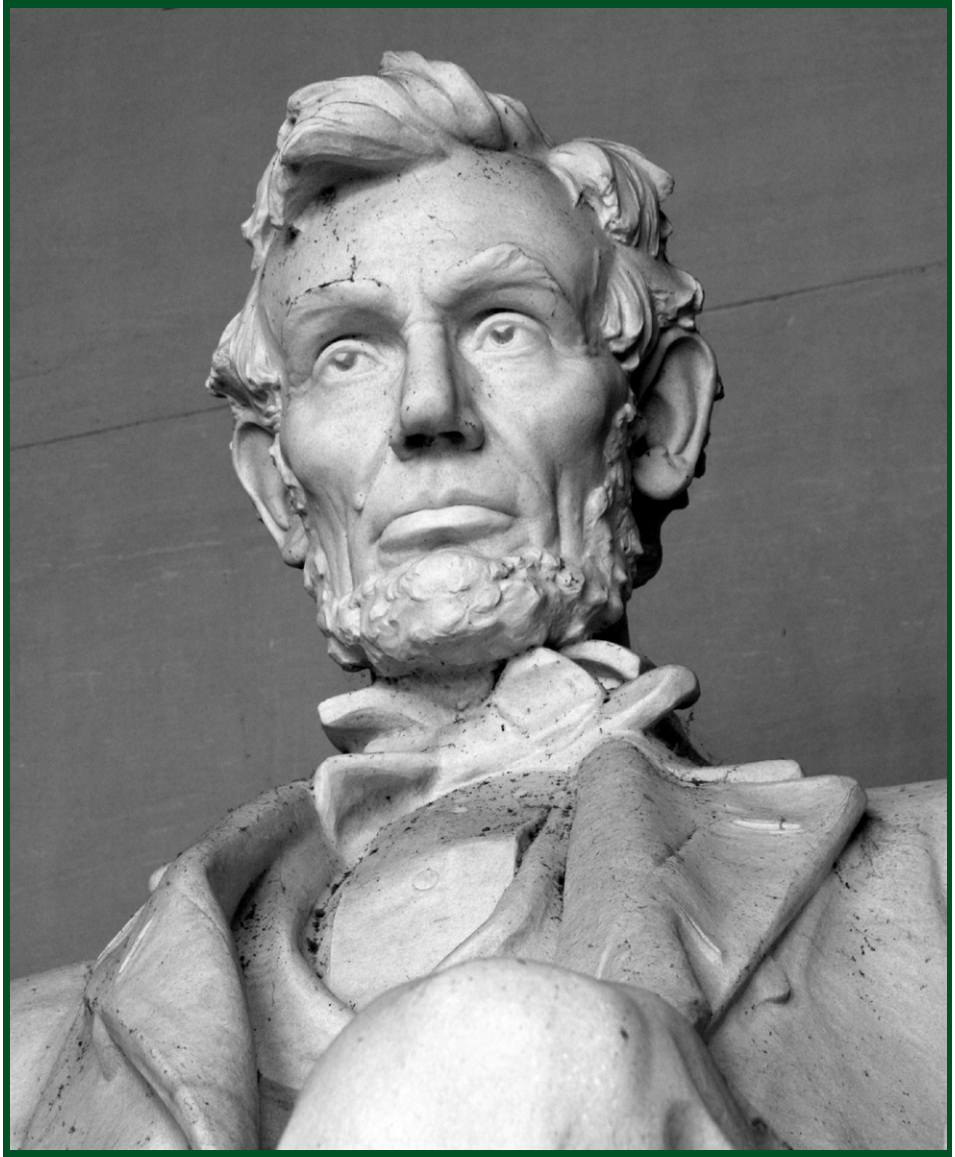
A Journey to Greatness

By Edgar "Jed" C. Morrison, Jr.

***Editor's Note:** 150 years ago Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as President of the United States. As he prepared for that event, his final train trip as a private citizen formally introduced Lincoln the President-elect to the nation, and gave the people a personal glimpse of Lincoln the man.*



Early on the cold, drizzly Monday morning of February 11, 1861, Springfield, Illinois trial lawyer Abraham Lincoln left the practice of law behind him for the last time. After breakfasting at the Chenery House Hotel, where he spent his last night in Springfield, Lincoln and eldest son Robert rode a carriage though the muddy streets to the Great Western Railroad Depot. Mary Todd Lincoln met him at the station to bid him goodbye. She and the two younger Lincoln sons would take another train later that day and meet the party in Indianapolis.

Taking what would be his last look at his home town, the President-elect boarded a special New York Central inaugural train early that morning. The "victory train" would take him on a meandering 13-day journey from America's heartland to the heartbeat of the government, a triumphal trip that ended in a most unexpected fashion.

Neither the early hour, nor the cold temperatures — with average lows of 22 degrees in February — chilled the enthusiasm of the estimated 1,000 Springfield citizens gathered at the Depot to say goodbye and "Godspeed" to their favorite son. All was enthusiasm and exuberance, mixed with a tinge of sadness. But who in the crowd could have anticipated the tragic homecoming only four years later, when a black-draped funeral cortege slowly and sadly returned Lincoln home for a final rest from his labors?

A Sad Parting

Perhaps just one person in the crowd that morning with a sense of the moment had a dark glimpse of the future. Braving the chill, Lincoln, a skilled orator who usually devoted exhaustive preparation to his speeches, spontaneously shared his thoughts with his family and friends. He spoke without notes but not without emotion:

> My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with

a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.[1]

Just after 8 A.M. the crowd erupted with three sustained cheers as the modern Rogers locomotive slowly pulled the train out of the Depot, picking up speed for the scheduled four and one half hour meandering first leg to the Indiana state line. Some dozen or more reporters from the major newspapers and the Associated Press accompanied the Lincoln party on the train. According to Lincoln law partner William Herndon, Lincoln "never overlooked a newspaper man who had it in his power to say a good or bad thing of him."[2] These correspondents' reports provide the details of Lincoln's life over the ensuing two-week journey.

Later that morning, in the small town of Tolono, the junction of the Great Western and Illinois Central Railroads, Lincoln made his last and perhaps his briefest speech ever to the people of Illinois. It was still a "dreary, dank, drizzly day" when Lincoln briefly stepped onto the train platform:

> I am leaving you on an errand of national importance, attended as you are aware with considerable difficulties. Let us believe as some poet has expressed it "behind the cloud the sun is still shining." I bid you an affectionate farewell.[3]

Lincoln almost certainly knew he quoted Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Rainy Day" as he said his last goodbye to Illinois. Longfellow's dreary poem of a dark and rainy day ("into each life some rain must fall") would have appealed to Lincoln's melancholy nature. But he had reason for apprehension. As Lincoln began his journey, seven southern states, including Texas, already had seceded from the Union. Confederate militia surrounded federal troops at Ft. Sumter, South Carolina and Southern artillery fire had repulsed efforts to reinforce them with additional Union troops. Lincoln indeed recognized he faced "a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington" and it's little wonder that he sought the comfort of the poet's pen.

But if Lincoln dreaded the task ahead, he also embraced it. He scripted his journey to take him through seven states and their capitals, scores of towns, across dozens of rivers, and through the doorway of history to take office as the 16th President of the United States. Lincoln's journey was both practical and symbolic. Train travel was the most efficient and safest mode of transportation in the 1860s and villages, towns, and major cities lined the tracks of the nation's young railway system. The two-week, whistle-stop tour gave Lincoln time to prepare for his Presidency and at the same time gave tens of thousands of Americans an opportunity to see the "Man from Sangamon."

Wild Crowds

And see and hear him they did. Steam engines of that period required stopping for water and fuel as frequently as every few hours. Lincoln's train thus passed through and stopped at dozens and dozens of towns and cities along the way. Lincoln's private secretary John Nicolay was on the trip and noted:

> On the whole route from Springfield to Washington, at almost every station, even the smallest, was gathered a crowd of people in hope to catch a glimpse of the face of the President-elect, or, at least, to see the flying train. At the larger stopping-places these gatherings were swelled to thousands, and in the great cities into almost unmanageable assemblages. Everywhere there were vociferous calls for Mr. Lincoln, and, if he showed himself, for a speech. Whenever there was sufficient time, he would step to the rear platform of the car and bow his acknowledgments as the train was moving away, and sometimes utter a few words of thanks and greeting.[4]

Although Lincoln tried to avoid discussing substantive plans or policies on the trip (he had spent weeks and weeks carefully researching and writing his inaugural address, at which time all would be said), he at times was clear enough. In Indianapolis, on his 52nd birthday, Lincoln sharply posed the question before the nation:

> If the union of these States and the liberties of this people shall be lost, it is but little to any one man of fifty-two years of age, but a great deal to the thirty millions of people who inhabit these United States, and to their posterity in all coming time. It is your business to rise up and preserve the Union and liberty for yourselves and not for me. . . . I appeal to you again to constantly bear in mind that not with politicians, not with Presidents, not with office-seekers, but with you, is the question, Shall the Union and shall the liberties of this country be preserved to the latest generations?[5]

On February 14, in Steubenville, Ohio, Lincoln spoke again of Southern demands as if he was lecturing schoolchildren:

> If the majority should not rule, who would be the judge? Where is such a judge to be found? We should all be bound by the majority of the American people — if not, then the minority must control. Would that be right?[6]

For the most part, however, Lincoln confined his remarks to short generalities. In London, Ohio, he remarked:

> Fellow citizens, I do not appear before you to make a speech, and have not strength nor time to do so. If I were to undertake to make a speech at every station, I should be completely [worn out] before I reached the capital. I perceive a band of music present, and while the iron horse stops to water himself, I would prefer they should discourse in their more eloquent music than I am capable of.[7]

And in Hudson, New York, he repeated a playful theme that always drew laughter and appreciative applause from the ladies:

> I do not appear before you for the purpose of making a speech. I come only to see you and to give you the opportunity to see me; and I say to you, as I have before said to crowds where there were so many handsome ladies as there are here, I have decidedly the best of the bargain. I have only, therefore, to thank you most cordially for this kind reception, and bid you all farewell.[8]

Even in his address to a joint session of the New York legislature in Albany, Lincoln demurred, and chose not to "enter into any explanation of any particular line of policy as to our present difficulties to be adopted by the incoming administration."[9]

Abe's Facial Consultant

There were memorable moments on the trip as well. On February 16, in Westfield, New York, a small village on the banks of Lake Erie, Lincoln greeted a throng of well-wishers. In one of the most celebrated encounters of his time as President-elect, Lincoln met Miss Grace Bedell, the 11-year-old young lady who wrote Lincoln a pre-election letter encouraging him to grow a beard to cover up his "thin" face. One newspaper gave the following account of the meeting:

> Mr. Lincoln greeted a large crowd of ladies, and several thousand of the sterner sex. Addressing the ladies, he said, "I am glad to see you; I suppose you are to see me; but I certainly think I have the best of the bargain. (Applause.) Some three

Miss Bedell's pre-election letter and Lincoln's reply, are innocent and enduring images of days gone by.

N Y, Westfield Chatauqua Co Oct 15. 1860
Hon A B Lincoln

Dear Sir

My father has just [perhaps "come"] home from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only 11 years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much so I hope you wont think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell her to write to me if you cannot answer this letter. I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try to get every one to vote for you that I can I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter direct to Grace Bedell Westfield Chautauqua County New York.

I must not write any more answer this letter right off Good bye
Grace Bedell

Oct 19, 1860 Springfield, Illinois
Miss Grace Bedell

My dear little Miss

Your very agreeable letter of the 15th is received.

I regret the necessity of saying I have no daughters — I have three sons — one seventeen, one nine, and one seven years of age. They, with their mother, constitute my whole family.

As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affectation if I were to begin it now?

Your very sincere well wisher
A. Lincoln[11]

[1] 4 The Abraham Lincoln Association, Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (Roy P. Basler, ed., Rutgers University Press ed. 1953) (hereafter "Collected Works").
[2] William H. Herndon, Herndon's Lincoln 231 (Wilson and Davis, eds. 2006).
[3] Lincoln 1861 Inaugural Train Stop, The Historical Marker Database, http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=4720 (last visited January 16, 2011)
[4] John G. Nicolay, A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln 169 (1902).
[5] *Id.* at 170.
[6] *Id.* at 171.
[7] 4 Collected Works 204.

months ago, I received a letter from a young lady here; it was a very pretty letter, and she advised me to let my whiskers grow, as it would improve my personal appearance; acting partly upon her suggestion, I have done so; and now, if she is here, I would like to see her; I think her name was Miss BARLLY [sic]." A small boy, mounted on a post, with his mouth and eyes both wide open, cried out, "there she is, Mr. LINCOLN," pointing to a beautiful girl, with black eyes, who was blushing all over her fair face. The President left the car, and the crowd making way for him, he reached her, and gave her several hearty kisses, and amid the yells of delight from the excited crowd, he bade her good-bye, and on we rushed.[10]

New York

Leaving his newfound friend behind, Lincoln's train continued from Westfield through an overnight stop in Buffalo and then to the state capitol in Albany, where Lincoln again met with a joint session of its legislature. New York was important to Lincoln. His famed "Cooper Union" speech in New York City the year before had propelled him to national prominence and a frontrunner position for the Republican nomination. New York's convention endorsement of Lincoln, after the failed nomination of native son William Seward, ensured Lincoln's nomination. He justifiably and literally went "out of his way" to make a grand tour of the Empire State.

Despite supportive crowds, Lincoln was aware of the difficulties he soon would face. Somewhere in Albany he must have received news that the "Confederate States of America" had inaugurated Jefferson Davis as its president on February 18. The inauguration festivities included the popular song "Dixie," which the South would appropriate as its unofficial anthem. Within weeks Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas would secede.

Lincoln Inauguration

The country was coming unraveled.[12]

From Albany, the victory train rolled down the Hudson River valley towards New York City, stopping briefly for water and fuel in the towns of Troy, Hudson, Poughkeepsie, and Fishkill. On February 19, Lincoln's final stop before reaching New York City was the tiny town of Peekskill, population 3,560. After nearly nine days of travel in the dead of winter, Lincoln was surely fatigued. His train pulled into Peekskill precisely at 2 P.M. Noting that some 1,500 citizens jammed the station, the Peekskill *Highland Democrat*, reported the scene:

> Exactly at the time set in the special table of the company, the train arrived, locomotive and cars beautifully decorated with flags, etc. There was a bustle, cheers and hurrahs and Abraham Lincoln stepped from the rear car, followed by half a dozen reporters and passed onto the platform prepared by the committee. . . . He looked jaded, fatigued, as if just aroused from a nap, but when he commenced speaking, his whole countenance lighted up.[13]

Now customary, Lincoln's remarks were brief and general:

> Ladies and Gentlemen. I have but a moment to stand before you to listen to and return your kind greeting. I thank you for this reception, and for the pleasant manner in which it is tendered to me by our mutual friend. [Congressman Nelson] I will say in a single sentence, in regard to the difficulties that lie before me and our beloved country, that if I can only

[8] 4 Collected Works (citing the New York *Herald*, February 20, 1861).
[9] *Lincoln in Albany Commemorative Marker*, The Historical Marker Database.
[10] Philadelphia *Inquirer*, February 20, 1861.
[11] 4 Collected Works
[12] *A Civil War Timeline*, The New York Times, *available at* http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/08/a-civil-war-timeline/ (last visited January 16, 2011).
[13] Peekskill Lincoln Society Webpage, "The Lincoln Depot Museum," *available at* http://www.lincolnsociety.com/LincolnDepotMuseum.html (last visited January 16, 2011) (quoting *Mr. Lincoln at Peekskill*, Highland Democrat, February 23, 1861).
[14] *Id*.

be as generously and unanimously sustained as the demonstration I have witnessed indicate I shall be, I shall not fail; but without your sustaining hands I am sure that neither I nor any other man can hope to surmount these difficulties. I trust in the course I shall pursue I shall be sustained not only by the party that elected me, but by the patriotic people of the whole country.[14]

Next was New York City. The train pulled into the new Hudson River Railroad Terminal late in the afternoon on February 19. Thirty-five waiting carriages ferried the President-elect and his growing entourage to the Astor House, the same luxury hotel where he stayed the previous February when he introduced himself to New York audiences (and the nation) at The Cooper Union.

As one might expect for America's largest city, nowhere did Lincoln encounter crowds like those in New York City. Numbering in the tens of thousands, the crowds were polite but seemingly more curious than anything else. Lincoln failed to carry New York City in the November election, and its pro-South mayor Ferdinand Wood had recently suggested support for secession, even going so far as to suggest New York might form its own independent republic, in order to guarantee its commercial interests with both North and South.[15] So Lincoln was not beloved to the same degree as in his previous destinations. It seemed the principal conclusion of many New Yorkers who saw or met Lincoln was that with his new-found set of whiskers, he was "much better looking than is represented."[16]

The visit was satisfactory, but hardly a triumph. After many rounds of handshaking, a private breakfast with Wall Street leaders, a chilly audience with the renegade mayor, gracious avoidance of an invitation from the showman P.T. Barnum to visit his museum and "Samson the two-thousand-pound bear," and an enthusiastic ovation while attending the New York Academy of Music Opera, Lincoln gathered himself and his family and friends to begin the last leg of his journey to the Presidency.

February 21 dawned cold and clear. The day brought the Lincoln entourage across the Hudson River, through two speeches at the State House in Trenton, New Jersey, and eventually to Philadelphia and a roaring welcome by a crowd estimated over 100,000. But despite the fireworks and festivities, the mood of some in the party grew more apprehensive. Perhaps it was simply fatigue. Perhaps it was the rumors of secessionist threats from Baltimore, one of the remaining scheduled stops on his journey. After nearly 12 days of speeches and bands and throngs of supporters, the exhausted Lincoln apparently began to feel the strain.

[15] Harold Holzer, Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860-1861 362 (2008).
[16] *Id.* at 356 (quoting Letter of Lavinia Goodell to Maria Goodell Frost (February 25, 1861), Berea College Library, Berea, Kentucky).
[17] *Id.* at 379-80.
[18] Alexander Kelly McClure, Abraham Lincoln and men of war-times 55 (Philadelphia Times Publ'g, 4th ed. 1892).
[19] Harold Holzer, Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860-1861 397 (2008).

A Surprise Arrival

Such was the setting for what would be the most politically damaging decision of Lincoln's inaugural journey. The president of the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore railroads retained detective Allan Pinkerton to investigate rumors of secessionist sabotage along its rail lines. Late on the night of February 21, after a crowded dinner and a dazzling fireworks display, Pinkerton presented himself to Lincoln in a secret meeting at Lincoln's Philadelphia hotel. Ever the lawyer, Lincoln questioned and listened gravely to Pinkerton about mounting evidence of a credible conspiracy and threat to Lincoln's life when his train arrived in South-sympathizing Baltimore. Later that evening, Lincoln received correspondence from soon-to-be Secretary of State William Seward who separately produced reliable evidence of a Baltimore plot. Over the objections of some advisors, Lincoln agreed to bypass a public appearance in Baltimore by secreting though town on an unannounced night train and to proceed directly to Washington; but only on the condition that he fulfill all of his planned public appearances the next day in the capitol Harrisburg.[17]

After completing his Harrisburg duties on February 22, Lincoln and his bodyguard — former Illinois lawyer Ward Hill Lamon — quietly left Harrisburg at 6 P.M. on a special train back to Philadelphia, where he arrived at 10 P.M. Changing cars, Lincoln then arrived in Baltimore around 4 A.M., disguised in a loose overcoat, a muffler, and a soft low brim hat given to him in New York only days before. After another hasty engine change, Lincoln, Lamon, Pinkerton, and a few others quietly steamed out of Baltimore, arriving at the Washington station just after 6 A.M. Lincoln checked in to the Willard Hotel and got some much needed sleep.

No one can say for certain whether bypassing Baltimore avoided an assassination attempt. While no attempt was made and Lincoln arrived in the Capitol safely, it was at considerable cost to his image and reputation. The newspapers and cartoonists were merciless in their criticism of him. Never had a politician been forced to flee "to power," remarked one wag. Lincoln himself later acknowledged the diversion was one of his gravest political miscalculations.[18] In fact, one famed Lincoln historian noted: "The secret trip undid weeks of careful reputation-building, embarrassed many Republican supporters, and provided both Democrats and Southerners with an irresistible excuse for ridicule."[19] The most public inaugural journey in history had ended in complete secrecy.

Although the ride of the victory train ended in a whimper, Lincoln redeemed his reputation and gave comfort to the nation with his expressive and heartfelt inaugural speech on March 4. As the nation steeled itself for the turbulent and bloody days to come, the 16th President took his first steps towards preserving the Union and preserving his own place in history: A President widely acknowledged as one of the greatest ever.

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