

The Town Abraham Lincoln Warned:

The Living Namesake Heritage of
Lincoln, Illinois

D. Leigh Henson

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Book design, including the cover, and cover photos by the author: the photos on the outside and inside of the front cover show statues of Abraham Lincoln in folk art and high art, respectively, in Lincoln, Illinois—his first namesake town. The outside front cover photo depicts the 350-pound, twelve-foot Lincoln statue, made with fiberglass, on *The Railsplitter Covered Wagon*, the world's largest covered wagon according to *The Guinness Book of World Records*. A former Illinois State Police officer created this work. The photo inside the front cover shows the seven-foot-two-inch, painted plaster statue of Mr. Lincoln in the rotunda of the Logan County Courthouse, and this statue embodies the work of two acclaimed sculptors. Both of these statues, described in more detail in Chapter 7, are important components of the distinctive Lincoln heritage of this town. The photos inside the back cover show sites where this community's Lincoln heritage could be further developed, as explained in the Conclusions and Recommendations.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of my parents,
Lydia Jane Wilson Henson and Edward Darold Henson,
life-long residents of the first Lincoln namesake town and
its historic Postville neighborhood;
to the memory of my teachers in Lincoln, Illinois; and
to David Doolin

**Commentary on
The Town Abraham Lincoln Warned**

“It wasn’t planned, but Leigh Henson’s book fits very nicely with my recently published book [*Abraham Lincoln in Logan County, Illinois 1834—1860*]. Leigh’s work basically picks up where my book ends.”
—Paul J. Beaver, professor emeritus of history, Lincoln College of Lincoln, Illinois

“A splendid story of Lincoln, Illinois’ heritage as the unique town and its college that were named for Abraham Lincoln during his lifetime. Thus, no other location can claim that honor. Professor Henson has mined his primary sources well and writes with style and verve. His documented book is a model which could be emulated by others who wish to preserve their heritage and history.” —Dr. Wayne C. Temple, chief deputy director, Illinois State Archives, and author of *Abraham Lincoln, from Skeptic to Prophet; By Square and Compass: the Building of Lincoln’s Home and Its Saga; Abraham Lincoln and Others at the St. Nicholas; Lincoln the Railsplitter*; and others

“Here is a true labor of love: Leigh Henson, born and raised in Lincoln, Illinois, but long a resident in Missouri, has returned frequently in person, and continually in imagination and via the internet. His aim has been to discover the way the town has learned to remember and celebrate its own history, and its relationship to the state’s most famous citizen, Abraham Lincoln. This was the first town named for Lincoln, who helped in its creation, owned a piece of ground in it, and ceremonially christened it with watermelon juice. As an advocate of faithful historical representations, Henson is one of many heroes in his own story, which, mixing nostalgia, patriotism, and commercialism, tells a rich tale about ‘flyover country’—considerably more interesting than denizens of our great metropolises might think.” —Robert M. McColley, professor emeritus of history, the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

“I once heard Ken Burns say about the value of history—‘How can you possibly know where you are going if you don’t know where you have been?’ D. Leigh Henson’s writing helps us understand where we have been, who we are, and how Abraham Lincoln’s first namesake town has been shaped by that heritage. The town may be Lincoln, but Henson’s weaving of time and place and heritage together tells a story of small town America.” —James A. Knecht, native Lincolnite and justice of the Illinois Appellate Court

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Foreword	xiii
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xxi
Introduction	1
The Hometown in Midwestern Literature	1
The First Lincoln Namesake Town in Literature.....	3
The First Lincoln Namesake Town’s Lincoln Heritage in Literature	7
Overview of the Lincoln Sites in His First Namesake Town.....	9
1. Speculation, Appropriation, and Collaboration: The Original Postville Courthouse, Henry Ford, and the Postville Courthouse Replica	21
The Original Postville Courthouse (1839).....	21
Henry Ford’s Purchase of the Postville Courthouse (1929)	22
The Postville Courthouse Replica (1953).....	24
Questions About Postville Courthouse Chimneys.....	28
Recent History of the Postville Courthouse Replica	30
Conclusion	31
2. From the Indoor Elite to the People in the Street: Twentieth-Century Celebrations.....	43
The Centennial Celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s Birth (1909)	43
The Centennial Celebration of the Founding of Lincoln (1953).....	49

Conclusion	60
3. A Lincoln Heritage Story with Legs Longer Than His: The Question of Whether Abraham Lincoln Practiced Law in the Lincoln Christian Church (1911—2010).....	71
Judge L.B. Stringer: First Proponent of the “Abe in Church” Legend	72
James T. Hickey’s Answer to the Question.....	73
Stringer’s Mistaken Identification of Lincoln’s Handwriting ...	76
The Reminiscence of Jacob Hoke Beidler	78
Conclusion	82
4. Pushing the Heritage Fun Envelope: Festivals	87
The Annual Abraham Lincoln National Railsplitting Festival (1970—2010).....	87
The Lincoln Heritage Days Festival (2003—2009)	90
Conclusion	92
5. Old Wine in New Bottles: The Sesquicentennial Celebration of the Founding of Lincoln (2003) and Other Commemorations	99
The Deskins Tavern Well Restoration Initiative (2001—2003)	100
The Proposed Postville Historic Preservation Ordinance (2001).....	101
The Sesquicentennial Celebration of the Founding of Lincoln (2003).....	102
New Historical Markers (2000—2010).....	110
Conclusion	116
6. Discovering and Showcasing Buried Treasure: The Bicentennial Celebration of Lincoln’s Birth (2008—2009).....	127
Preliminary Planning	127

Table of Contents

vii

The Author’s Proposals for the Lincoln
Bicentennial Celebration 128

The Author’s Research for the Re-enactment Play Script..... 131

Additional Bicentennial Celebration Activities 134

Conclusion 135

7. Almost Nothing Is Carved in Stone: Lincoln Statues,
Busts, and Life Masks 147

 The Problem of the Union Soldier
 Statue on the Civil War Monument 147

 The Max Bachman Lincoln Statue 154

 The Lincoln Statues at Lincoln College 156

 The Lincoln Christening Statue in
 the State Bank of Lincoln 158

 The Proposed Lincoln Statue as
 Tall as the Statue of Liberty..... 159

 The Proposed Van Bibber Granite Lincoln Statues..... 164

 The Proposed Statue of Mr. Lincoln at
 His 1858 Rally-Speech 165

 Busts and Life Masks of Lincoln..... 166

 Folk Art Statues 168

 Conclusion 169

8. Finishing Touches: Other Art in the Living Namesake Heritage ... 177

 Lincoln-Related Photographs 177

 Paintings and Drawings 180

 Souvenir Lincoln Busts 184

 Images of Mr. Lincoln on the Street..... 184

Documentary/Promotional Film and Video..... 185

Commemorative China Plates 189

Miscellaneous Memorabilia..... 190

Conclusion 192

Conclusions and Recommendations 201

 Conclusions 201

 Recommendations 204

About the Author 214

List of Illustrations

Unless otherwise noted under the captions in the text, the photos and other images are courtesy of the author and his wife, Pat Hartman.

The 1964 Postville Park Historical Marker	xx
The Author’s Mother, Jane Wilson, in 1923 at Age Two; Route 4; and Postville Park	xxiv
The Author in 1944 at Age Two with Great-Grandmother Parlee Webb Henson in Postville Park	xxiv
The Author in Postville Park with His First Car, circa 1945	xxv
The Third Generation of the Harrison Franklin Wilson Family Playing Croquet in Postville Park in the Mid-1950s	xxv
One of the Earliest Images of Mr. Lincoln in His First Namesake Town’s Historical Record.....	xxvi
A 1970s-Era Billboard South of Lincoln on Route 66	xxvi
Jacob Hoke Beidler.....	17
The Cover of Beidler’s Poetic Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln.....	18
Four Who Debated the Fate of the Original Postville Courthouse	19
D.F. Nickols Holding His Co-authored <i>Mentor Graham</i>	20
The Postville Courthouse Replica in 2010	39
The Deskins Well and Postville Courthouse Replicas	39
The 1917 D.A.R. Lincoln Memorial Boulder at the Postville Courthouse Replica Site	40
The 1934 State of Illinois Postville Courthouse Historical Marker	40
The 1964 Deskins Tavern Historical Marker	41
The 1920s Billboard Advertising the Postville Courthouse Site	41
Overlap of the Lincoln Heritage and the Route 66 Heritage at the Postville Courthouse Site	42

Anachronistic Cannon Fireworks Behind the Postville Courthouse Replica	42
The Broadway Theatre	66
Dedication Page of <i>The Namesake Town: A Centennial History of Lincoln, Illinois</i> (1953).....	67
Some of the Thousands Flooding the Streets During the 1953 Lincoln Centennial Parade.....	68
Brothers of the Brush Jail	68
Brothers of the Brush at Kangaroo Court.....	69
Civic Leaders and Max Bachman’s Lincoln Statue During the 1953 Centennial Celebration	70
Darold Henson Family in Postville Park During the Town of Lincoln’s 1953 Centennial Celebration	70
Abraham Lincoln’s Contemporary Namesake Town Look-Alike: Judge Lionel P. Lacey	85
Disassembly in 1903 of the 1857 Lincoln Christian Church.....	86
The 1904 Lincoln Christian Church	86
Lloyd Ostendorf’s Portrait of Abraham Lincoln and Lester Sheridan .	96
President Ford, the Railsplitter Candidate of 1976.....	97
An Undated Scene from the Railsplitting Festival	97
President Ford Rechristening the First Lincoln Namesake Town	98
Charles Ott as Mr. Lincoln Christening His Namesake Town	98
Congressman Ray LaHood Speaking at the Town of Lincoln’s 2003 Sesquicentennial Celebration	122
Two Lincoln Impersonators Are Better Than One	122
Squeezing Watermelon Juice for the 2003 Rechristening.....	123

List of Illustrations

xi

The 2003 Sesquicentennial Parade Float of the
Lincoln Community High School Noble Class of 1960 123

Rebels Flying the Stars and Bars in Lincoln’s Longest Parade 124

The Looking for Lincoln Historical Marker at the
Postville Courthouse Site 124

The 1964 Historical Marker for Douglas’s 1858 Lincoln
Namesake Town Rally-Speech..... 125

The 2010 Historical Marker for Douglas’s 1858 Lincoln
Namesake Town Rally-Speech..... 125

The Author’s Proposal to Mark Mr. Lincoln’s
1858 Rally-Speech..... 126

The Author’s Mock-up of His Proposed Historical Marker
for Mr. Lincoln’s 1858 Political Rally-Speech..... 126

The Author’s Re-enactment Proposal
in *The Courier*, Nov. 17, 2007..... 140

The Logan County Courthouse Where Mr. Lincoln
Spoke for Two Hours on Oct. 16, 1858..... 140

Promotional Flyer for Mr. Lincoln’s
1858 Rally-Speech Re-enactment 141

Some of the Hundreds of Students at the Re-enactment 142

Mr. Lincoln Greeting His Audience 142

Front Row of Mr. Lincoln’s Eager Audience..... 143

Tim Searby Singing Campaign Song After
Mr. Lincoln’s Speech 143

The Author, Sean Leonard as Mr. Lincoln, and the
Author’s Wife, Pat Hartman..... 144

Cover of the ISHS *Journal* Issue That Includes the Author’s
Article on His Research for the Play Script of the Re-enactment 145

Second Page of the Author’s Article on
His Re-enactment Research..... 146

Merrell Gage's <i>Lincoln, the Student</i> at Lincoln College	174
Andrew Jumonville's <i>Lincoln</i> at Lincoln College.....	174
Head and Shoulders of Max Bachman's <i>Lincoln</i> Statue in the Logan County Courthouse.....	175
Lincoln Bust at the Logan County Genealogical and Historical Society	175
Bachman's Lincoln Statue and Traveling Exhibit of the Gettysburg Address at the Logan County Courthouse, 1944	176
Lateral Reversal of Brady's Cooper Union Lincoln as Published in Beidler's 1903 <i>Poems</i>	195
Head and Shoulders of Brady's Cooper Union Lincoln.....	195
The Lincoln Bust Distributed by the Lincoln Casket Company of Lincoln, Illinois.....	195
Lincoln Cameo on the Third Floor of the Logan County Courthouse.....	196
Small Bas-Relief Lincoln Profile on Street Curb Cast Iron Drain Grate	196
The 1921 D.A.R. "Little Brother of the Great Memorial"	197
Jerry Gibson, History Buff from the LCHS Noble Class of 1960, with Salvaged 1953 Centennial Celebration Street Banner.....	197
Sacha Newley's <i>The Head of Lincoln</i> at Lincoln College.....	198
Wall Art Along Clinton Street in Lincoln, Illinois	198
Lincoln Penny Wall Art on Pulaski Street in Lincoln	199
The "Lincoln Montage" on Back of the Lincoln Theatre Between Kickapoo Street and Chicago Street.....	199
The Author's Looking for Lincoln Award	200
Photo of Lloyd Ostendorf with His Drawing of Lincoln in Prayer	212
Ostendorf's Drawing of Lincoln in Prayer	213

Foreword

Dr. Leigh Henson's book, *The Town Abraham Lincoln Warned*, is one of those rare gifts that operates on several distinct levels at once, like a great movie that can capture children, awe teenagers, and move adults who see it. Such creative works are rare, but when they come along they have a staying power and a reach that make them truly special. This book is creative and sophisticated in just such a fashion.

Dr. Henson's book will appeal to Lincoln amateurs and aficionados for its clean, effective storytelling, stories that arise from the literature and folk art of a small town. One of those stories, in fact, concerns Abraham Lincoln's own involvement in the naming of this small town in the heart of Illinois, the only town named for him *before* he became President. The book is remarkably well documented.

Apart from its Lincoln lore, however, Dr. Henson's writing should find an enthusiastic welcome among the thousands of town and city leaders across the country interested in unlocking the historical roots and heritage of their own home "places." Astoundingly, this book about Abraham Lincoln's "own little town" provides a virtual road map for the careful but effective study and promotion of local civic history.

The book is an outgrowth of Dr. Henson's one-of-a-kind, award-winning Web site, begun in 2003. It is devoted to the history and lore of Lincoln, Illinois, a town thirty miles northeast of Springfield, the state capital, and not far from New Salem, both Lincoln landmarks. Nearby Lincoln, Illinois, turns out also to be a place that Honest Abe knew well, as Dr. Henson is meticulously documenting.

Henson grew up in Lincoln and graduated from Lincoln Community High School. After high school, his experiences at Lincoln College turned him into a student of "Lincoln in Lincoln." Ironically, the work of discovering and telling the Lincoln, Illinois, story goes on, as the Web site continues to grow, story by story, research project by research project. In 2004, the Web site was honored by the Illinois State Historical Society as the "best of the year," a model of historical work, packaged in a highly readable fashion, not in books until now, but on the Internet. This remarkable book, too, has the distinct and promising sense of being a "work in progress."

Because Lincoln, Illinois, sitting along the famed Route 66 midway between Chicago and St. Louis, did not become a city but has re-

mained a relatively small town, it represents small towns everywhere. Ironically, like Lincoln, small towns, whether in New England, in the rural South, the Great Plains or out West, have unique histories. While Dr. Henson's Web site is the "story" of his town—as well as my own—this book has come into being, at least in part, to provide a template for leaders of small towns everywhere who wish to "discover" the unique histories of their own towns and turn those histories into a town's special identity, its signature, both for the present and the future. This book is a veritable tour de force in how to do that, written by one who demonstrates the process, step-by-step along the way.

It is a practical volume, crammed with ideas, filled with cautions—a gold mine for civic leaders and day-to-day citizens who are proud of their own "town" and wish to capture it for future generations—whether Abraham Lincoln walked in its streets or not.

What Leigh Henson has done for "his town," as described in detail in this stunning book, will live for generations beyond him. He has been instrumental in bringing to life—nay, to larger-than-life—one special little town's on-going celebrations, public art, and habits of remembering that will introduce countless visitors and students of a youthful Lincoln to the Great Emancipator's own town, the one he christened himself, the records suggest, with a watermelon.

—Joseph Morris Webb, Ph.D., professor of Communication Studies, Gardner-Webb University; author of seven books and the forthcoming *Don't Call Us Mormons*; graduate of Lincoln Christian University, 1964; and salutatorian of the Lincoln Community High School (LCHS) Class of 1960

Boiling Springs, North Carolina
November 17, 2010

Preface

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. —Abraham Lincoln

This Book's Purpose and Significance

According to legend, in 1853 when three speculators wanted to form a new railroad town thirty miles north of Springfield, Illinois—the state capital—, they asked their attorney, Abraham Lincoln, for permission to name the town for him, and he quipped: “You’d better not do that, for I never knew anything named Lincoln that amounted to much.”¹ In August of that year Mr. Lincoln used watermelon juice to christen the town in his name. The town thus became the first Lincoln namesake town—and the only town named for him before he became famous.

Abraham Lincoln tenaciously struggled to attain his “peculiar ambition” of earning respect—but was widely and severely criticized during the Civil War and perhaps would have been amazed at the worldwide fame he achieved in posterity. For generations and in many ways, Lincoln, Illinois—the seat of Logan County since 1854—has searched for, commemorated, and exploited its Abraham Lincoln-related history and the Lincoln legend in general as this town has aspired to “amount to something.” The tradition of engaging in these activities forms the living namesake heritage of Lincoln, Illinois, and this book probes the questions of how this town has created that heritage and how well it has done so.

The foundation of the Lincoln heritage of this community consists of Mr. Lincoln’s legal work and social activities in Postville and Lincoln, his role in the founding of his first namesake town, his ownership of a lot on the square, and his political activity in these settings. This book tells how this community has explored its Abraham Lincoln-related history and developed its Lincoln-related historic sites, historical markers, celebrations, re-enactments, and festivals. Also discussed are the works of art relating to the local historic sites and Mr. Lincoln, including locally produced or owned literature, statues, busts, photographs, drawings, paintings, film/video, and other commemorative works.

The story of the Lincoln heritage in his first namesake town has involved the civic engagement and interaction of individuals, government, educational institutions, business and industry, and nonprofits. The research used to investigate these relationships and the heritage they de-

veloped encompasses such primary sources (those contemporary to events) as newspaper articles, reminiscence, and the personal experience of my community service. Of course, numerous secondary sources are used as well, including publications for academic and general readers. The study of this Lincoln heritage reveals the community's or an individual's sometimes faithful adherence to facts, sometimes the struggle to distinguish between fact and myth, and sometimes an eager association of the local Lincoln heritage with Lincoln lore in general, including the odd, sometimes controversial treatments of him seen in popular culture.

Countless creative and scholarly works have been written to portray and explain local and regional history, but there is a lack of research and publication on how communities have used their history to construct heritage. Thus, this study of how the first Lincoln namesake town has developed such a heritage provides an original approach to writing social-cultural history.

The Genesis and Research of This Book

I was born and raised in the small prairie town of Lincoln, Illinois. I moved from there in 1961 to study at Illinois State University. Then, for thirty years I taught in Pekin, Illinois, but Lincoln was only about forty miles away so I often returned to visit family and friends. In 2002 I began to research the history of my hometown for personal and professional reasons. Many people have a natural curiosity about the social factors that have shaped their lives. I researched my hometown's history for insight into how that community influenced my parents' generation, my generation, and me. I have only an undergraduate minor in history, but I am educated and experienced as a researcher and writer, with publications in several areas of English studies and history: the theory, practice, and pedagogy of technical communication; rhetoric and composition; the pedagogy of literature; literary history; literary criticism; and Illinois history.

My research benefited from the Internet's growing power to allow database searches for books and articles geared for both scholars and general readers. The use of email expedited communication with professional and talented amateur historians. Web site publication with email links stimulated reader response, providing testimonials and generating leads for further research and reminiscence from former and present-day Lincolnites.

I learned a great deal, exploring how this community is both unique and typical of small Midwestern towns. This information has helped me to assess the mixed feelings about this town that I have experienced since adolescence (of course, many others have mixed feelings about their hometowns, large or small). My research has strengthened my view that overall the experience of my formative years in Lincoln (1942—1961) was positive. My family life was stable, and at Lincoln Community High School and Lincoln College, I discovered the subjects I have always enjoyed studying and teaching—literature, history, and writing.

A professional motive for my history research was to adapt it for publication that would serve the state-mandated public affairs mission of Missouri State University, where I was tenured in the English Department. I adapted my research by creating an extensive community history Web site (comparable to a multi-volume book) as a “distance” public service to inform viewers about the social-cultural history and heritage of Lincoln, Illinois. That Web site aims to strengthen the civic pride of former, current, and future Lincolnites; to inspire readers to become more interested in the social-cultural history of the Land of Lincoln; and to encourage people to visit this historic central Illinois town.

Using various kinds of resources, I developed an online community history of Lincoln, Illinois, that is broader, deeper, and richer in textual and graphic content (maps, photographs, and picture postcards) than hardbound versions of local histories. With this project, I aspired to create a new model for the development of community history Web sites. Another professional reason for creating this online community history was to develop skill in Web site publication and promotion. As I learned how to use computer and Internet technology for these purposes, I applied that know-how to the courses in technical writing, research, and Web site design and development that I taught at Missouri State University as part of its Master of Arts in Writing program.

In July of 2003, I announced the publication of the Web site titled *Mr. Lincoln, Route 66, and Other Highlights of Lincoln, Illinois*.² In response to the press releases I sent, several central Illinois newspapers, including the *Lincoln Courier*, *LincolnDailyNews.com*, and the *Peoria Journal Star*, published feature stories about this project. The publishers of two major Web sites devoted to Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln Online* and *The Abraham Lincoln Research Site*, added links to my community history Web site, as did the Web site of the Illinois State Historical Society and Web sites devoted to Route 66 history. In 2004 the Illi-

nois State Historical Society awarded this publication “Best Web Site of the Year.” The award cites this project for its “superior achievement: serves as a model for the profession and reaches a greater public.” In 2005 I published an article about this community history Web site in a peer-reviewed journal in my primary field of technical communication.³

I have continually augmented and refined this online hometown history. The result is an innovative resource with diverse content: social, cultural-literary, political, and family history, including reminiscence. The site presents new information based on my research about Abraham Lincoln’s activity in his namesake town and the local Lincoln heritage. The Web site also presents my two research-supported essays on social factors seen in William Maxwell’s writings based on Lincoln, Illinois, our mutual hometown. Some of the content of this site has been published as articles in academic journals and central Illinois newspapers.

Within the broad scope of the community history Web site of Lincoln, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln continually emerged as a central subject-theme. My Lincoln Web site documents Mr. Lincoln’s legal, business, and political activities in the only town named for (and by) him before he became famous. This community history project, moreover, has led me to write some original material that expands, refines, and promotes the history and Lincoln heritage of his first namesake town. In effect, my community history Web site is a rich companion resource for this book.

In 2007, using the Internet, I became directly involved in shaping the Lincoln-related history and heritage of my hometown. In the fall of that year, I publicly debated with officials of the Lincoln Christian Church over their claim that Abraham Lincoln had practiced law in the building that became their first church. That building had been used for circuit court proceedings after the Logan County Courthouse burned in the spring of 1857. This debate took place in various central Illinois media. In 2010 I continued my research and publication about that question. This debate is described in Chapter 3.

Also in the fall of 2007 I made two public proposals for ways my hometown could celebrate the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, and as a result I was appointed to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Lincoln, Illinois. Further, I offered to create a Web site for this Commission.⁴ That Web site served as a clearinghouse of information about the Commission’s progress and as a promotional tool for the events it sanctioned and sponsored. Additionally, I researched and wrote the play

script used to re-enact Mr. Lincoln's 1858 namesake town rally and speech as the primary event of the local Lincoln Bicentennial Celebration. In period costume, my wife and I participated in that re-enactment on October 16, 2008, the sesquicentennial anniversary of Mr. Lincoln's grandest day in his first namesake town.

In 2010 I wrote a grant proposal for the Abraham Lincoln Tourism Bureau of Logan County to fund a historical marker, co-sponsored by the Illinois State Historical Society, to commemorate Mr. Lincoln's first namesake town's 1858 political rally and speech. Also, in 2010 I became actively involved in the public debate over whether to replace the fallen Logan County Civil War soldier statue with marble, like the original, or with bronze as some on the statue replacement committee proposed. This book describes all of these Lincoln heritage activities.

In the summer of 2009 I began writing this book as a fun-work retirement project. Although history is not my primary field, my educational and professional experiences required a lot of research, writing, and work with graphics: eleven years of writing reports in higher education English studies; forty-four years of developing instructional materials at the high school, community college, and university levels; and seven years of part-time work in business and industry in which I designed, wrote, and edited various kinds of documents. I was lucky—and am proud to note—that my formal education began in the public school system of Mr. Lincoln's first namesake town and Lincoln College, where in both settings I had really good teachers.

I am self-taught in computer programs, and the main ones used in creating this book were MS Word for writing and editing; Adobe Photoshop for sizing photos, improving their clarity, and formatting them for print; MS Publisher for page design, layout, and typography; and Adobe Acrobat Professional for creating PDF files used in printing. One of the advantages Mr. Lincoln had of living in the nineteenth century is that he was spared “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that go with “learning computers.”

D.L.H.

Springfield, Missouri
January 31, 2011

Notes—Preface

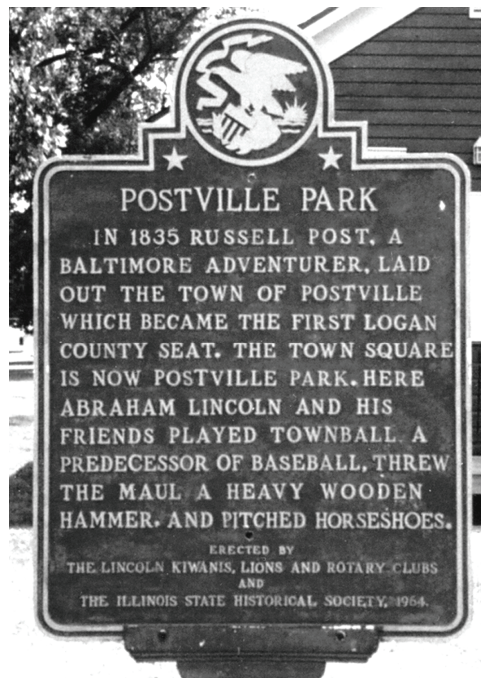
Note: The *Chicago Manual of Style* (13th ed.) was the standard for documentation format and other usage, with no more than a couple of exceptions based on personal preference.

1 Lawrence B. Stringer, *History of Logan County, Illinois*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1911. Reprint [2 vols. in 1]. Evansville, IN: UNIGRAPHIC, INC., 1978), 568.

2 Darold Leigh Henson, *Mr. Lincoln, Route 66, & Other Highlights of Lincoln, Illinois*, <http://findinglincolnillinois.com>. The Web site is a companion resource for this book, providing reminiscence from current and former residents and many photos, picture postcards, and maps.

3 ———, “Using the Internet as a Tool for Public Service: Creating a Community History Web Site.” *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 35.1 (2005): 71—94.

4 ———, *The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Lincoln, Illinois*, <http://findinglincolnillinois.com/abes200th-lincoln.html>.



The 1964 Postville Park Historical Marker

Acknowledgments

My interest in Abraham Lincoln, the history of his first namesake town, and its Lincoln heritage began with my family in Lincoln. My parents, Edward Darold Henson (1918—2008) and Lydia Jane Wilson Henson (1921—1978), first told me about the Postville Courthouse site when I was in grade school. This site was just one block south from our family home and three blocks northeast of Postville Park, where Mr. Lincoln entertained himself during circuit court visits to that village and where my family enjoyed picnics and recreation from the 1920s through the early 1960s. As soon as I was able to walk, my footsteps crossed Abraham Lincoln's path in Postville Park.

My maternal grandparents, the Harrison Franklin ("H.F.") Wilsons, owned and operated a grocery store and service station on Business Route 66 "kitty corner" from Postville Park. Grandmother Blanch Hoblit Wilson helped to instill in me a sense of family and community history. She organized family picnics in Postville Park, sometimes taking photos that included Wilson property on Route 66 in the background. My roots in the Lincoln-Logan County region trace to the mid-nineteenth century on the Hoblit side of the family, including Hoblit forebears who fought in the Civil War. During my fourth, fifth, and sixth years of elementary education at Jefferson School, I heard stories of the Lincoln legend told by E.H. Lukenbill, the beloved, long-time Logan County superintendent of schools. He frequently visited schools throughout the county and enjoyed telling his Lincoln stories to the delight of students and teachers.

In my freshman year at Lincoln College (1960—1961), I took a two-semester course in the life of Abraham Lincoln that strengthened the foundation for research on local history and Abraham Lincoln that I did not seriously undertake until more than forty years later. This course was taught by historian James T. Hickey. He was for many years the curator of the Lincoln Collection of the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield (now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum), and he published numerous articles about his research into the historical record of Lincoln's personal and professional lives, including the Lincolns' household finances. The acclaimed Lincoln expert Mark E. Neely, Jr., described Hickey as "the greatest Lincoln curator of his generation."¹ Also, at Lincoln College, English teacher Florence Molen introduced me to William Maxwell's work and to the idea that it could be useful to write about a specific locale. At Illinois State University, Dr. Stan Renner, the chair of my doctoral dissertation committee, spent extra time with me in conference, tutoring me in how to improve clarity and

readability. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Kristene Sutliff of Missouri State University for giving me the job that ultimately led to the idea for this book. I was given the time to do it because in 1998 three men saved my life: Dave Muegge, M.D.; Michael Scott, M.D.; and Gary Hoos, M.D.

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Among the current and former residents are several family members. Cousin Keith Leesman, a volunteer at the Postville Courthouse State Historic Site, relayed information from that site's resources. My stepmother, Judy Henson, found pertinent books and memorabilia in various places ranging from libraries to yard sales in Lincoln. My Aunt Mary Wilson provided the poem by William Childress whose essence is quoted in the Introduction, and Mr. Childress granted permission for this inclusion. Cousin Jerry Gibson provided anecdotal information about the 1953 Centennial Celebration of the town's founding. My sister, Linda, of Washington state has enthusiastically followed and encouraged this work.

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Special thanks are due the publishers and managing editors of the news media of Lincoln, Illinois, for publishing my letters to the editor and articles about my research into the town's history and my contributions to its Lincoln heritage from 2003 to the present. Specifically, I thank Jeff Nelson, managing editor emeritus of *The Courier*, and Dan Tackett, current managing editor of *The Courier*. Equal thanks go to Ms. Jan Youngquist, co-publisher of *LincolnDailyNews.com*, and to Mike Fak, its managing editor. In several instances my writing that appeared in those publications prompted readers to provide me with reminiscence and leads for more research that enabled me to expand my online community history of Lincoln, Illinois. Thanks also are due the various reporters of these publications whose work is cited throughout the book, which is their story as well as mine.

Stacy Stout and Shannon Conlon of Meyer Library at Missouri State University, Springfield, assisted in obtaining sources. Amy Schuldt of Missouri State University's Publications Office advised on graphics editing and file formats. For years Michael Stowe, senior instructor in the English Department at Missouri State University, has helped me with computer programs. Jonny Carter of Missouri State's Computer Services Department answered my questions about MS Publisher.

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Finally and most gratefully, I am indebted beyond words to my wife, Patricia Hartman, for her clear editorial mind and eye, and characteristically quiet, patient support. Despite the invaluable help I have been given on this project from those named above (and those whose names are unintentionally omitted), I alone am responsible for the shortcomings in this manuscript.

1 "James T. Hickey, Lincoln Curator," in James T. Hickey, *The Collected Writings of James T. Hickey* (Springfield: the Illinois State Historical Society, 1990), vii.



**The Author's Mother, Jane Wilson, in 1923 at Age Two;
Route 4; and Postville Park in the Background**



**The Author in 1944 at Age Two with Great-Grandmother
Parlee Webb Henson in Postville Park**

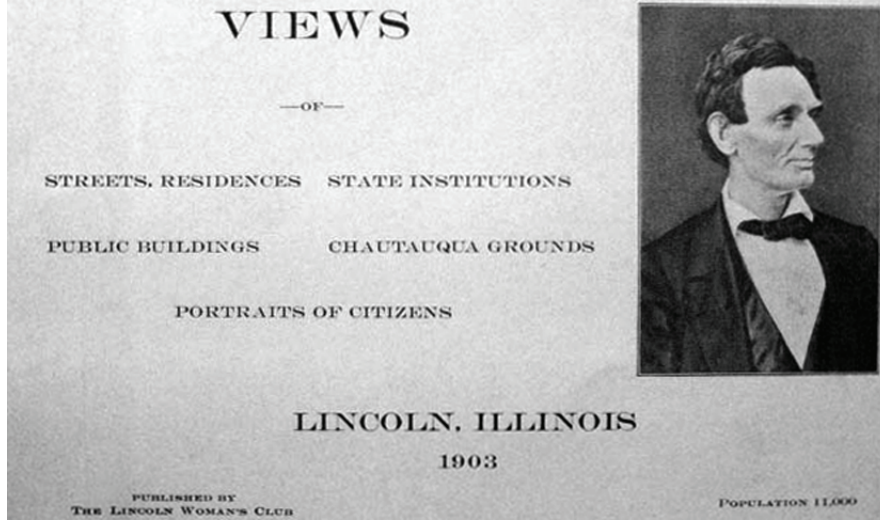


The Author in Postville Park with His First Car, circa 1945

The author's grandparents, the H.F. Wilsons, owned and operated the gas station seen in the background at left and the grocery store next to it. Those establishments were on Business Route 66. The gas station in the right background was owned by Bob Sanders. Dick Logan later occupied that building with his auto service business. Postville Park was known for its swings, picnic tables, concrete drinking fountain, and shade provided by ancient walnut trees. It also had a brick fireplace grill.



**The Third Generation of the Harrison Franklin Wilson Family
Playing Croquet in Postville Park in the Mid-1950s**



One of the Earliest Images of Mr. Lincoln in His First Namesake Town's Historical Record (famous 1860 photo by Alexander Hesler)



A 1970s-Era Billboard South of Lincoln on Route 66

The two images on this page illustrate the dual themes of this town's Lincoln heritage: civic pride and heritage tourism.