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This and That...

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The Real Lincoln Highway: The Forgotten Lincoln Circuit Markers

GUY C. FRAKER

Imagine a bright, crisp autumn day in Central Illinois, September 26, 1852. A party of travelers pauses on a ridge, surveying the sweeping view to the west, miles of prairie grass as far as they can see. The grass is almost as tall as their horses, russet in its fall color, spotted with the yellows of late-season blooms, some as tall as the grass. The long ridge, made of enormous deposits left by ancient glaciers as they retreated ten thousand to fifteen thousand years earlier, will someday be known as the Eureka Moraine. The scene is unbroken but for the track they are following. The riders are on the road from Metamora, the seat of Woodford County, to Bloomington, seat of McLean County. They are in the vicinity of the county line. Other than an occasional farmstead and a rare passing rider, they have seen no other sign of settlement for some time. They have seen retreating wolves keeping their distance, and they have frequently startled deer from their grassy hiding places. The group had ascended the ridge from the ford on the Mackinaw River.

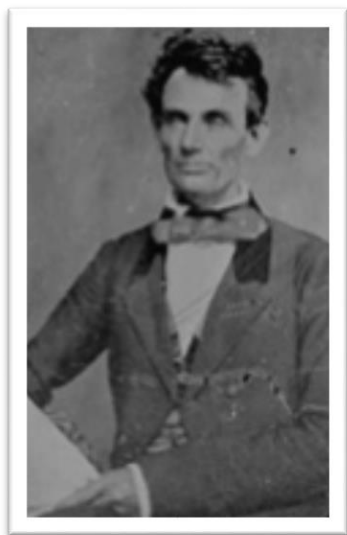
The men are lawyers riding from the semi-annual court session in one county to that in the next. These lawyers were

traveling the Eighth Judicial Circuit, consisting of fourteen counties containing an area of over ten thousand square miles—more than twice the size of the state of Connecticut (Figure 1). The population of those counties in the census of 1850 was approximately one hundred thousand. Each spring and fall, court was held in consecutive weeks in each of the fourteen counties, a week or less in each. The exception was Springfield, the state capital and the seat of Sangamon County. The fall term opened there for a period of two weeks. Then the lawyers traveled the fifty-five miles to Pekin, which replaced Tremont as the Tazewell County seat in 18. After a week, they traveled the thirty-five miles to Metamora, where they spent three days. Completing the circuit took a total of eleven weeks and traveling a distance of more than four hundred miles.

Riding in a carriage drawn by two horses was the judge, David Davis of Bloomington. He is said to have weighed three hundred pounds, too heavy to ride a horse. He practiced law briefly in Pekin before moving to Bloomington in 1836, where he practiced until his election as circuit judge in 1848. Davis was the only circuit judge for the entire circuit and would hold the position until his appointment to the United States Supreme Court in 1862.

Davis was one of the principal architects of Lincoln's nomination for the presidency in Chicago in 1860. Davis amassed a fortune in land, the "gold" of Illinois at the time, building a huge mansion in Bloomington in 1872. He was nominated for president by an obscure third party in 1872. In 1877 he resigned from the Supreme Court after Democrats and independents in the Illinois legislature elected him United States senator. There he served as an independent, eventually being elected president pro-tem.

Davis not only ruled the circuit's courtrooms but also its social hierarchy during the numerous evenings in country inns, taverns, and hotels along the route. He was the monarch of this traveling society. Riding along with him was Abraham Lincoln on his horse, "Old Tom." Lincoln had defended a slander case before a jury the preceding day, with Judge Davis presiding. Though Lincoln's client had lost, the verdict was only \$13, though the plaintiff had sought \$5,000. Suits for slander were fairly common in those days. Lincoln had been riding the Eighth Circuit since his admission to the bar in 1837, other than his years in Congress in



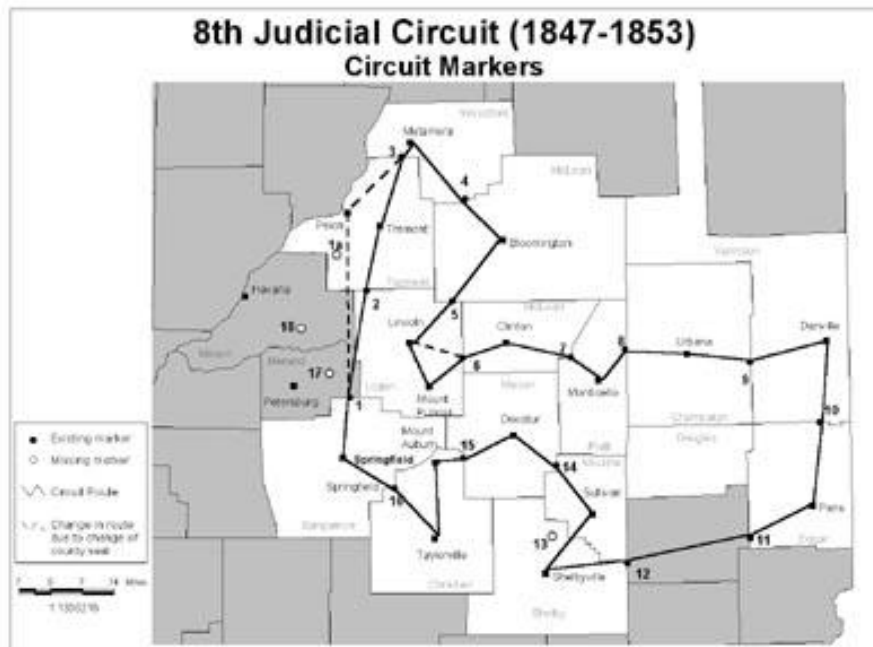
1847 and 1848, and would continue to do so until his election to the presidency in 1860. Most of the lawyers rode only a portion of the circuit; others went home between sessions. Lincoln, on the other hand, was one of the few who made the entire tour without interruption as a general rule. He was arguably the most prominent lawyer on the circuit, handling a wide variety of cases, mostly civil as opposed to criminal. Many of the local lawyers would refer cases to the visiting Lincoln. He was perhaps the lawyer closest to the Judge; this closeness was apparently not resented by other lawyers.

Imagine a similar September day one hundred and fifty years later in the same area. An automobile traveling U.S. Route 150 enters the village of Carlock, which didn't exist in 1852. On the other hand, the village of Oak Grove is no longer, the former a beneficiary of the coming of a railroad, the latter a victim. Metamora is no longer Woodford's county seat, having been replaced by Eureka in 1896. The nearby Mackinaw River is no longer clear, its waters now muddy with silt from farm fields and lacking the cleansing of the long since converted wetlands. Deer numbers are probably higher because of the extirpation of the predators. The population of those fourteen counties in the 2000 census was more than one million. Slander suits are rare.

The car turns north and soon is on a lightly traveled county blacktop, the same path that group of lawyers had traveled so long ago. The road ascends the same ridge from the opposite direction the lawyers had been going. The same vista to the west exists, except that the prairies have been replaced with corn and soybeans, and the landscape is dotted with farmhouses, grain elevators, and other outbuildings.

There, at the county line, on the west side of the road, is a rather strange monument that resembles an eight-foot-tall chess piece. It bears an artfully designed bronze plaque on its face with a profile of Lincoln and the legend: "ABRAHAM LINCOLN / Traveled this way as he rode / The circuit of the / Eighth Judicial District / 1847 1859 / Erected 1922." The plaque has the symbol of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in the left lower corner and the symbol of a newly formed organization, the Lincoln Circuit Marking Association, opposite. On the right side of the base is a bronze plate labeled *WOODFORD*, and on the left side, *McLEAN*.

This marker is one of nineteen placed on the county lines of each of the counties of the Eighth Judicial Circuit in 1922 and 1923. In addition, a monument bearing a slightly different profile of Lincoln with the same legend was placed on the face of a rectangle of granite at every county seat of the circuit. The creation of this collective memorial to Lincoln and the circuit's role in his life began in 1914 when the Alliance Chapter of the DAR in Champaign-Urbana invited Judge Joseph O. Cunningham of Urbana to speak. The appearance was apparently sparked by the creation of the proposed Lincoln Highway, a coast-to-coast highway that ultimately became U.S. 30, crossing Illinois further north.



Map of the 8th Judicial Circuit (1847–1853). The solid line shows the route of the circuit riding lawyers. The broken line shows changes in the route as a result of county seat relocations.

Figure 1.

The total cost for all the county-seat markers was \$4,950.



Figure 2. County-seat marker.



Figure 3. County-line marker.

The markers were placed in 1921, 1922, and 1923. The placement was generally commemorated by a dedication ceremony of considerable pomp. An official program of one of the dedications survives. The cover is the image of the county-seat plaque; a printed list contains the counties and seats, the officers and directors, and what appears to be the members, pictures of both markers, and dates of all the scheduled dedications around the circuit. The "Official Programme" noted music by two bands, a symposium entitled "I Knew Lincoln," and other speakers of some prominence. The unveiling featured children of the community public schools, and the ceremony included the ritual of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The dedication of the Woodford/McLean marker was held on July 11, 1923. The ceremony took place at nearby Walnut Grove before moving to the marker site for the unveiling. It included patriotic readings, music, and speeches by several speakers. The monument was unveiled and presented to the two counties and accepted by the chairman of the board of supervisors of each county.

The Marking Association's memorial commemorating Lincoln's Eighth Judicial Circuit remains spread across the old circuit. All of the original seventeen county-seat markers remain, although several have been moved or modified. Most are at the Lincoln courthouse sites. These markers are impressive reminders of Lincoln's connection to these locations, but they tell us what we already know or could readily find out. This is not the case with the county-line markers. The efforts and relative success of Lotte Jones in rediscovering these roads and placing the markers is the real contribution of the Lincoln Circuit Marking Association and all those who aided the effort. Finding the roads then in the 1920s—seventy years after the fact—was a difficult task. Finding them now another eighty years later is almost as difficult. Records of the association refer to maps that were made as the search continued during the site selection process, but the records do not include these maps. They do reveal the difficulty of the task. Judge Cunningham in his initial speech noted the impact of the settlement of central Illinois on the locations of roads. Land ownership and creation of farms often moved the roads from the direct route, frequently diagonal, to following section lines, on the square, erasing some of the original landmarks.

The challenge was worthy of the indomitable Lotte Jones and her hired assistant, Frederick Gordan Lysle. They used a map by Peck and Messinger that she dated as 1844. Perusal of the historic map reveals several obvious roads that the lawyers would have used. For the rest of these roads, Jones had to rely on local sources and her own research. It took her several years

and repeated trips to each of the counties of the circuit. The original plan was to place nineteen markers; today, fifteen, or parts thereof, remain. Eleven remain intact, four only in part.

Traveling from marker to marker creates a sense of what it was like to travel these roads during the time of Lincoln and his contemporaries. The roads are little traveled; some are not paved. All are rural, removed from the frantic pace of today's world. Each marker's location is so unheralded that it is almost hidden. Though row crops have replaced the prairie, one still feels the seemingly endless miles, the gentle roll of the land, and the serene flow of its streams. It is essentially the same place where Abraham Lincoln grew from a callow, newly initiated attorney to a seasoned professional with the qualities that our nation demanded. The markers and their roads re-create the central Illinois of that day; traveling these roads between markers creates a sense of the place that t

Contact Us

Questions, ideas - Love to hear from you

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