



For the People

A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association
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Lincoln's "Suicide" Poem: Has It Been Found?

By Richard Lawrence Miller*

In William Herndon's *Life of Lincoln*, ghostwriter Jesse Weik has Herndon say that Abraham Lincoln wrote "a few lines under the gloomy title of 'Suicide'" at around the time of the depression Lincoln suffered in 1841 after breaking his engagement with Mary Todd and learning that his best friend Joshua Speed was moving back to Kentucky. According to the recollection attributed to Herndon, the poem was published in the *Sangamo Journal*, but in the newspaper's files the poem later had been clipped from the issue containing it: "I have always supposed it was done by Lincoln or by some one at his instigation."

The piece has been a minor literary mystery. Skepticism has even existed about the poem's existence, on grounds that scrapbooks should have preserved it, and that Springfield's Democratic *Illinois Register* of the era would have reprinted anything embarrassing to Lincoln (see Mary Leighton Miles, "The Fatal First of January, 1841," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 20 [1927-1928]: 16).

Although Jesse Weik is an outstanding authority, Herndon saw flaws in the book. Was the poetry account an example of error in detail? Weik dates the piece from 1841. Herndon's notes of a circa June 10, 1865, interview with Joshua Speed date the poem as "about 1840." A September 13, 1866, letter from Speed to Herndon says: "My recollection is that the Poem on Suicide was written in the Spring of 1840, or Summer of 1841," and "It was published in the Sangamon Journal soon after it was written."

Speed appeared less certain than

Weik about when the poem was produced. The spring of 1840 would remove any connection of the poem with Lincoln's black mood of 1841. Herndon himself once recalled an even earlier date: "As to the Lincoln poem on suicide, I found out from Speed that it was written 1838, and I hunted up the Journal and found where the poem was, what day published, etc., etc., but someone had cut it out—supposed to be Lincoln. I could never find another copy, and so there is an end of that" (see Herndon to Ward Lamon, Feb. 25, 1870, in Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln, from the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* [New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940], 67).

Was the poem indeed clipped out from the newspaper file? Herndon does not declare personal recollection of ever seeing the poem; on the contrary, he seems to rely on Speed for knowledge of the item's existence. Searchers examining the standard *Sangamo Journal* file do encounter an occasional empty rectangle where an item once existed, but how did Herndon know that a particular empty rectangle had contained a poem he evidently did not remember and (given the dating conflicts) published in a year he apparently was uncertain of? Perhaps his remarks to Lamon should be treated as sincere but casual, a private comment made to a friend but not intended as a public declaration that could be proven. Weik's prose on the subject, attributed to Herndon, was very public but may have had no more backing than Herndon's earlier comment to Lamon.

If we are willing to consider that Herndon possibly erred about the poem's disappearance, an item from

the August 25, 1838, *Sangamo Journal* is a candidate for being the poem in question. Lacking, however, a holograph manuscript or dependable identification by contemporaries familiar with the work, we are left to our own devices in determining whether Lincoln might be the author.

This candidate poem satisfies basic requirements. Dating is within proper perimeters. The subject matter of suicide is extraordinary. The *Sangamo Journal* and other Illinois newspapers of that time routinely contained verse with themes of death or mortality, but not suicide. Lincoln appears to have had no competitors dealing with that theme. The title given by Weik, without access to the poem itself, may be imprecise. And typically, poetry in the *Sangamo Journal* did not give an author's name, so lack of attribution does not argue against Lincoln's authorship.

Aspects of content are consistent with his authorship. Given the rarity of suicide verse in newspapers of the era, we can easily speculate that *Sangamo Journal* editor Simeon Francis had particular respect for the item's author, else the submission might have been rejected. Francis is well known for giving Lincoln open access to the newspaper's columns. Although Herndon and Weik implied that someone thought Lincoln's suicide poem contained thoughts best hidden from posterity, Lincoln was not given to public confession of intimate thoughts. Nor would his personal and political friend Francis be likely to publish a piece raising questions about Lincoln's steadiness; even if such a piece lacked public attribution, persons closely connected to the

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Lincoln and the Cold War

By Thomas E. Schwartz

Part of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial observances was the appearance of West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt in Springfield, Illinois. A crowd of fifteen hundred gathered at the Illinois State Armory for a steak dinner and an address by the young forty-four-year-old mayor of the divided city of Berlin. The evening revelers included twenty-four diplomats, including Sir Harold Cassia, the British ambassador, and Herve' Alphand, the French ambassador. The local newspaper, the *Illinois State Journal Register*, noted the last-minute cancellation of Czechoslovakian charge d' affaires, Dr. Carl Duda, with the headline, "Reds Snub Lincoln Fete." Czechoslovakia was the only "Iron Curtain" country that had indicated a willingness to participate in the celebration.

In spite of this small diplomatic incident, the evening was a great success. The famous singer and actress Etta Moten sang the "National Anthem" while the University of Illinois Symphony Orchestra and Varsity Men's Glee Club provided additional music, including a performance of Aaron Copeland's "A Lincoln Portrait."

Springfield Mayor Nelson O. Howarth, Governor William Stratton, and Senator Everett M. Dirksen were among the elected officials representing Illinois. In recognition of Brandt's efforts, he was presented a gavel "made from a block of black walnut taken from a tree that grew in the yard of the Sangamon County Courthouse where Lincoln gave his "House Divided" speech." Brandt was also given bookends fashioned after Daniel Chester French's seated Lincoln that was inscribed: "Presented to Mayor Willy Brandt by the people of Springfield, Ill., Feb. 12, 1959."

Brandt used the occasion of Lincoln's 175th birthday to discuss

Lincoln's legacy, especially as it pertained to division of Germany. Recent Soviet statements of reunifying Berlin prompted Brandt to seek reassurances from the United States that West Berlin would remain safe from any outside military threats. President Eisenhower stood firmly behind Brandt and the people of West Berlin. Brandt used Lincoln's "House Divided" speech as his point of departure. It is reproduced here in its entirety.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We have come together here in Springfield to pay homage to a great political leader of your country. I have gladly come the long way from Berlin to Springfield, because I consider it a high honor that I may have a part in these ceremonies and that I may speak to you.

to say to you here in Springfield, as well as to all the people of America, how greatly indebted we are to you. I have just passed several pleasant and encouraging days; and they have strengthened my conviction that Berlin can rely on its friends and that we shall march forward shoulder to shoulder, permitting nothing to come between us.

The history of nations, particularly the nations of Europe, has passed on to posterity in ample measure the deeds of those personalities whose fame rests on the external employment of power. Yet, it may be rightly said that a greater historical force has emanated from those men and women who have helped their country and their people to attain inner greatness and strength and who thus became the embodiment of ideas which have influenced many countries and many generations.



*West Berlin's Mayor Willy Brandt
and Illinois First Lady Shirley Stratton*

My fellow-Berliners are filled with the same sense of gratitude; and I bring to all of you and to your many guests their heartfelt greetings. I wish

In my city of Berlin, during those most difficult years after the war, we had such a personality at our head, a
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THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN
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Member News and
Announcements

Springfield attorney Joseph E. McMenamin serves in the Illinois National Guard. He and his unit have been deployed to Afghanistan for one year. Our thoughts and prayers are with him and all the men and women serving in the military.

Myron Marty will be discussing books that Abraham Lincoln read and some of the best books written about the Sixteenth President. The discussion will be streamed live over the Internet on Thursday, April 1 at 7:00 P.M. at www.drake.edu. For further information, contact Claudia Cackler at 515.271.4049 or via e-mail at claudia.cackler@drake.edu.

A "sneak peek" at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum attracted over 4,400 individuals on Valentine's Day. Richard Norton Smith, executive director of the ALPLM, was surprised and gratified by the public interest.

Former Illinois Governor Jim Edgar has agreed to head the reconstituted Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Foundation.

Allen C. Guelzo appeared on numerous television and radio shows discussing his new book *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*. Guelzo has also

accepted a position with the history department at Gettysburg College beginning in the fall.

James M. McPherson is writing a biography on Abraham Lincoln.

Catherine Clinton, author of *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, is working on a biography of Mary Todd Lincoln.

The Abraham Lincoln Association and the Governor Oglesby Mansion are hosting "A Lincoln Evening" on Thursday, April 29, 2004, in Decatur, Illinois. The evening will begin with a reception from 5:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. at the Governor Oglesby Mansion at 421 West Williams Street. The festivities then move to the Madden Auditorium at the Decatur Public Library, 130 North Franklin Street, where noted author Ronald C. White Jr. will give a lecture on "Lincoln's Eloquence." White has received high praise for his book *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*. His current research explores Lincoln's eloquence as a writer and orator. Copies of White's book as well as titles from other Lincoln historians will be available for purchase and signing at the library. While the event is free, donations at the Governor Oglesby Mansion are accepted. Mark your calendars and plan to attend!

Mr. Lincoln at 195

The Abraham Lincoln Association celebrated the one hundred ninety-fifth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth in Springfield, Illinois, with an exciting lineup of speakers and events. The Board of Directors met to elect new officers and some new board members. Dr. Roger D. Bridges replaced Dr. Robert S. Eckley, who stepped down to chair the endowment campaign. Bridges is the former director of the Rutherford B.

Hayes Presidential Library and Museum in Fremont, Ohio, as well as past director of the Illinois State Historical Library. He and his wife Karen reside in Bloomington, Illinois.

Also elected were Molly Becker, Richard E. Hart, and Richard Mills as vice presidents, Thomas F. Schwartz as secretary, and Robert Stuart Jr. as treasurer.

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Lincoln and the Cold War

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man whose life and work was permeated with the knowledge that spiritual forces and moral values are stronger than the exigencies of the moment. I am thinking of Ernst Reuter, who showed us Berliners not only the way of resistance to tyranny but also the way of close cooperation with our American friends.

We here today, all the American people and millions of freedom-loving men and women throughout the world are honoring that great man, Abraham Lincoln, who in martyrdom has gone down in history as the uniter of his people. But this man does not belong to you alone, my friends. He belongs to all of us, above all to our young people, and he lives in the hearts of mankind everywhere. In Abraham Lincoln intellectual force was matched with moral strength. He understood the spirit as well as the needs of his time; and he was possessed of that pragmatic way of thinking which is conducive to successful action and which always stands the test if it is anchored in firm convictions.

When I say that Lincoln belongs to all of us, I am naturally thinking—as the spokesmen of Germany’s capital—of his connections with Germany and of the help which he received, before and after his election to the presidency, from men of German origin. I need only mention such names as Carl Schurz, Gustav Koerner, and Franz Lieber.

As a man who has emerged from the labor movement, I wish to point out, secondly, that it was Abraham Lincoln who called the free laborer a bulwark of democracy, and that he considered those particularly worthy to be trusted who toil up from poverty. This spirit of impartiality and of faith in equal opportunity was also understood on the other side of the ocean. A police conference in Berlin in June 1865,

however, regarded it as improper that the General Association of German workers—a predecessor of my own party—expressed its sympathy on the occasion of Lincoln’s death in addresses to the American Government.

Third, and foremost, however, I am thinking of the character of that man, who, with so much warmth and understanding, stood at the side of those people then struggling for their freedom. Let us remember his words about the electric cord that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty loving men together throughout the world. Perhaps we should also remember that Lincoln was one of those men who here in Springfield, more than one hundred years ago, put it on paper that Russian action with regard to the Hungarian freedom-fighters of those days was an “illegal and unwarrantable interference.”

In other words, Lincoln and his friends avowed their solidarity with all those people in the world who fought for freedom, for human rights and for the right to self-reliance. Important periods of American policy have since borne the mark of this principle. The world would look bad indeed had not the American people and their government been permeated by this basic attitude, especially during recent decades.

Ladies and gentleman, you will not expect me to give you an interpretation of your great president in terms of domestic American affairs. Yet even an outsider may venture the guess that those who stood “on the other side of the barricade” during the Civil War would also agree today without hesitation that the United States could not have become a haven of freedom and the leading world power had the unity of the nation been shattered.

Abraham Lincoln spoke of the duty of the whole people to never entrust to any hands but their own . . . the preservation . . . of their own liber-

ties, a duty which, after bitter experience, the great majority of the German people also acknowledge.

He spoke of the eternal struggle between democracy and tyranny. We know that this struggle has torn apart the European continent and that it has assumed world-wide dimensions. He quoted the passage from the Bible about the house divided against itself, and expressed his conviction that this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.

The truths which Lincoln spoke here in Springfield in June, 1858, are perhaps even more applicable to the present situation of the German people than to the one which he faced: that is, to the arbitrary disruption of their lives, for which, of course, they are not without guilt themselves. I can only tell you that the Germans in the East and in the West have not accepted this situation and that they will not accept conditions under which a son is separated from his mother, a brother from his brother.

I can only ask you all to imagine what it means when each and every day for ten years and more hundreds of Germans become refugees in their own country, because they can no longer endure the tyrannical pressure put upon them in the part of Germany ruled by the Soviets. I must make you aware of the danger resulting from this arbitrary division. It is a threat to peace in Europe and to peace in the world.

Therefore, the German question, the desire of the Germans for the reestablishment of their national unity, has greater significance than merely a legitimate national interest. In fact, it is rather the accepted common interest of everyone who wants a peaceful order in Europe and in the world. Of course, I know that the German question today, in many respects, is interwoven with the over-all problems of common security and East-West relations. I am,

therefore, aware of the fact that neither an isolated nor a sudden solution is possible and that we must hope for gradual changes, for step-by-step solutions as the result of persistent negotiation.

In this sense, I am for flexibility and opposed to our becoming imprisoned in the framework of out-dated formulas. But I say with Abraham Lincoln that important principles may and must be inflexible. For the days ahead, firmness, unity and patience are as important for the West as the willingness to examine changing conditions and to accommodate ourselves to them whenever possible.

This also applies to Berlin, which has once more become the target of Soviet probing and blackmail and which in the months to come will yet be the subject of much agitation, for the climax of the Soviet-provoked crisis has not yet been reached. But in the weeks past we have won two peaceful victories.

The Berliners themselves repulsed that attack against their social order and their economic reconstructions. On December 7, 93 percent of them hastened to the ballot boxes and all save a bare 2 percent cast their votes against the Soviet threats.

And the United States together with their allies have told the Soviets: Hands off Berlin! They have made it clear to Moscow that they will not renounce their rights and obligations even under the pressure of an ultimatum. Today the Soviets realize the serious risk of unilateral action. If it becomes necessary, it must also be made clear to them that the same risk is involved as far as the hindrance of impairment of access to Berlin is concerned, for without free access, the agreements on Berlin would become a mere farce.

We see time and again that forgery is turned into political practice. Lincoln said that there is much talk about freedom but that the concept of freedom is often filled with very different substances. Lincoln's remark has even greater relevance today.

This also applies to the Berlin case. Talk goes on about creating a "free city

of West-Berlin." But what the Soviet announcements proclaim in this context means anything but freedom for the citizens involved. No, Berlin is to be "free" from the Americans and the other Western powers, it is to be "free" from its economic and legal relationship with the German West, "free" from freedom. Let me answer in Lincoln's words, namely, that you can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.

Those who talk about a "demilitarized" city and who accuse the West of wanting to prolong artificially the occupation status of Soviet divisions encircling the city and to absorb what is left into that part of Germany ruled by the Communists. For us, the powers embarrassing to the interests of the population. We regard them as protecting powers and as our friends.

What has been rebuilt in Berlin, the transformation of a vast desert of ruins into a place of flourishing economic and intellectual life is to a great extent the common achievement of the Berliners and their American friends. We all still vividly remember the magnificent performance of the airlift by the Americans and their British allies. When in May we will solemnly celebrate the tenth anniversary of the lifting of the Berlin blockade, it will be a great pleasure for us to welcome in our midst a number of those men who at that time shifted the points the right way.

Now again, it is essential that the points remain properly set, that is, that together we persevere in our stand for right and freedom. This does not mean that we should not negotiate—on the contrary. It also does not mean that counter-proposals cannot be offered with regard to the Berlin situation—within the framework of more far-reaching negotiations, particularly with regard to improved transit between Berlin and West-Germany. But we ought to understand that the East wants nothing but a unilateral change in circumstance to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the West. This is unacceptable because of the

people living in Berlin; it is also impossible because a capitulation in the Berlin question would have far-reaching, devastating consequences, and because a new and permanent settlement cannot be built upon the breach of justice and treaty law.

This can and will not come to pass. You can rely on the people of Berlin. We know how important it is to preserve peace, but we do not want to lose freedom. If freedom is at stake, we will bend our knee to nobody.

Since shortly after the end of the Berlin blockade the Freedom Bell has hung in the town hall of West-Berlin. It came to us from your country with parchment scrolls bearing the signatures of fifteen million American men and women. Each day at 12 noon we listen to the sound of this bell, which reminds us of what we have to preserve and what we yet have to achieve.

The Freedom Bell also reminds us of the immortal work of Abraham Lincoln. It reminds us in particular of the address he delivered at the national cemetery in Gettysburg—that great prose work in which, referring to the honored dead, he declared that the living should dedicate themselves to the task for which they gave the highest sacrifice so that this sacrifice shall not have been in vain. Engraved on our Freedom Bell are these noble words from the Gettysburg Address: "That this world," Lincoln said "nation," but today he, too, would include the whole world, "under God shall have a new birth of freedom."

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Lincoln's "Suicide" Poem: Has It Been Found?

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newspaper or to Springfield's political and social scenes would be likely to learn the author's identity. Lincoln's fascination with poetry about mortality is ample reason to postulate he produced a poem about suicide having nothing to do with personal anguish of his own. Given these factors, we should not expect Lincoln's suicide poem to have any explicit personal reference. Such lack would also be the simplest explanation for why political opponents never used the poem against Lincoln.

Lincoln's secretary and biographer John G. Nicolay observed: "The music of Lincoln's thought was always in the minor key. His favorite poems, such as 'Oh, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud?' and Holmes's 'Last Leaf' specially emphasize this mood; they are distinctively poems of sadness. So also among Shakespeare's plays he found his chief fascination in 'Macbeth,' full of the same undercurrent of the great problems of life and destiny with which his own slight attempts at versification are in harmony" (see "Lincoln's Literary Experiments," *Century* 47 [1894]: 831).

Those observations may be pertinent in seeking to establish authorship of the poem below. Mere themes of sadness are of little relevance, as newspapers of that era commonly printed verse with such themes. The poem in question does, however, have themes enjoyed by lovers of Shakespearean tragedy, elements absent from typical mortality verse of the era. Below we have the debate of whether to be or not to be, of desertion or betrayal by friends, a resolution of conflict through death. In smaller details we have reference to a "dagger," a term familiar in Shakespeare but unfamiliar in newspaper accounts of violence during the 1830s and 1840s. One can easily see the poem's author as a lover of Shakespeare. In an 1846 Lincoln poem

about childhood memories, filled with musings about madness and ambiguous rationality of death, we see subject matter (insanity) and reasoning (that particular circumstances can make death more sensible than life) that are also seen in the interplay of rationality and madness below—the protagonist's appeal to cold reason for justification of his action is especially Lincolnian in spirit. Below, too, in this 1838 poem is the oratorical flourish found in Lincoln's 1838 address to the Young Men's Lyceum.

Of poetry known to be Lincoln's, technical similarity can be seen in the following item. We have stanzas of four lines. The first and third lines in stanzas have eight beats; second and fourth lines typically have six beats (although, as in Lincoln's "The Bear Hunt," second and fourth lines occasionally have an extra beat shifting away from pure iambic meter). First lines rhyme with third lines; second lines rhyme with fourth lines. These are classic thumbprints left by Lincoln the poet. Moreover, these particular characteristics are unusual in other *Sangamo Journal* poetry. For example in a long run of issues from 1841, only one poem maintained those characteristics through its entirety.

Absolute certainty about Lincoln's authorship of an unattributed printed item can be elusive. The poem below, however, has so many characteristics we should expect to find in Lincoln's "suicide" poem (publication source, dating, themes, technical construction) that we might be justified in wondering if the mystery of Lincoln's "suicide" poem may now be solved.

THE SUICIDE'S SOLILOQUY.

The following lines were said to have been found near the bones of a man supposed to have committed suicide, in a deep forest, on the Flat Branch of the Sangamon, sometime ago.

Here, where the lonely hooting owl
Sends forth his midnight moans,
Fierce wolves shall o'er my carcase growl,
Or buzzards pick my bones.

No fellow-man shall learn my fate,
Or where my ashes lie;
Unless by beasts drawn round their bait,
Or by the ravens' cry.

Yes! I've resolved the deed to do,
And this the place to do it:
This heart I'll rush a dagger through,
Though I in hell should rue it!

Hell! What is hell to one like me
Who pleasures never knew;
By *friends* consigned to misery,
By *hope* deserted too?

To ease me of *this* power to *think*,
That through my bosom raves,
I'll headlong leap from hell's high brink,
And wallow in its waves.

Though devils yell, and burning chains
May waken long regret;
Their frightful screams, and piercing pains,
Will help me to *forget*.

Yes! I'm prepared, through endless night,
To take that fiery berth!
Think not with tales of hell to fright
Me, who am damn'd on earth!

Sweet steel! come forth from out your sheath,
And glist'ning, speak your powers;
Rip up the organs of my breath,
And draw my blood in showers!

I strike! It quivers in that heart
Which drives me to this end;
I draw and kiss the bloody dart,
My last—my only friend!

*Richard Lawrence Miller is an independent scholar. His books include *Truman: The Rise to Power* and *Nazi Justiz: Law of the Holocaust*. He is preparing a multivolume account of Lincoln's years in Illinois.

Mr. Lincoln at 195

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New board members include L. Kenneth Anderson, an attorney and judge from Highland, Indiana; Lee McTurnan, a prominent Indianapolis



Richard Norton Smith

attorney in the firm McTurnan and Turner; Myron Marty, professor of history emeritus from Drake University; Richard Norton Smith, executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; and

Nicky Stratton, director of “Looking for Lincoln, Inc.” Professor Robert W. Johannsen was voted a distinguished director.

Book signings began in the Old State Capitol at 11:30 A.M. Among the distinguished authors were Martin Marty, Michael Holt, Mark E. Neely Jr., Mark Voss-Hubbard, Wayne Temple, and Mark Plummer. Kim Mathew Bauer, curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln Collection, presided over the symposium. He began the symposium by announcing the winner of the fourth annual Hay-Nicolay dissertation prize. Dr. Mathew Parks of Exeter, New Hampshire, was awarded the prize for his dissertation, “Self-Evident No More: American Political Thought, 1820–1850.” The prize is underwritten by the Lincoln Institute and the Lehrman Institute. The Abraham Lincoln Association and the Abraham Lincoln Institute, Inc. select the recipients and alternate awarding the prize from year to year. A board of five scholars representing each entity serves as the jury.

Mark E. Neely Jr. began the symposium with a probing and provocative paper exploring the political culture of the Republican party. Mark Voss-

Hubbard explored the problems that the Republican party encountered with land reform policies during and after the Civil War. Michael Holt rounded out the session with a paper arguing



Martin Marty

that no coherent two-party system of Republicans and Democrats existed during the Civil War to providing Lincoln with a “unified” Republican party. Graham Peck provided thoughtful comments on each paper.

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

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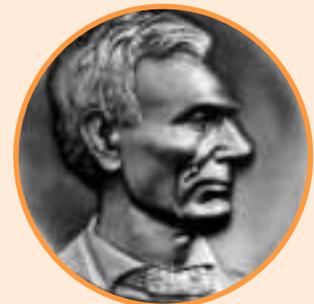
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More Pictures from the 2004 Abraham Lincoln Symposium



Mark E. Neely Jr. addresses the symposium audience.



Martin Marty signs a copy of his book prior to the symposium.



Incoming President Roger D. Bridges (l) presents outgoing President Robert S. Eckley with the traditional framed portrait of Abraham Lincoln.



The 114th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment (Reactivated) presents the colors.

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