

Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, the Bridge, and the Making of America

Marvin Bergman

State Historical Society of Iowa

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Bergman, Marvin. "Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, the Bridge, and the Making of America." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 80-82.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12454>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

In chapter four, "Father and Son," Dirck emphasizes the tension between Abraham and Thomas. The father provided well materially for his large family by farming and carpentry, but there was always the threat of failure and the county poorhouse. Thomas did not drink or gamble and was a member of a Calvinist Baptist church. Even so, Thomas was perceived as a "piddler" and was only semiliterate. Abraham, on the other hand, disliked manual labor, read constantly, did not participate in organized religion, and disliked having to turn over his wages to his father until he reached adulthood.

Chapter five, "Growing," emphasizes the alienation of father and son. The son created partial separation from the father by working in small businesses in nearby Ohio River towns and even took a long journey to New Orleans with another teenaged boy during which Abraham became disgusted with slavery upon seeing slaves in chains.

In chapter six, "Leaving," we see Abraham helping his family move to the central Illinois prairie in 1830 to farm richer soil. After the move, Lincoln quickly divorced himself from the family by moving to the Springfield region in order to ascend to the professional urban class. His example embodied the opportunity for success for ambitious white men in the urbanizing antebellum Midwest. The 1787 Ordinance made a great difference in Lincoln's life and for many other midwesterners.

Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, the Bridge, and the Making of America, by Brian McGinty. New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., a division of W. W. Norton & Co., 2015. 260 pp. Illustrations, timeline, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95 hardcover, \$15.95 paperback.

Reviewer Marvin Bergman has been the editor of the *Annals of Iowa* since 1987. He edited the *Iowa History Reader* (1996 and 2008) and coedited *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* (2008).

The legal case *Hurd et al. v. The Railroad Bridge Company*, better known as the *Effie Afton* case, is the subject of a paragraph or so in many histories of related topics, such as railroads, steamboats, Abraham Lincoln, and regional economic development in the Midwest. Here, in fewer than 200 pages of text, the case gets a detailed treatment and is thoroughly set in its context, with its ramifications also spelled out.

For context, readers are treated to accounts of such topics as steamboats and steamboating on the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the development of railroads and Lincoln's advocacy of that development, the history of bridge building going back to Roman times and beyond, the history of Rock Island (which includes Dred Scott's residence there as well as a brief account of the Black Hawk War, in which Lincoln

served as a militiaman), and Lincoln's involvement in a few other cases relating to river traffic and in many both for and against railroads. (In one case, Lincoln successfully represented the Illinois Central but then sued the company when it refused to pay his \$2,000 fee because that was "as much as Daniel Webster himself would have charged." Lincoln sued for \$5,000 instead—the shocking equivalent of about \$130,000 in today's dollars—and won.) This context is usually helpful and interesting, although sometimes it seems excessive: Do we really need a biography of the author for whom the *Effie Afton* was named?

The trial itself is the subject of just 4 of 14 chapters (56 of 192 pages). Technically, the case was a suit by the owners of the *Effie Afton* to recover the damages they incurred when the steamboat and its contents were destroyed (along with a portion of the bridge) when it crashed into a pier of the Rock Island Bridge, the first railroad bridge over the Mississippi River, completed just a month earlier. In effect, though, it was a case that pitted steamboat interests against railroad interests or, to put it more simply, a case of St. Louis versus Chicago. Official transcripts of the trial were lost in the great Chicago Fire of 1871, but readers of this book might actually be grateful for that. McGinty relies on newspaper reports from the *Chicago Press* and especially the *Missouri Republican*, whose reporter recorded much of the trial in his own shorthand and passed it along to readers. McGinty complains that both reporters "were content from time to time to summarize points they considered marginally important and eliminate those they considered obvious, repetitious, or merely trivial" (119). Readers might occasionally wish that McGinty had used more of that kind of judgment.

A couple of concluding chapters quickly summarize Lincoln's subsequent career, emphasizing his support for a transcontinental railroad beginning in Omaha, and describe subsequent efforts to bridge the upper Mississippi River.

The title is somewhat disingenuous. Although the author highlights Lincoln's role in the story at every opportunity, he also takes pains to show that Lincoln was not a lead attorney in the *Effie Afton* case, and it's not clear how prominent his role actually was. This is a story primarily about the case, not about Abraham Lincoln.

It's unlikely that historians of Lincoln, railroads, steamboats, or the economic development of the Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century will learn anything significant from the treatment of those topics here, and there's no real thesis, except for the author's advocacy of the importance of the case for Lincoln and for sectional development (the result strengthened the ties linking Iowa and the Great Plains to Chicago at the

cost of St. Louis and New Orleans). Most of the context is based, appropriately enough, on secondary sources. Sometimes the choice of secondary source is questionable; for example, his account of the famous 1854 Grand Excursion on the recently completed Chicago & Rock Island route from Chicago to Rock Island and then up the Mississippi by steamboat to St. Anthony Falls relies on a 1933 article in the *Palimpsest* by William J. Petersen rather than the more recent and more thorough book, *Grand Excursion*, by Steven J. Keillor (2004). If there's nothing particularly new here for scholars, however, the narrative is clear and engaging enough for the book to appeal to any lay person who might be interested in the topics it covers. McGinty's book complements the earlier privately published book by Larry Riney, *Hell Gate of the Mississippi: The Effie Afton Trial and Abraham Lincoln's Role in It* (2006) in illuminating an important legal case for the development of Iowa and the Midwest.

Prairie Defender: The Murder Trials of Abraham Lincoln, by George R. Dekle Sr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017. xiv, 248 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.50 hardcover.

Reviewer John A. Lupton is executive director of the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission. He was formerly an assistant editor on *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln* and has written extensively about Lincoln as a lawyer.

Since the publication of the *Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* (LPAL) in 2000, new books on Lincoln's pre-presidential career have enlightened readers not only on his 25-year law practice but on midwestern antebellum society as well. In *Prairie Defender*, George Dekle Sr. relies on 30 years of experience as a criminal lawyer paired with the documentary record made available by LPAL to examine Lincoln's criminal cases generally, and murder cases specifically.

Dekle argues against a long-standing misconception that Lincoln detested criminal practice and was not good at it (2). He focuses primarily on Lincoln's 18 murder cases but mentions other criminal cases — most notably, a child-rape case in which Lincoln served as prosecutor. He devotes one chapter to Lincoln's pardon practice and concludes the book with a summary assessment of Lincoln's murder cases, deconstructing several popular myths about his criminal caseload.

By examining famous (Almanac, Harrison, and Goings) and not-so-famous (Patterson, Longnecker, and Bantzhouse) murder cases, Dekle provides, for the first time, a complete study of Lincoln's murder cases, demonstrating that Lincoln was a competent and successful criminal