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Building With Lincoln Logs

Transforming the Lincoln Legal Papers

Daniel W. Stowell

The challenges of the past two and one-half years for the staff of the Lincoln Legal Papers have been daunting. First, we had to take a successful project through the transition from one director to another and from one form of publication to another. Then, in quick succession, we began a larger initiative—the Papers of Abraham Lincoln—of which the Lincoln Legal Papers became a part.

The Lincoln Legal Papers began in 1985 as a five-year project to locate and edit the surviving documentation from Abraham Lincoln's legal career. Fifteen years later, the University of Illinois Press published a comprehensive electronic edition on three DVD-ROM discs entitled *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*.¹ This publication provides electronic facsimiles of over 96,000 documents from more than 5,100 cases and nearly five hundred non-litigation activities. A database of more than three million pieces of data provides extensive details about each case and document. A custom-designed interface allows users to search for specific cases and documents using more than a dozen indexes, including date, participant, venue, subject, legal action, document type, author/signer, and others. One-paragraph summaries for each case provide an overview of the issues in dispute and Lincoln's role in the case. The

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result, according to a recent review, is “*extraordinary* in every sense of that much overused word.”² For twelve of the project's fifteen years, Dr. Cullom Davis was the director and driving force. He transformed the project from a good idea into a viable operation. Cullom retired as a professor from the University of Illinois at Springfield in 1996, but continued as director of the Lincoln Legal Papers through the publication of the comprehensive electronic edition.

In January 2000, I became the director of the project,

stepping forward to fill Cullom's very large shoes. At the same time, the project was moving from the preparation of a cutting-edge comprehensive edition to a more traditional, four-volume book edition. Over the past two and one-half years, the editorial staff of the Lincoln Legal Papers has successfully completed the transition and is on schedule to complete editorial work on the four volumes by 2005 for simultaneous publication in 2006.

What advice can we offer from this transition? What lessons did we learn? What mistakes did we make? What did we do that worked? Three areas are particularly notable: personnel, educational outreach, and project support.

First, let me suggest that in any project transition, the director must pay particular attention to the morale of his or her most important resource—the staff. At the end of the very stressful period of final proofing and revision of our massive electronic edition, staff morale was a bit low. We were trying to cross the last “t” and dot the last “i” before sending our material off to the University of Illinois Press, but we had not yet had the satisfaction of holding the completed product in our hands. Substantial challenges lay ahead as we made the transition to a different mode of thinking and working together.

At our first meeting to discuss the selective book edition on 9 December 1999, I laid out for the staff my vision to make the Lincoln



Abraham Lincoln
c. 1847

Library of Congress
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Legal Papers the first part of a larger, comprehensive edition of Lincoln's papers—the Papers of Abraham Lincoln. This strategy of providing the long-term vision allowed the staff to situate themselves and their work within the overall plan and enter the new phase with renewed commitment. We also began to hold short weekly staff meetings that afford everyone an opportunity to know where other staff members are in their work, a process that has aided in breaking down some of the compartmentalization of tasks that was common in the final stages of work on the electronic edition.

In the Spring of 1999, I had the good fortune to be able to teach a graduate-level course in documentary editing at the University of Illinois at Springfield. I used Mary-Jo Kline's *Guide to Documentary Editing* and Michael Stevens and Steven Burg's *Editing Historical Documents* handbook as my basic texts, supplemented by various articles. Teaching that course gave me a good opportunity to reflect on the process of selection we faced and to draw on the collective wisdom and experience of many different documentary editors and editing projects. At the Lincoln Legal Papers, we had to choose from a pool of over 5,100 cases some fifty or so that would demonstrate the breadth, depth, and complexity of Lincoln's legal practice, while also telling stories that readers would find engaging. As we worked through this process, the *Complete Documentary Edition* gave us unprecedented intellectual control over the corpus of Lincoln's legal papers, which we could arrange and rearrange to examine from a variety of perspectives. With a wealth of statistics about the legal papers at our fingertips, we were able to wrestle more effectively with the tensions between faithfully replicating the ratios of each type of case in Lincoln's practice on the one hand and on the other presenting important, interesting, and representative cases that illustrated a broader array of cases and subject matter. Instead of filling two-and-a-half volumes with debt cases (which would accurately represent the distribution of cases in statistical terms), we chose the other course, but always with our eyes on representing a numerically significant segment of Lincoln's practice through each case presentation.

From the start, we viewed the selective book edition as an introduction—a gateway—into the riches of the *Complete Documentary Edition*. Although the interface of the *Complete Documentary Edition* is easy to use and the documents are deeply indexed, they are not transcribed but presented in image form. For some users, the difficulty of reading nineteenth-century handwritten documents is daunting. Others find the sheer volume of documents and cases overwhelming. The electronic form of the edition itself also discourages some potential users from exploring the riches of the edition. The publication of a four-volume selective edition will over-

come many of these difficulties. Presented in a familiar print form with fully transcribed documents, the selective edition will feature contextualization for each case and explanatory annotation for each document. Behind each case will be dozens of other cases like it in the *Complete Documentary Edition*. For example, if the divorce case of *Rogers v. Rogers* in the selective book edition interests readers, they can examine 144 more divorce cases from Lincoln's practice in the *Complete Documentary Edition*.

From December 1999 to May 2000, the editorial staff kept up a grueling schedule of meetings to design and implement a selection procedure with which we could all work and which would yield the best combination of cases. Through many hours of meetings, we discussed, debated, and even argued. I am pleased to say, however, that over two years later, we have had to make no significant alterations to that original, tentative table of contents. I continue to assign chosen cases to an individual editor, who takes responsibility for that chapter. Each time, the individual editor conducts initial research and returns to the group even more enthusiastic about the choices we have made. We have completed over one third of the chapters already, and editors are at work on six more. I have my own methods for determining who assumes editorial responsibility for what chapter, a secret I jealously though mirthfully guard. I do not assign several case chapters to each individual because doing so might dilute the editor's focus on the case before him or her. Looking ahead to future cases and trying to conduct research on several simultaneously would be distracting. Each editor now focuses his or her complete attention on one case and is responsible for selecting documents, transcribing documents, conducting research, and writing the entire case presentation. Two other editors proof all document transcriptions orally in the presence of the chapter editor, and the entire editorial staff gives each editor input at three separate stages during the preparation of the chapter.

As we have worked together over the past three years, we have developed renewed appreciation for the specialties and talents each editor brings to our collective decision-making. Staff morale is high, and each editor has a strong sense of how she or he is contributing to the project's progress and success. The recent publication of five very positive reviews of the *Complete Documentary Edition* has only strengthened our pride in our work.

A second lesson we learned was that when a project issues a major publication like *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, it must make sure that the public knows that, although an important phase is completed, the project is still underway. There was a widespread assumption, even among some of our closest sup-

porters, that the project ended with the publication of our DVD-ROM edition. The project staff had to combat this perception for some six months after the transition period. In a similar fashion, we had to explain very carefully why we were publishing a selective book edition after completing a comprehensive electronic edition. Here, the project's quarterly newsletter, sent to some 3,300 friends of the project, was an invaluable asset. It provided us with an opportunity to remind supporters and other interested parties that we are still at work and are producing a complementary publication for a broader audience over the next several years.

A third and related lesson we learned during our transition concerned what might be called the secondary products of an editing project: curriculum materials, donor premiums, newsletters, and the project web site. Our experience suggests that these components of the project, far from being either a distraction or a luxury, actually play an important role in providing continuity during a time of transition. By building on the past achievements of the Lincoln Legal Papers, we were able to issue curriculum materials and donor premiums that visibly made an important statement: the Lincoln Legal Papers was still underway.

The Abraham Lincoln Association contributed funding to the project to allow us to make available curriculum materials based on documents from Abraham Lincoln's legal career. Working with curriculum specialists from Illinois State University, we identified six areas of antebellum history in which documents from Lincoln's legal career could provide useful teaching materials. Our editorial staff selected potential documents in each of these areas, and the curriculum specialists developed lesson plans using two or three documents for each plan. After having the plans peer-reviewed, we published them to our web site in February 2001 as "The Lincoln Legal Papers Curriculum: Understanding Illinois Social History Through Documents from the Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln, 1836-1861" (www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org/LLP_Curriculum_Online.htm).

Building on the success of the online lesson plans, we sought and received a grant from the Illinois Bar Foundation to prepare and publish a curriculum magazine, modeled on the Organization of American Historians' *Magazine of History*. We commissioned six historians—Michael Grossberg, R. Douglas Hurt, Nicole Etcheson, Stewart Winger, David Blanke, and John E. Clark Jr.—from a variety of specialties to write historical essays that would be paired with abbreviated versions of each of the lesson plans. Assistant Editor Dennis Suttles condensed each of the lesson plans for presentation in the printed magazine. In addition to these essays, Assistant Editor Susan Krause and I prepared a lesson plan based on three Illinois courthouses in which Lincoln practiced. This

lesson plan is patterned after the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Teaching With Historic Places" guidelines. The finished product, *From Courtroom to Classroom: The Lincoln Legal Papers Curriculum*, is a 96-page magazine with illustrations from the collections of the Illinois State Historical Library. The Illinois Bar Foundation grant enabled us to print 6,000 copies of the magazine and to distribute over 4,100 copies to history teachers throughout Illinois. In addition, we made the entire publication available online in Portable Document Format (.pdf) on our web site (http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org/from_courtroom_to_classroom).

In addition to creating curriculum materials and making them broadly available, we have made an extra effort to insure that the premium that we provide to donors of \$100 or more is as attractive as possible. In the fall of 2000, Assistant Editor Susan Krause prepared *From Log Cabins to Temples of Justice: Courthouses in Lincoln's Illinois* as the donor premium. This attractive, 80-page booklet provides photographs of each of the central Illinois courthouses and law offices in which Lincoln practiced law, together with a short narrative description of the building and a summary of a case in which Lincoln participated there. This premium has generated some donations outright and assured other donors that we are still producing important and interesting materials. This premium even became the first to become the subject of a review in a professional journal!³

As a companion to *From Log Cabins to Temples of Justice*, Susan Krause last year produced *Judging Lincoln: The Bench in Lincoln's Illinois*. This 72-page booklet offers biographical sketches of twenty-nine state and federal judges who rendered verdicts in Lincoln's cases. Many were members of the Illinois Supreme Court, but others were state circuit court judges, federal district and circuit court judges in Illinois, and even a few justices of the United States Supreme Court. Each two-page spread provides a photograph or a portrait of the judge or justice, the courts in which he presided, a brief biography, and a summary of a Lincoln case in which the judge rendered a verdict or crafted the majority opinion.

To assist us in spreading the word that the project is still going strong and still needs the support of its friends, we redesigned both the quarterly newsletter and the project's web site. Assistant Editor Stacy McDermott developed a new design for the masthead of the newsletter, and we chose a different, more attractive paper and decided to use brown ink to give the newsletter an antique look. Stacy McDermott also initiated a major facelift of our web site, adding features and making the entire site look better and more professional. We also changed the URL to make it easier to remember and locate (www.lincolnlegalpapers.org). All of these changes

took thought and time, but the statistics from our web site counter and the positive comments we have received on the new look of the newsletter indicate that the effort was worthwhile.

In the midst of this transition from a comprehensive electronic edition to a selective book edition, the staff and I began an even larger and more complicated transformation by launching the Papers of Abraham Lincoln. In the planning stages for over two years, this new initiative is now underway and has begun to produce results. The Lincoln Legal Papers will serve as Series I of the larger three-series project. Series II is the Illinois Papers, and Series III is the Presidential Papers.

Again, we have learned lessons that may be informative to other projects. Three stand out. First, we have learned that scholars can be both our greatest advocates and our most persistent critics. Anyone who has been an editor for more than a year or two has probably experienced a fate similar to mine when I describe my work to friends from graduate school or to other professional colleagues. In a conversation about transcribing nineteenth-century documents, one such scholar, a bright young legal historian, said to me only *half* jokingly, "Don't you just have to copy it down?" Happily, some scholars, like Bruce Cole, the new director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), view editions as "one of the agency's crowning glories" and "among the most important and long-lasting contributions the NEH can make to the advancement of the humanities and to the understanding of our past and present." The fine editorial board for the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, which includes documentary editors, Lincoln scholars, and nineteenth-century historians, shares Cole's appreciation for well-founded and well-crafted documentary editions.

Unfortunately, too many scholars find our attention to the details of texts curious at best and a waste of time and resources at worst. These scholars have little patience with documentary editions that take more than a few years to complete, from conceptualization to publication. Eager to use the results of a new edition in their own ongoing research projects, they insist that the search can be done quickly, that transcriptions need be only approximate, that careful proofing is unnecessary, that contextual annotation is a luxury that can be added later if at all, and that the ability to publish electronically has reduced the time required to complete an edition to a small fraction of that formerly needed. In the case of Abraham Lincoln, such scholars have even launched an editing project of their own.

The Internet has only fueled such scholars' impatience. Believing that the Internet is a panacea for creating documentary editions, they show little interest in the intellectual

rigor in editions for which the Model Editions Partnership and the ADE's Committee on Electronic Standards have called. The illusion of quick returns on investments has also lured some substantial donors to expect their contributions to create editions of great scope and complexity in very short order. The Internet does enhance editors' ability to search for documents, conduct research, and publish editions, but it does not, and cannot, substitute for the application of an editor's knowledge, skill, and experience to a text. That portion of the editing process, that heart of what we do, stubbornly remains a time-consuming, but essential and rewarding, task.

A second and related lesson pertains to lay boards of supporters and advisers. Support from such groups of devotees of one's subject can breathe life into a documentary editing project. They can contribute funds directly and suggest and attract other sources for funding as well. Although well-meaning, enthusiastic, and intelligent people, they, too, have little patience for the theoretical foundations and practical intricacies of documentary editing. Discussions of editorial policy, with its focus on selection, transcription, annotation, and presentation, leave them confused or bored or both. Yet they do respond to scholars with whom they are personally familiar, even if those scholars do not share an appreciation of the difficulties and complexities of documentary editing. Such board members are also attuned to issues of form and symbolism. They enthusiastically welcome polished newsletters, donor premiums, a well-designed web site, and they are good gauges both of a project's public image and of the public reception an edition is likely to receive. For these reasons, the relationship with such boards is both quite important and particularly challenging.

A third lesson is perhaps more practical and obvious. In any such transformation as this one, it remains important to pay attention to staff morale and to provide project members with significant milestones as the identity of the project changes. For example, although the transformation from the Lincoln Legal Papers to the larger Papers of Abraham Lincoln had been ongoing since December 1999, we took the simple step of changing the way we answer the phones on 1 October 2001. Now, when you call our offices, the staff secretary will answer the phone, "Papers of Abraham Lincoln." This change and a variety of other small changes offer the project's staff clear markers of the transformation and of their place within it. With the assistance of a private donation, we contracted with a local design firm to prepare a logo for the Papers of Abraham Lincoln that we could incorporate into our stationery and the masthead of a new newsletter, the *Lincoln Editor*. This quarterly publication, also designed by Assistant Editor Stacy McDermott, informs friends of the project about our progress on Series II and III.

Likewise, a second web site (www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org) allows us to reach a broader public with information about the Papers of Abraham Lincoln while we maintain our Lincoln Legal Papers web site as well for those familiar with it. In these transitions, we have had to be particularly careful to keep the Lincoln Legal Papers somewhat distinct from the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, as some of the cosponsors and funders of the former have not yet endorsed or supported the latter. However, the primary sponsor—the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency—enthusiastically endorses this new initiative, especially as it relates to the mission and programs of the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, now under construction in Springfield.

I would like to offer one final note of explanation for why these transitions have gone as smoothly as they have. Cullom Davis, my predecessor as director of the Lincoln Legal Papers, made his personal transition from director and editor to consulting editor with style and grace, and he allowed me the room to test my own ideas. However, he was always ready with an attentive ear or a word of encouragement if I needed it. In the larger transition that has made the Lincoln Legal Papers a part of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Cullom has been a most enthusiastic and vocal advocate of the wisdom and integrity of the project as we have designed and implemented it.

In these transitions I have frequently considered one of my children's simple toys. For Christmas 2000, my wife and I bought our then twenty-one-month-old son Benjamin a set of Special Edition Lincoln Logs. Like the original Lincoln Logs of more than eighty years ago, these were made entirely of wood. As Lincoln Logs regained some of their popularity in the 1970s, the company that owned them issued sets first with plastic gables and plastic chimneys, then with roofs formed entirely from plastic. Some competitors even issued imitation sets with plastic logs. Now, many families, including ours, are returning to the sturdy originals. As you might guess, the sets made entirely from wood cost a bit more, but from our perspective they are worth it. You see, Benjamin's grandchildren will be able to play with those Lincoln Logs. They will withstand years of rough play and years of storage between his teenage years and the years when he has his own children. Each dent and scratch only adds to the character of the wood.

As the director of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, I draw inspiration from those original Lincoln Logs. Long after the Tinker Toys have broken and the plastic "Happy Meal" toys are inhabiting landfills, the simple, sturdy Lincoln Logs will still endure. The Papers of Abraham Lincoln seeks a similar longevity. Long after the fleeting editions designed for today only, or this year only, or for the next few years, have faded

from memory, the Papers of Abraham Lincoln will provide Benjamin's children with authoritative texts from the life of Abraham Lincoln. It will cost more and take longer, but in the end, doing less is not worthy of either our craft or our subject.

Notes

1. Martha Brenner and Cullom Davis et al., eds., *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, 3 DVD-ROMs (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
2. Stephen Walch, review of *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, in *Journal of Illinois History* 4 (2001):168.
3. Wayne C. Temple, review of *From Log Cabins to Temples of Justice: Courthouses in Lincoln's Illinois*, in *The Lincoln Herald*, forthcoming.

Associate Editor Harriet Jacobs Papers Project

The Harriet Jacobs Papers Project at Pace University in New York City announces an opening for a full-time Associate Editor. Requirements include an advanced degree in a relevant field (such as American or African American history or literature); strong computer skills; strong writing and research skills; and experience in documentary editing.

The Jacobs Papers, under the general editorship of Jean Fagan Yellin, will be a two-volume edition of approximately 600 documents by and about the 19th-century author, abolitionist, and reformer Harriet Jacobs (1813–97), best known as the fugitive slave who wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The edition is under contract with the University of North Carolina Press. The Associate Editor's responsibilities will include participation in all aspects of preparing the text, including the drafting of textual notes and textual introduction; conducting final proofreadings of transcriptions; supervising (with the Editor-in-Chief) the researching and drafting of annotation; supervising the indexing process; supervising a senior research assistant; and supervising and helping to train student research assistants.

This is a grant-funded, two-year, full-time position with benefits and will begin summer 2002. Please send letter of interest and qualifications, c.v., and names of three references to Joseph M. Thomas, Pace University, 41 Park Row, 16th floor, New York, NY 10038. Review of applications will begin immediately.