

Lincoln's River

A personal journey recounting Abraham Lincoln's experiences with the Sangamon River in Central Illinois

by Scott Hays

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1.

Lincoln Paddles the Sangamon

I stood upon the high bluff overlooking the Sangamon, about 100 steps from his log home. Young Abe Lincoln was there beside me, gazing wistfully downriver.

Abe obviously had far more important things on his mind than these simple surroundings.

Abe was 21, an adult, new voter, and free from whatever obligations he may have had as his father's son. Back when he was 19, he had worked as a bowman on a flatboat journey to New Orleans so he knew something of the world beyond. He knew this little Sangamon River connected him to the Illinois River, the Mississippi, and on to the entire "riverine West".

Abe only existed in my mind of course, but he actually stood right there - 186 years earlier - in the early months of 1831. And as I stood there I could feel his presence; I could feel what he must have felt. I've felt this feeling often from my own bluff overlooking the Sangamon, gazing downriver.

This is the story of Abraham Lincoln on the Sangamon River; Lincoln's River.

The Sangamon was a central part of Lincoln's early life, his life as a state legislator, his thinking and his ideas. Lincoln would even invent and patent a watercraft custom-designed to traverse the low waters of the Sangamon, the only president in history to hold a US Patent.

Lincoln's Sangamon story begins with his family's move to the River from southern Indiana. While in Southern Indiana, he worked for store owner James Gentry who would occasionally arrange flatboat trips from there down the Ohio to the Mississippi and on to New Orleans to sell off stockpiles of the region's produce, a 1,279 mile journey. In 1828, at 19 years of age, Lincoln eagerly signed on as a bowman on one of these trips with Gentry's 21 year old son Alan.

According to Richard Campenella's book "Lincoln in New Orleans", this trip "offered Abe the most exciting and important experience of his Indiana years and would influence his intellectual fiber in significant ways." In particular, it likely played a role in Lincoln's disenchantment with the simple frontier life and set his sights on bigger things.

In March of 1830, the Lincolns and several relatives moved from Southern Indiana to a new homestead located "about 10 miles west of Decatur and about 100 steps from the Sangamon River and on the north side of it on a kind of bluff" as described years later by his cousin John Hanks. Campanella relates that for Lincoln: "this new homestead offered access to the entire riverine West, just a few steps below the bluff."

His family prospered in their new homestead on the Sangamon, with Abe helping to build a log cabin, a smokehouse, a barn, split-rail fencing and helping plant 15 acres of corn. Abe thrived in the ways of frontier life, but was already gaining a larger reputation. That summer, a political candidate came to town and made a speech on internal improvements, and according to the later

recollection of cousin Hanks “It was a bad one and I said Abe could beat it. I turned down a box and Abe made his speech” - one which many historians now identify as being Abraham Lincoln’s first political speech. His subject? The navigability of the Sangamon River.

Despite prosperous beginnings, later that year the Lincoln family suffered “an affliction with ague and fever” which was followed by the “Winter of the Deep Snow”, when over three feet of snow blanketed the region.

Thomas Lincoln had been reluctant to leave Indiana, and by spring of 1831, he had determined that the move to Illinois had set the family backward and he plotted to move yet again. Abraham was not excited. According to Campanella, “The wintry confinement, the dreary prospect of another move and another cycle of land clearing and cabin building prompted the newly independent Abraham to cast his eyes to the wider world he first experienced two years earlier. His outlet was the little river flowing below their bluff, the Sangamon.”

So there Abraham stood in early 1831, gazing wistfully downriver.

It was not long after that when his cousin John Hanks came by with an offer Abe couldn’t refuse. A man by the name of Denton Offutt wanted them to pilot a flatboat to New Orleans. Abe and John were to meet up with him in Springfield.

The melting of the heavy snow prohibited travel by land, so Abe and his cousin purchased a canoe. And on Tuesday, March 1, 1831, John Hanks and Abraham Lincoln shoved off on the Sangamon River from what is now Lincoln’s Homestead State Park. Abe and his cousin paddled down the Sangamon River, away from his previous life as the son of his father to begin an entirely new life that was to take him places he never could have imagined.

2.

Ghost Town on the River

I sat to Abe's left. He was the dealer. I looked into his mischievous, yet pleasantly playful eyes and decided to beg, so I just said "pass".

Abe then dealt out another three cards to his cousin and John Johnston, the others sitting at the table at Jacob Carman's Tavern on the corner of Mill and Bridge Streets, one of the first businesses that had recently opened in the newly platted Sangamo Town.

Abe turned up a new trump card, said "Take it!" John scored a point and play began.

We spent many an evening playing Abe's favorite game of Seven-Up at Jacob Carman's Tavern while camped just outside of Sangamo Town on the banks of the Sangamon River. We were building a flatboat, an unexpected diversion for our planned trip to down the Sangamon and on to New Orleans. Playing Seven Up was just our diversion to a diversion.

* * *

At least that's how I would have remembered it, had I actually been there.

In fact there is no there anymore. 172 years ago, Sangamo Town was swallowed by the tall grass of a prairie on a high bluff overlooking the Sangamon River.

It was March of 1831. Abe Lincoln and his cousin John Hanks were canoeing downriver on the Sangamon, leaving Abe's homestead up near Decatur behind. They pulled off the Sangamon at Judy's Ferry east of Springfield to meet their third crewmember, Abe's stepbrother John D. Johnston, the three then walked into town to track down Denton Offutt, who had arranged with them to "take a boatload of stock and provisions to New Orleans". They would go by flatboat from New Salem, by way of the Sangamon River, then the Illinois and then down the Mississippi, Huck Finn style, right through the middle of the young country.

Flatboating was something of a "craze" in the early 1830's, being the primary means of transporting goods from much of the newly settled farmlands of the Midwest to markets beyond.

Offutt was a businessman, trader, and opportunist. The three found him at the Buckhorn Inn, a favorite Springfield watering hole, sleeping off a drunken night. He had the cargo for New Orleans all right but "too many deep potations with new-comers who daily thronged the Buckhorn had interfered with the execution of Offutt's plans." Meaning that he had neglected to secure a flatboat for the voyage.

Regretful and probably embarrassed, Offutt offered to pay the three young men twelve dollars per month to build a flatboat from scratch. While this would set them behind by six weeks, it was paying work. They took the deal.

The crew set off for a site “about 7 miles northwest of the city of Springfield.” at the confluence of Spring Creek and the Sangamon River, known as “Congress Land”, a patch of old-growth forest “with innumerable flat-boats growing in their primal timber.” According to Lincoln, they constructed a “shantee-shed about 90 feet from the river” and “camped in a camp on the Sangamon River, done our own cooking, mending, and washing.”

And they began to build their flatboat. They spent days cutting trees and used a “country saw-mill” at nearby Sangamo Town to cut them into lumber to build their flatboat. Lincoln boarded some nights in town with the Jacob Carman family.

Years later, Carman recalled Abe as “funny, jokey, humorous, full of yarns and stories. Frequently quoting poetry and reciting prose-like orations.” John Roll, another local merchant said “local folks would seat themselves on a log bench (which became known as “Abe’s log”) outside Shepherds’ gristmill in Sangamo Town during morning, noon and evening breaks to hear Lincoln’s jokes and stories.”

Abe must have looked every bit the young frontier pioneer. Years later, Roll recalled Abe’s appearance during his time at Sangamo Town: “It seemed that everything was too short for him. His pantaloons lacked four or five inches of reaching the ground. He wore a drab-colored wool hat, pretty well-worn, small-crowned and broad-brimmed – he was the rawest, most primitive looking specimen of humanity I ever saw. Tall, bony, and as homely as he has ever been pictured.”

In the Spring of 1831, Lincoln was in the small audience that had gathered to see a traveling magician who had stopped by Carman’s Tavern. The magician asked to borrow Abe’s hat, into which he was going to break several eggs. Abe declined, as the story goes, not because he was concerned for his hat, but for the magician’s eggs.

But Lincoln was also known to be a learned man. Carman recalled that Lincoln was “a very intelligent young man, his conversation very often about books such as Shakespeare and other histories. He talked about politics considerable. He was a John Q Adams man, opposed to slavery and said he thought it a curse to the land.”

Sangamo Town on the Sangamon River has since become part of the lore of Lincoln.

Moses Broadwell who had purchased the land and founded the town, had intended for Sangamo Town to be the county seat of the newly formed Sangamon County, but it was not to be. As the story goes, in March of 1825, Andrew Elliott, proprietor of Springfield’s Buckhorn Tavern, guided County Commissioners to each prospective site. He chose the most undesirable, circuitous route instead of following a well blazed trail that led directly to Sangamo Town. The commissioners thought highly of Sangamo Town, but decided its inaccessibility made it a poor choice for the seat of government, and the fate of Sangamo Town was sealed.

In 1845, Sangamo Town was formally vacated by the Illinois legislature and abandoned. But on Lincoln’s death in 1865, every detail of his pioneer days began to take shape as part of the legend and lore of Lincoln. And the town where Abe built the floatboat was now fading into this

legend. According to Ida Tarbell, writing in the “Early Life of Abraham Lincoln” in 1897, “Sangamo Town, where Mr. Lincoln built the flatboat, has, since his day, completely disappeared from the earth.”

An entire town, abandoned at the close of the frontier era, had basically been lost, if not forgotten. According to archeologist Robert Mazrim: “just about everything regarding the place was a cipher – the location, the layout, the number of buildings that were actually built there, the duration of their occupation, and the things that went on inside them. The paper record really only told us that a town existed.” According to Mazrim, “All that is left is archeology.”

* * *

On a warm morning in June, 1994, Mazrim drove his truck down a narrow dirt lane that led to the river. He only knew that Sangamo Town could exist anywhere on this 320 acre parcel once owned by Moses Broadwell.

Mazrim: “I parked the truck along the edge of a large field situated very near the edge of the river valley itself. The field was not in cultivation and was instead covered in shoulder-high grass. I waded along through the grass taking 15 inch deep shovel tests of the soil.” His first two dozen shovel tests yielded nothing. But the next yielded a “patch of swirled grays, browns and blacks, which represented a backfilled excavation into the subsoil.”

Here, the soil produced a pearlware cup and the stem of a smoking pipe, both of which dated to the time of Sangamo Town. “Someone was here, then, smoking tobacco.”

Mazrim went on to discover many artifacts and locate the entire plat of Sangamo Town on the bluff overlooking the river where Abe Lincoln once shared his tales, jokes, friendship, and even did the “cooking, mending and washing”.

Sangamo Town, still very much a long-abandoned ghost town with nothing visible remaining, its location long a cipher, had been found.

3.

Abe Builds a Flatboat

March, 1831. Abe, John Hanks and John Johnston were constructing their flatboat beside the Sangamon River at their encampment just outside of Sangamo Town.

This was no simple Huck-Finn style flatboat. Coming in at 80 feet long and 18 feet wide, Abe and his team were building this flatboat “for a substantial load and an experienced crew of four”.

The construction process followed standard flatboat construction, well-known at the time: “Lay down the two gunwhales ... lay girders across and join them ... lay and join two end girders at bow and stern ... lay and join streamers across the girders ... lay planks across the streamers and pin them down to form the floor ... caulk all seams.”

Crowds came down to the Sangamon River from Sangamo Town to watch construction unfold. While constructing the flatboat, Abe directed some co-workers to create a dugout canoe for side-excursions during the trip, typical for Mississippi flatboat voyages.

As the tale is told, when they completed the canoe, the two workers enthusiastically jumped in, but the unstable craft slipped out from underneath them, dumping them into the cold and turbulent waters of the Sangamon created by the melting “Winter of the Great Snow” earlier that year. They were quickly swept downriver.

As if by instinct, the crowd turned to Lincoln, who urged the workers over to an overhanging old elm tree. They hung on, clinging as they shivered in the cold water, straining against the current. Lincoln instructed a few bystanders to tie a rope to a log and drop it in the current while holding the rope securely at the bank. When ready, a young man hopped on the log but quickly fell in, was taken downstream and grasped onto the overhanging elm tree with the others.

They drew the log back in and now Abe himself hopped on, carefully drifting out toward the tree, his freezing long legs submerged in the Sangamon wrapped tightly around the log. He grasped the other three men, secured them to the log and signaled the villagers to haul all four back to shore.

The dramatic log rescue reportedly “made a hero of Abe all along the Sangamon River, and local inhabitants never tired of telling of the daring exploit.”

Work on the flatboat progressed.

Six weeks later, it was ready for the journey. The launch of the flatboat was a rousing public event attracting crowds from all around. According to one account, it “was the occasion of much political chat and buncombe in which the Whig Party and Andrew Jackson alike were, strangely

enough, lauded to the skies”. Abe apparently took part in the fiery political rhetoric finding “a good field for practice and debate.”

Preparing for launch, they loaded the floatboat with “sides of bacon, sacks of corn, pork in barrels, and live hogs and then swung their flatboat out into the stream”.

By Tuesday, April 19, 1831, Abe, Hanks, Johnston and Offutt left Sangamo Town and were “poling down the wending Sangamon River.” According to Lincoln himself, they were “as a sort of floating driftwood on the great freshet produced in the thawing of that snow.”

4.

Flatboating on the Sangamon River

I hopped out of Louis's shiny black Mini-Cooper along Highway 123 near New Salem. He was hosting me around the area and we had pulled over by a historical marker.

There it was: Abe Lincoln's flatboat. It sat there alone on the nicely mown grassy roadside, floorboards rotting and weeds growing up inside. Still, it was an impressive vessel, constructed using the latest technological advances of 1831: no nails, no iron.

It mostly resembles a modern-day pontoon boat; like a small, low log cabin built on a barge. Two forked logs protrude up like antennae from the roof near the front and one at the center of the back.

A flatboat's crew of 4 or 5 spent most of their time on the cabin's roof; the cabin being used for storing Midwestern farm goods to be sold in New Orleans in a journey that could take from 4 to 6 weeks. The crew steered this craft using two "sweeps" or 30 to 55 foot long logs mounted in the front Y's and a 30 to 55 foot rudder on the rear. These large front sweeps gave such flatboats the nickname "Mississippi Broadhorns".

As interesting as it seemed, my first thought was: that's a heck of a way to get to New Orleans! All things considered, I'd rather take Louis's Mini.

* * *

Anyone that's been there can tell you that the Sangamon is a quite beautiful, tranquil river, but like many rivers, it can also be temperamental and quite moody. In his book, "Lincoln in New Orleans," Richard Campanella described it as the "tortuous Sangamon."

So it's probably not difficult to imagine that navigating a flatboat measuring 80 feet long and 18 feet wide down the Sangamon River might pose a few challenges.

While flatboats were all the rage for getting the goods of the Midwest downriver to the markets of New Orleans, they had not quite yet been established as viable for navigation down the Sangamon River. Denton Offutt's excursion with Abe, his cousin and stepbrother was among the first.

It didn't go well.

The town of New Salem was formed when James Rutledge and John Camron were granted permission to build a mill dam on the Sangamon River. This somewhat simple dam was built of "two elongated wooden trough-like structures filled with rocks", which "diverted a focused outlet of water" to one side where they built their water wheel. Much of the Sangamon's water

flowed right over top of this “low-head dam” creating a serious river hazard, as it remained nearly invisible from upstream.

Only 16 miles into their 1600-plus mile journey, Lincoln and his crew approached New Salem. As they did, their flatboat “jolted to a stop with a sickening thud.” They had found the Rutledge/Camron dam.

With part of the bow pressing forward out over the dam and the stern being forced downward, the river crept up onto the rear deck and starting flowing into the lower holds, sinking it further. As this happened, the boat became heavier and the gunwales (sides) bent down dangerously.

A crowd down from New Salem formed on the bank to gawk as the tragedy unfolded just as a “striking six-foot-four stranger” took charge.

Abe commandeered an empty flatboat and they swiftly started to transfer cargo. As they did so, Abe augured a hole into their flatboat’s hull up near the bow. As they continued to unload the cargo and the load lightened, the stern of their flatboat “sprang upwards” sloshing the water inside up toward the bow, where it drained out the hole.

The load lightened even further and the crew was able to pry the flatboat over top of the dam and safely on down river.

Abe became a local hero among New Salem residents who “were suitably impressed by this singular young man and his cleverness.”

As for Offutt, he too was “profoundly impressed” with Lincoln’s ingenuity and declared to the crowd that he would build a steamboat to plow the Sangamon River with none other than Abe Lincoln as captain. But that is another installment.

Beyond New Salem, our crew guided their flatboat down the Sangamon through undulating terrain until it was joined by Salt Creek. There, the river turns westward into a narrow valley where - as Lincoln himself described it, the river meandered wildly “in a zig-zag pattern forming complete peninsulas.” Campanella writes that “the little river wended for over sixty miles within the thirty mile long valley.”

Along this stretch, there was weakening current, logs and sandbars which slowed the expedition to speeds barely faster than a brisk walk. Lincoln himself recalled of this part of the voyage, “The water was lower than it had been since the breaking of winter in February which made drifted timber a constant obstruction.”

Lincoln may not have been enamored with the romance of his flatboat voyage on the Sangamon River. According to Philip Clark, a fellow flatboater also making the downriver trip at the same time as Lincoln, “Lincoln told me he thought he could better his situation, as he had no liking for the flatboat business.” Clark goes on to say “He was at all times, even in those cheerless times, aspiring to better knowledge and better position.”

The flatboat would have reached Beardstown in about three days, a popular flatboaters' stop. From there, it would be over 1500 more river miles on to New Orleans.

* * *

Louis and I stood down by the mill site on the Sangamon River near New Salem. Weeds and grass grew over the reconstructed mill dam and the river now flows far off to the East, barely visible. As I looked down on the mill dam among the weeds on dry land, I tried to imagine an 80 by 18 foot flatboat navigating over it. It wasn't difficult to imagine such a craft hung up there.

A few weeks later my wife Carol and I put in our canoe at the Gudgel Bridge just upriver from New Salem with about 30 other fellow Sangamon River enthusiasts. I know from my own experience that the Sangamon is a beautiful, but nonetheless temperamental and moody river. A few days earlier, just before a heavy rainfall, the river was down so far that Scott (not me), the trip leader, had to mark the narrow channel of only a few feet wide with brightly colored flags so canoes and kayaks wouldn't run aground.

Paddling this stretch of the Sangamon downstream towards New Salem, I pondered thoughts of Lincoln and his 80 by 18 foot flatboat as we paddled around log obstructions and pushed our canoe across unseen sandbars we were hung up on.

No, it wasn't at all difficult to relate the challenges faced during Lincoln's flatboat experience on the "tortuous Sangamon" back in 1831.

It must have been quite the journey.

5.

Lincoln in New Orleans

April 23, 1831. The flatboat journey down the Sangamon was completed. After stopping off at Beardstown, Abe and the flatboat crew of four resumed their journey. They glided past Alton, St. Louis, Cairo, Vicksburg and Natchez. By historian Richard Campanella's estimate, using current and flow estimates from the time and general knowledge of progress and time spent on the river per day, they most likely arrived in New Orleans on May 12.

Quick Factcheck: the flatboat that Lewis and I had visited alongside Highway 123 isn't really Abe Lincoln's flatboat. It's actually a scale replica, smaller than the original by half, and built by a bunch of intrepid and committed volunteers in the 1980's seeking to reenact part of Abe's voyage. Still, it does make for an impressive roadside stop; that part is factual. And they did use 1830's technology to recreate the craft, albeit in the 1980s.

We also know it must be a replica because Abe and his crew, like nearly all flatboat crews of the day, dismantled their craft once they sold off all of their cargo and then sold the timbers to homebuilders in the rapidly burgeoning metropolis of New Orleans. Abe's flatboat was most likely reborn as an early New Orleans log home.

Although there are scant records of this trip and Lincoln never related this journey firsthand, the impacts of Lincoln's visit to New Orleans are both legendary and mythic. Especially as it relates to Lincoln's experience of the institution of slavery. Once they arrived, Abe and his crew likely lingered in New Orleans for as long a month.

Only a short walk inland, at the corner of St. Louis and Chartres Streets stood Hewlett's Exchange, billed as the largest slave market in the South. During 1831, an average of 91 slaves per month arrived for auction at Hewlett's. Lincoln undoubtedly picked up the local *Louisiana Courant* with advertisements for "real estate" such as Matilda with a "mild and humble disposition" and Juliana as "active, intelligent and fully guaranteed".

Lincoln had been to New Orleans on a previous flatboat trip in 1828 yet, as Michael Blumenthal writes, "his anger was hardly softened by familiarity, but instead intensified."

After his experience of the slave market, Lincoln reportedly said: "By God boys, let's get away from this. If ever I get a change to hit that thing (meaning slavery) I'll hit it hard."

According to Abe's law partner John Herndon - in a much later interview: "In New Orleans, Lincoln beheld the true horrors of human slavery. He saw negroes in chains, maltreated, whipped and scourged. Slavery ran the iron into him, then and there."

Abe's cousin John Hanks related that while they were in New Orleans, Abe's talk against slavery was vociferous, with "the fear of our good ol' deacon back in Indiana. We were afeared of

getting into trouble about his talking so much, and we coaxed him with all our might to be quieter-like down there, for it wouldn't do any good no-how."

Hanks also related that while in New Orleans they visited "a voodoo negress, an old fortune-teller". During this meeting she became very excited, exclaiming to Lincoln "You will be President. And all the negroes will be free!"

One can't say how a single experience shapes a person, and ultimately can affect the outcomes of American history, but we do know that Lincoln's flatboat journey to New Orleans, along with his previous journey, were Lincoln's only travels into the deep slave-holding South where he would have directly experienced the horrors of slavery. And we do know that this journey hardened his anti-slavery beliefs.

A journey that began on our Sangamon River, and one that continues with Lincoln's return to Illinois and a new life in New Salem along the Sangamon River.

6.

“Lincoln’s” New Salem

We came up from Florida to Illinois. And by and by our path brought us to New Salem, a pioneer town along the Sangamon River. A town that was there because of the Sangamon River. In 1829, the state of Illinois granted John Camron and James Rutledge rights to build a grist and logging mill by damming the Sangamon River. Not long after that, up on a bluff above the mill, the town of New Salem was born.

We explored New Salem and found it to our liking. We visited Denton Offutt’s general store, which seemed to stock everything an Illinois pioneer family might need.

More recently, we returned to New Salem on a dark, starry, candlelit night. Carol and I listened to the soft gentle sounds of vocalists and stringed instruments which could be heard in the distance as campfires glowed and coffee pots warmed over their flames. The windows of the rough-hewn log cabins glowed orange with firelight as women sat inside spinning yarn or warming cider.

The path ahead was lit by small lanterns as the crowd plodded along guided by the phosphorescent hues of their smartphones glowing brightly.

We were there for New Salem’s “Candlelight Walk” and except for the huge crowds and their smartphones, the scene seemed reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln’s time: 1831 Illinois. Perhaps young Abe himself arrived at New Salem sometime after dark as he returned from his journey to New Orleans.

The first time we visited New Salem, many years ago, was also the first time we saw the smallish, meandering Sangamon River. A river that has since become a significant part of our lives.

Abraham Lincoln came up from New Orleans to Illinois. And by and by his path led him to New Salem, a pioneer town along the Sangamon River. There was a mill there and a dam on the Sangamon River. A few months before, Abe had freed up his flatboat that had become hung up on that mill dam, which had nearly brought an early and catastrophic end to his journey to New Orleans.

Abe explored New Salem and must have found it to his liking. He visited a store that was soon to be opening by the man who had hired him for his flatboat voyage, Denton Offutt. According to Offutt, the store was to stock everything a pioneer family might need, when the stock was delivered.

Offutt had been impressed with Abe from the flatboat trip and offered him the position of “Chief Clerk” at his soon-to-be-opening store. So Abe took up residence in New Salem.

Lincoln was to live in New Salem for six more years, where he would clerk for Offutt and then open his own store, serve in the Blackhawk War, become a surveyor, study the law and in 1834, get himself elected as a state legislator in Springfield, one of its youngest members.

By 1837, Lincoln had moved on to Springfield, leaving his “young pioneer” existence at New Salem forever behind.

By 1839, the legislature established the Menard County seat 2 miles further down the Sangamon River at the more favorable location of Petersburg. Back at New Salem, villagers moved away, shops and stores were vacated and moved and - quietly and without fanfare - New Salem simply disappeared.

Many years later, Lincoln, the controversial but beloved President that navigated our nation through the most turbulent time in our history (present era notwithstanding), was assassinated.

As America embarked on a long and difficult path of mourning and healing, everything “Lincoln” became valued as a crucial part of what the nation wanted to see, learn and experience. History, reality, and myth melded together to create the legendary Lincoln. Lincoln’s law partner and biographer William Herndon told the story of a young pioneer in a small town on the Sangamon River on the American frontier, splitting logs, engaging in wraslin’ matches and getting a first job clerking in Denton Offutt’s country store.

Without that story and without Abraham Lincoln, New Salem was destined to be lost forever, remembered only vaguely by those who had once called it home.

But thanks to our 16th President’s life there, New Salem was rediscovered as an integral part of the Lincoln legend. As early as the 1880’s, 40 years after it disappeared, and despite the fact that it was little more than a vacant hilltop beside the Sangamon River, visitors began to arrive, seeking anything that recalled Lincoln’s early life. A crumbling old foundation wall and some scattered rotting timbers lying about were the only reminders that a village so central to Lincoln’s early days was ever there. But if you rebuild it, they will come.

In 1919, the Old Salem Lincoln League began the reconstruction of New Salem, just as the state purchased “Old Salem Hill”. The League constructed 5 replica cabins in their original locations and as accurately as possible.

Then, in 1932, Governor Louis Emmerson released funding for a complete replica of the village, including the replacement of the five Lincoln League replicas and the construction of eight additional structures. In 1934, the Civilian Conservation Corps recreated the entire village. This is the New Salem that stands today.

Visitors flocked to “Lincoln’s New Salem,” so-called despite the fact that Lincoln had nothing to do with New Salem’s establishment, growth, expansion or ultimate decline. But they came to

experience the re-created log cabin frontier life of our 16th President. And they, just like Carol and myself, still do today.

The town of New Salem was created because of its location on the Sangamon River, and “Lincoln’s” New Salem was created because of Abraham Lincoln.

The first time Carol and I visited New Salem was also the first time we saw the smallish, meandering Sangamon River. A river that has become a central part of our lives. And so in a very real sense, Abe Lincoln introduced me to the Sangamon River.

And now I repay the favor. Thanks, Abe.

7.

Journey of the Talisman: Upriver

Coming on Christmas, 1831.

In his fictional but mostly historically accurate 1952 novel, *Steamboat on the River*, author Darwin Teilhet relates the tale of the arrival in Cincinnati of (fictional) 16 year-old dandy Horace Owens on the steamer *Star of Ohio* for Christmas from boarding school in Philadelphia. His father, Jim Owens owned Owens Boatworks, which had nearly completed work on the 95 foot long steamboat *Talisman* (real).

Horace Owens relates:

My father pointed and said "There-there's a clear view of the Talisman, What do you think of her? Isn't she a little beauty?"

I looked. He wasn't pointing at that proud handsome steamer tied at the farthest wharf. He was pointing directly at that snubby little stern-wheeler among all the keelboats. That was my father's new steamboat? She didn't look much wider or longer than an ordinary keelboat. My heart dropped clear to rock bottom.

Why, at second glance you'd have decided all my father had done was to take one of his keelboat hulls and hang a paddle wheel at the stern. The boiler was so small I couldn't believe my eyes. I judged it was no more than five feet long. It was as small as the boilers on the new steam locomotives I used to see that pulled trains of cars on the line out of Philadelphia to Germantown.

I heard my father explaining that she had an adjustable paddle wheel which would be raised and lowered when passing over sand bars, which was one of the new wrinkles he'd thought of for his steamboat.

Captain Vincent Bogue owned a mill at Portland's Landing near the growing frontier town of Springfield, Illinois. A wealthy Springfield businessman and entrepreneur, he sought to demonstrate the Sangamon River's navigability by chartering a load of freight and passengers up the Sangamon to Springfield, and the 95 foot *Talisman* seemed perfectly suited to the task. Other boats would soon follow in the wake of the *Talisman's* success as Springfield prospered from river-based commerce.

Captain Bogue hired a river pilot with experience on smaller rivers and the deal was made.

With the enthusiastic energy that surrounded the risky venture, Horace's father Jim related:

"I wouldn't miss the voyage for anything. We'll leave the Mississippi above St Louis and start steaming up the Illinois and east into the Sangamon, where no steamboat's ever been. If the

voyage's a success, once the Talisman's proved herself, I shouldn't have much trouble finding a buyer for her."

The Talisman was underway by the first of February 1832.

By this time, 'Abe Linkern' was fast becoming a well-known riverman. Certainly, Captain Bogue was now familiar with the frontiersman. The fictional Horace related:

Captain Bogue stopped alongside of me, and he said "A friend of mine, Abe Linkern, was hired to take a 'broadhorn' - what was called a flatboat - to N'Orleans. I've heard him telling of that trip - Abe lives at New Salem now. He runs a grocery store there for Denton Offut. I got cargo aboard for Offut. You'd prob'ly meet Linkern if you was to go on with your Pa from St. Louis. Abe can tell stories funny enough to make a cat laugh!"

Approaching Beardstown, Captain Bogue had sent word ahead over land to Springfield of their imminent arrival. In response, a number of citizens - among them Abe Lincoln and William Greene (who was to become one of Menard County's most prosperous citizens) - rode by horseback to Beardstown to meet the *Talisman*. This pioneer crew brought "axes having long handles, to cut away branches of trees hanging over from the banks."

Teilhet imagines "Slicky Bill" Greene relating another tale of Abe Linkern to Horace:

"Oh, Abe Linkern, you see'd him this morning. Till noon he worked like a beaver 'long the river with us. He's the best feller with an ax thar is in the nation, I guess. But he hed ter ride fer home. He's goin' ter run for state leg'slature this fall. Leastwise, my paw an Mr. Cameron an' some of the inflooshul fellers 've back him. But he's leavin for the Injun war next week an' he needs all the time he can git fer 'lectioneerin'. He's runnin' on the platform to make this here river nav'g'ble to the Salt Fork and further, effen the state'll put up the cash. Ef you're plannin' ter bring more steamboats this here way, you ought to hire Abe on one."

The Talisman arrived at Portland's Landing on March 29th, 1832 to a massive local reception. The arrival of a steamboat from the east was cause for celebration, providing "proof uncontestable" that the Sangamon was navigable! Springfield and all of the small frontier towns along the Sangamon would now become connected by water with the outside world.

William Herndon, Abraham Lincoln's future law partner and posthumous biographer, was there when the riverboat Talisman was steaming upriver from New Salem to Portland's Landing near Springfield.

I and other boys on horseback followed the boat, riding along the river's banks as far as Bogue's Mill, where she tied up. There we went about aboard and, lost in boyish wonder, feasted our eyes on the splendor of her interior decorations.

Herndon went on to describe it as: "My first sight of a steamboat and the first time I ever saw Mr. Lincoln."

In Teilhet's novel, Horace relates the scene:

I guess that afternoon almost everyone in town including the entire population of dogs had come by carriage, horse, or shanks' mare to see our arrival. It was like a big fair. Stands had been set up under awnings to serve grub. Peddlers were there. Big dray wagons with their horses were lined up in the meadow waiting for cargo to be unloaded.

Locals offered a rousing tune written especially for the occasion:

O'Captain Bogue he gave the load,

And Captain Bogue he showed the road

And we came up with a right good will

And tied our boat up to his mil.

Now we are up the Sangamaw,

And here we'll have a grand hurra,

So fill your glasses to the brim

Of whiskey, brandy, wine and gin.

Illinois Suckers, young and raw,

Were strung along the Sangamaw,

To see a boat come up by steam

They surely thought it was a dream.

Yet all was not well. The experienced river pilot who had so successfully navigated the *Talisman* upriver deserted the crew and ran off with a woman "of doubtful reputation" who had boarded the steamer in St. Louis.

And now, with rapidly dropping water levels in the Sangamon narrowing the channel and exposing more sandbars and submerged logs on the downstream route, the *Talisman* was in danger of becoming a permanent fixture at Portland's Landing.

The *Talisman* sat for another week at Bogue's Mill awaiting a new pilot to take her downriver. Finally, a tall, lanky man with a growing reputation as a riverman on the Sangamon River would rise to the occasion, but that is another story.

8.

Journey of the Talisman: Downriver

Late March, 1832.

In the eyes of most settlers in the area, the journey of the Talisman upriver to Portland's Landing at Bogue's Mill had been nothing short of miraculous, portending a new era of trade, success, and modernity to frontier towns all along the Sangamon River. It even spawned a boom in speculative property purchases in towns along the river, anticipating rapid growth.

Many thought it couldn't be done, and indeed, a full size steamer could never have navigated the relatively small, winding Sangamon River. The Talisman, however, was custom-designed for the job. And the upriver journey proved the Talisman was able to meet the challenge.

Yet later that very week, the Talisman still sat docked in the Sangamon River at Portland's Landing. It was now early April as the water levels in the Sangamon dropped precariously and Captain Vincent Bogue, who had chartered the Talisman for this journey, was getting concerned.

He was aware that the steamer had been repeatedly delayed on its upriver journey as it navigated submerged logs, areas of shallow water and sand bars. Overhanging tree branches had to be cut away, a task assisted by Abe Lincoln.

Another hazard awaited downriver from Portland's Landing: the Cameron/Rutledge mill dam at New Salem. On its upriver journey, the Talisman had cleared the dam with "just enough depth to spare for her 2 ½ foot draft."

Now waiting at Portland's Landing with no pilot, it looked like the Talisman might be stranded through the fall, a financial disaster for its owner.

But there emerged a "tall, lanky man with a growing reputation as a riverman on the Sangamon River." Abraham Lincoln. Unfortunately, Abe was no riverboat pilot.

As fate would have it, William Herndon's cousin Rowan Herndon was in the area. And he had been a pilot of the Shawneetown Ferry on the Ohio River.

Herndon and Lincoln were hired!

Abe Lincoln either stood beside pilot Rowan Herndon up in the wheelhouse, pointing out the way of the channel, or he paddled a rowboat out ahead, sounding the channel as the Talisman made its way slowly and carefully downriver.

William Herndon recounted: “The two inland navigators undertook the piloting of the vessel – which had now become elephantine in proportions – through the uncertain channel of the Sangamon. The average speed was four miles a day.”

In another recounting of the tale: “The going was treacherously slow. The boat spent hour after hour with its flailing stern wheel slowly clawing through the mud flats and sand bars.”

In a few days, the Talisman arrived at the mill dam at New Salem with no hope of passing over. The dam had to be lowered or removed. The owners of the dam protested strenuously while the boat’s officers argued that the dam owners had no right under the Federal Constitution to dam up or obstruct a “navigable stream”. And after all, the Talisman had – arguably – demonstrated that the Sangamon River was – technically speaking – navigable. There was no agreement.

So the Talisman rammed the dam, threw the anchor over, and as it backed off the anchor pulled away part of the dam, then built up a head of steam heading forward and ran over the dam, damaging it even further. As a result, Captain Bogue was required to pay the owners of the dam \$90 in reparations.

Several days later and without further reported incidents, the Talisman finally completed its journey down the Sangamon to Beardstown. Lincoln and Herndon each made \$40 for the trip. Then they walked back to New Salem from Beardstown. The Talisman ventured on to St. Louis.

In the end, Captain Vincent Bogue, who had financed the entire venture, and was hailed as a conqueror when the Talisman arrived at Portland’s Landing, went bust, leaving his creditors in the lurch.

And finally, in a cruel epilogue, only a few months later while docked at a wharf in St. Louis, the famed steamboat Talisman, with all its hope and all its splendor, went up in flames and burned to the waterline, never to be seen or heard from again.

At this point, one might think that after such a distressing experience with a steamboat portentously named “The Talisman”, there would never again be riverboat travel on the twisted, treacherous Sangamon River and the exasperated Abe Lincoln would give up on our little river. But in actuality, neither was to be the case. As we shall see as our story of Lincoln’s River continues.

9.

Journey of the Talisman: Resurrection

I sat by the front window at JT's Brewery, staring unfocused down Main Street, looking bleak as February lingered far too long, nurturing a rich, dark Talisman Porter. One of the few reminders of the journey of the Talisman on the Sangamon River.

None other than Abe Lincoln helped clear the Sangamon River for the Talisman on its way upstream and helped to navigate it back downstream.

But not long after its downstream journey, as frequently happened with steamboats, made of wood and powered with wood and fire, the Talisman burned to the waterline at a wharf in St. Louis and was gone.

The appropriately named Talisman might have been a portent, directing people away from ever attempting steamboat travel on the Sangamon River. And for 130 years, it was.

And then along came the Trone brothers, Dennis and Robert "Moon". As it happened they were from Central Illinois, but owned an interest in a shipyard in Dubuque and they rather liked the legend of the long-lost Talisman. And they had the vision (and the ability) to bring it back to life. Dennis was a Naval architect and Moon was an attorney (also an essential skill for shipbuilding – ask anyone). So they did.

In July of 1961, the Talisman came steaming down the Mississippi from Dubuque with its 60 horse, diesel-powered, piston-driven, 40 inch stroke paddle wheel with a top speed of ten mph. Then it turned and headed up the Illinois to Beardstown.

It took 16 days to pilot the new Talisman up the seventy miles of the Sangamon River from Beardstown to New Salem. It was, according to one account an "eventful trip." Before really getting into the Sangamon River, the Talisman's rudders were torn off in Muscooten Bay near Beardstown. Upriver, an overhanging tree knocked down one of the boats attractive signature high smokestacks. A collision with an old, collapsed wagon bridge put a hole in the heavy steel hull. Further upriver, they had to remove the remaining smoke stack and upper part of the pilot house to pass under low bridges.

And then came the dam.

Before arriving at its home at a wharf near the New Salem mill, the Talisman had to pass over a dam constructed at Petersburg. And Petersburg wasn't giving in.

So they anchored below the dam and waited. Three weeks passed. Eventually after a July deluge, the Sangamon rose, topped the dam and the Talisman, sensing opportunity, powered up and steamed over the dam and beyond.

The Talisman was a hit! It went on to host banquets, parties, homecomings, proms, and many, many passengers. It left the wharf hourly every day from noon til dark, late May through late August, carrying a load of up to 100 passengers for its journey 2 and a half miles up the Sangamon River and back. One count put the number of Talisman passengers at 60,000 in a single summer season.

Dennis and Moon are both passed now, but I had the wonderful opportunity to speak recently with Mike Stier, licensed Talisman riverboat pilot. He began piloting the Talisman as a summer job in 1989 and continued through 1998 for its final journey.

As one could imagine (especially one who limits one's Sangamon River excursions to canoes and kayaks), piloting a 73 foot long, 45 ton paddle wheeler fully loaded with 100 passengers on the shallow Sangamon River had its challenges. Fortunately, the fully loaded, but flat-bottomed Talisman only drew 18 inches of water. On paddling that stretch by canoe last fall, with my canoe dragging the gravelly river bottom, I could appreciate how important a shallow draft was.

The Talisman was driven by its paddle wheel, and according to Mike, this came in handy during low water. Sometimes he'd have to turn the Talisman around, with the paddle wheel in front, digging its own channel through sand bars for the Talisman to pass through.

During a Coast Guard inspection, the inspector inquired about the Talisman's 'man-overboard' safety procedures. Mike explained to him that he'd just yell down to the overboard passenger to stand there in the river and wait til he could maneuver the boat over to pick him up. The inspector asked who would be assigned to dive in after the passenger. Mike couldn't help but laugh.

In 1998, after nearly 40 years of loyal service, the new journey of the Talisman came to an end. Not only was the boat getting to the end of its 40 year lifespan, but Petersburg would not maintain its dam, even refusing to accept a large federal grant for the purpose. They felt the dam was a hazard and didn't want the liability associated with maintaining it. So they let it fall apart as the Sangamon became too low to run the steamboat.

Now the Talisman rests, with a pleasant view of the placid Sangamon River, left to canoes and kayaks. It sits on a neatly mown grassy lawn, tied off to some large Silver Maples in case it got the urge to float away during high water, which it wouldn't. The high water just comes up and floods the decks, slowly submerging the paddle wheel itself as the Talisman sits on the ground. Able to float no more.

I swallowed the last of my Talisman Porter and pondered the journey of the Talisman and men like Vincent Bogue, Rowan Herndon, Derwin Telheit, Dennis and Moon Trone, Mike Stier and Abe Lincoln. All of whom were captivated by the idea of a steamboat on the Sangamon River.

There aren't many reminders left of the Talisman except this dark porter, a historical marker at a rest stop just north of Springfield on I-55 and the riverboat sitting to rest overlooking the river. I met a fellow river rat who said she used to paddle this part of the river, taking out just downstream of where the Talisman rests on the bank. She knew her journey would end soon when she passed it by. So it goes.

The Talisman remains beautiful in its wrinkly, paint-peeling old age, like an abandoned amusement park ride; it's a testament to good times past, its loyal service and to all of those 60,000 people per year who toured the Sangamon River from its decks, reliving a tiny little slice of Abraham Lincoln's experiences on the Sangamon River. Lincoln's River. Our story continues.

10.

Lincoln the Candidate

Dateline: March 9, New Salem, Illinois.

As we look forward to the fall general election, Lincoln's River devotes this week's column to providing readers with information about one of the more promising young upcoming candidates. We recently had the opportunity to catch up with state house candidate Abraham Lincoln at the Rutledge Tavern in New Salem. At 21 years of age, Abe is one of the youngest candidates for election this year; a local shopkeeper and a newcomer to the area political scene.

LR: Any opening thoughts, Mr. Lincoln?

AL: Having become a candidate for representative in the next General Assembly, it becomes my duty to make my sentiments known to the people I propose to represent.

LR: That's great, Abe. What do you see as one of our more important issues?

AL: Time and experience have verified a demonstration: the public utility of internal improvements.

LR: You mean an infrastructure plan? That's great to hear, Abe! Please, continue.

AL: No person will deny that the poorest and most thinly populated counties would be greatly benefitted by the opening of good roads, and in the clearing of navigable streams within their limits.

LR: That's true, Abe. But I hear some hesitancy in your voice...

AL: There cannot justly be any objection to having railroads and canals, any more than any other good things, providing they cost nothing. The only objection is to paying for them; the objection to paying arises from the want of ability to pay.

LR: That's a great point. What kind of proposals are on the table?

AL: A meeting has been held enquiring into the expediency of constructing a railroad from the Illinois River through the town of Jacksonville in Sangamon County. This is indeed a very desirable object. The railroad is not interrupted by either high or low water or freezing weather.

LR: Sounds good, but I suspect you have some concerns...

AL: However desirable an object the construction of a railroad through our country may be; however high our imaginations may be heated at thoughts of it – there is always a heart appalling

shock accompanying the account of its cost, which forces us to shrink from our pleasing anticipations.

LR: Have you heard any initial estimates?

AL: The probable cost of this contemplated railroad is estimated at \$290,000 – the bare statement of which, in my opinion, is sufficient to justify the belief that the improvement of the Sangamon River is an object much better suited to our infant resources. (Author's note: Total prior year revenue for state of Illinois: \$290,000)

LR: An interesting point, Abe. But is the Sangamon a navigable river?

AL: Respecting this view, I think I may say without fear of being contradicted, that its navigation may be rendered completely practicable as high as the mouth of the South Fork, or probably higher, to vessels of from 25 to 30 tons burden, for at least one half of all common years, and to vessels of much greater burden a part of that time.

LR: That's impressive, Abe. Are you sure?

AL: It is probable that for the last twelve months I have given as particular attention to this river as any other person in the country. In March of 1831, I commenced building a flatboat on the Sangamon and took her out in the course of the spring. We crossed the mill dam in the last days of April when the water was lower than it had been since the breaking of winter in February. The principal difficulties we encountered in descending the river were from drifted timber, which is not difficult to remove. Knowing almost precisely the height of water, I believe I am safe in saying that it has often been higher or lower since.

LR: So the Sangamon River is navigable.

AL: From this view of the subject, it appears that my calculations with the regard to the navigation of the Sangamon cannot be unfounded in reason; but whatever may be its natural advantages it never can be practically useful to any great extent without being greatly improved.

LR: So what would you propose?

AL: Of all parts of this river, none will require so much labor to make it navigable as the last thirty or thirty-five miles. This route is upon prairie land the whole distance; so by removing the turf a sufficient width and damming up the old channel, the whole river would wash its way through thereby curtailing the distance and increasing the velocity of the current very considerably. There would be no timber upon the banks to obstruct its navigation in future; and being nearly straight, the timber, which might float in at the head would be apt to go clear through.

LR: I must say Abe, it sounds like you've really thought this one through.

AL: I believe the improvement of the Sangamon River to be vastly important and highly desirable to the people of this county and if elected, any measure having this for its object shall receive my support.

LR: Abe, unfortunately our time together is nearing an end. Any parting thoughts for our readers?

AL: Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. I have no other so great as being truly esteemed of my fellow men. How far I shall succeed in this ambition is yet to be developed. I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.

LR: Nicely put, Abe. We here at Lincoln's River sincerely thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Author's note: All of Lincoln's quotes here are taken, with minor edits, from Lincoln's First Political Announcement, a statement penned by Lincoln himself and published in the Sangamo Journal on March 9, 1832. Later that fall, Lincoln was to lose that election. But of course there was much more to come from this remarkable young man. As our story of Lincoln's River continues.

11.

Lincoln the *Environmentalist*?

WWLD?

What would Lincoln do?

I was walking down Highway 47 along the stretch of roadway that the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy “adopted”. In this case, “adopting” means “picking up other people’s garbage several times a year.” It’s an interesting experience which gives one lots of time to think.

The first thing that comes to mind is how unfathomably careless and unconcerned an astonishingly large proportion of our population is. After taking that last bite of Big Mac or swallowing that last swig from their can of Bud Light (while driving), it’s astounding how many people will just toss it out their car window for us to pick up.

I imagine most Lincoln’s River readers would never even contemplate such a thing. I know this because I have yet to pick up any gently used copies of Lincoln’s River on the roadside along Highway 47.

But the question for Lincoln’s River readers is: “What would Lincoln do?” And that is an interesting question. As great of a man as Abraham Lincoln was, saving our nation from dividing against itself and all that, I wonder if he’d come out to pick up trash along Highway 47.

Not that politicians don’t do such things. On several past outings, Mahomet Mayor Sean Widener has been known to kick in to pitch in during highway cleanups. Is Sean a better man than Abe? It’s certainly worthy of contemplation.

I ask this because in the last chapter, Abe started his first nascent effort at becoming a politician. And part of his platform was to dig a straight channel cutting across more than 35 miles of the twisting and turning Sangamon River south of New Salem. The sole purpose of such an effort was only to make the river more easily navigable for commercial traffic on the river between its confluence with the Illinois River near Beardstown and New Salem and Springfield.

As I read up on this part of Abe’s approach to natural areas, it hit me that Abe was no naturalist. And that’s a painful realization as another “Earth Day” approaches.

I’ve been writing about Abe’s experiences on and around the Sangamon River, researching, reading about, and compiling his experiences on, in and around the river and relating them to my own similar experiences. Sometimes this makes me feel like – honestly - Abe and I, we’d be buds. This based on our mutual love and respect for this beautiful central Illinois waterway.

But alas, Abe was no naturalist. Sometimes, from our comfortable sofas watching Hallmark Specials about Little Houses on Prairies, we romantically imagine strapping young men and capable young women snapping their suspenders in the morning as they rise to step out into the

great outdoors, carving a life out of the untamed wild. We imagine people who worked in close collaboration with nature and natural cycles, who knew about the land, the trees, how to feed themselves with a bowie knife, a rifle and a fishing pole, or with an ox and a plow. Then we flip the cable channel to a BBC documentary about the exotic birds of Madagascar. Yes, we do love our nature! Just like our forbearers!

But while they understood nature far more than we do today, it's kind of doubtful that they loved it. In fact, it's far more likely that most thought nature was a pain in the a**.

Abe certainly did. Preceding such lovers of nature like Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau by only a few years, Abe saw nature to be conquered, rivers to be straightened, "improved" for the benefit of commercial traffic and the expansion of growth and business in America's vast mid-section. Abe was a consummate man of his time, an engineer, a man who saw possibility where others may see the beauty of a pleasantly meandering watercourse.

And what's wrong with that? Even Mahomet's Mayor Widener wants to bring business growth to Mahomet. And yet, there he was, picking up trash along the highway with the rest of us intrepid volunteers.

So I'm afraid the answer to WWLD would probably be no, he wouldn't be out picking up trash along a highway. I say this for many, many reasons. First, pioneers didn't litter. Not because they had any actual moral or ethical opposition to littering per se, but because there was a distinct lack of Big Macs and Bud Lights.

But more importantly, Abe was a forward-thinking renaissance man of large ideas and even larger ambitions. When Lincoln was on the Sangamon River, he undoubtedly saw much of what we see today: slowly flowing smooth water, Sycamores overhanging the river, blue skies above and the occasional white-tail sauntering along the banks. But Abe also saw potential, possibility; a route connecting America's central Illinois frontier to the Mississippi River and the entire world beyond. He saw progress, the future, and he wanted to be a part of making that happen.

It's not at all clear that Abe, for all his amazing feats, was about appreciating the subtle beauty of a river like the Sangamon or about making our planet a more beautiful place by picking up other people's garbage. However, I have to add that it's pretty doubtful that Abe would have tossed any garbage from his horseback while out riding the Circuit, either.

So perhaps I'm wrong, and perhaps Abe would have followed the example set by Mahomet's Mayor and leant a helping hand to our efforts. And perhaps as Abe was walking along, he'd say something profound like, "back more than four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth in central Illinois some nice new roads. And when we did, we were dedicated to the proposition that no man would toss their Bud Light cans out their window. We could *never* have been this careless and unconcerned."

This Earth Day and beyond, try to imagine Abraham Lincoln out there picking up your casually discarded beer cans. And as you go to pitch it out the window, ask yourself, what would Lincoln do?

As our story of Lincoln's River continues.

12.

The Sangamon River: Mother of Invention

All creation is a mine, and every man, a miner. – A. Lincoln

To Abraham Lincoln, the Sangamon River must have been an enigma.

Here was this river, a primary mode of transit, running right by New Salem - the town where he found himself living. An opportunity to bring prosperity. Waiting for people to appreciate it. Yet it had...issues. Mostly stemming from variable water depth and exposed shoals during seasons of low flow.

Lincoln, again: *The whole earth, and all within it, upon it, and round about it, including himself ... are the infinitely various leads from which man... was to dig out his destiny.*

1832. Rivers are the primary transportation corridor. A large map of the upper Mississippi basin at Land Between the Lakes Visitor's Center in Kentucky shows every single significant town of that day dotted along rivers. So here was the Sangamon River in Lincoln's mind: opportunity. Yet to make this opportunity real, it needed...something.

During his first campaign in 1832, his four terms as an Illinois state legislator between 1834 and 1842 and as a Representative to the US House from 1847 to 1849, Lincoln remained a "vociferous supporter" of internal improvements, advocating for creating roads, bridges, railways and canals and clearing impediments to improve river travel.

Traveling home on the steamboat *Globe* from his first session as a Representative in Washington in 1848, Lincoln watched as the passing steamboat *Canada* navigated the shallow waters of the Detroit River by forcing empty barrels and boxes under the sides to buoy it over shallow water. Thinking of how he raised his flatboat over the mill dam at New Salem, for the remainder of the trip he thought about designing a vessel to navigate shallow waters.

So Lincoln invented a very special craft with adjustable buoyant air chambers that could reduce its draft to navigate shallow waters. According to Jason Emerson, author of *Lincoln the Inventor*, this vessel was "the realization of Lincoln's understanding of the needs of the western American as well as an outgrowth of his long-held political belief in internal improvements."

For two months between October and November 1848, Lincoln worked on a model of the craft in his partner William Herndon's office. While whittling, he talked about "the revolution it was destined to work on steamboat navigation." Herndon: "Although I regarded the thing as impracticable, I said nothing, out of respect for Lincoln's well-known reputation as a boatman."

When finished the model remained in their office and, according to Herndon, “Lincoln would expatiate on the marvels and merits of the device for the benefit of the few persons who dropped in and were sufficiently interested to listen to his vivid and rosy predictions.”

On completion, Lincoln demonstrated his model to passersby in a horse trough across the street from the law office to prove that steamboat navigation on the Sangamon River was practicable. Lincoln announced: “now is the time to witness the successful navigation by model of the Sangamon!” The novel invention worked and, while there were doubters as to its practicability for actual transportation, they gave Lincoln three cheers and were off.

When Lincoln left Springfield for Washington late that November, he took his model with him and headed to the US Patent Office where he successfully patented his invention.

The Patent states: “I, Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, in the County of Sangamon, in the State of Illinois, have invented a new and improved manner of combining adjustable buoyant air chambers with a steamboat or other vessel for the purpose of enabling their draught of water to be readily lessened to enable them to pass through shallow water, without discharging their cargo.” Patent No. 6489, May 22, 1849.

With this approval, Abraham Lincoln, inspired by the necessity of navigation on the Sangamon River, became the first – and only – US President to hold a US Patent for his own invention.

Emerson writes: “Here Lincoln had achieved exactly what he believed was the quintessence of man’s greatness and advancement and determination: he had created an actual mechanical device to help improve man’s labor and increase his bounty.”

Yet, after designing the vessel, constructing the model, demonstrating its practicability, and patenting the invention, Lincoln never did anything further to promote it. According to patent office historian Harry Goldsmith, it “just became another one among those thousands of patents which fail of commercial success.” William Herndon called it a “perfect failure”.

After he was elected US President in 1860, the Scientific American ran an illustrated article about his invention, offering the opinion that “We hope the author of it will have better success in presiding as Chief Magistrate over the people of the United States than he has had as an inventor.”

In April 1861, Harper’s Weekly saw Lincoln’s invention as metaphor, “It has fallen to his lot to be in command of a ship of uncommon burden on a voyage of uncommon dangers. It devolves upon him to navigate the ship of state through shallows of unprecedented peril, and over flats of unparalleled extent. The difficulty is how to prevent her grounding and becoming a wreck.” Those who have paddled the Sangamon in late summer can surely relate.

Harper’s went on: “We trust the President will set the fashion of using his own patent. Unless he can set his air-chambers at work so as to diminish the draught of his vessel and increase her buoyancy, he will run no small risk of losing her altogether.”

Later, after Lincoln's death in 1865, the Scientific American sang a different tune, using his invention as metaphor to praise Lincoln's "skill in buoying the great vessel of state over dangerous breakers that has made his name honored throughout the whole civilized world."

While Lincoln's invention remained little more than an intriguingly curious notion, Lincoln himself remained firmly committed to the necessity of invention: "Man is not the only man who labors; but he is the only one who improves his workmanship. This improvement, he effects by Discoveries and Inventions."— First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, April 6, 1858.

The power of invention was coupled with a belief in the necessity of the patent system itself: "The patent system secured to the inventor, for a limited time, the exclusive use of his invention; and thereby added the fuel of interest to the fire of genius." Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, February 11, 1859.

The latter part of this statement is now etched in marble above the northeast entrance to the US Patent Office in Washington.

And so for Lincoln, the Sangamon was the Mother of Invention.

For us today, living here in and around Mahomet, Illinois, the Sangamon River is an enigma.

Here is this river, a primary means of recreation and enjoyment of the outdoors, running right by the center of Mahomet - the town where we all live. An opportunity to bring prosperity. Waiting for people to appreciate it.

13.

Lincoln's River: The Final Chapter

I stood on the brand new bicycle bridge crossing the Sangamon River on the Sangamon Valley Bicycle Trail that leads north from Springfield between Stuart Park and Irwin Bridge Road in the direction of New Salem. Once a rail bridge, this tall wooden bridge with a spectacular tree-top level view of the Sangamon River and the surrounding landscape is the latest extension of the Sangamon Valley Trail, opening just last November.

As I gazed out over the Sangamon River, it was hard for a guy like me not to spend time pondering the thought that just a brief 187 years ago, Abraham Lincoln crossed by just underneath me.

When people experience the Sangamon River, their first thought isn't necessarily "Abe Lincoln". But the Sangamon River was very much a part of Abe Lincoln's early life and career.

People thought of rivers differently then. Rivers were transportation corridors; rivers like the Sangamon connected people like Abe Lincoln to the Illinois River, the Mississippi, and to the entire "riverine West".

When Lincoln first gazed upon the Sangamon River from his family's homestead on the river just west of Decatur, he apparently had the same thought. So at 21 years old in 1831, Abe left his family home after the "Winter of Deep Snows" by canoe on the Sangamon River, destined for Springfield, New Salem, New Orleans, and ultimately Washington DC.

I've told most of the story of Lincoln's River, the canoe journey departure from his family's homestead near Decatur, building a flatboat in Sangamo Town and piloting it downriver to New Orleans, the journey of the Talisman and then Lincoln's advocacy for river improvements and his patented design to create a vessel to traverse shallow rivers such as the Sangamon.

Into the 1830's as a legislator, Lincoln advocated for Sangamon River improvements in hopes that the river could realize its potential as a transportation link between Central Illinois and the world beyond, mostly involving channelization or elaborate canal projects. He sponsored, wrote and voted for several such bills supporting canal construction, but these bills were never implemented during Lincoln's time.

Lincoln served in the Illinois legislature, in the US Congress for one term, and then became a full time attorney.

During his time as an attorney riding horseback around the 8th Judicial Circuit, Lincoln and his crew of travelling attorneys and judges frequently crossed the Sangamon River, mostly by riding through it across river fords, these being the days before bridges. They crossed the river north of

Springfield, at Monticello and then at Decatur they crossed the river and came back after their court sessions.

Author Guy Fraker, in “Lincoln’s Ladder to the Presidency” opens his book with a tale of a harrowing river crossing of the flooded Sangamon River at Decatur by Lincoln and Circuit Judge David Davis.

Yet, occasional river crossings were to be Lincoln’s only experiences of the Sangamon River during this time.

Ultimately, the coming of the steam engine and the rapid growth of railroads sealed the fate of rivers such as the Sangamon as transportation corridors, leaving only the largest rivers such as the Illinois and the Mississippi as viable transportation routes.

By 1857, Lincoln - like most people - recognized that the future of our country belonged to railroads. Hired as an attorney by Illinois Central Railroad, Lincoln tried what author Brian McGinty called “Lincoln’s Greatest Case”. In our story, this case – metaphorically – shows Abe issuing the ultimate betrayal of any love and any hope he may have had for river travel, especially on smaller rivers such as the Sangamon.

The case, “Hurd et al. v. The Railroad Bridge Company” arose after the steamboat Effie Afton, piloted by Jacob Hurd, crashed into the Rock Island Bridge on May 6, 1856 and caught fire, causing substantial damage. This bridge was the first railroad bridge ever built across the Mississippi River; the first to connect the Eastern US to the vast Western US by rail. The boat owners sued the railroad company for obstructing river traffic to recover their losses of the steamboat and also to have the rail bridge torn down. The case came at a crucial time of steamboats v. railroads that also pitted old, established river towns such as St. Louis against newly rising rail towns such as Chicago. Depending on who won, the future of our nation was at stake. McGinty calls the case “the most important legal battle that Lincoln ever fought.”

Lincoln defended the railroad’s position, stressing the importance of rail traffic over steamboats to our nation’s future. In the end, the jury voted 9-3 in favor of the railroad and against the steamboat owners, a hung jury, since it was not a unanimous verdict. On appeal, the case was decided in favor of the railroads which was instrumental in rail overtaking steamboats – and by association, rivers - as the nation’s primary corridors of transportation.

Not long after that, Lincoln left central Illinois and the reaches of the Sangamon River for Washington DC to guide the country through a far greater controversy, only to ultimately return by casket.

Today, the Sangamon is now channelized in certain areas far downstream of Mahomet, as Lincoln may have wanted, but this was mostly part of a greater effort to help drain the wetlands of Central Illinois in anticipation of growing agricultural demands for water drainage rather than to create the river-based transportation corridor as Lincoln had anticipated.

So I pondered the irony of standing on an old railroad bridge over the Sangamon River, long since abandoned by those same railroads that made steamboats obsolete. A bridge now reborn as

part of a modern transportation corridor providing a new generation of health-conscious, outdoor-loving cyclists with an amazing scenic view of the Sangamon River.

In 1831, Lincoln himself passed by this spot where the bridge crosses the river on a flatboat, with the Sangamon River leading him to places of which he never could have dreamed. At various times, he may have had high hopes for the Sangamon River, but at every turn the Sangamon wanted to be just a peaceful, slow, meandering, shallow Central Illinois river.

Which is, and always was, what it was meant to be. A place for peace, relaxation, and to sit and ponder the Sangamon River's role in the life of a great man, Abraham Lincoln.

*** * The End * ***

...and the Beginning...

Epilogue

Lincoln's River, Our River

As I write this, the earth has already passed the point of the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year and Summer is well under way! So I'd like to invite you to experience what the Sangamon River Alliance calls "Lincoln's River, Our River".

Starting with the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy in Mahomet, opportunities abound to get out there on, near, or in the river. First, there is no better way to experience Lincoln's river as Lincoln did back in 1831 than by canoe. Every month, the USRC hosts 1 to 2 paddler meet-up float trips, usually led and coordinated by me. If you have a canoe or kayak, feel free to join in. The USRC will lay out the route and we'll work together to provide transportation from launch site to take out point.

What's more, through many generous donations, the USRC owns several canoes and kayaks that paddlers can always use for FREE on any float trip (some experience with steering a canoe from the rear is required). Paddler meet-ups are usually on the first and third weekend of summer months, weather and river conditions permitting. Next trip is scheduled for this Saturday, July 20. Check the Facebook page or the website calendar of the USRC for regular updates at www.sangamonriver.org.

The USRC also hosts several other events to get people closer to our river. The last Saturday in August, the USRC co-hosts the Annual Duck Race. A fundraiser for the USRC and Mahomet Parks and Rec, everyone in town can get in the race by purchasing a chance on a duck for \$5. We drop the ducks in the river off of the old iron bicycle bridge in Mahomet and they race downriver for 100 yards or so to the finish 'funnel'. The winner can take home \$500 and others can win up to 30 other fabulous prizes!

After that is our Annual Mussel Survey on the Sangamon River at Riverbend Forest Preserve. In 2017 at the Sangamon River Forest Preserve we had 60 volunteers and found over 1,000 mussels representing over 14 different species in a 200 foot stretch of river. Everyone is invited to come out and crawl around in the river scouring the bottom for mussels and helping with identification and counting. We'll identify species such as the Pistolgrip, Monkeyface, Heelsplitter, Pimpleback, Fatmucket, Wabash Pigtoe and many more. And no, they aren't for dinner. Not only do they (reportedly) taste awful, they are also protected in Illinois. After identifying and counting, we put them right back in the river.

The Second Saturday in September 15 we host the Annual Sangamon River Cleanup event. Bring your own watercraft or we provide watercraft for free on a first-come, first-served basis. Do our community a big favor by beautifying our river and removing Styrofoam cups, beer cans, fish bait containers, plastic water bottles, fertilizer bags, charcoal grills, air conditioners, water heaters and car doors. All this and more is out there and waiting for you! Join us!

As if that weren't enough, you can hop in your car and explore even more of Lincoln's River. Start your experience as Lincoln did, with a kayak outing from Lincoln's Homestead State Park south of Decatur. They installed a brand new kayak and canoe launch so you can launch just as Abraham Lincoln did on that cold March day in 1831. To find out even more about Lincoln's experiences on and connections to the Sangamon River you can head down to Rock Springs Nature Center in Decatur and learn how rivers played an important role in Lincoln's life. Then you can take a walk by the Sangamon and see it much as Lincoln did.

As a matter of fact, based on Lincoln's experience on the Sangamon, the entire stretch of the River from Lincoln Trail Homestead to Petersburg is designated as the Lincoln's Heritage Water Trail. This is from their website, which says it better than I can:

The Water Trail provides the public with a unique opportunity to not simply see the places Lincoln lived, but to experience some of the places, vistas and adventures that are now much as they were 150 years ago, when Lincoln made this trek. From remnants of bison trails, river crossings, old mill sites and abandoned buildings long forgotten, you can relive history.

Today, Lincoln's Sangamon River is essentially undeveloped and is a fantastic natural resource for canoeists, kayakers and photographers. History awaits your discovery!

In October, watch for "Canoes and Candlelight", also hosted by LHWTA. It's an informational float trip during the day down the Sangamon River followed by an evening at Lincoln's New Salem, open during the night time and lit with candlelight, campfires and hearth fires in the cabins, complete with period re-enactors and hot apple cider! More details on their website soon.

There are many ways that you can share in the Lincoln's River Experience this summer and anytime. And don't forget to visit the many Forest Preserves in Champaign County along the Sangamon including Riverbend, Lake of the Woods, and my personal peaceful favorite, the Sangamon River Forest Preserve south of Fisher.

What are you waiting for? Get out there and experience 'Lincoln's River – Our River.'

For comprehensive information and links to activities and events up and down the Sangamon River from here to Petersburg, be sure and visit the website of the Sangamon River Alliance: www.sangamonriveralliance.org. For more on the activities near Mahomet, Illinois, visit: sangamonriver.org.

