Democrats by striking a deal that gave them control of the state in exchange for repealing its Black Codes.¹⁴⁹

Jesse Fell, a friend from Bloomington who had conceived the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, tried to explain to a skeptical Lincoln why he could defeat both men for the Republican nomination.

“Oh, Fell, what’s the use talking of me for the presidency, whilst we have such men as Seward and Chase and others who are so much better known to the people, and whose names are so intimately associated with the Republican Party,” Lincoln told him.

“The men you allude to, occupying more prominent positions, have undoubtedly rendered a larger service in the Republican cause than you have; but the truth is, they have rendered *too much* service to be available candidates,” Fell replied. “Seward and Chase have both made long records on the slavery question, and have said some very radical things which, however just and true in themselves, and however much these men may challenge our admiration for their courage and devotion to unpopular truths, would seriously damage them in the contest, if nominated. We must bear in mind, Lincoln, that we are yet in a minority; we are struggling against fearful odds for supremacy. We were

¹⁴⁹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005). 108-113.

defeated on the same issue in 1856, and we will be again in 1860, unless we get a great many new votes from what might be called the old conservative parties. These will be repelled by the radical utterances and votes of such men as Seward and Chase. What the Republican party wants, to insure success in 1860, is a man of popular origin, of acknowledged ability, committed against slavery aggressions, who has no record to defend and no radicalism of an offensive character to repel votes from parties hitherto adverse.”¹⁵⁰

Let us compare Lincoln’s positions on anti-slavery issues to those of Seward and Chase. As a follower of Henry Clay, Lincoln had supported the Compromise of 1850. During the early days of the Republican Party in Illinois, he had explicitly supported the Fugitive Slave Act, and helped ensure that opposition to the measure was not included in the 1856 Bloomington platform. As a congressman, Lincoln had written a bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, but only after a plebiscite of the capital’s residents. Lincoln endorsed Illinois’s Black Laws, making it clear during his debates with Douglas that he did not believe Negroes should be allowed to vote, serve on juries, or marry whites. He had never represented a fugitive slave in court (although he had not objected when his law partner, Herndon, did so). Unlike Seward and Chase, who had spoken in favor of Negro equality, Lincoln was not above appealing to his audience’s racial prejudices to argue that nationalizing slavery would bring detested blacks into their midst. Lincoln could be accused of no more than advocating the lowest common denominator of Republicanism: opposition to expanding slavery into the territories.

¹⁵⁰ Sherman Day Wakefield, *How Lincoln Became President* (New York: Wilson, Erickson, 1936), 96-97.

Wrote Doris Kearns Goodwin of the contrast between Seward’s radicalism and Lincoln’s pragmatism: “The difference in their positions was due largely to the contrasting political environments of the more progressive New York and the conservatism of Southern-leaning Illinois.”¹⁵¹ That difference in environments would result in disappointment for Seward, and triumph for Lincoln.

Lincoln was well aware of the middle course the Republicans needed to navigate, and warned political allies of the dangers of bending too far to pursue Southern votes, or to accommodate Northern radicals. To Mark Delahay, an 1859 Senate candidate in Kansas, he wrote that “lower[ing] the Republican standard in deference to Douglasism” or “the Southern opposition element...would surrender the object of the Republican organization – the preventing the *spread* and *nationalization* of slavery,” thus losing the party more votes than it gained.¹⁵² He wrote to Schuyler Colfax, a congressman from Indiana and future speaker of the House, to discuss “hedg[ing] against divisions in the Republican ranks generally, and particularly in the contest of 1860”:

“The point of danger is the temptation in different locations to ‘platform’ for something which will be popular just there, but which, nevertheless, will be a firebrand elsewhere, especially in a National convention. As instances: the movement against foreigners in Massachusetts; in New Hampshire, to make obedience to the Fugitive Slave Law, punishable as a crime; in Ohio, to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law; and squatter sovereignty in Kansas. In these things there is enough explosive matter to blow up half a dozen conventions.”¹⁵³

Lincoln loved politics more than he loved the law. In spite of his resolution to get

¹⁵¹ Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 133.

¹⁵² Abraham Lincoln to Mark W. Delahay, May 14, 1859, *Collected Works*, 3: 378-379.

¹⁵³ Abraham Lincoln to Schuyler Colfax, *Collected Works*, 3: 390-391.

back to business, he could not resist the opportunity to rejoin the debate – especially because it offered him an outside chance at the Republican nomination. During the autumn of 1859, Lincoln made speeches throughout the battleground states of the Midwest: in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana. In Cincinnati, the southernmost great free city, he declared that he believed slavery “wrong, morally and politically,” and that he “should not object if it should gradually terminate in the whole Union.” At the same time, he disavowed any intention to prohibit slavery where it existed, “because the constitution forbids it,” or to water down the Fugitive Slave Law, “because the constitution requires us, as I understand it, not to withhold such a law.” The Constitution, however, did not require the extension of slavery. Unlike Seward, who had declared that he followed a “higher law than the Constitution,” Lincoln was presenting his positions on legal, not moral grounds, and also appealing to the self-interest of his listeners. Gesturing across the river, he addressed the resident of the slave state of Kentucky.

“If there was a necessary conflict between the white man and the negro, I should be for the white man as much as Judge Douglas,” Lincoln said; “but I say there is no such necessary conflict. I say there is room enough for us all to be free, and that it not only does not wrong the white man that the negro should be free, but it positively wrongs the mass of the white men that the negro should be enslaved; that the mass of white men are really injured by the effect of slave labor in the vicinity of their own labor.”¹⁵⁴

On October 16 of that year, the radical Kansas abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to start a slave revolt. Brown’s plot failed, and he was hanged on December 2, but opponents of Republicanism argued

¹⁵⁴ Speech at Cincinnati, Ohio, *Collected Works*, 3: 438-462.

that Seward's anti-slavery rhetoric had incited Brown's violent insurrection.

“[W]ith even southern moderates openly discussing secession, party leaders previously nervous about Seward's chances in what were already being dubbed ‘battleground states’ were forced to confront the possibility that he might actually carry fewer states than had Fremont,” wrote Douglas R. Egerton in *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln and the Election That Brought on the Civil War*. “Writing to Lincoln from Washington, Josiah Lucas flatly predicted that Seward would be the nominee. With Democrats in Pennsylvania and Illinois blaming the Brown fiasco on Seward's rhetoric, Lucas thought it imperative to find a less controversial nominee.”¹⁵⁵

Lincoln responded to Brown's raid in a speech at Leavenworth, Kansas, delivered the day after the abolitionist's hanging: he made sure to disassociate himself from the rebel's actions – while at the same time associating those actions with Southern threats of secession. Once again, Lincoln had situated himself the middle ground between radical extremes on the slavery question.

“Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against a state,” Lincoln said. “We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right. So, if constitutionally we elect a president, and therefore you undertake to destroy the Union, it will be our duty to deal with you as old John Brown has been dealt with.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Douglas R. Egerton, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln and the Election That Brought on the Civil War* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 117.

¹⁵⁶ Speech at Leavenworth, Kansas, *Collected Works*, 3: 497-502.

Jesse Fell had told Lincoln that on his trips to New York and New England, he had often been asked, “Who is this man Lincoln, of your State, now canvassing in opposition to Senator Douglas?”¹⁵⁷ Lincoln may not have believed he was nationally famous, but he received confirmation of that fact when he was invited to New York City to speak before the Young Men’s Central Republican Union of New York. Prominent New Yorkers, including Horace Greeley, William Cullen Bryant, Hamilton Fish and David Dudley Field, was auditioning moderate Western candidates who might have a better chance of carrying the swing states than Seward.¹⁵⁸ Lincoln’s address would follow speeches by Frank Blair of Missouri, and Cassius Clay, the Kentucky abolitionist. The speech was originally scheduled to be delivered at Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, but because of intense public interest in Lincoln, it was moved to the new Cooper Union in Manhattan. More than 1,500 Republicans turned out to hear Lincoln speak on the night of February 27. As he had done in his Midwestern speeches, Lincoln presented his anti-slavery positions as consistent with the Constitution, and as he had done during his campaign against Douglas, he argued that extending slavery would also extend the social ills that accompanied the institution. Lincoln first pointed out that the law forbidding slavery in the Northwest Territories, which had been invalidated by the Dred Scott Decision, had been passed by a Congress consisting of many members who had attended the Constitutional convention. The law had been signed by George Washington, a slaveholder who had nonetheless once written to the Marquis de Lafayette

¹⁵⁷ *How Lincoln Became President*, 95.

¹⁵⁸ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 14.

a letter opposing the spread of slavery, and expressing hope for a confederation of free states. The Constitution, Lincoln argued, was “literally silent” on the right to bring slaves into the territories. Not only that, it was silent on the right to hold slaves.

“An inspection of the Constitution will show that the right of property in a slave is not *distinctly* and *expressly* affirmed in it,” Lincoln said. “[N]either the word ‘slave’ nor ‘slavery’ is to be found in the Constitution, nor the word ‘property’ even, in any connection with language alluding to the things slave, or slavery, and that whenever in that instrument the slave is alluded to, he is called a ‘person’ – and wherever his master’s legal right in relation to him is alluded to, it is spoken of as ‘service or labor which may be done’ – as a debt payable in service or labor. Also, it would be open to show, by contemporaneous history, that this mode of alluding to slaves and slavery, instead of speaking of them, was employed on purpose to exclude from the Constitution the idea that there could be property in man.”

Lincoln was well practiced in parrying the argument, so prevalent in Illinois, that opposition to slavery was opposition to the Constitution, and a threat to national unity. He tried to turn that argument around on the proponents of slavery, accusing them of ignoring the Constitution and refusing to compromise on the issue. Southerners were insisting that free states shred their anti-slavery constitutions. What would satisfy them, Lincoln asked rhetorically: “This and only this: cease to call slavery *wrong*, and join them in calling it *right*.”¹⁵⁹

While the Cooper Union speech was undoubtedly important in securing Lincoln the nomination, his campaign for the presidency was rooted in Central Illinois. Jesse Fell

¹⁵⁹ Address at Cooper Institute, New York City, *Collected Works*, 3: 522-550.

of Bloomington had helped put the idea of running for the office in his head. Judge David Davis, also of Bloomington, agreed to serve as his campaign manager. Lincoln was chosen as a favorite son candidate at the Illinois Republican Party convention in Decatur – the same prairie city where, four years before, had participated in the meeting of newspaper editors who had founded the state party. Lincoln would ultimately succeed in winning the nomination because he was not only a candidate from a swing state, he was a candidate from the *swing region* of that state. Lincoln was not only more acceptable to Central Illinoisans than Seward, he was more acceptable to Northern Illinoisans than Edward Bates, the Missourian who had overseen the final Whig National Convention in Baltimore in 1856, which had nominated Fillmore. Even worse, Bates owned slaves, and had impatiently dismissed “the Negro question” as a “pestilent” issue promoted by radicals to “exasperate the unreasoning jealousy of sections.”¹⁶⁰

In an 1860 letter to Illinois Secretary of State Ozias Hatch, Nathan M. Knapp of Winchester examined the presidential contenders, and found Lincoln the only acceptable choice.

“Lincoln...is the most available candidate for unadulterated Republicanism – Presidential, I mean,” Knapp wrote. Commenting on Seward, he continued:

“I am not for him *under any circumstances*. If the Republican Party is bent on him it will be because of their unfitness for self government... With Seward, Hale, Chase or Giddings, we are gone up. I am a *Lincoln man first last & all the time*. Douglas will be the nominee. Lincoln deserves it against him, and it would be a shame not to give it to him. He can beat him 10,000 votes in Illinois. Lincoln is the purest chance for an election – he can carry all the free states east of Indiana certain; he stands a better chance of Illinois and Indiana than any man except Bates... Bates would get a good many old Whigs that have acted the fool in those states; yet it is

¹⁶⁰ Egerton, *Year of Meteors*, 122.

an open question whether he would not lose more extreme Republicans than he would get fool Whigs. In the states East there is more uncertainty for Bates. His Baltimore convention of 1856 damns him with me, viewed from a certain point. Right at the point where it was uncertain with old Whigs whether they should vote for Fremont or Fillmore, but inclining to Fremont for Expediency's sake, his *Whig Demonstrations* of 1856, following in the wake of the Baltimore convention, set all the old Whigs of Morgan, Sangamon & Madison to cooperating with the locofocos in addressing Fremont as the Rocky Mountain bug-eater, and the Republicans as abolitionists.”¹⁶¹

Don E. Fehrenbacher wrote that within the Republican Party, “Lincoln exercised a restraining influence on the more aggressive opponents of slavery...guided by conviction no less than political discretion...Lincoln's position in the Republican party...was neither on the left wing or the right, but very close to dead center.” As a result, in a state whose divisions closely reflected those of the nation, Lincoln was seen as the perfect candidate.¹⁶²

“With Seward's name anathema in one part of the state and Bates unacceptable in the other, Lincoln proved to be about the only man upon whom Illinois Republicans could unite. Thus even in his own he was to some extent a compromise candidate – an embodiment of availability,” Fehrenbacher wrote.¹⁶³

At the Decatur convention, the Illinois Republicans reaffirmed their Bloomington platform, but included only one mention of slavery: “That the territory of Kansas...ought to be admitted as a sovereign State, speedily, and without slavery.” The convention also resolved “[t]hat Abraham Lincoln is the first choice of Illinois for the presidency, and

¹⁶¹ Nathan M. Knapp to Ozias Hatch, March 12, 1860, Ozias M. Hatch Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹⁶² Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 147.

¹⁶³ Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 154.

that its delegation be instructed to use all honorable means to secure his nomination by the Chicago convention and to cast their votes as a unit for him.”¹⁶⁴

Lincoln’s hometown newspaper, the *Illinois State Journal*, had of course endorsed him for president, mentioning that a Pennsylvania newspaper had suggested a ticket topped by that state’s senator, Simon Cameron, with Lincoln in the vice presidential spot.

“It remarks that it is essential to the success of the Republican party in 1860, that they carry Pennsylvania and Illinois, and it thinks with this ticket that our triumph is certain,” the *Journal* wrote. “We think this ticket would suit the Republicans of Illinois better if the names were transposed.”¹⁶⁵

The *Quincy Daily Whig* promoted Lincoln as a candidate acceptable to all factions of the Republican Party, asserting that “[h]is political position cannot but be perfectly satisfactory to the most radical in our ranks, and will rally the young men and conservatives of the land to his support in irresistible and overwhelming numbers.”¹⁶⁶

That the convention was held in Chicago was the work of Lincoln’s ally, Norman Judd, who had persuaded the Republican National Committee to assemble in his hometown to recognize the importance of the west. Since Seward, Cameron, Chase and Bates were considered the leading contenders for the nomination, Chicago was also considered neutral territory. Judd never let on that his state would be pushing for Lincoln.

When Lincoln’s managers, led by Davis, arrived in Chicago, they immediately began lobbying the swing state delegations. Seward would undoubtedly receive the most

¹⁶⁴ Otto R. Kyle, *Abraham Lincoln in Decatur* (New York: Vantage Press, 1957), 113.

¹⁶⁵ *Illinois State Journal*, October 18, 1859.

¹⁶⁶ *Quincy Daily Whig*, March 31, 1860.

votes on the first ballot, but if they could prevent him from reaching a majority, and establish Lincoln as the second choice of delegations who were obliged to cast their initial votes for a favorite son, they might be able to win on a later ballot. The states of the Lower North held the balance of power at the convention, as they would in the November election. Horace Greeley, who was working behind the scenes to stop Seward and nominate Bates, predicted that “you couldn’t elect Seward if you could nominate him...He cannot carry New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana or Iowa.”¹⁶⁷ Among those states, Davis found an eagerness to nominate a candidate other than Seward. A Committee of Twelve, consisting of delegates from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois, gathered to discuss backing a candidate who could stop Seward. Indiana agreed to vote for Lincoln on the first ballot. The state’s governor, Henry Lane, was worried that Seward’s name at the top of the ticket would hurt his own re-election prospects, both because of his perceived radicalism on slavery, and because his support for Catholic education as governor of New York would alienate Indiana’s sizable Know Nothing vote. “In the south half of my state, a good proportion of my people have come from Slave States,” Lane said, according to the account of Addison Procter, a Kansas delegate. “They were poor people, forced to work for a living, and they did not want to bring up their families to labor in competition with the slaves, so they have moved to Indiana to get away from that influence. will not tolerate slavery in Indiana or in our free territories, but they will not oppose it where it is, if it would only stay there. These people want a man of the Lincoln type as their president. They are afraid Seward would be

¹⁶⁷ Addison Gilbert Procter, *Lincoln and the Convention of 1860* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1918), 8.

influenced by that abolition element of the East and make war on slavery where it is. This they do not want, so they believe Lincoln understanding this as one of their kind would be acceptable and would probably get the support of the entire element. If at any time the South should undertake in the interest of slavery to destroy this Union we can depend on everyone in this class to shoulder his musket and go to the front in defense of a united nation even at the cost of slavery itself.”¹⁶⁸

With Lincoln backed by Indiana and Illinois, and with Davis’s assurance that he was second to Seward in total delegates, New Jersey and Pennsylvania agreed to vote for him on the second ballot. Pennsylvania Gov. Andrew Curtin also believed Seward at the top of the ticket would doom his re-election effort.¹⁶⁹

On the first ballot, Seward received 173½ votes, Lincoln 102, Chase 49, and Bates 48. The Illinois delegation had voted as a bloc, despite the sentiments of some of its members for other candidates.

Illinois delegate Orville Hickman Browning of Quincy, who would the following year replace Stephen Douglas in the Senate, favored Bates, for reasons that made it clear he would have been uncomfortable with Seward.

“My first choice for the Presidency was Mr. Bates of Missouri,” Browning wrote in his diary, “but under instructions our whole delegation voted for Mr. Lincoln. Many reasons influenced me to support Mr. Bates, the chief of which, next to his eminent fitness, were to strengthen our organization in the South, and remove apprehensions in the South of any hostile purpose on the part of Republicans to the institutions of the

¹⁶⁸ Procter, *Lincoln and the Convention of 1860*, 12-13.

¹⁶⁹ Procter, *Lincoln and the Convention of 1860*, 8.

South, to restore fraternal regards among the different sections of the Union – to bring to our support the old Whigs in the free states, who have not yet fraternized with us, and to give some check to the ultra tendencies of the Republican party.”¹⁷⁰

No longer a dark horse, Lincoln was now clearly the only man who could defeat Seward. On the second ballot, he nearly equaled Seward, with 181 votes to the New Yorker’s 184½. Bates’s conservative supporters, seeing that their candidate had no chance to win, were swinging their votes to Lincoln. Montgomery Blair, the leader of the Maryland delegation, and a Bates supporter, concluded that Lincoln was more electable than Seward, and delivered his state.¹⁷¹ On the third ballot, Lincoln’s 231½ votes were only one-and-a-half short of the nomination. Ohio switched four votes from Chase, and Lincoln was the nominee.

During the Civil War, Lincoln would demonstrate his greatness, his leadership, and his perfect suitability for the historical moment in which he found himself. He was not, however, an indispensable man. Other men could have led the country successfully through that war. As a politician, Lincoln was the right man, from the right place, at the right time. He was far from the most distinguished candidate for the Republican nomination that year, having served a single term in Congress, and having failed in two attempts to reach the Senate, but he was exactly what his party needed at that moment: a Westerner, from a battleground state, who had spent his political career trying to find a position on slavery that satisfied abolitionists, Free Soilers and old Whigs, without

¹⁷⁰ Orville Hickman Browning papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹⁷¹ Willard L. King, *Lincoln’s Manager: David Davis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 141.

sacrificing the bedrock principle of Republicanism: no expansion of slave territory. That had been a political necessity in Central Illinois. If Lincoln had settled 75 miles to the north, in Ottawa, his personal abhorrence of slavery might have led him to join the Liberty Party, which was acceptable in a section of Illinois that eventually elected Owen Lovejoy to Congress. If he had settled 75 miles to the south, in Vandalia, his anti-slavery politics and his Whiggery might have made him an unacceptable candidate to his neighbors. Springfield turned out to be the perfect environment to prepare Lincoln to be the Republicans' compromise candidate in 1860, and to win the election that fall. There was no guarantee that Seward would have carried the states of the Lower North, especially after John Brown's raid, which Democrats blamed on Seward's "irrepressible conflict" rhetoric. Had Seward failed to win a majority in the Electoral College, the election would have gone to the House of Representatives, where Democrats controlled a majority of the state delegations. Lincoln won the four battleground states – Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey – whose delegates had feared a Seward candidacy, and demanded a moderate alternative. Lincoln carried every free state, giving him 180 electoral votes, and the presidency. After leaving Springfield to take up his duties in Washington, Lincoln never saw his hometown again. It has been said that Lincoln made Springfield famous around the world, but it could just as fairly be said the other way around.

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