

# Lincoln ON THE VERGE

By HON. HENRY S. COHN

*In Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington, historian Ted Widmer describes how Abraham Lincoln traveled in February 1861 to his inauguration as president.*

**I**N JULY 2019, my wife and I cruised by riverboat down the Ohio River from its origin in Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. At one stop, we made a land excursion to Wheeling, West Virginia's Independence Hall, where delegates had voted to secede from Virginia to form a new state. On April 20, 1863, President Lincoln ratified this action.

Wheeling is also remembered as the site where, on "Lincoln Day," February 9, 1950, Joseph McCarthy delivered a speech to a Republican women's group at the McLure Hotel. His national career began there as he attacked the State Department for allegedly failing to remove Communists from its employ.

We also toured Cincinnati, across the Ohio River from Kentucky, a stopping point prior to the Civil War for slaves traveling on the Underground Railroad. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who lived for some years in the town, famously featured Eliza crossing the Ohio River near Cincinnati in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Ted Widmer's recent book, *Lincoln on the Verge*, already a classic among the approxi-



mately 15,000 books about Lincoln, also focuses in part on the Ohio River. The book describes Lincoln's February 1861 13-day train trip from Springfield, IL, to Washington, DC, just before his inauguration as president on March 4, 1861.

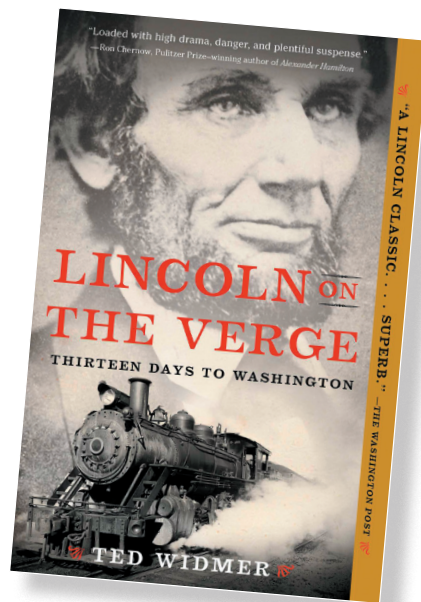
Lincoln made the trip to introduce himself to the Northern electorate. He wanted to demonstrate that he was not just a Western "hick," as he had been portrayed in several newspapers of the day.

In addition, the Confederacy was only coming together at this point; Virginia had not seceded. On each stop along the train route, Lincoln urged the public to support unity. He would not accept that war was the answer to the country's problems.

A train was the ideal vehicle to assist Lincoln in his goal of keeping the nation united. The North dominated the South in train travel and in the expansion of rail lines. This made for easy access to the many stops on Lincoln's route. Lincoln was familiar with train travel to attend court hearings in the Illinois eighth judicial circuit as well as from his campaign trips in the 1850s and during the 1860 election.

Located in the South and vulnerable to being occupied by Southern troops, Washington, DC, in February 1861, was waiting for Lincoln's arrival to bring stability to the city. Congress was still dominated by Southern sympathizers. Even the count of the electoral ballots from the 1860 election to take place on February 13, 1861, was threatened. The ballots were being stored in the office of Vice President Breckenridge, and it was feared that before they were counted, Lincoln's opponents might seize them. President Buchanan had placed federal military forces under the command of General Winfield Scott, a Mexican War hero. Though Scott committed himself to defend the US capital, he was riddled with disease and so overweight that he could not mount a horse.

Lincoln's trip began on February 11, 1861, with his tearful farewell to Springfield, deliv-



ered in the rain to a gathering of almost all the town's residents. As the train pulled away from the station, he and his secretary, John Nicolay, wrote out in hand the text of his oral address. This one-paragraph document remains moving. Widmer states that Lincoln "was also introducing himself to the American people and explaining where he came from." He noted the kindness of the Springfield citizenry; the public had assisted him here as he passed from "a young to an old man." He saw his challenges as greater than George Washington's and trusted their resolution to divine assistance. Widmer adds that Lincoln was never to see Springfield again.

Widmer proceeds to detail Lincoln's 13-day trip to Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> The first major stop was Lafayette, IN, where Lincoln declared that "we are all united in our feeling for the Union."

Then the train headed on to Indianapolis, arriving at the original "Union Station," where the crowd was estimated at 50,000. He was welcomed by Governor Oliver Morton and a 34-gun salute. Thirteen-year-old Thomas A. Edison was present.

In a talk later that day, Lincoln compared the Southern states' ignoring the binding nature of the Union to someone who approved of "free love." This phrase was objected to by some commentators as not meeting Victorian good taste.

Another Indianapolis incident involved Robert Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's oldest son. Teenage Robert was thrilled to be traveling with his father. He was allowed to ride in the engine and occasionally press the accelerator. He also enjoyed the company of some youths his own age whom he met in the town.

Lincoln asked Robert to watch a satchel that contained Lincoln's carefully written draft of his inaugural address, but, when Lincoln asked for the satchel in Indianapolis, Robert could not remember where the satchel was. Lincoln, panic stricken, spent some time looking for the satchel and eventually found it in his hotel's baggage room.

On February 12, Lincoln's 52nd birthday, the train reached Cincinnati, along the Ohio River. From Cincinnati, Lincoln could look across the river and see Kentucky, the state of his birth. Widmer describes the economy of Cincinnati: pig meat packers flourished to such an extent that the city's nickname was Porkopolis.

In Cincinnati, Lincoln led a parade of 150,000, which included the three-year-old William Howard Taft. He spoke at the German Industrial Association, cautiously declaring about the Southern threats that he "should wait until the last moment, for a development of the present national difficulties before I express myself decidedly what course I shall propose."

Temporarily leaving the Ohio River route on February 13, Lincoln's next major stop was Columbus, Ohio's capital. There he again asked the South to refrain from precipitous action. Widmer relates that Lincoln's hands were unbearably sore from greeting the public there.

On February 14, the train turned back toward the Ohio River and Pittsburgh. Lincoln told an enormous crowd at the Monongahela House: "I could not help thinking, my friends, as I traveled in the rain through your crowded streets, on my way here, that if all people were in favor of the Union, it can certainly be in no great danger—it will be preserved."

## LINCOLN ON THE VERGE

On February 16, stopping in Cleveland, he declared that the so-called crisis was an “artificial crisis.” Later that day, he stopped in Westfield, NY, where he called out for 12-year-old Grace Bedell and then kissed her when she appeared. As those in attendance yelled out in delight, Lincoln explained that Bedell had written to him during the 1860 campaign, urging him to “let his whiskers grow.” And “acting partly upon her suggestion, I have done so.”

Next in Buffalo, Lincoln met former president Millard Fillmore. On the following day, Sunday, February 17, Lincoln and Fillmore attended services at a local Unitarian church. On February 18, Lincoln arrived in Albany. He received word that Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated as president of the Confederate States of America.

Lincoln’s train reached New York City on February 19. Walt Whitman observed, as he joined those welcoming Lincoln, that Lincoln had “perfect composure,” but he also noted his “uncouth height; his dress of complete black,

stovepipe hat pushed back on his head; dark-brown complexion; seamed and wrinkled yet canny-looking face; black, bush head of hair; disproportionately long neck; and his hands held behind...”

On February 20, Lincoln attended a Verdi opera at the Academy of Music. The audience interrupted the performance to sing the Star Spangled Banner in his honor. Lincoln also met with the New York City mayor and city council, telling them that he never would consent to the destruction of the Union.

The next stop, on February 21, was in Trenton, where he met with the New Jersey legislature. In a speech to the State Senate, he said that he wished “that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea” for which the Revolutionary War was fought.

Speaking the same day to the New Jersey General Assembly, Lincoln departed from his usual cautious, conciliatory approach to

the attempts of the South to take a separate course. “It may be necessary,” he declared, “to put the foot down firmly.” He lifted up his foot and pressed it to the floor. The representatives erupted in approval.

On September 22, he spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, describing his lifelong affection for the Declaration of Independence. Later that day, he raised an American flag with 34 stars, including a new star representing the admission of Kansas to the Union. He then traveled to Pennsylvania’s capital city of Harrisburg, telling listeners that he would “endeavor to preserve the peace of this country.”

Beginning in Philadelphia and continuing in Harrisburg, Lincoln had been informed by Detective Allan Pinkerton and William Seward’s son Fred that there was a plot to murder Lincoln as his train passed through Baltimore.

Lincoln and Pinkerton decided that he must secretly return from Harrisburg to Philadel-



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phia and take an unpublicized night train from there to Baltimore and then Washington. Lincoln also agreed to disguise himself. This ruse was successful and Lincoln arrived in Washington unharmed on February 23, 1861.

*Lincoln on the Verge* is not only a history, but also a travelogue and a thriller. The main part of the book ends triumphantly, as Lincoln takes the oath of office on March 4, 1861, and survives the country's brutal war. Sadly, though, Widmer's epilogue is tragic. After Lincoln's assassination, his funeral train to Springfield in April 1865 covered much the same route in reverse that Lincoln traveled when he was "on the verge" in February 1861. ■

*Hon. Henry S. Cohn is a judge trial referee in New Britain.*

**NOTES**

1. In this summary, in addition to Widmer's book, I have relied upon Brian Wolly's "Lincoln's Whistle-Stop trip to Washington" found at smithsonianmag.com, February 9, 2011, and Harold Holzer and Thomas Horrocks, *The Annotated Lincoln* (2016).



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