May 29, 1856

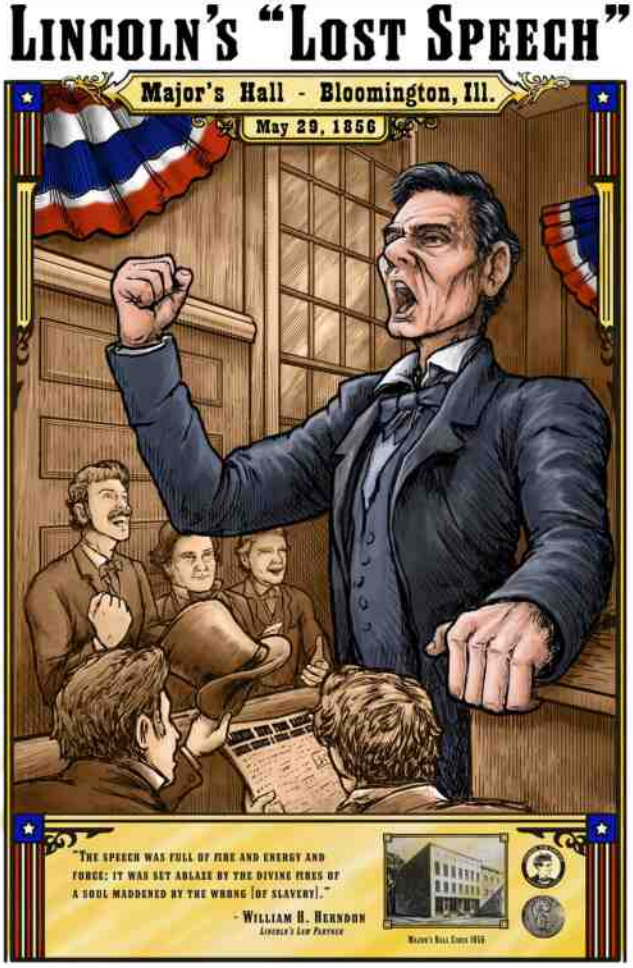
BLOOMINGTON ANTI-NEBRASKA CONVENTION

Greg Koos, Executive Director Emeritus of the McLean County Museum of History, delivered a presentation on the "Lost Speech" in 2008 titled, "Lost or Not." Referencing the "Lost Speech" memorial on the corner of Front and East Streets in Bloomington he said, "When we made an effort to publicly commemorate the most important event ever to take place locally – we *lost* the fact that it was about African American people."

The original 1946 memorial plaques included no reference to enslaved or African American people. In 2009, the Looking for Lincoln Heritage Coalition established a series of new outdoor wayside exhibits. Today, there are 13 stops throughout Bloomington-Normal that share Lincoln's connection to the area. The "Lost Speech" wayside exhibit states, "Abraham Lincoln and other Illinoisans gathered here to organize the Republican Party, which was dedicated to stopping the spread of the enslavement of African American people."

What happened in Bloomington on May 29, 1856, ultimately led to emancipation and three constitutional amendments. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, guaranteed citizenship, and the equal protections of citizens, to all persons born or naturalized in the United States, including formerly enslaved individuals. The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, extended voting rights to African American men.

Over the next 160 years, race and the fight for equality continued to dominate societal discourse; from Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement – equality continues to be one of the most prevalent challenges of our time.



As we celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we remember that Abraham Lincoln used the Declaration in his argument against the expansion of slavery into the Free Western Territories. Keep reading this document to learn more about the "Lost Speech", its monumental historical impact, and the journey to make a mural out of it!

1849 - 1856

ANNIVERSARIES & LINCOLN'S AWAKENING

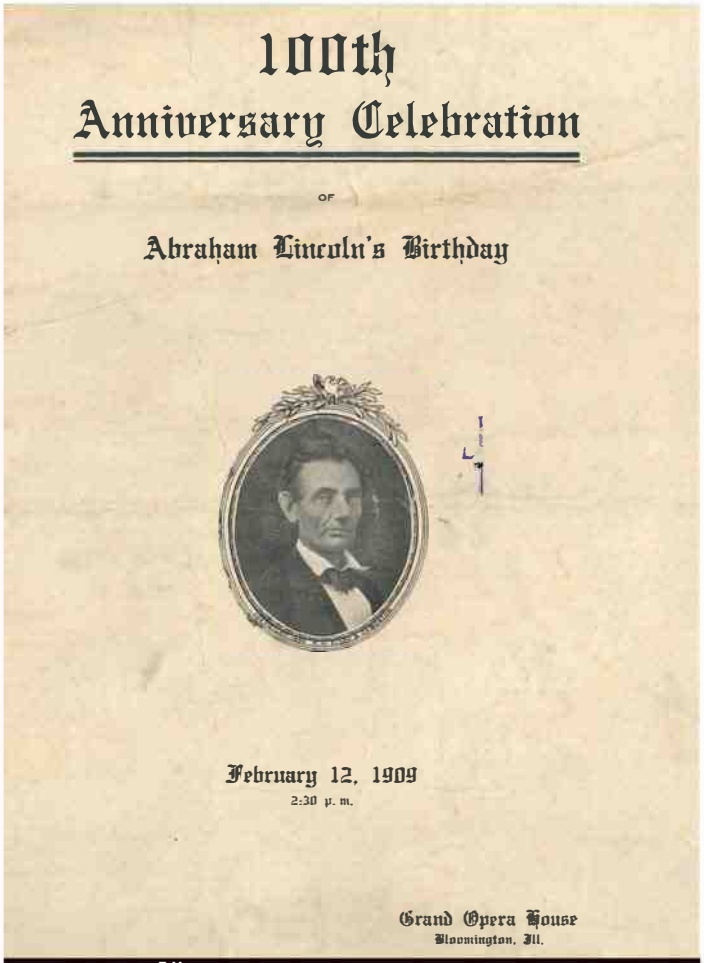
McLean County celebrated Lincoln's "Lost Speech" with ceremonies in 1928 (75th), 1946 (90th), 1956 (100th), and 2006 (150th). Dr. Louis Warren, Director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, spoke at the 100th anniversary celebration titled "The charm of Lincoln's Oratory". Warren stated, "The City of Bloomington offered the inspirational atmosphere for Lincoln's supreme effort in the art of public speaking and should share with the political interests in the sparking of the famous 'Lost Speech'."

After serving a single term in the U.S. Congress, Abraham Lincoln returned to Springfield in 1849 and focused on his law practice until 1854. He re-entered politics after Senator Stephen Douglas championed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and opened the door to the expansion of slavery into the Western Territories. Deeply opposed to the act, Lincoln began speaking out against it in the fall of 1854. He delivered several speeches across Illinois, including two in Bloomington on September 12th and 26th. These led up to his October 16th speech in Peoria—considered his first major anti-slavery address—because it was the only one he fully wrote out and submitted to newspapers for publication.

The fight over slavery in the new territories reached a crescendo in the spring of 1856. Ronald C. White Jr. describes the mood in his book *A. Lincoln*:

"Eight days before the Convention a huge Kansas posse, including Missouri 'border ruffians' had swept into Lawrence, Kansas, with the intent of striking terror among the rising free-state population. Finding that the free-state leaders had fled, they proceeded to throw two printing presses into the streets and turned five cannons on the Free State Hotel, finally setting the building on fire.

Although no one was killed, homes and businesses were pillaged, and the story of the Sack of Lawrence ignited antislavery meetings across the North."



100TH ANNIVERSARY PROGRAM

1856 - 2009

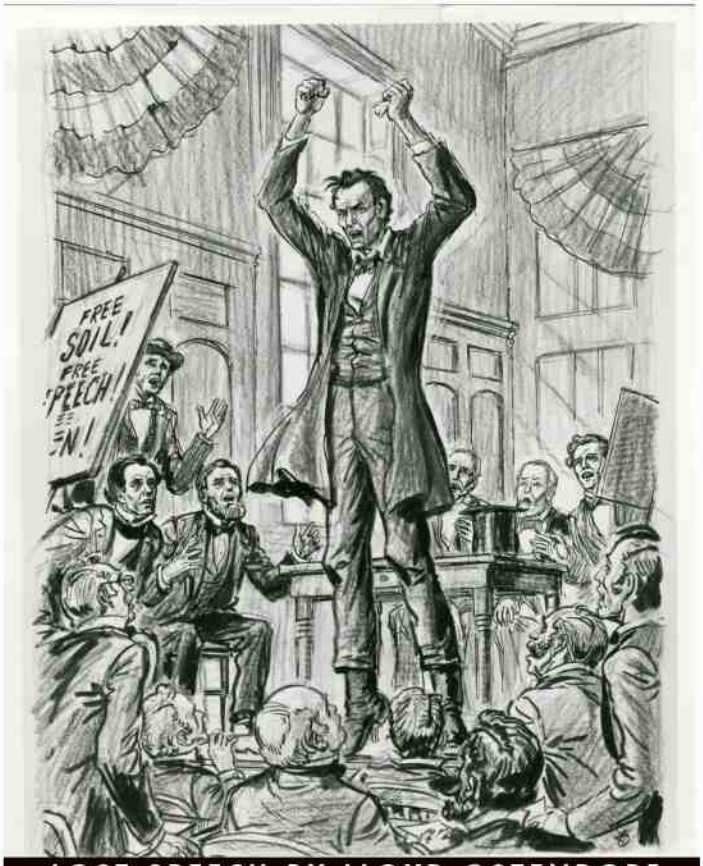
PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

"On May 22, 1856, as the Senate was adjourning, Senator Charles Sumner was attacked by young South Carolina representative Preston S. Brooks, a nephew of Senator Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina. Sumner was beaten into bloody unconsciousness with a walking cane on the Senate floor. The caning was the result of an earlier speech made by Sumner on May 19 and 20 on the "Crime against Kansas."

September 20, 1923, an article in the *New York Herald* tells the recollections of John Alexander Latimer of Abraham Lincoln's Lost Speech:

"...the excitement was at the frenzy point when the delegates reached Bloomington. Kansas, the new State, was in the hands of the pro-slavery mob, her capital was in ruins, the abolitionists were not allowed to vote, and the Governor was a prisoner. The newspapers were full of accounts of Brooks' attack of Senator Sumner and Paul Selby, who had done a great deal for the new party and had been largely responsible for the calling of the Convention,

CANING OF CHARLES SUMNER



LOST SPEECH BY LLOYD OSTENDORF

was lying prostrated at his home by a cowardly blow that had been given him from behind by a political opponent. Most of the members were for radical action.

Then he [Lincoln] began his speech. He showed great emotion; he seemed to realize that it was a crisis. He spoke slowly at the start. Before he had spoken long, the people all over the house began to get up and leave their seats. They were slowly moving up to the vacant place in the front of the platform. I found myself going with the rest. I have since thought about it many times and it has always seemed to me that I, along with the others, was hypnotized."

1856 - 2009

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

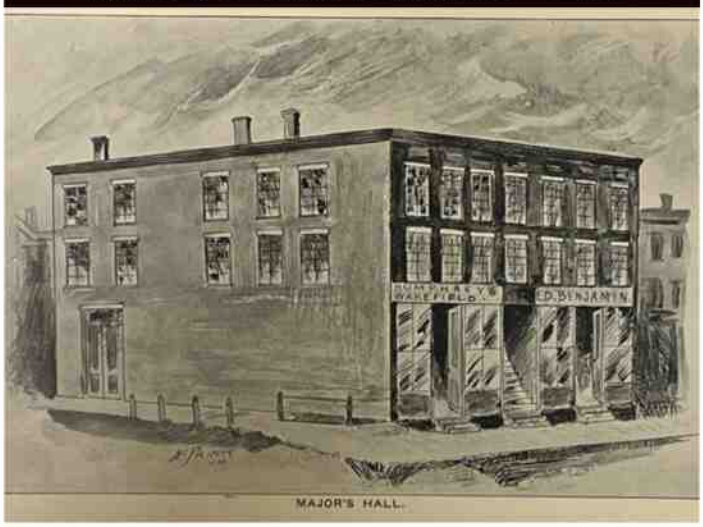
"There was not a sound in the room save that made by Lincoln's voice. If he was interrupted with cheers, I did not hear it. We stood there with tense muscles, our faces pale and eager, listening to him, I don't know how long. His gestures seemed to impress me the most. He seemed to literally throw the words out of his hands. I never saw such a sight. I have heard many actors and many great orators, but none of them ever impressed me as did this speech.

I alternately cried and laughed. I was alternately mad and then happy. His talk was on slavery and Kansas. When he began, he stood at the back of the platform and his hands on his hips, but gradually he moved up till he was on a line with the front edge of the platform. His face was white, and his eyes were blazing.

He spoke of the Missouri compromise and the restoration of it. He begged that his hearers should bury all resentment and personal feelings. He advised that the new party, which was just being formed should fight with the ballot instead of the bullet. Nearly his whole talk was on the Kansas question and the means of keeping slavery out of that State. The climax of the whole speech was when he said to the Southern disunionists, 'We won't go out of the union, and you shan't.

As soon as he finished the audience seemed to realize that they had heard a great speech. Most of the men present eemed to think that is was strange that they had left their seats and were standing in the front of the platform. That is one of the reasons that I think that they were hypnotized. They did not seem to know where they were at."

MAJOR'S HALL DRAWING 1859



***Weekly Pantagraph*, Wednesday, June 4, 1856**

"The Delegates to the anti-Nebraska Convention, in this place, on Thursday last, was very fully attended - They came in crowds from all parts of the State; and we never saw such unanimity and enthusiasm manifested in a similar assemblage. One common sentiment, opposition to the aggressive movements of the Slave power, so med [sic] to move all. Men were here acting in concert and harmony, who have hitherto been antipodes in political parties... Although six candidates were nominated for State Officers, not a ballot was cast; it was not an office seeking convention, and the only anxiety manifested was to find the best men who would serve; all were unanimously nominated by acclamation! Such a spirit pervaded the whole assemblage, and ran

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

through all its movements, as will sweep the State next November like a whirlwind. When the question of crushing by violence and blood, Freedom from the Territories of the Union, comes up thus singly and distinctly before the American people the invincible spirit of '76 is aroused, and nothing can stand before it.

Several most heart-stirring and powerful speeches were made during the convention; but without being invidious, we must say that Mr. Lincoln, on Thursday evening, surpassed all others-even himself. His points were unanswerable, and the force and power of his appeals irresistible – and were received by a storm of applause."

***Peoria Democratic Press*, May 31, 1856**

"Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, was next called out, and made the speech of the occasion. Never has it been our fortune to listen to a more eloquent and masterly presentation of a subject. I shall not mar any of its fine proportions or brilliant passages by attempting even a synopsis of it. Mr. Lincoln must write it out and let it go before all the people. For an hour and a half, he held the assemblage spell bound by the power of his argument, the intense irony of his invective, and the deep earnestness and fervid brilliance of his eloquence. When he concluded, the audience sprang to their feet and cheer after cheer told how deeply their hearts had been touched, and their souls warmed up to a generous enthusiasm."

Recollections of Lincoln by J.O. Cunningham (historian, friend of Lincoln, and delegate of the 1856 convention)

"After the settlement of the question of a platform and candidates, Mr. Lincoln, who had until then been busy in the committees, was called to the platform, and was indeed needed in order that the excitement, then at the fever heat, be allayed. With a coolness that contrasted with that of the convention, he began his address with a mild but well-understood rebuke of the counseled force of previous speakers, telling his audience to "Wait until November, and then to shoot paper ballots at them."

Perspectives from William Herndon, Leonard Swett, and T. Lyle Dickey

Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, exulted that Lincoln's "speech was full of fire and energy and force; it was set ablaze by the divine fires of a soul maddened by the wrong; it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarly, backed with wrath." Some historians have suggested that Lincoln's language was so radical that he neither wanted it transcribed nor reported. Although the "Lost Speech" has been described as passionate, there is evidence that Lincoln used the sober logic of his Peoria speech. The controversy flared for years about Lincoln's language at the convention, especially his use of the phrase "a house divided, half slave, half free," according to Leonard Swett, Bloomingtonian and one of Lincoln's closest friends. The conservative T. Lyle Dickey insisted that Lincoln first publicly spoke of a "house divided" in the Bloomington speech, not as generally believed in 1858.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

Burlingame, Michael. *Abraham Lincoln: A Life. Vol. 1.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008

"In 1908, Eugene F. Baldwin, a Peoria editor and publisher, agreed that 'the great mass of the leaders felt that Lincoln made too radical a speech and they did not want it produced for fear it would damage the party. Lincoln himself said he had put his foot into it and asked the reporters to simply report the meeting and not attempt to record his words and they agreed to it.' Some biographers have endorsed this conclusion, which seems plausible, though no hard evidence supports it. It is also possible that reporters were indeed so caught up in the excitement that they stopped writing in order to listen. That had happened before when Edward Bates delivered a stirring address at the Chicago River and Harbor Convention in 1847."

The Honorable John Moses recollections of the Lost Speech in a March 6, 1894, *The Pantagraph*

Judge Moses made it very clear that "Mr. Lincoln's great success lay in the skill with which he showed his hearers that they could carry out their anti-slavery ideas by joining the new Republican Party. He convinced the assembly that the new party would resist the further spread of slavery without making abolitionists of its members, and did this so eloquently that he carried conviction to the hearts of that convention, made up as it was of Anti-Nebraska Whigs, and Anti-Nebraska Democrats, Know Nothings, Free Soilers, and Abolitionists, it was one of the greatest triumphs of human oratory."

Justice John A. Fulwiler recounts his memory of the Lost Speech in a 1923 *Pantagraph* article

"That convention, and above all Lincoln's oration, produced such a horror of slavery, that even as a boy of 13, I resolved to do everything in my power to put an end to the loathsome system. Lincoln's speech was of such wonderful eloquence and power that it fairly electrified every person who heard it. It was a great effort in the burning eloquence of his words and in the manner in which he delivered it. If there ever was an inspired speech, Lincoln's appeal would seem to warrant this designation."

One term governor of Illinois, Joe Fifer of Bloomington, in a 1928 *Pantagraph* interview

"Joseph Medill, former editor of the Chicago Tribune, who attended the Bloomington Convention where the Lost Speech was given stated that, 'I have always regarded the convention held here of May 29, 1856, as one of the most important political events in our history. It was in fact the time and place of the birth of the Republican Party. Other sections have claimed this honor [Rippon, Wisconsin] I feel sure it belongs to Bloomington, as the convention was among the first organized movements toward the formation of a new party, and besides Abraham Lincoln was the central figure of the convention'."

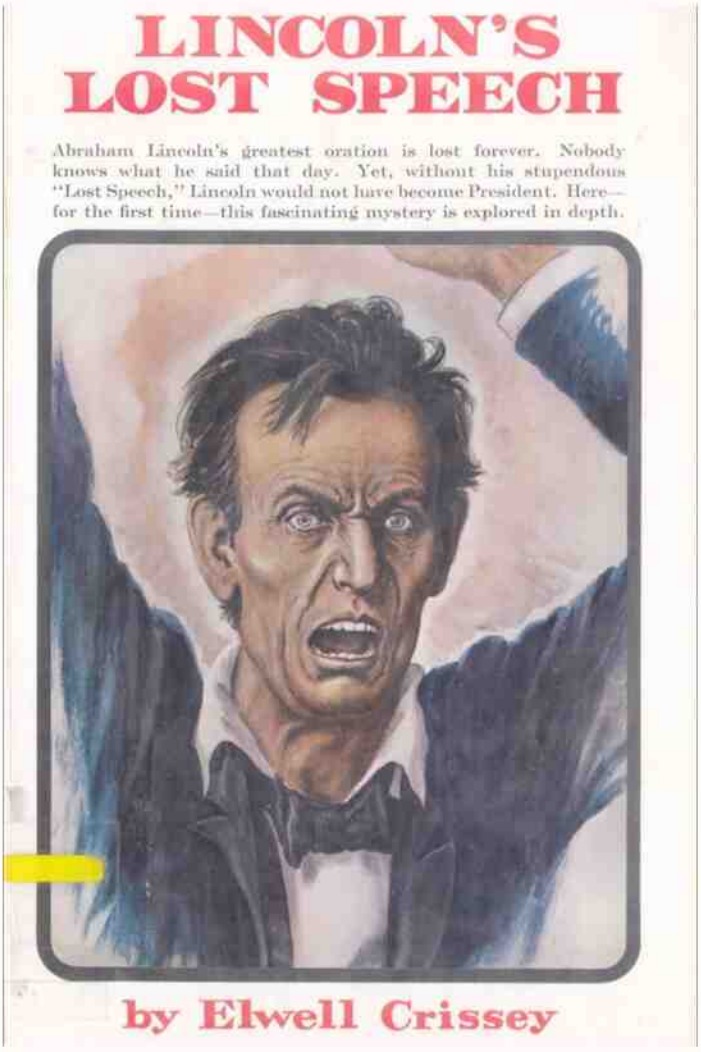
PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

Crissey, Elwell. *Lincoln's Lost Speech: The Pivot of His Career*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967

Elwell Crissey, Bloomingtonian, and author of *Lincoln's Lost Speech* in 1967, stated that after 13 years of research, he was convinced that the speech was the turning point of Lincoln's political career. He wrote, "Without his Lost Speech, in every probability Abraham Lincoln would never have become President of the United States."

Crissey identifies some of the notable Bloomingtonians that were present for the "Lost Speech":

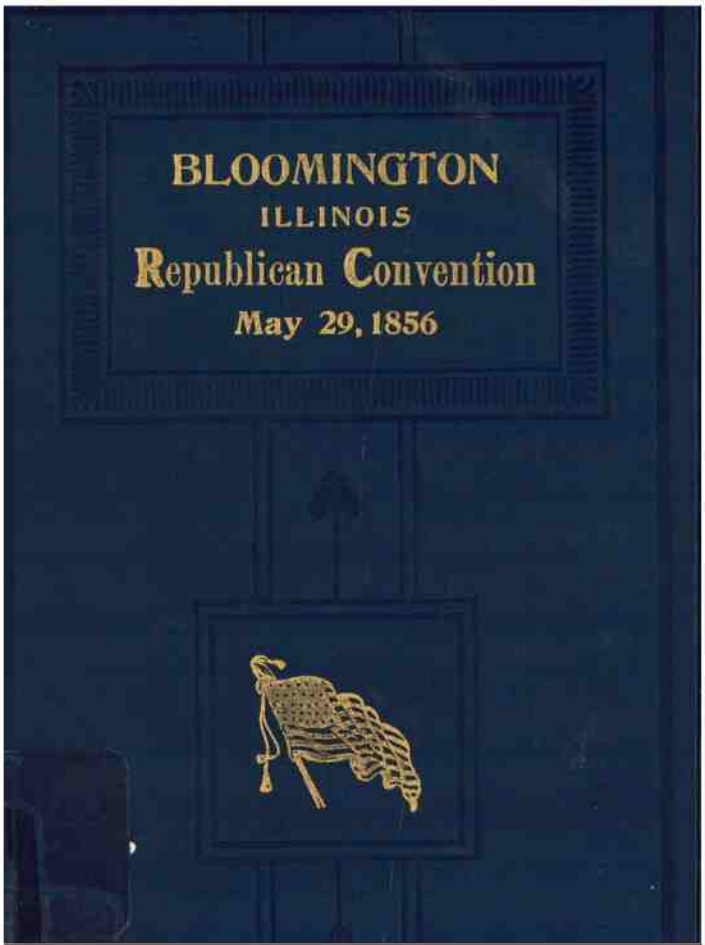
- Leonard Swett: A Bloomington/Chicago lawyer, counselor, orator. He was a long-time friend and advisor of Lincoln.
- John Milton Scott: A jurist, judge, and legal associate with Lincoln on the 8th judicial circuit. He was was born near East St. Louis, Illinois in 1824 and was admitted to the bar at Belleville in 1848. In 1849, he opened a law office in Bloomington.
- John L. Routt: The McLean County Sherriff, soldier, and protégé of President Grant. He was born a Kentuckian in 1826, but became a McLean County resident when his parents moved to the area when he was an infant.
- Adlai Ewing Stevenson: Born in Kentucky in 1835, he was the son of a small planter and slave owner. After the disposing of the ensalved people he owned in 1852, Stevenson's father moved his family to Bloomington, Illinois.



- James Stevenson Ewing: He was born in 1835 – the same year as his illustrious cousin, Adlai Ewing Stevenson. In several areas their careers paralleled. They were classmates at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, and later at Centre College, Danville, Kentucky. For many years they were law partners working in Bloomington. They both were Democrats and each filled distinguished posts under President Cleveland.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

- Jesse Weldon Fell: He was a lawyer, politician, land speculator, horticulturalist, editor, and civic planner. Fell was often referred to as "Bloomington's first citizen."
- Isaac Funk of McLean County: Known for being a pioneer, extensive landowner, stockman, politician, agriculturist. He lived near what we know today as Funks Grove.
- Asahel Gridley: Born in 1810 in Cazenovia, New York, Gridley moved to Bloomington in 1831 after his education at Pompey Academy. He was known for being a merchant, lawyer, legislator, and financier.
- William Trabue Major: Known for being the namesake for Major's Hall, the building where the convention met, he was born in Kentucky in 1790. He went to school in Georgetown, Kentucky hoping to study law, but was prevented by poor health. He moved to Bloomington in 1835. A Baptist, he started a church in Bloomington and opposed slavery.
- Charles P. Merriman: He worked as the editor of the *Weekly Pantagraph* in Bloomington at the time of the convention. He was born in Quebec, Canada, and attended a Catholic college near Montreal. He moved to Bloomington in 1844.
- William McCullough: Known as one of McLean County's most colorful figures, he was a warm friend to Lincoln. McCullough was born in Kentucky in 1812 and his family settled in McLean County, Illinois in 1826, on a farm where the boy worked for his father. He was Sheriff of McLean County.
- William Ward Orme: He was known for being a Bloomington lawyer, soldier, and Lincoln protégé. Orme was born in Washington D.C. in 1832 and was educated at Mount St. Mary's College in Maryland. He was Leonard Swett's junior partner. Lincoln was fond of Orme, describing him as "the most promising lawyer of his age in Illinois."



Prince, Ezra, ed. Vol. III Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Convention of May 29, 1856, 1900. McLean County Historical Society.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONVENTION

The significance of the 1856 Bloomington Republican Convention was formally commemorated on its 44th anniversary, May 29, 1900, by the McLean County Historical Society. This commemorative gathering, documented in Volume III of the Society's Transactions, featured firsthand recollections, thoughtful reflections on the convention's lasting impact, and in-depth discussions on the birth of the Republican Party in Illinois.

On the final page of the Transactions, the Historical Society placed a message entitled, "The Lost Speech," which stated:

"At the convention of 1856, enthused by the sympathy of the audience and feeling perhaps a prophetic insight into the future. Mr. Lincoln made one of his great speeches, great even for him in which he showed the sinfulness of slavery and the need of a new party to curb the aggressions of the slave power and so preserve the Union from impending destruction.

His audience, spell-bound by his eloquence and earnestness, listened only to applaud. The reporters, affected the same as the other hearers, made no notes of the speech. This has been called the 'Lost Speech' of Mr. Lincoln. Since then, portions of this speech have lingered in men's minds like some half-forgotten music which one thinks he can recall, but regretfully finds it an elusive dream. Lately there has been published a 'Lost Speech' made up from alleged notes [of Henry Clay Whitney]."

The McLean County Historical Society does not think it proper to send out a report of this reunion without stating that in this community, where many now living heard the great speech, where Mr. Lincoln was so well known and loved, all of his friends consider the speech still lost. The Historical Society had hoped to recover from the memory of the still living hearers some portions of that speech but found their efforts in vain."

Memorials of the "Lost Speech"

The Letitia Green Stevenson Chapter of the DAR placed a tablet marking the site where the "Lost Speech" took place at Major's Hall in 1918. Additional commemorative plates were created in 1946. The McLean County Historical Society placed a commemorative tablet in the 1903 Courthouse, now the McLean County Museum of History, in 1956. The original memorial wall was placed soon after Major's Hall was torn down in December 1958. A new memorial wall was created in 1990 when the Abraham Lincoln Parking Deck was created. A Looking for Lincoln wayside marker was added at the site in 2009.

LOST SPEECH MEMORIAL

JOURNEY TO THE MURAL

On May 29, 2025, the McLean County Historical Society dedicated a "Lost Speech" mural on the alleyway wall of Rosie's Pub adjacent to the site of Major's Hall.

In 2024, the McLean County Museum of History began discussing ways that it might celebrate the upcoming 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. One idea that gained traction was the creation of a mural celebrating Abraham Lincoln's "Lost Speech" which took place in downtown Bloomington, just a block south of the Museum.

Director of Development Norris Porter envisioned the mural near the site where the speech was delivered at the corner of Front and East Streets. Having recently utilized artist Troy Freeman from FreeSky Studios on Rt. 66 related murals during spring 2024, Troy agreed to take on the "Lost Speech" mural project in August. One of the walls that Freeman suggested was the west facing wall of Rosie's Pub. Cindy Anet, owner of Rosie's, was intrigued with the project and readily agreed to make the wall available.

Confirming the artist and wall, Porter began to organize fund raising materials and an advisory committee that could provide input on art renderings. From the beginning it was the intent to have an accompanying website that would provide additional information and perspective for viewers of the mural that would be accessed by using a QR code on a brass plate by the mural. Museum staff involved with the project also included Bill Kemp, Jeff Woodard, and Julie Emig. The Museum's board was in favor of the project, so the project proceeded with the intent of the mural to be completed in 2025 or 2026 pending funding progress. The cost of the mural was $27,000 with an additional $3,500 for the brass marker.

Freeman completed the initial artwork rendering in November of 2024, and in early December the third revision of the original artwork was shared with the committee via email. The committee would meet in-person in late January for further discussion, and a sixth and final artwork rendering was obtained in late March of 2025. The advisory committee consisted of Museum staff and thirteen community members representing Lincoln enthusiasts, academics, scholars, artists, tourism specialists, and an engineer.

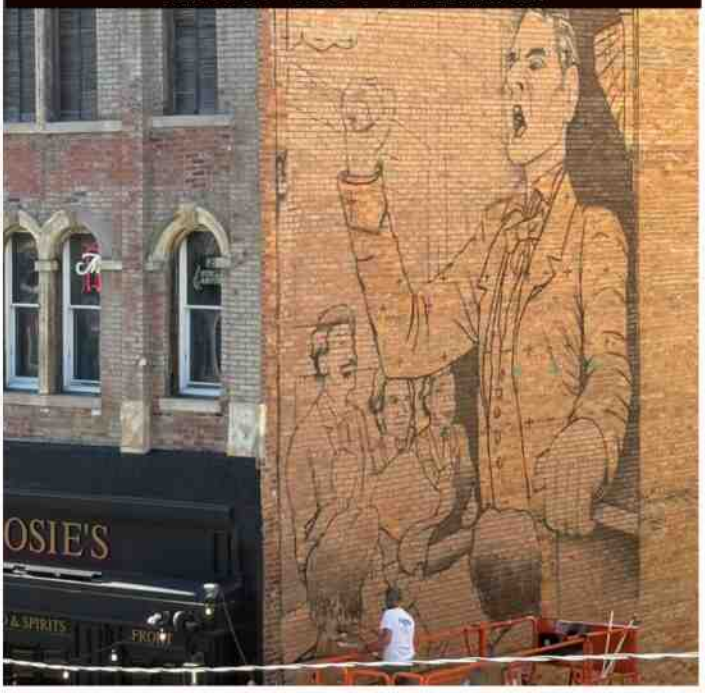
In August of 2024 Dianne and John Hollister made the first $5,000 gift towards the mural. In October memorial gifts in honor of Jacob DiCiaula added an additional $2,650. Additional donors came, and Neil and Rochelle Gridley topped off contributions in January of 2025. By March, a grant from the Looking for Lincoln Heritage coalition for $3,500 was obtained to pay for the brass plate.

JOURNEY TO THE MURAL

Hannah Johnson and Museum staff were instrumental in the finalization of wording for the brass plate with consultation from Museum Executive Director Emeritus, Greg Koos.

By May 2025, the itinerary for the program was confirmed to include music from the 33rd Illinois Regimental Band, Lincoln impersonator Randy Duncan, and comments from local Lincoln Scholar Guy Fraker. The Museum looks forward to further opportunities to celebrate the impact of what happened at the Bloomington Anti-Nebraska Convention of May 29, 1856, as we approach the 175th Anniversary milestones of Abraham Lincoln's journey to the presidency and the impact of his achievements. Special thanks to intern Connor Monson who worked on several Abraham Lincoln research projects in the fall of 2024 that helped in creating this summary.

ARTIST TROY FREEMAN



Mural Advisory Committee

Cindy Anet, Ruth Cobb, Zach Dietmeier, Guy Fraker, Dianne Hollister, Doug Johnson, Hannah Johnson, Connor Monson, Jeff Saulsberry, Mike Sewell, David Wiegers, Stewart Winger, and Marcia Young. The Museum staff included in the project were Julie Emig, Bill Kemp, Jeff Woodard, and Norris Porter.

The advisory committee was dedicated to every detail. When looking at the mural, observe subtle nuances in the mural design, including a headline of the day, and notables Owen Lovejoy and Jesse Fell.

Mural Donors

Dianne & John Hollister, memorial gifts in honor of Jacob DiCiaula, Robert & Stephanie Porter, Tom Dzurison, J. Gordon & Sandra Bidner, Guy & Kathy DiCiaula, History Club, Commerce Bank, Jerry & Carole Ringer, Evelyn Feltner in honor of Ruthie Cobb, Josh Rohrscheib & Ciara Kent, CEFCU, Fred Walk, Neil & Rochelle Gridley, Looking for Lincoln Heritage Coalition.

Looking for Lincoln in Bloomington-Normal

You can take a mobile tour of the 13 Looking for Lincoln sites in Bloomington-Normal on the Museum's web-based mobile tour platform, Tourient. Scan the QR code or visit mchistory.tourient.app to begin the tour!