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Dedication of Lincoln Fell-Davis Statue

A statue by sculptor Andrew Jumenville depicting the friendship between Abraham Lincoln and his McLean County advisors Jesse Fell and David Davis was unveiled at Lincoln Park in front of the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts. Davis was an early Illinois Wesleyan trustee and benefactor.

Saturday, October 23, 2010

When I was asked to select a favorite reading from the speeches and letters of Abraham Lincoln, my first thought was to turn to the Gettysburg Address or the Emancipation Proclamation, two very compelling and memorable statements. However, in preparing my remarks, I found myself drawn, for obvious reasons, to works that explained or reflected the breadth and depth of Lincoln's education.

It is widely known that Lincoln's formal education was limited. At the urging of Jesse Fell, he prepared an autobiography in 1859 that contained the following narrative on his education after his family moved to Indiana:

"There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was required of a teacher, beyond 'readin, writin, and ciphern' to the Rule of Three; but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity." ¹

The entire autobiography is barely two pages long. My colleague, Robert Bray, Lincoln Scholar and Colwell Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan, commented to me recently that it appears Lincoln very reluctantly agreed to prepare this autobiography for Jesse Fell following his defeat in the Senate election in 1858. Evidently Jesse Fell recognized that Lincoln had presidential potential long before that occurred to the future candidate himself.

It is interesting to contrast the first autobiography with the extended one produced for the Presidential election campaign of 1860, particularly in terms of confirming not only how he felt about his formal education but also about his continuing education efforts as an adult. (Lincoln wrote this autobiography in the third person):

"After he was twentythree, and had separated from his father, he studied English grammar, imperfectly of course, but so as to speak and write as well as he now does. He studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid, since he was a member of Congress. He regrets his want of education and does what he can to supply the want." ²

As someone who studied mathematics as an undergraduate, I was struck by his reference to Euclid. Euclid is a giant in the field of mathematics, someone who is credited with synthesizing mathematical knowledge, particularly in the area of geometry, and developing rigorous proofs to advance the field. I have to believe that such training provided Lincoln with habits of the mind that one can observe repeatedly in his approach to debates about public policy. One example comes from a speech opposing slavery that Lincoln delivered in Chicago on March 1, 1859:

"Suppose it is true that the Almighty has drawn a line across the continent, on the south side of which part of the people will hold the rest as slaves; that the Almighty ordered this; that it is

right, unchangeably right, that men ought there to be held as slaves, and their fellow men will always have the right to hold them as slaves. I ask you, this once admitted, how can you believe that it is not right for us, or for them coming here, to hold slaves on this other side of the line? Once we come to acknowledge that it is right, that it is the law of the Eternal Being, for slavery to exist on one side of the line, have we any sure ground to object to slaves being held on the other side?"³

This kind of logic and reasoning became Lincoln's trademark, a skill widely acknowledged and certainly not lost on those who engaged him in debate. Perhaps less well known was Lincoln's penchant for poetry. I would like to conclude my remarks with a few lines from the beginning and end of his poem, "My Childhood Home I See Again":

"My childhood-home I see again
And gladden with the view;
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,
There's sadness in it too.
The very spot where grew the bread
That formed my bones, I see
How strange, old field, on thee to tread,
And feel I'm part of thee!"⁴

Welcome back to the fields of Illinois, Mr. Lincoln.

1 - Abraham Lincoln, "To Jesse Fell, Enclosing Autobiography," *Abraham Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), vol. II, p. 107.

2 - Abraham Lincoln, "Autobiography Written for Campaign," *Abraham Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), vol. II, p. 162.

3 - Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois," *Abraham Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), vol. II, p. 16.

4 - Abraham Lincoln, "My Childhood-Home I See Again," *Abraham Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), vol. I, pp. 120-122.