

EXCERPT ON WILLIAM ELLABY LINCOLN FROM THE BOOK:
The Town That Started the Civil War, by Nat Brandt (199)

This book recounts how the pro-abolitionist people of Oberlin, Ohio rescued a man from slave hunters in 1858, and records the details of the subsequent trial of those who were involved.

Pages 8 to 12:

That March, after river traffic resumed, William Ellaby Lincoln, a pale but tall and impetuous twenty-four-year-old student from Oberlin College in Ohio, was on the upper deck of a Cincinnati steamboat as it headed upriver toward Maysville, when suddenly he heard "a confusion of curses" and the sounds of a scuffle coming from the deck below. "In with him," someone shouted. Rushing to the ladder leading to the lower deck, Lincoln saw "a crowd of excited cursing men" surrounding a Catholic priest. They were trying to shove the clergyman from the boat. The influx of foreigners of different religions—German and Irish immigrants in the main—had soured relations in the region, pitting Protestant against Catholic. Lincoln had no special liking for a "Romish priest," but without hesitating, he raced down the ladder.

Before he reached the lower rungs, he jumped from the ladder, landing between the mob and the priest and crying out at the same time, "If you get this man, you go over me." One of the ruffians shouted back that Lincoln was "a Jesuit; in with them both." But Lincoln stood his ground. "No I am not," he said and, lying slightly—he was unlicensed—added, "I'm a Congregational minister; this man has as much right to his opinion as you to yours." As he was speaking, the priest lunged for the ladder and started up it. Lincoln quickly followed him. The troublemakers did not pursue them, but, nevertheless, once on the upper deck, the priest was worried. Would Lincoln accompany him to his cabin?—"or they will get me yet." Lincoln escorted the priest to his quarters and once there suggested that they offer a prayer of thanks. But the priest begged off, saying he had a violent headache and had to lie down. "I saw," Lincoln realized, "he wd. not pray with a Heretic." Still, when the steamboat docked at Maysville, the priest was grateful to have Lincoln at his side as they disembarked and strode up the earthen ramp that led up from the landing to Maysville's Sutton Street.¹¹

Lincoln was an Englishman by birth, the son of a physician and the grandson of an army surgeon who had served at the Battle of Waterloo.

During the past winter, he had become so ill with consumption that he had been "given up by the doctor to die." He had rallied, however, and now felt better but was still "too weak to study at college." The winds off Lake Erie, near Oberlin, were "hurtful to his lungs." So he decided to travel into what he believed would be the more beneficial climate of Kentucky and do what many Oberlin students customarily did with their vacation time, even if they were not yet ordained: go "into the South to preach & do what I could agst. slavery." He hoped, among other things, that he also could be a colporteur for the American Missionary Association, peddling devotional tracts. He was "determined," he said, that "if I had to die, to die preaching."¹²

Lincoln was a rabid abolitionist. A fellow student had urged him to "read a novel"—one that the Village Item of Oberlin said "bids fair to do more good than all the sermons ever preached upon the subject."¹³ Lincoln did not even want to look at the book at first, "regarding it as lost time very largely." But at his friend's "earnest request," he relented and began reading Uncle Tom's Cabin:

"The interest was intense & when I reached the death of Uncle Tom, in tears I knelt & raising my hand, promised the Lord that I wd. do all I could to bring the horrible institution of Slavery to an end."

Lincoln vowed that he "would never cease struggling until the last slave was free."¹⁴

The next day, after reaching Maysville, Lincoln started out on foot for Cabin Creek, in neighboring Lewis County. There, only a few miles from Maysville, lived John G. Fee, a noted antislavery minister and educator, "the noblest, bravest & meekest man" Lincoln believed he would ever meet.

Lincoln was at Oberlin College when Fee came to speak there in 1855. The son of a slaveholder, Fee, who was about forty years old, had risked his life on more than one occasion to preach against slavery. He had been forced to abandon every church he started because of his abolitionist sentiments. Fee was in the midst of trying to get support to found what would become Berea College, which he hoped would "be to Kentucky what Oberlin is to Ohio, Anti-slavery, Anti-caste, Anti-secret societies, Anti-rum, Antisin."¹⁵ He urged Lincoln to take his message against slavery into Breathitt County, about seventy-five miles from Maysville over rough roads and narrow pathways. Taking Fee's advice,

Lincoln started out on foot. On his first day on the road, he was passing a cluster of broken-down houses surrounded by dogs, pigs, and cows, when he was startled by the voice of an old man, who cried out: "Is you the Abolition preacher[?]" When Lincoln replied in the affirmative, the old man shot back at him, "Did yer never read yer Bibul." Citing Genesis 9:25—the curse put on Canaan by Noah—the elder Kentuckian continued, "dont it say ... a sarvent of sar-vents shall he be to his brethren; aint we his brethren. This nigger wench & her brats, ant they mine didnt I buy her with my hard emed wages & isnt they all mine; & you want to steal them from me; you darn thief Reed yer Bibul you darned fool." Lincoln suggested that the words of the Bible had been fulfilled "long ago & that negros were not Canaanites &c," but the old man persisted, continuing to call him a thief and fool as Lincoln walked off into the forest.

Not far from where he had encountered the old man, Lincoln came upon a church whose minister had two families—"one of the parlor & one of the kitchen; one white, the other, black." The minister informed Lincoln that he intended to pay the college expenses of his white sons by selling one of his black children. The minister invited Lincoln to preach in his church. The young man did so, taking the opportunity to condemn what he regarded as the minister's "villainy." But the minister had his revenge: "A dog was lying near the wide fireplace, & he [the minister] winking to the boys, spat with wonderful skill, a mouthful of tobacco juice, into the dog's eye, & the scene of confusion as the dog howling rushed among the women, causing confusion & cries, disturbed my preaching & rejoiced his crowd. A revelation of the blinding influence of sin."

Lincoln resumed his journey toward Breathitt County, trekking over "hill and dale, rivulet & scenes of rolling wavings of green." Upon arriving at his destination, he met and stayed with a man who was an abolitionist but who was "careful not to expose himself too much" because of the "violent determination" of local slaveholders "to maintain even by mob violence their cruel & degrading system." That Sunday the two of them went to the local meetinghouse, where they heard a "colored preacher ... whose sermon was a careful steering between the master & the slave." But first, at his host's request, Lincoln was asked to guess the race of the male parishioners as they entered the church. "I made n mistakes in 15 minutes," Lincoln acknowledged. Apparently, work outdoors in the sun and wind had tarnished the face and hands of the men. "One case, were I put on oath, I shd. still affirm to be colored,"

Lincoln said. "He had shot 2 men for affirming he was a colored man." That afternoon, Lincoln himself was to preach to the congregation. As he approached the meetinghouse, he noticed a sheriff and two deputies, pistols drawn, outside, ordering slaves out of and away from the building. Lincoln's sermon was drawn from Ieremiah 18—"the law of national life & death ... I applied the law to the U.S. affirming that unless the slaves were freed that God wd. pour out his fury upon the nation." As he spoke, Lincoln noticed that the attention of the congregation had been drawn to his side. "I turned & saw the sheriff & a deputy pointing 2 pistols at the pulpit & I said 'Ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth'. The effect was strange; yet scriptural. The men turned pale their pistols fell from their hands; & clattered upon the floor & they followed & lay prone upon the seats. I preached on & at the end, young slaveholders came & with tears pressed me to ride at a gallop out of the valley; as the sheriff & his 2 deputies had sworn they wd. kill me; & they offered to keep them back, so I could escape." Lincoln answered the friendly slaveholders "very foolishly," saying: "If I begin to escape by hurried flight, I shall have to keep it up; I shall walk my horse out of the valley."

Lincoln started on his way, turning out of the valley and back up the mountain to the house of his host, who had stayed at home out of fear of what might occur. As his horse ambled along, the sheriff and his two deputies "trotted up & engaged me to preach at their place, the following Lord's day. Parting, they rode toward a large rock, by a stream, & I turned & rode up the mountain. The next thing I sensed was 3 pistol shots; I turned my horse & rode toward the 3, who with level pistols, stood near the rock. I raised my hand, to expostulate with them, when 3 more shots came, one grazing the horse who turned very suddenly from the shots & threw me out of the saddle & fear of being dragged to death crossed my mind. While out of the saddle 3 more shots came, 2 just by my head & perhaps 1 foot off. Had I been in the saddle, I shd. have been killed, pierced by 3 balls. My horse took fright & carried me up the mountain with dangerous speed. I had saved myself from being thrown by catching the pommel of the saddle by my foot."

Back at his host's home, Lincoln recounted what had happened. "My escape made no great stir; for such experiences were not unknown to the brethren; some met death & martyrdom for the slave & God's truth."

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In a little more than two years, and several hundred miles away in northern Ohio, the lives of William Lincoln and the slave John would intersect in a fateful test of one of the most controversial pieces of legislation ever passed by Congress.

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Rescuer John Watson continued his activities on behalf of black people after the war, presiding at one time at a state convention of black men in Columbus. He replaced John Mercer Langston on the Oberlin school board when Langston moved to Washington. Watson died in October 1872, when about fifty-four years old.

Rescuer David Watson left Oberlin. He was reported working as a druggist in Detroit in 1909, when he would have been about seventy-three years old.⁵²

Apparently the oldest surviving Rescuer was William E. Lincoln. Because the abolition of slavery was not a motivating factor in the Union's political program, the temperamental Lincoln purposely avoided serving in the Civil War. The reason, he acknowledged, had alienated him from his friends. "Oberlin," he wrote Gerrit Smith at the outbreak of the war in 1861, "does not sympathize

incomplete footnote, page 270:

11. William E. Lincoln, "Wellington Rescue," in William Pendleton Palmer Collection, WRHS. According to an Addendum by Henry Holcomb and dated Painesville, Ohio, September 6, 191s, Lincoln's reminiscence about the Rescue was apparently written in 1915. It was written on the pages of three 190s pollbooks and is unpaginated. Lincoln also included in his reminiscence the story of his adventures in Kentucky as well as other experiences. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes that follow are from this reminiscence. Lincoln was the author of other material relating to the Rescue—recollections and letters to the editor—which are cited when employed in later chapters. Interestingly, he often chose in them to repeat certain events—his conversion to abolitionism after reading Uncle Tom's Cabin and various details about his participation in the Oberlin-Welling-ton Rescue, in particular his

kneeling to pray for guidance and his leadership in the endeavor. It is almost as though nothing else in his long life meant anything to him. I have sometimes combined quotations from these sources to provide a more cohesive and dramatic narrative. When I do so, I cite all the sources that are employed. In addition to those sources, Lincoln wrote a lengthy letter to the president of Berea College (Berea, Kentucky), William G. Frost, in which he iterated his admiration of John G. Fee and included other incidents he experienced while preaching . . .

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4. Sears, *Day of Small Things*, is3.
5. William E. Lincoln to Philip D. Sherman, March 1918, Secretary's Office, 1833-1970, Oberlin College Archives |OCAJ.
6. J. H. Fairchild, "Baccalaureate Sermon: Providential Aspects of the

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18. Winsor, "How John Price Was Rescued," 254, refers to Bushnell as "Sim."

19. The recounting of Lincoln's joining in the Rescue is based on four sources: William E. Lincoln's "Wellington Rescue," Palmer Collection, WRHS; Obeilin News articles of September 15, 1909, and July 26, 1916; and Sears, *Day of Small Things*, 189-90.

20. Henry Viets.

21. Ione T. Hanna (nee Munger), "A Chapter of Reminiscences," 37-

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footnotes to chapter 13:

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