

John C. Ackerman

Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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“Honest Abe” is Established at Postville Courthouse

Built in 1840, the Courthouse in Postville (currently part of Lincoln, Illinois) was one of the places Abraham Lincoln would visit on his tours of the 8th Judicial Circuit. In the 1840's and 1850's, when Abraham Lincoln was a slim, tall, beardless young lawyer from Springfield with a family to support, he would travel for four to six months along the dusty dirt trails that connected the courthouses of the circuit.

The circuit was a large cross section of Central Illinois and involved stops in the Central Illinois communities of Urbana, Taylorville, Clinton, Paris, Mt. Pulaski, Decatur, Bloomington, Sullivan, Monticello, Springfield, Shelbyville, Tremont, Pekin, Danville, Metamora and Postville. He would be involved in an astonishing 5,000 legal cases during this stage of his life at the local, state and federal level. Lincoln argued several hundred cases before the Illinois Supreme Court, and he made his one and only United States Supreme Court appearance in 1849.

Perhaps Lincoln's greatest asset as a lawyer was his ability to simplify cases. He was able to reduce even complex cases to a few key points. He put legal disputes into simple focus. He had a gift for brevity and clarity. Lincoln's special talent was logical oral argument and not legal research. He had an uncanny ability to 'read' juries and influence them with his persuasive arguments.

In one of his more public law cases, young Abraham Lincoln was retained as a resident attorney for a popular East Coast lawyer called Edward Stanton. The case involved the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, which later became part of International Harvester Company. After the John Henry Manny companies Manny Reaper beat the McCormick reaper at the Paris Exposition of 1855, McCormick filed a lawsuit against Manny for patent infringement. The case was originally to be held in Chicago and as such lead attorney for the John Henry Manny companies, Edward Stanton, needed to hire a local attorney to meet the residence laws.

Stanton took one look at the lanky, unkempt Lincoln with his thick hick accent and with his elitist East Coast prejudices assessed that he could be of little assistance. The case was later moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and the John Henry Manny Companies would end up winning, but Stanton would reduce Lincoln's rule to next to anything. Little did Edwin Stanton realize that one day that country lawyer would be his boss when he would be Lincoln's Secretary of War.

During his years as a lawyer, Lincoln would often drop a client he felt was wrong or refuse a case he felt was immoral. One famous story from Springfield recalls a potential client who called on Lincoln at his Law Office. He wanted to retain Lincoln's services take the property of a widow do to a debt the late husband owed him from a contractual dispute.

Lincoln listened and said "I know I can win your case for you. But at what price? I can distress a widowed mother and her six fatherless children, and thereby gain for you six hundred dollars. I shall not

take your case, but I will give you a little advice for nothing. You seem an industrious and enterprising man. I would advise you to try your hand at making six hundred dollars in some other way.”

Taking this column back to Postville Courthouse, in 1843 Abraham Lincoln took the case of an individual who was trying to collect money he was owed. About halfway through the trial, Lincoln discovered that his client was in fact trying to wrongly collect this money even though he had already collected it. After the judge had called a recess, upon reconvening he could not find Lincoln. He sent the Sheriff to find him and subsequently found him in Postville Park playing baseball.

When told that the Judge wanted him, Lincoln remarked “tell the Judge I can’t come; my hands are dirty and I want to clean them.” Now Lincoln’s hands were dusty from the ballgame, but when the background of his client came forward it becomes clear he was also remarking about the ethics of his client. When told this, the Judge was to have simply remarked “Honest Abe”, thus knightening young Abraham Lincoln with what would become his most popular nick-name.

And what would happen to Postville Courthouse? It closed as a Courthouse in 1848 and was then after a private home. In 1929, inventor Henry Ford, eager to buy historic old buildings, purchased the old structure for \$8,000 mainly for the buildings connection to Abraham Lincoln. His contractors dismantled the frame structure, dug up the foundation, and moved everything to the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, where the original Postville Courthouse stands today. In 1953, a replica was constructed on the original site as part of the City of Lincoln’s centennial celebration. Today it stands as a museum to Lincoln’s time as a Lawyer.

The lesson to be learned from these tales of Lincoln’s past, only one of many that could be learned, is that what is legal is not always right. In each of the stories above, Lincoln could have won his case. He could have taken his portion of the money and rested secure with the knowledge that “legally” he was right. He did not though, because Lincoln’s moral compass, his guiding principles would not permit this type of behavior. This behavior trait would continue to serve him well and would be strong during the Civil War. Today it is accepted as one of the characteristics that made him the nation’s greatest President.

Today, all too often, we hear the reasoning “well legally we can”. The question of whether we should, the question Lincoln asked and answered correctly, is all too often forgotten.

John C. Ackerman
Look for John on the Web at:
www.JohnCAckerman.com