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Preface

Most people like Abraham Lincoln. He has his critics, to be sure, and any mature evaluation of his character must include recognition of his entirely human shortcomings, mistakes, and oddities. But on the whole, it is fair to say that the vast majority of Americans, indeed a fair number of people around the world, find Lincoln to be an appealing man—a good guy. He got things right most of the time, and even when he didn't, we generally believe he had his heart in the right place.

This is one reason why people avoid asking hard questions about him. Americans would much rather talk about his triumphs: his rags-to-riches life story, his crusade against slavery in the 1850s, his presidential leadership, and his eventual triumph as savior of the Union and as the Great Emancipator. These are good stories that reflect well upon a good person, and it is easy for Americans to celebrate these stories, over and over again. This is completely understandable. Americans are no more or no less given to lionizing their heroes than any other people.

But it is the sometimes unenviable task of professional historians to probe deeper and darker truths and to ask uncomfortable and even ugly questions about even the best of the men and women of America's past. And there is no darker, uglier area of American history than racism. With all its painful afflictions, racism has shaped America since Europeans first arrived, and it continues to do so today. Would that it were not so. All

Americans of goodwill wish racial prejudice had never stained a nation that otherwise stands for so much that is honorable and just.

But wishful thinking about America's past is at best a distortion and at worst an invitation to perpetuate past mistakes in the present and future. This is no less true when we examine the life and times of our greatest American heroes. If we ignore Abraham Lincoln's mistakes and limitations, we create a blind spot in our historical consciousness not only about a vitally important individual but also about the operations of American history as a whole.

In pursuing this inquiry into Abraham Lincoln and race—specifically, his views concerning whiteness and white racial identity—I found that Lincoln very definitely functioned under a set of limitations where race was concerned. He was in many ways a product of the predominant white culture of his time, and he was far less willing or able to transcend the limitations of that culture than I would have wished. In many respects, he was a typical nineteenth-century American white man, with all the problems and shortcomings this entailed.

Yet at the end of the day, he was still a likable man. He did not, it is true, fundamentally question the underpinnings of white supremacy, along the lines of radical abolitionists such as Theodore Dwight Weld or William Lloyd Garrison. He could have done more to confront white bigotry. And he might well have been capable of transcending the limitations of his whiteness to a greater extent than he did. He was far from perfect, and there were troubling moments in his life during which he seemed to cater to white America's worst instincts.

But after all was said and done, I found that Lincoln's approach to these matters was better than that displayed by most whites of his day. He was a flawed, eminently human, and yet still fundamentally admirable American white man. And perhaps this is where we as Americans should aim when we seek a mature perspective on Abraham Lincoln: critically informed admiration, of the sort that allows us to both celebrate his considerable accomplishments and simultaneously recognize his limitations. This is the only truly honest approach possible.



Acknowledgments

I decided long ago that I would make it a point to thank my mentor and friend, the late professor Phillip Paludan, in any book of history that I write. Phil's untimely passing in August 2007 left a hole in many people's lives that is impossible to fill. For my own part, I greatly miss Phil's wisdom, wit, and vast knowledge of the Civil War era. But I draw some comfort in the thought that I was able to benefit from his advice and guidance, and I hope my scholarship reflects well on his tutelage.

Fred Woodward, my editor at the University Press of Kansas, persevered through what was a difficult writing process. I'm afraid I tested his nearly inexhaustible patience on more than one occasion—a fact which causes me no small distress, since he is not only a first-rate editor but also a very nice man. Fred should receive a great deal of credit for anything of value to be found in this book.

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advice and encouragement. They have all saved me from numerous gaffes. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my responsibility alone.

During the research stages of this project, I was (as always) aided immeasurably by the staff at Anderson University's Nicholson Library. Jan Brewer and Barbara Hoover have always been ready and willing to help. Jill Branscum of the Interlibrary Loan Department brought her expertise to the task of locating the sort of off-beat and obscure materials that delight us historians (but probably drive librarians to distraction).

Having served as a faculty member at Anderson University for over decade, I have come increasingly to appreciate how blessed I am to be part of such a fine institution. I am particularly grateful for the sabbatical leave granted to me in the fall of 2009 to pursue the research and writing of this book. My fellow members of the faculty of the department of history and political science—professors Dan Allen, Michael Frank, David Murphy, Jaye Rogers, and Joel Shrock—are not only fine colleagues but good friends. Blake Janutolo, dean of the College of Science the Humanities, has always been a source of unflagging support and friendship, as have Dr. Marie Morris, vice president of Academic Affairs, and Dr. James Edwards, the university's president. Taken together, my friends and colleagues at Anderson University—and my students—have created a most amiable and positive academic community.

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My mother and father have always been loving and supportive in my career and my life generally. I could have never aspired to the proper pursuit of a college degree, let alone my academic career, without their steadfast love and support.

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Finally, I have chosen to dedicate this book to my wife Julie. I often joke that she let herself in for far more trouble than she realized when she married a Lincoln scholar: my endless ramblings about my research and writing, occasional ventures into the fascinating but admittedly sometimes peculiar world of Lincoln aficionados, and tolerance of my traveling and absences while speaking at this or that conference or book panel. I have told her less often than I should just how grateful I am for this and her many other virtues, too numerous to mention. Perhaps placing her name at this book's forefront might begin to make amends.





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A B R A H A M L I N C O L N A N D

W H I T E A M E R I C A



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Introduction

Frederick Douglass once called Abraham Lincoln a white man's president, during a speech he delivered in 1876 at the dedication of the Freedmen's Monument in Washington, D.C. His exact words, spoken before a predominantly white crowd, were, "[Lincoln] was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men."¹

These were controversial words. But then, the monument itself was controversial. Begun by African Americans (an ex-slave named Charlotte Scott started the project by donating \$5 to construct a statue honoring Lincoln) but quickly co-opted by Lincoln's many white admirers, it offered a swirl of the heavily symbolic visual images popular among sculptors during the era, drawn from the nation's recent history, antiquity, or the sometimes shifting whims of the monument's design committee: the Emancipation Proclamation, a whipping post in the background, a profile of George Washington, a shield with an American flag design. The controversy arose from the demeanor of the statue's central figures—Lincoln helping a struggling black man from his knees, having broken his chains through the device of emancipation. To some, this depiction was as it should be, honoring the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. But to others, it was patronizing and demeaning, giving Lincoln too much credit and black people too little for the role they played in bringing about their own liberation.²

Douglass's precise purpose in tagging Lincoln as a white man's president in his speech is not entirely clear. At first glance, the label does not seem to have been a compliment. Douglass followed with the tart observation that to Lincoln, black Americans were merely "stepchildren." The president was "entirely devoted to the welfare of white men," he argued, and "he was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country."³

Lincoln detractors such as Lerone Bennett make much of Douglass's words as proof positive of Lincoln's fundamentally racist character, but others offer a more balanced assessment. Lincoln scholar Michael Burlingame, for example, points out that in other speeches, Douglass was far more charitable toward Lincoln. And historian Lucas Morel sees the 1876 speech as a shrewd species of racial politics, as Douglass sought to reassure a white audience in those racially charged times that they should support Reconstruction policies as a matter of white self-interest and as a way to honor Lincoln's legacy. A number of scholars suggest that Douglass wanted not so much to demean Lincoln as to elevate the freedmen in the (white) public eye.⁴

That such an extensive and nuanced scholarly conversation could grow around one passage in one speech illustrates the capacity for controversy in nearly all matters related to Abraham Lincoln. But if we clear away all the swirling words, arguments, and ideas, there remains one rather obvious but often overlooked truth in Douglass's speech: Lincoln indeed was a white man's president, in the simple fact that he himself was a white man and a product of nineteenth-century America's white culture. Whiteness defined him, his presidency, and his era.

Oddly enough, historians have rarely explored just what this meant. Lerone Bennett is almost the only scholar who has even tried to explicitly examine Lincoln's relationship with white racism, and his analysis is sadly limited. Bennett's controversial 2000 anti-Lincoln polemic, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*, though valuable in its provocative call to reexamine Lincoln's racial legacy, is utterly lacking in nuance or sophistication concerning either Lincoln or whiteness. Bennett's arguments are severely limited by their laserlike narrowness. He wants only to prove that Abraham Lincoln hated black people and sought to protect white supremacy. He does not exhibit much interest in trying to figure out exactly what *white* meant in Lincoln's time or what it may have meant to Lincoln himself.⁵

For all the many words that have been written concerning Abraham Lincoln's attitude toward African Americans, almost no one has asked what would seem to be a natural corollary question: how did Lincoln understand white Americans and whiteness? This question has not often been asked because the very concept of analyzing and explaining white as a racial identity, with its own rules and history, is relatively new. What has been termed *whiteness studies* in American history is the product of pioneering work by David R. Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Noel Ignatiev, and (most recently) Nell Irvin Painter. Most of this scholarship has appeared only since the early 1990s.⁶

A key premise of the new literature on whiteness is central to my approach to Lincoln: that it is impossible to understand the intricate and insidious ways race functions in American society without looking at whiteness as a distinct racial category. To suggest (as has usually been the case) that only nonwhite people are people of color, whereas whites are normatively neutral and colorless by definition, perpetuates the thinking that has made white supremacy so powerful and pernicious a presence in America's history.⁷

Uncovering Lincoln's ideas about whiteness is not easy. Like most other whites in his day, Lincoln rarely thought of himself as possessing a racial color, and he was not given to analyzing what it meant to be white in his America or the nature of race in general. As historian James Oakes rightly observes, "Most of Lincoln's brief utterances on race have lent themselves to extravagantly different interpretations."⁸ Any investigation of Lincoln and race will involve caution and qualification. And any investigation of Lincoln and whiteness will involve careful analysis of what he thought about blackness and other racial categories, for it is often only by analyzing what Lincoln thought about blacks that we can draw inferences concerning his ideas about whites.

However difficult getting at Lincoln's ideas about whiteness may be, those ideas were terribly important—perhaps as important as Lincoln's ideas concerning blackness and other nonwhite people. When he formulated political arguments and policies related to African Americans, Lincoln inevitably affected and was affected by issues and problems related to whites and how they perceived both themselves and the nation. And on a more personal level, Abraham Lincoln was himself a white man. He carried within himself the multiple assumptions, prejudices, and limitations of white racial identity that pervaded the culture of his times. He was taught

from birth, in a myriad of ways great and small, that as a white American, he belonged to the master race, the top tier of America's racial pyramid. Few people questioned this order of things. Surprisingly few white people were self-aware enough, racially speaking, to perceive how America's pervasive white racist ideology shaped their lives and their destinies. Lincoln swam in this white culture as a fish swims in water.

As obvious as this may seem, it is not a common way of viewing Lincoln. His popular legacy as the Great Emancipator confers upon him a kind of racial neutrality in the popular memory. In our mythology, he is simply a good man and a good American, his skin color be damned, who rose above the muck that is America's sad racial legacy and conferred freedom on millions of slaves in the name of color-blind principles of justice, liberty, and equality. Those principles, we believe, should transcend black and white. Lincoln, we believe, should transcend black and white.

But he does not. He cannot. Abraham Lincoln was not color-blind. Nor was he some sort of translucent racial anomaly, a man with no skin color of consequence. Whiteness shaped him, transformed him, and in some ways severely proscribed what he would or could do in the name of American racial equality.

He has long defied simple answers because he was not a simple man, and he did not live in simple times. Readers looking for a straightforward, linear story arc concerning Lincoln and whiteness will be disappointed. In some respects, he was quite critical of the various ways in which white supremacy operated in his era; in others ways, he was not. He could be extremely critical of whiteness, but he could also take great pains to forgo such criticism. He could sometimes see past the limitations imposed by his white skin. At other times, those limitations severely constrained him.

We will see that there was a broad progression, a growing impatience in Lincoln toward white bigotry, especially during the latter part of the Civil War. This progression roughly paralleled his increased wartime willingness to embrace a black presence in American life and to support a measure of black racial equality. But though of course closely related, the dynamics of Lincoln's white and black racial progress were different. When Douglass observed that Lincoln was the white man's president, he did not pose that as a serious analytical category. But to better understand not just the Lincoln presidency but also the man himself, that is exactly what we should do.

O N E



Seven Negroes

Abraham Lincoln's first recorded, face-to-face encounter with people who were not white occurred on a river flatboat, sometime in 1828.¹ He was in all likelihood terrified.

He was nineteen that winter and still working for his father, Thomas, on the family's Indiana farm. He didn't earn much in the way of actual cash, and most (if not all) of what he did earn went into Thomas's pockets. It was a common arrangement among farming families of the day but one that chafed Lincoln, who was fast becoming "ambitious to make his way in the world."²

To that end, he hired himself out, sometime in the late fall or early winter of 1828, as a crewman on a flatboat loaded with "hoop poles" (used in the construction of barrels), bacon, and other odds and ends on a river trip from Rockport, Indiana, down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, Louisiana. His employer was James Gentry, a man of means (the town of Gentryville was named after him) who later purchased the land that encompassed the Lincoln family farm. He was "*the* rich man in our very poor neighborhood," according to Lincoln.³

Lincoln's companion on the trip was Allen Gentry, James's son. Gentry was a bit younger than Lincoln, and he had his wild side; he would meet his end years later when in a drunken stupor on a steamboat, he fell overboard and drowned.⁴ Between the two of them, Gentry and Lincoln split

the various tasks of manning a fully loaded flatboat, either guiding the craft by means of the long steering oar from the stern or plying a sweeping pole to clear driftwood, brush tangles, and other obstacles from the boat's path. The pay was \$8 per month, plus the price of passage home once the cargo and raft were sold (flatboats were too unwieldy to transport back upriver).⁵

A typical Ohio River flatboat—variously nicknamed an “Orleans boat,” a “Kentucky flat,” or a “broadhorn”—was simple and unadorned, basically “a covered shed . . . with a bottom sufficiently strong to contain it.” It was constructed near the riverbank from materials easily at hand, such as poplar, gum, or green oak wood, and sealed by driving hemp into the cracks between the boards; the hemp was soaked in “tow” or “oakum,” a form of caulking made from tree sap. More elaborate boats were available from professional builders (usually living near river towns), but most farmers made do with their own carpentry skills, since their creations were designed to do little more than float in a straight line with the current while keeping cargo and occupants reasonably safe and dry.⁶

And there were a lot of them. Flatboats crowded the Ohio River and its tributaries throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century. One historian estimated that nine-tenths of Indiana's surplus corn, bacon, hogs, hoop poles, and the like was carried on flatboats downriver for sale, with yearly voyages numbering in the thousands. “I have often passed fifty of them in one day, rowing with their long sweeps or floating leisurely on the current,” noted the author of a traveler's guidebook, adding that “this form of navigation is slow, compared with the steamboat, but it is cheap.”⁷

Those flatboats were more than just the sum of their wood and oakum parts. There was a thriving flatboating culture along the banks of the Ohio River. Families banded together to form cooperatives, sharing a voyage's risks and profits. Their annual spring flatboat launch (the vessels were nearly always launched in spring, when the poplars used in constructing the gunwales had seasoned properly) was a social event, giving rise to frolics or barn dances near the local river landing; “sometimes half the population of the village was present to tender their wishes for a prosperous trip.”⁸

Some men made flatboating a career. “They are a distinct class of beings, livers on the water,” noted one observer, “strong, hardy, rough and uncouth.” Another described them as an “adventurous, muscular set of men, inured to constant peril and privation.”⁹ Flatboaters could attain the status of cult heroes, among them Mike Fink, the “legend of the Ohio,” a

Bunyanesque giant who was said to be the match in drinking, brawling, and general mayhem of any man on the river.¹⁰

Lincoln and Gentry weren't flatboaters in the Mike Fink sense, given that their sojourn on the river was temporary. But they were part of a little ritual of their own, whereby young men from isolated farms grew up a little by manning flatboats through the Ohio and Mississippi river regions and seeing something of the world. Lincoln's father hired out for several such trips himself in his younger days, ferrying loads of pork and similar items to markets along the river. Thomas once was compelled to walk all the way back home from New Orleans (making his son's deal for the price of homebound passage probably seem all the sweeter). "The instance of a young man of enterprise and standing, as a merchant, trader, or even farmer, who has not made at least one trip to New Orleans is uncommon," claimed one Indiana man.¹¹

This thriving flatboat culture was many things, but underlying it all was one subtle characteristic: it was white. Those enterprising young Hoosier men who made their way to New Orleans and back were white, and the professional flatboatmen were likewise white.¹² Mike Fink, the quintessential flatboatman of history and legend, not only was a white man, but also threw his whiteness into sharp relief by besting whatever nonwhite people he happened upon during his exploits, in ways that white storytellers and wags of the day found highly amusing. According to one tale, Fink at some point saw a black man

who had the singularly projecting heel, peculiar to some races of Africans. . . . [Whereupon Fink] raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired, carrying away the offensive projection. The negro fell, crying murder, believing himself to be mortally wounded. Mike was apprehended for this trick at St. Louis, and found guilty. But we do not hear of the infliction of any punishment. . . . Mike's only defense was, that the fellow could not wear a genteel boot, and he wanted to fix it so that he could.¹³

Lincoln and Gentry would have been well within their comfort zones, at least racially speaking, as they push-poled their cargo out onto the Ohio River that spring, taking their place among dozens of other boats manned by similar-looking and similar-acting young men. The Indiana counties on the Ohio's right bank were predominantly white, as was the entire state.

Black people were rare. According to the 1810 census, there were only a little over 600 blacks living in the entire Indiana Territory (as opposed to over 23,000 whites). Only 5 African Americans lived in the county surrounding Pigeon Creek ten years later when the Lincolns established their farm. It is hardly surprising, then, that there is no reliable record of an encounter between Lincoln and any nonwhite person while he lived in Indiana.¹⁴

The state was inhospitable to blacks. In the early days of the territory's existence, a number of Hoosiers, many with Southern roots, tried to persuade Congress to overturn the antislavery provisions of the Northwest Ordinance and allow slavery's introduction into their midst. Failing that, they made Indiana one of the most racially restrictive states in the country, passing legislation that imposed a variety of restrictions on black people crossing its borders. In 1805, the state's legislature created laws declaring that African Americans could not lawfully refuse to enter even lengthy and highly discriminatory indenture contracts with white masters, and in 1806, it imposed harsh punishment such as whipping on slaves who traveled without proper paperwork, participated in large assemblies, or uttered "seditious speeches."¹⁵

As they floated down the Ohio, Lincoln and Gentry saw on their left the slaveholding land of Kentucky. The dynamic of race there was, of course, substantially different than in Indiana, since there was a palpable difference between owning human beings, on the one hand, and not doing so, on the other. But the differences weren't all that great. If Indiana had its Black Laws, then Kentucky had its slave code. Nonwhites, including Indians and mixed-race Kentuckians, lived under severe and humiliating legal restrictions. For instance, Kentucky law in Lincoln's time provided that "any negro, mulatto, or Indian, bond or free," who "shall at any time lift his hand, in opposition to any white person, shall receive thirty lashes on his or her bare back, well laid on."¹⁶

Despite Kentucky's much larger African American population, as compared to Indiana's, Lincoln seems not to have come into much contact with black Kentuckians. The family farm at Knob Creek in Kentucky was located near the Natchez Road, and it is possible that as a small child, Lincoln sometimes saw Native Americans as well as black men and women as they traveled by his front door, in chains perhaps, as part of a slave coffle or labor force. A fairly large number of African Americans lived in the Knob Creek area—around 17 percent of the local population, according to

one estimate.¹⁷ Still, there is no reliable extant record of Lincoln interacting with any nonwhites while living in Kentucky. At least one neighbor thought it unlikely that he saw many black people at all, telling an interviewer, “I doubt whether the Negro cut much figure here.”¹⁸

White in Kentucky, white in Indiana, white on a flatboat slicing its way between the two—things were pretty much the same all the way around. Here was one way, perhaps the most prevalent way, in which whiteness was defined in Abraham Lincoln’s world, as a ubiquitous sameness, a homogeneity so pervasive that often whites themselves were not aware of it as such. This sameness was created, at least in Lincoln’s part of the world, by a combination of circumstances: by demographics; by cultural affinity; and if need be by laws, rules, and regulations that kept nonwhites bounded off and away from polite white society. What exactly was “white” in 1828?

It was skin color, of course. But matters were not nearly so simple. White was difficult to pin down, more so than black or red or any other ethnicity, because white was not seen by most white Americans—the people who by and large defined “American”—as an ethnicity. Nonwhite people had ethnicity; *they* were “colored.” Whites were “normal,” to the point that their whiteness faded into the background. White was everywhere, and therefore, it was nowhere.

If pressed to answer, an American in 1828 would likely have responded that white was a race of some sort—or, rather, races. People of that day did not commonly believe in one homogeneous white race but rather in a collection of subgroups filed under the broad heading of white. Just what separated one category of the white race from another was hard to say. Some intellectuals tried, with limited success, to delineate the precise lines between types of white people. An atlas published two years before Lincoln’s flatboat trip, for example, identified two broad families of the white race: one included “the Hebrews, the Druscs and other inhabitants of Mount Libanus . . . [and] the sun-burnt hordes of Northern Africa,” and the other encompassed Europeans, Americans, “the Caucasian tribes of Usbeca,” and a variety of other eastern European “tribes.”¹⁹

Few ordinary Americans had ever heard of Druscs or Mount Libanus. For most people, whiteness was more about vague associations—the inefable and often ill-defined links between white and that which was beautiful, desirable, and successful. White was strong like Mike Fink or industrious and enterprising like all those young men making their way down the Ohio River to New Orleans. White was the beauty of a milky-

marble Greek statue, of the fair hue of ladies and gentlemen of quality, or of an angel's robes. White was the presumed color of Jesus.²⁰

White was also the presumed color of American democracy and citizenship. The Founding Fathers—and most Americans who came after them—associated the liberty and individualism of American citizenship with whiteness. *White* was a common qualifier for the various national and local laws regulating naturalization. “I use the word citizen as not embracing the colored population,” stated a delegate to Pennsylvania’s 1837 state constitutional convention.²¹

The very words that came from people’s mouths or were printed on paper buttressed this valued sense of whiteness. Noah Webster’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, published the same year Lincoln took his flatboat trip down the Mississippi, defined *white* as “being in the color of pure snow,” as “pure; clean; free from spot; as white robed innocence . . . unblemished,” and—following the Bible—as “purified from sin; sanctified.” The Bible equated whiteness with a wide variety of positive attributes. It was the color of the manna from heaven that saved Moses and the chosen people (Exodus 16:31), and one of the Psalms declared, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 57:7). Ecclesiastes enjoined godly people to “always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil” (Ecclesiastes 9:7). And the book of Daniel described God as wearing clothing that “was as white as snow” (Daniel 7:9).²²

In Indiana, Lincoln acquired a copy of James Barclay’s popular dictionary of the English language, which would have told him that white was equated with that which was “pure,” “unspotted,” and “innocent.” Thomas Dilworth’s *New Guide to the English Tongue* (commonly called *Dilworth’s Spelling Book*), which Lincoln carried with him to the various little “ABC” schools he attended off and on as a boy, contained a passage titled “On Youth” about the fragility of purity, admonishing that “White Lilies hang their Heads, and soon decay; and whiter Snow in Minutes melts away.” *Pilgrim’s Progress*, another book the young Lincoln read, associated white with heaven. “You are going now, said they, to the Paradise of God,” read one passage, “and when you come there, you shall have white robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of Eternity.” *Robinson Crusoe*, also among Lincoln’s books, described two native islander women as “well-favored, agree-

able persons” who, “had they been perfect white, would have passed for very handsome women, even in London itself.”²³

Slight and understated inferences these were, background details in a life and time when people such as Lincoln were not encouraged to think of whiteness as an ethnicity at all. But they were real enough. Language mirrors thought and vice versa, and there is no reason to think that Abraham Lincoln was immune to this sort of thinking, no evidence setting him apart from the overwhelming majority of his neighbors in Kentucky and Indiana who spoke, thought, and acted as if white entailed all that was good, pure, and superior. Being told on occasion that this or that person was white and then reading and hearing white described as the color of purity, innocence, beauty . . . Lincoln surely made the connections.

The corollary was the opposite of white: those people who were defined in various ways as the nonwhite Other. A community defines itself by setting boundaries, beyond which lie those who do not belong and who are not part of “us.” Some devote so much time and energy to this negative act of self-definition that community members understand who they are largely by articulating who they are not.

White America did just that in Lincoln’s day. Whites often were not all that aware of their whiteness, and typically, they held no intellectually coherent definition of the word *white* in their heads. But they knew and could usually describe in vivid and sharply distinct terms exactly what a *nigger*, an *Indian savage*, or a *Paddy* was (in an era when most Americans thought of the Irish as a nonwhite and separate race). The very use of the term *black* by whites to denote African Americans was itself a glaringly reductionist example of this sort of thinking, given the fact that most black people were actually nothing of the sort, having skin colors in a wide range of hues. Yet that simple, stark category of blackness was quite efficient and tidy in its rendering of those who did not stand within the boundaries of polite white society.

Part of this was simply a matter of hardwiring. Children categorize at an early age, and they do so based primarily on what they see: skin color, eye color, body type, hairstyle, clothing, mannerisms. Children are also predisposed to favor features that remind them the most of themselves, particularly those that are judged worthy and beautiful by the adults around them, such as white skin.²⁴ They do all of this instinctively—dividing, subdividing, associating, and disassociating one thing and another, one experi-

ence and another, one person and another—in constant negotiation with the world around them.²⁵

Lincoln would have been no different from the generations of children who have done so before and since. Like any other child, he would have been susceptible to grouping other children and adults according to categories based upon what he saw and what society told him mattered. By the time he reached young manhood, those categories would have been so firmly embedded in his consciousness that he likely never gave them much critical attention. Race was just such a category. Surely for Lincoln—as for nearly any white person around him—race was a readily available and (by the standards of his day) entirely reasonable and viable means by which to understand and make sense of the world. For white people, the fact that race was configured in ways conferring upon them superiority and power simply made racial categorization all the more appealing.

Consider the Indians. They were a separate and distinct “race” according to white Americans, most of whom alternated between lumping all Native Americans under that one imprecise (and inaccurate) Indian category and identifying different tribes as ethnicities unto themselves: Creeks, Fox, Sac, Cherokees, and so forth. Indians as a race were subjected to many of the same indignities, biases, and discriminations that defined other races in America, such as African Americans. But there were differences. Some whites—Thomas Jefferson, for one—believed in a rough original equality between whites and Indians, before whites outstripped Indians in their development of so-called civilized behavior. Some held out hope that the native “savages” of America could someday be assimilated into white American society, a sentiment not often applied to African Americans.²⁶

Indians were often fixed by whites with the label *savage*, a term connoting wildness, non-Christian heathenism, brutality, and a harsh disregard for the value of human life. The Savage was an integral part of the sixteenth-century European mind-set that invented concepts of race in the first place, describing the nonwhite peoples then being discovered in Africa and the New World alike.²⁷ To the average white American living in Lincoln’s time, particularly in the West, *savage* had a more immediate, raw meaning when applied to Indians. According to whites, Indians had recently engaged in barbarous acts—and in their own backyards. In his *Traits of Indian Character*, published in 1836, a self-described expert in the “aborigines of North America” named George Turner asked, “What can be attached to the character of the savage [Indian] man, but the brutality of the forest[?] . . .

Abroad, he is worse than the most ferocious feeder upon man. The brute beast of the forest is satisfied with his meal; savage man requires more: he must first torture—and then feast upon his unhappy victim!”²⁸

Lincoln was born in a region known for its violent clashes between white settlers and Indians. Kentuckians harbored a dark heritage of conflicts over land rights, white invasions of tribal hunting grounds, bloody reprisals between whites and Indians, and a general brutality that echoed down through the years. In his time, the image of the Indian was still marked by a fresh smattering of savagery and uncivilized behavior, despite the fact that few Native Americans lived in the immediate vicinity of either Hardin County or Pigeon Creek.

But memories lingered. Hardin County was named after Col. John Hardin, who won his fame and fortune by participating in the Indian wars in Kentucky during the 1790s. John’s kinsman William Hardin was celebrated for the harsh skills he employed in fighting Indians. “In warfare he acted on the principle that the only effectual way to subdue the red man was to kill him,” noted one admiring observer. Hardin’s nickname among Kentucky’s settlers was “Indian Bill.”²⁹

Hardin’s exploits took place only a few years before Lincoln was born, and stories of bloody encounters between Indians and whites would have still been floating around in his corner of Kentucky. Residents along Indiana’s Pigeon Creek possessed even more recent and vivid memories of Indian hostilities. In 1812—four years before the Lincolns arrived—warriors of the Pottawattamie, Miami, Delaware, and other tribes clashed with white settlers in raids ranging all across Indiana Territory. Stories of Indian cannibalism, kidnapping, and terror abounded, and whether true or not, they fastened upon Indiana’s Native American populace an unsavory reputation for atrocity and mayhem.³⁰

Lincoln grew up with stories about Indian savagery, starting with one of his favorite books—the classic biography of George Washington written by Mason Locke “Parson” Weems, which as a boy Lincoln read thoroughly “by ‘spells’ as he could snatch from his daily toil.”³¹ Biographers have long noted the influence of Weems’s biography on Lincoln, as seen in his life-long veneration of Washington and the Founders, his overall patriotism, his desire for self-improvement, his sense of republican virtue, and even the way he wrote the Gettysburg Address.³²

Nestled among the stories Weems related in his biography (most famously his dubious rendering of Washington chopping down a cherry tree

and then forthrightly owning up to the deed) were darker influences: passages recalling the lurid exploits of Native Americans during the French and Indian War. Lincoln read that the “whole country west of the Blue Mountains” in Washington’s day was “from time immemorial the gloomy haunt of ravening beasts and murderous savages. No voices had ever broken the awful silence of those dreary woods, save the hiss of rattlesnakes, the shrieks of panthers, [and] the yell of Indians.” Similarly, he read that during British general William Braddock’s defeat, the Indians allied with the French had attacked, “grimly painted, yelling like furies, burst[ing] from their coverts, eager to glut their hellish rage.” Elsewhere, Weems wrote that the Indians were “a great public terror,” that one of Washington’s good friends was burned at the stake by Native Americans at Sandusky, and that the roads “were filled with thousands of distracted parents, with their weeping little ones,” fleeing in “dread of the Indians.”³³

Lincoln heard such stories from his own family. His grandfather (also named Abraham) was killed by Indians. The elder Abraham arrived in Kentucky in 1786, and with his sons, Mordecai, Josiah, and Thomas (Lincoln’s father), he carved out a homestead in the woods. While clearing a cornfield, the men were suddenly attacked by Indians. Abraham was killed instantly; his son Mordecai grabbed a rifle and shot an Indian who was about to assault Thomas. “Mordecai said the Indian had a silver half moon trinket on his breast,” remembered a relative, “that silver being the mark he shot at. He said it was the prettiest mark he held a rifle on.”³⁴

The story was told and retold, with embellishments. One cousin’s recounting had the Indian grabbing Thomas “by the nap[e] of the neck and seat of the breeches and was running Down a lane with him” until Mordecai shot him dead.³⁵ It was said that Mordecai felt “an intense hatred of the Indians—a feeling from which he never recovered.” He “swore eternal vengeance on all Indians an oath which he faithfully kept as he afterwards during times of profound peace with the Indians killed several of them.” Another claimed that Mordecai murdered an Indian who had been passing through his neighborhood and boasted of leaving the body in a sinkhole as a grim means of gaining “satisfaction” for his father’s death.³⁶

All these tales made quite an impression on Lincoln. “The story of [Grandfather Abraham’s] death by the Indians, and of Uncle Mordecai, then fourteen years old, killing one of the Indians, is the legend more strongly than all others imprinted upon my mind and memory,” he later wrote. That account, along with the Indian bloodlust in Weems’s book and

other such stories he surely heard occasionally from neighbors, friends, and playmates, would have etched an image of Native American savagery in his mind—an image of brutality that was sharply at odds with the more civilized conduct of whites. Perhaps even his uncle Mordecai’s rage seemed more justified than the random killing of his grandfather, couched as Mordecai’s behavior was in the language of honorable revenge and “satisfaction.”³⁷

That said, Lincoln does not seem to have been afflicted by any sort of deep-seated hatred of Native Americans. In fact, his only direct experience with an actual Indian war, the Black Hawk War of 1832, revealed him to be a young man with more compassion and sympathy for Native Americans than many others of his day.

When Black Hawk, a Sac Indian chieftain, and several hundred followers entered Illinois in April 1832 to reclaim lands they believed were fraudulently taken from them through an earlier treaty, the governor of Illinois called out the state militia to repel them and issued a call for volunteers. Along with hundreds of other young white men, Lincoln joined the militia, and he was elected his company’s captain.³⁸

By all accounts, the men in his company were a wild bunch, hard young frontiersmen who posed a variety of discipline problems with their drinking, fighting, gambling, and overall reluctance to obey orders they did not like. They also harbored the usual prejudices and biases toward Native Americans, exacerbated by the threat of war and violence that Black Hawk and his followers represented.³⁹

Their attitude was made abundantly clear when an elderly Indian stumbled into camp, waving a piece of paper stating that he was a “good and true man.” Unimpressed, Lincoln’s troops began to grumble that the old man was “a damned spy,” adding, “We have come out to fight Indians and we intend to do so.” Sensing trouble, Lincoln got between his men and the Indian, preventing any violence and saying, “Men this must not be done—he must not be shot and killed by us.”⁴⁰

This anecdote is entirely hearsay, a secondhand account recalled many years after the fact by friends who were not above embellishing their tales. We should allow for the usual coating of romantic mythmaking that routinely surrounded Lincoln’s life story following his death in 1865—it is entirely possible that his rescue of the old Indian was greatly exaggerated or perhaps even entirely fabricated. Yet the story accords with multiple accounts depicting Lincoln as a compassionate young man. Moreover, it sug-

gests that he was less inclined toward the more vicious aspects of defining nonwhite Others than were many of his white contemporaries.

By the 1820s, Indians had as often as not been superseded by African Americans, with their corresponding “blackness,” as white America’s foil of choice. *Webster’s* defined *black* variously as “destitute of light,” “sullen,” “atrociously wicked: horrible,” “dismal,” and “calamitous.” *Dilworth’s Spelling Book* lamented “the dark discourse” of “some gay idiot” suffering from an “untutored tongue.” And in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, “a man black of flesh but covered with a very light Robe” led the pilgrims to what they believed was the Celestial City. But they became lost, and when “the white Robe fell off the black man’s back,” they saw they had been led astray by “a false Apostle, that hath transformed himself into an Angel of Light.”⁴¹

Weems’s *Life of George Washington* matched its depictions of Indians with equally negative characterizations of African Americans. In one passage, the author’s imagination had a poor Irishman thanking Washington for meeting with him promptly concerning a land sale. “I do thank you a thousand times,” the Irishman declared, “for many a great man would have kept me waiting like a black negro.” Elsewhere, Weems conjured up age-old images of the black trickster and buffoon. He described a British officer named Sir Peter who when crossing a river queried his black pilot, Cudjo, “‘What water have you got there?’” Cudjo replied, “‘What water, massa? what water? why salt water, be sure, sir?—sea water always sea water, an’t he, massa?’” To which Sir Peter replied, “‘You black rascal, I knew it was salt water. I only wanted to know how much water you have there?’” Cudjo then replied, “‘How much water here, massa? God bless me, massa! Where I going get quart pot for measure him?’” “This was right down impudence,” Weems wrote, “and Cudjo richly deserved a rope’s end for it.”⁴²

Lincoln would have seen a similar passage in *The American Preceptor*, a primer of speeches and writing selections that he read while living in Indiana.⁴³ The *Preceptor* contained a dialogue “showing the folly and inconsistency of dueling” between a white gentleman named Mr. Fenton and a black man named Nero. Fenton finds Nero loading a pistol and asks if he intends any mischief. “I only going to fight de duel, as dey call em, with Tom,” Nero replies. When Fenton asks why, Nero responds, “He call me neger, neger, once, twice, three time, and I no bear him.” After Fenton lectures Nero at length concerning the folly of dueling, including its violation

of Christian precepts and the fact that Tom is the best shot around, Nero thinks better of the matter and exclaims, “O Masser Fenton, take de pistol fore Nero shoot himself. Let de world call Nero neger, neger, neger; what Nero care?”⁴⁴

As the Bible elevated the concept of white to the level of purity and holiness, it likewise subsumed under the concept of black a variety of sins, impurities, and evils. “My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat,” reads Job 30:30, in reference to Job’s suffering. Lamentations 4 describes the accursed state of “the precious sons of Zion,” whose “visage is blacker than coal” because of their various transgressions. The second book of Peter, chapter 2, promises that for “false teachers,” the “mist of darkness is reserved.” The Song of Solomon reassures that “I am black” but comely despite that fact.⁴⁵

There was also the so-called Curse of Ham, which many people directly connected with Africans, African Americans, and black skin. Ham was one of Noah’s sons, the father of Canaan, who saw Noah lying naked in a drunken stupor within his tent “and told his two brethren [Shem and Japheth].” Shem and Japheth hurriedly covered their father’s shame with a cloth and avoided staring at his nudity. When Noah awoke and learned what Ham had done, he cursed Ham and Canaan. “Cursed be Canaan,” reads Genesis 9:25, “a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”

White Christians in Lincoln’s time commonly held that this Curse of Ham and his descendants was the origin of dark-skinned Africans. Although the Bible itself nowhere states that Ham, Canaan, or any of their descendants had dark skin, ancient Jewish scholars connected the name Ham to the Hebrew words for “dark” and “black.” Christian scholars and ministers followed their lead, and by Lincoln’s time, established Christian wisdom held that Ham and his lineage were the foundation of Egyptian and African tribes and that the dark-skinned peoples who were from those places deserved their degraded status as part of God’s just punishment for Ham’s sins.⁴⁶

Of course, race was a matter of more than just black or red skin. Dig a bit and one could find in early America all sorts of unsavory notions about Jews, or Chinese (“Celestials,” as they were known), or brown-skinned people from Mexico. Who knows exactly what Lincoln picked up from Thomas (who, according to one neighbor, was especially fond of “Indian stories”) or what he overheard in a local general store conversation or from other boys poking around the woods in Pigeon Creek? A “nigger”

joke here, a crack about “Sambo” or “Cuffy” or “Paddy” there, a lurid Indian tale or two . . . they floated in the air, thick as germs. Lincoln had no known immunity.

But there were other influences as well. He may have absorbed some antislavery sentiments while growing up in Kentucky. Historians have speculated that Thomas Lincoln was not enamored of slavery and that he left Kentucky because of his antislavery beliefs, speculation fueled by Lincoln himself. He claimed in 1860 that when Thomas moved the family to Indiana, “this removal was partly on account of slavery.”⁴⁷ A number of biographies have suggested that his father’s antislavery motives provided an early foundation for the future Great Emancipator’s crusade for freedom and equality.⁴⁸

But Thomas’s exact motives for moving to Indiana are difficult to pin down. One neighbor who knew the Lincolns in Kentucky felt that slavery played no role in Thomas’s thinking. “I have never heard that Slavery was any Cause of his leaving K[entuck]y,” he noted, “and think quite likely it was Not.” Lincoln’s cousin Dennis Hanks agreed: “It is said in the Biographies that Mr. Lincoln left the State of K[entuck]y because and only because Slavery was there. This is untrue. He moved off to better his Condition.” Hanks believed that “Slavery did not operate on him.”⁴⁹

Hanks’s account should be treated with the requisite amount of caution, coming as it did long after Abraham Lincoln’s death. Nor is there any reason to think that, for his part, Lincoln was lying about his father’s motives. He himself qualified his statement about Thomas’s motives with the word *partly*, indicating the truth probably lies somewhere in between; escaping slavery’s influence may well have played some role in shoving Thomas and his family across the Ohio River (“to better his condition” included escaping the skewed labor market that slavery created) but likely not in the form of an outright moral crusade.

Some have also argued that Lincoln picked up antislavery ideas at school and at church. During his brief time in school, he studied from a book called *The Kentucky Preceptor*, which contained among its subjects for student debate the question “Which has the most right to complain, the Indian or the Negro?”⁵⁰ In church, two of the Baptist ministers who preached at services attended by the Lincoln family in Kentucky, William Downs and David Elkin, were known to be vocal critics of slavery. Downs was described by one critic as “a disorderly preacher” who introduced a “factious spirit” among Kentucky Baptists by constantly agitating against

slavery from his pulpit. Elkin was similarly controversial for his antislavery leanings, as well as his generally slovenly demeanor and (later in life) his habitual drunkenness.⁵¹ Some believe that the two ministers exerted a powerful influence on Lincoln's thinking about slavery while he was still a child. "Even before Abraham could read or write, he learned of the wrongs of slavery by listening to these men of God," one historian has claimed.⁵²

Lincoln's early reading habits also exposed him to antislavery sentiments. He likely read a poem by Englishman William Cowper (in a literary compilation called *The English Reader*, which he saw while a boy in Indiana) criticizing the British Empire's complicity in the slave system. He also read in *The Kentucky Preceptor* two selections of antislavery sentiment, "The Desperate Negro" and "Liberty and Slavery," both of which offered passionate arguments against the injustice of human bondage.⁵³

But even if we allow the most generous possible interpretation—that the young Lincoln was influenced by his books, his family's antislavery ideas, and his church leaders' antislavery principles—all this says little about their beliefs concerning black people themselves or race in general. *Race* is not *slavery*, and it is naive to think that opposition to the latter necessarily involved a more tolerant perspective on the former.

Slavery, in an odd sort of way, was clearer than race. A boy such as Abraham Lincoln could get slavery handed to him in well-defined images by his ministers or possibly by his father: human beings in shackles, families torn asunder on the auction block, field hands abused while working on the land. Americans with antislavery leanings learned how to use dramatic and clear-cut images to shock and cajole their audiences. Later in life, Lincoln became pretty good at this himself.

But race was different. It was a muddled mix of bits and pieces of ideas, perceptions, assumptions, and half-formed images—shards and nuggets buried in the silt of everyday American life. Those shards, when sifted, billowed up ugly clouds of anxiety and fear. Fear was the foundation of race in Lincoln's America: fear of the "savage," fear of the "nigger," fear of Ham's Curse, fear even of the quasi-comical Neros and Cudjos whose moronic behavior and goofy mannerisms provoked laughter among whites that sometimes had a forced nervousness about it.

A young man such as Lincoln could learn to detest slavery, to think it a backward, immoral, and un-Christian institution. He could be told that slaves were the victims of great injustice, that they hardly deserved their fate, and that the world would be far better off if slavery had never existed.

Yet the powerful cultural undercurrents of the words *black* and *savage*, the baggage attached to all the unfortunate and ugly things said and written about people in America who weren't white—all of that would still operate on him, as it did on all of white America in his time. Such was the gloomy pervasiveness of race in Lincoln's age.

VETERAN FLATBOATERS said they could see the exact place where the Ohio River collided with the mighty Mississippi. It was a matter of color. The Mississippi River, the “father of waters,” had a more brownish, muddy hue due to its swift currents that constantly stirred the mud beneath. The flatboaters said you could literally see the line in the water demarcating the two rivers and know precisely the moment when you crossed from the Ohio to the mighty Mississippi.

Lincoln and Gentry's flatboat crossed that line and bobbed out into the Mississippi near Cairo, Illinois, probably sometime in the late summer of 1828. They made the big left turn and headed south—to the Deep South, with slave soil on both sides. Lincoln was now entering completely unfamiliar territory.

They would have stopped often, for there were frequent landings along the river where they could sell their wares or dock at nightfall to cook and sleep.⁵⁴ As they did so, their odds of running into people who were not white steadily increased, both onshore and out on the river itself. But *colored* carried a different connotation in this region, particularly as the flatboat floated deeper into Louisiana. No longer was Lincoln plying predominantly white waters, with relatively few blacks and even fewer people of different ethnicities. What he instinctively thought of as white was mixed in Louisiana with Creole and its various combinations of white, black, Indian, and possibly Spanish and French blood. He might also have discovered that *colored* and *Negro* carried different meanings in Louisiana. The two terms were used more or less interchangeably in Kentucky and Illinois, denoting simply a black person. But in Louisiana, *colored* meant any person with a mixture of black and some other ethnicity, whereas *Negro* was used almost exclusively to label a person of pure African descent.⁵⁵

The river itself would also have been peppered with a different sort of racial mixture. Lincoln and Gentry likely crossed paths with crews of African American slaves who manned boats loaded with cotton—nicknamed “cotton boxes” because of their high sideboards—or other staples. Flatboats near slaveholding and slave-trading states also sometimes

sported African Americans not as crew but as cargo, either being shipped downriver for sale at some distant slave market or accompanying a white master. Lincoln may have glimpsed his first slave coffle on a passing flat-boat, hauling away human beings as if they were so many hoop poles or barrels of pork.⁵⁶

At some point, the two young men entered what was known as the Sugar Coast region of Louisiana. Stretching just north of Baton Rouge and extending along the Mississippi River on both banks to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico, the Sugar Coast boasted some of the largest plantations in the entire nation. The plantations were typically situated between the river coast and the swamplands a few miles back, with necessary drainage and flood control provided by complex systems of levees that required constant, diligent maintenance. Lincoln and Gentry would have seen long networks of cross-ditches, interspersed between fields of sugarcane, occasionally mixed with a bit of cotton, corn, wheat, and indigo.⁵⁷

Those levees and ditches were raised, dug, cleaned, and continuously cleared of their brackish (and potentially deadly) water by black hands. Sugar production as a whole was intimately connected with slavery, as it had been for centuries. Black men and women—and often young boys and girls—worked the cane fields in an endless cycle of year-round labor, from weaving cane mats to protect the sugar seeds in the winter, to the back-breaking process of harvesting the cane crop in the summer, to the fall preparation of the following year's seedlings, then back again. If they arrived in the late summer or early fall, Lincoln and Gentry might have seen pillars of smoke rising through the skies and smelled the acrid, sweet stench of "boiling season," when slaves were engaged in the grueling work of boiling down the sugar crop.⁵⁸

Life for a slave on the Sugar Coast was cruel. Black men were sent into the swamps to collect fuel for the sugar-boiling fires, which necessarily exposed them to malaria, yellow fever, and other deadly diseases. Black women were usually used for the "lighter" tasks of tending the boiling fires themselves—hot, sweaty, and exhausting work, especially in the fetid Louisiana climate. Sugar planters and their overseers often drove their labor force mercilessly, especially during the harvest and boiling seasons when the pressures of time and profit were intense—the sugar had to be harvested and processed before cold weather arrived. "The planters generally declared . . . that they were *obliged* to over-work their slaves during the sugar-making season, (from eight to ten weeks) so as to *use them up* in

seven or eight years,” wrote an appalled Northerner upon a trip through the region. Some planters coldly calculated that they could turn a better profit by overworking and “using up” a labor force in a short period of time and replacing the lot, rather than working them more lightly and being obliged to feed and clothe them for a longer period.⁵⁹

Even aside from the high mortality rate among plantation slaves, life was cheap on the Sugar Coast; the area had an ugly reputation. Pirates and brigands had been an ongoing problem since the eighteenth century, and roaming bands of thieves and ne'er-do-wells, of all colors, preyed upon unwarly river travelers. “Murder and Plunder are already too common,” complained a man living in Rapide Parish. A congressman from the Mississippi side of the river agreed: “It has become the great thoroughfare of crime and vice as well as of wealth and enterprise; villains of every description, outlaws from other States, refugees from justice, thieves, robbers, and banditti of all sorts are continually floating upon its currents.”⁶⁰

Lincoln and Gentry slowly made their way south through this land. Lincoln later wrote that the “nature part of the cargo load . . . made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the Sugar coast.”⁶¹ Exactly what he meant by this was unclear. Maybe he and Gentry felt that their load of hoop poles would find a ready market among the sugar planters who were constructing hogshead barrels to hold the sugar and molasses they were in the process of harvesting and boiling down. Whatever Lincoln and Gentry’s purpose, their lingering in the area meant that their presence would have become well-known to the locals—not all of them friendly.

They passed through Concordia Parish, perhaps stopping in the town of Concordia itself, across the river from Natchez, Mississippi. Then they moved past Point Coupe and Baton Rouge; through Iberville Parish; and, just beyond a slight southwestward dip of the river, through Ascension Parish. New Orleans was not far off—only some 20 or 30 miles away.⁶²

A few miles into Ascension Parish, they saw on their left the Houmas plantation, named for the Houmas Indians who had sold the place to white settlers at the end of the eighteenth century. By Lincoln’s time, Houmas was owned in absentia by Wade Hampton, Virginia congressman and grandfather of the future Confederate general Wade Hampton III. Today, it is a tourist attraction, marketing its moonlight-and-magnolias ambience as an appropriate setting for weddings and special events of all occasions.⁶³ But in 1828, it was a no-nonsense sugar-production facility with a substantial labor force of slaves and a simple, altogether unromantic four-room, frame

main house (where the more grandiose mansion standing on the site today would eventually be built). A hard little world, this Houmas plantation, with its sugar mill and boiling house, its humid and disease-infested sugar brakes, its endless hours of backbreaking work—for the dark-skinned backs, anyway—its slave quarters, and no doubt its whipping posts.

Lincoln and Gentry apparently floated into the Houmas plantation's general vicinity near the end of the day, and as the sun set, they searched for a place to spend the night. We do not know exactly where they ultimately landed. Some later said it was close to the Houmas plantation proper, but others placed the landing site closer to a plantation owned by a Madame Duchesne—possibly Phillippa Rose Duchesne, a Catholic nun who had established missionary facilities in the area a few years earlier in order to work with the local Creole and Indian populations.⁶⁴

Wherever they landed, they cooked their dinner and bedded down for the evening. Lincoln slept in the flatboat's cabin. Perhaps Gentry did so as well, though if both of them decided to sleep without setting any kind of watch—traveling as they were in a strange and dangerous land—they committed an egregious lapse of judgment and common sense that nearly cost them their lives.

Sometime around midnight, their boat was boarded by seven African American men. They were armed with makeshift clubs, and according to Lincoln, they rushed the flatboat “with the intent to kill and rob” the two young Hoosiers.⁶⁵ Hearing a commotion—splashing water, maybe voices, and the loud stomp of feet on the raw oak deck—Gentry yelled to Lincoln inside the cabin. Lincoln scrambled up and staggered sleepily to the cabin's door, probably not entirely certain what was happening. As he emerged, one of the thieves swung a sharpened fence stake at his head. The stake hit Lincoln, who would carry the scar for the rest of his life. But it also glanced off some part of the cabin's upper structure, maybe the roof overhang, deflecting the force of what might otherwise have been a fatal blow.⁶⁶

The next few seconds must have been a confused blur. Lincoln and Gentry ran from whichever part of the boat the thieves boarded. There likely wasn't much light, so neither they nor the thieves could see too clearly, a situation Lincoln and Gentry used to their advantage. As they ducked out of sight—in the cabin, perhaps, or behind cargo piled on the deck—Gentry shouted, “Lincoln, get the guns and shoot!” They had no guns, but the thieves fell for the ruse and beat a hasty retreat back into the night darkness.

Who were the thieves? We can only guess. Possibly they were slaves from the Houmas plantation or some other plantation in the area, on the prowl after dark to augment what little their masters gave them with whatever they could steal along the river. They may have been runaways, eking out a shaky existence in the Louisiana swamplands, dodging slave patrols, and stealing to survive. Or perhaps they were free African Americans, living not so different an existence than runaways, forever marginalized at the fringes of Louisiana society, and likewise making do with whatever they could take.

Lincoln and Gentry didn't know, either. They were understandably rattled, staring out into the Louisiana night and wondering if the gang might regroup for another assault on their boat, potentially with reinforcements. Traveling on the Mississippi River at night was difficult and perilous, the inky blackness of the night sky and the water hiding all sorts of dangers: floating driftwood, snags, sandbars, and other boats. But Lincoln and Gentry's fear of the thieves surpassed their fear of the dark. As Lincoln later wrote, they "cut cable,' 'weighed anchor' and left."⁶⁷

He recounted this story in an autobiography he gave to Chicago publisher John L. Scripps, who had requested a sketch of Lincoln's life as the basis of a biography he would publish of the Republicans' presidential candidate for the 1860 campaign. Lincoln responded with a 3,200-word document, the most comprehensive autobiography he ever wrote.

Lincoln related the story of the flatboat assault in considerable detail, sandwiched among various anecdotes that seem designed by him to establish his bona fides as a pioneer boy made good (which had become a substantial feature of his political image). He wanted to paint an image of himself as a young man who overcame hardships on America's primitive and hazardous frontier, highlighting his want of education, an incident when he was ten and "was kicked by a horse, and apparently killed for a time," and then the flatboat trip.

In his account, the assailants were identified merely as "seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them." (Lincoln wrote the account in the third person.) There was no apparent malice or latent fear in his language. Yet he did not write "seven men" or "seven thieves." They were "seven negroes," the fact of their blackness apparently adding just a bit more of an edge to the tale—more so, perhaps, than if they had been white or an unidentified neutral color.⁶⁸