

The Springfield Lyceums and Lincoln's 1838 Speech

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No other speech by Abraham Lincoln has been more closely scrutinized by psychobiographers than his January 27, 1838, address "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" delivered to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield. Literary critic Edmund Wilson first suggested that Lincoln's speech revealed the twenty-seven-year-old politician's inordinate ambition. Later writers have picked up on the theme and offered their own variations.¹ By using Lincoln's address as a guide portending his later behavior, however, psychohistorians have overlooked a very important element of the story: the nature of the Young Men's Lyceum.

While traditional biographers have written much about Lincoln's speech, they mention the Lyceum only in passing.² The definitive account of Lincoln's Springfield—Paul M. Angle's "*Here I Have Lived*"—confuses the Young Men's

Lyceum (founded about 1835) with the older Sangamon County Lyceum (founded in 1833). The editors of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* repeat the mistake.³ A closer look at the lyceum movement in Illinois generally and the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum specifically offers a new perspective on Lincoln and his 1838 address.

Lyceums offered an early form of popular education through lectures and debates. According to cultural historian Russel Blaine Nye, the lyceum was "a self-supporting, locally controlled, voluntary association that played a vital role in the development of American culture."⁴ But educating the community was not the sole function of the lyceum. Advancement of individual skills and careers also played an important role. The associations provided young professional men with an opportunity for demonstrating their knowledge

¹ Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Farrar, 1977), pp. 106-8, 129-30. For those who accept Wilson's thesis in whole or in part, see George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: Norton, 1979); Dwight G. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality* (New York: Knopf, 1982); and Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York: Basic, 1982). This article began as a research query from Professor Strozier, concerning the location of the building where Lincoln spoke.

² Reinhard H. Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice, 1960), pp. 49-50;

Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1952), pp. 71-72; Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1977; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1978), pp. 50-52.

³ Angle, "*Here I Have Lived*": *A History of Lincoln's Springfield, 1821-1865*, new ed. (Chicago: Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, 1971), p. 52; Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), I, 108n (hereafter cited as *Collected Works*).

⁴ Nye, *Society and Culture in America, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper, 1974), p. 360.

and oratorical ability before an audience.⁵

Lyceums in central Illinois were patterned after their earlier eastern counterparts. Josiah Holbrook, who formalized the lyceum structure in 1826, never imagined that eight years later the nation would boast three thousand local groups.⁶ The first lyceum in central Illinois was established at Illinois College in Jacksonville, probably in early December of 1831. The speaker was Holbrook himself. Soon thereafter, the Jacksonville group under the leadership of Illinois College President Edward Beecher was publishing announcements under the names State Lyceum or Illinois State Lyceum. Although the Lyceum advertised in Springfield's *Sangamo Journal*, it is unlikely that many Springfield residents attended the Jacksonville functions.⁷

Two years later, a group of Springfield citizens met at "Mr. John B. Watson's School Room" on December 7, 1833, "for the purpose of establishing a Lyceum." Led by *Sangamo Journal* editor Simeon Francis, the group adopted a constitution and bylaws. Francis was elected president; Edward J. Phillips, first vice-president; William Alvey, second vice-president; J. W. Clark, secretary; John Williams, treasurer; and Charles Emerson, reader. The Committee of Arrangements included Thomas Moffett, John Todd Stuart, Dan Stone, H. K. Ashley, and John M. Cabiness. The Lyceum selected as its first topic "Ought Capital Punishment to be abolished?" Moffett, Emerson, and Clark argued the affirmative; Alvey, Phillips, and Watson argued the negative.⁸ One week later, the members were calling themselves the Sangamon County Lyceum and were meeting at the Presbyterian Meeting House, more commonly known as the First Presbyterian Church. At that session, Dr. Anson G. Henry delivered a lec-

ture titled "On the Responsibilities of the Medical Profession."⁹

The Sangamon County Lyceum offered wide-ranging topics that dealt with five general themes: science, culture, health and medicine, politics, and history. Audiences interested in physical science were treated to Clark's "On the Properties of Water" and Emerson's discussion of "The Structure and Formation of the Earth." Other talks ranged from "On the Philosophy of Vision" to chemistry, phrenology, and the doctrine of the temperaments. Henry also delighted the Lyceum with predictions on the future of Illinois and medical addresses about the heart, circulation, nutrition, and longevity.¹⁰

Political discussions addressed both national and state issues. Founding members Stone, Alvey, Moffett, Stuart, Emerson, and Edward Jones debated the question "Ought the General Government to appropriate funds from the Treasury, in aid of the Colonization Society?"¹¹ Other meetings dealt with laws regulating money, pensions to settlers of Kentucky and Ohio, the question of slavery in the District of Columbia, and temperance laws.¹² Lighthearted debates examined

⁵ Donald M. Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History*, 66 (1980), 791-809.

⁶ Nye, p. 360.

⁷ *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield), Dec. 8 (p. 3, col. 2), Dec. 22 (p. 3, col. 3), 1831.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Dec. 7, 1833, p. 3, col. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 14, 1833, p. 3, col. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, March 22 (p. 3, col. 6), April 5 (p. 3, col. 6), 1834, and Jan. 31 (p. 3, col. 5), Feb. 7 (p. 3, col. 5), May 2 (p. 3, col. 5), May 16 (p. 3, col. 5), May 23 (p. 3, col. 6), Dec. 5 (p. 1, cols. 5-7), 1835, and Nov. 5 (p. 2, col. 3), Dec. 3 (p. 2, col. 6), 1836.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 21, 1833, p. 3, col. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, Feb. 22 (p. 3, col. 6), April 12 (p. 3, col. 6), 1834, and Jan. 3 (p. 3, col. 3), Feb. 28 (p. 3, col. 5), 1835.

such life-style questions as whether married people were happier than single people and whether the human species possessed "an innate moral sense." There were esoteric discussions on the practicality of studying dead languages and the credibility of newspapers in presenting "a true and faithful chronicle of passing events."¹³ The mix of lecture, open floor discussion, and formal debate by teams or individuals provided Lyceum members with variety.

The published membership list of the Sangamon County Lyceum suggests that the organization was also nonpartisan. While many members would become leaders in the Whig party by 1840, at least two frequent participants—George Forquer and Samuel H. Treat—were prominent Democrats. Of greater interest is the high level of educational achievement by many of the men. Stuart was a lawyer, an ordained Presbyterian minister, and a past professor of languages at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Reverend John C. Bergen was a Princeton graduate, and Dr. Elias H. Merryman had degrees from both the College of William and Mary and Baltimore Medical University. Overall, members reflected diverse regional interests and attitudes. Many had New England or Ohio origins, while others hailed from Virginia, Tennessee, or Kentucky.¹⁴

The Sangamon County Lyceum offered more than a forum for disseminating and discussing information. Forquer, Moffett,

LYCEUM NOTICE.

The Sangamo County Lyceum will meet as usual on Thursday evening next. Lecture by Dr. Merryman.

All the members of the Lyceum are requested to be present—as there will be important business to be acted on.

Feb. 5. A. G. HENRY, sec. pro tem.

9-7 The Young Mens' Lyceum will meet on Saturday evening, 6th instant, at Mr. Chase's school room, when a lecture may be expected from Mr. M. Hay, on "American History."

After which the question will be discussed—"Ought Capital punishment to be abolished?" Aff. Messrs. J. O. Maxey, Amos and J. H. Matheny.

Neg. Messrs. Kline, Ragsdell and Gorden. N. W. MATHENY, Sec.

This notice for the two Springfield lyceums is from the February 6, 1836, issue of the Sangamo Journal.

and Phillips were among those in the forefront of the common school movement in Illinois. After an address by Jonathan Baldwin Turner, discussion led to the adoption of several resolutions that included a call for a state education convention in Vandalia and the election of delegates to that convention.¹⁵ The Lyceum also demonstrated its civic pride by cosponsoring July 4, 1835, activities with the First Springfield Artillery. Events included an early hour *feu de joie* (bonfire) at the Court House, a procession to the Methodist Church, and festivities there that included an invocation, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, an oration by Dan Stone, benediction, and dinner.¹⁶

It is unclear when and why the Young Men's Lyceum was organized. The first newspaper announcement, on December 19, 1835, was brief but certain: "The Young Men's Lyceum will meet on Monday next, at the school room." Who were

¹³ Ibid., Jan. 18 (p. 3, col. 6), Feb. 1 (p. 3, col. 5), March 1 (p. 3, col. 4), Dec. 6 (p. 3, col. 6), 1834.

¹⁴ John Carroll Power, *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Chicago: Edwin A. Wilson & Co., 1876), passim.

¹⁵ *Sangamo Journal*, Nov. 8, 1834, p. 3, col. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., June 20, 1835, p. 2, col. 6.

the Young Men? It is difficult to discern because the speakers may not have been members of the organization. Where information exists, most of the presenters were born after 1800 and were either self-taught or apprenticed in a profession. A notable exception was James C. Conkling, who had a degree from Princeton University. Throughout the winter, activities of the Sangamon County Lyceum continued.¹⁷

Announcements in 1836 identified the Young Men's Lyceum meeting place as "Mr. Chase's school room," but reports of their activities were not as frequent or descriptive as those of the older group. Both the Sangamon County Lyceum and the Young Men's Lyceum held meetings throughout 1836. Curiously, announcements of the Sangamon County Lyceum do not appear in the *Sangamo Journal* after December of 1836. From 1837 until its disappearance in 1842, the Young Men's Lyceum provided the main forum for Springfield intellectuals. Perhaps its demise was tied to the relocation of the Capital. Once Springfield became the seat of government, political debate was plentiful, negating the need for a lyceum.¹⁸

One clue to the origins of the Young Men's Lyceum appeared in a *Sangamo Journal* article of November 15, 1839. Titled "Young Men's Lyceum: Advantages of Early Culture," the article described the purpose of the lyceum as training a new generation of men with oratorical and analytic skills necessary for leadership.¹⁹ The emphasis was on civic responsibility and the preservation of the republic. It is not surprising that topics for discussion were overwhelmingly political, dealing with questions of slavery, international affairs, the banking system, aliens and officeholding, and the influence of political parties on the workings of government. A few meetings explored cultural and historical topics, but science and health—matters of

great interest to the Sangamon County Lyceum—disappeared completely.²⁰

At first, the Young Men's Lyceum used a debate format. Its first question was "Ought capital punishment to be abolished?"—the same topic chosen by the Sangamon County Lyceum. Although several 1836 notices fail to specify a single topic, one meeting in November announced the general discussion "Do the signs of the present times indicate the downfall of this Government?"²¹ That topic was repeated on December 23, 1837, and was restated in a positive manner by Abraham Lincoln on January 27, 1838, as "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." Lincoln's speech was printed in its entirety in the *Sangamo Journal* of February 3, 1838.²²

The Young Men's Lyceum found a regular meeting place from 1838 to 1840 at the Baptist Church, located on the southwest corner of Seventh and Adams streets. Meetings were usually scheduled on Saturday evenings at half past six or seven o'clock.²³ The Young Men's Lyceum con-

¹⁷ Ibid., Dec. 19, 1835, p. 3, col. 2, Feb. 6, 1836, p. 2, col. 7. Conclusions on the backgrounds of Young Men's Lyceum members are drawn from Power, passim. The only speaker who appeared before both lyceums was Edward Dickinson Baker; see *Sangamo Journal*, Jan. 30, 1836, p. 2, col. 1, and Jan. 13, 1838, p. 3, col. 1.

¹⁸ The last entry for the Young Men's Lyceum in the *Sangamo Journal* was Nov. 25, 1842, p. 3, col. 2.

¹⁹ See p. 2, cols. 6–7.

²⁰ *Sangamo Journal*, Nov. 11, 1837, p. 3, col. 1, and Feb. 9 (p. 3, col. 4), March 2 (p. 2, col. 7), Nov. 1 (p. 3, col. 2), Nov. 8 (p. 3, col. 3), Nov. 15 (p. 2, col. 7), 1839, and Nov. 26, 1841, p. 2, col. 7.

²¹ Ibid., Nov. 12, 1836, p. 2, col. 7.

²² Ibid., Dec. 23, 1837, p. 3, col. 3, and Feb. 3, 1838, p. 2, cols. 3–5.

²³ The notice for Lincoln's address indicated that the meeting would be held at "the usual time and place." The Jan. 13, 1838, notice for Edward D. Baker's address indicated the Baptist Church as the location. Later entries that year, when a location is cited, place meetings at the Baptist Church; see *ibid.*, Jan. 13 (p. 3, col. 1), Feb. 17 (p. 2, col. 7), Nov. 10 (p. 3, col. 4), 1838.

tinued the Sangamon County Lyceum tradition of inviting women to attend meetings, which not only provided both sexes an opportunity to hear learned discourse on a variety of subjects but also offered an opportunity for socializing beyond church or a private cotillion.²⁴

Lincoln scholars have traced the origin of his Lyceum address to the November 7, 1837, murder of Alton abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah P. Lovejoy. Although the speech contains only an indirect reference to Lovejoy, one source asserted, "Members of the Lyceum who listened to Lincoln without sensing the specter of Lovejoy in their midst must have been obtuse indeed."²⁵ But why should Lovejoy's death be considered the main cause of the speech? Clearly, the focus of the Young Men's Lyceum was to nurture civic responsibility, and what better topic to advance that purpose than the one Lincoln selected?

Lincoln restated many of the commonly held assumptions of his day. More than two years before his address, the Sangamon County Lyceum published Henry's "Illinois Twenty Years Hence," the first half of which described the evolution of Illinois from territory to state. The last half discussed the aspirations of past generations and how they could be realized by

present and future generations. Arguing the importance of common schools and internal improvements, Henry concluded on a cautionary note: "I trust there is no one present, who does not experience, in his own condition, and in the condition of those most near and dear to him, the benefits of our free institutions. Let us then acknowledge the blessing; let us feel it deeply; let us cherish a strong affection for it, and show it by putting down every symptom of mobocracy and lawless violence by enforcing the laws. The blood of our fathers, let it not have been shed in vain."²⁶

This is not to argue that Lincoln plagiarized Henry's speech but rather to show that local political orators had a longstanding fear of mobocracy and lawlessness.

Instead of viewing Lincoln's speech as a reaction to events, it might be more fruitful to see it as a speech carefully crafted to impress his peers. After all, Lincoln was still new to Springfield, having arrived on April 15, 1837. His controversy with James Adams quickly introduced him to local partisan squabbles. Not wanting to arouse any further animosity, he needed to select a nonpartisan topic that appealed to the interests of his audience, while allowing him an opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge and oratorical ability. By selecting a topic that held the fascination of the post-Revolution generation, Lincoln succeeded in meeting the needs of both his audience and himself.

²⁴Ibid., Dec. 23, 1837, p. 3, col. 3, and Jan. 5, 1839, p. 2, col. 6.

²⁵*Collected Works*, I, 111n.

²⁶*Sangamo Journal*, Dec. 5, 1835, p. 1, cols. 6-7.

The Young Men's Lyceum will meet on Monday evening next, at the school room.
N. W. MATHENY, Sec'y.

First known published announcement of the Young Men's Lyceum, from the December 19, 1835, Sangamo Journal