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Come-outers and Community Men: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of Community in Nineteenth-Century America

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Abstract
The most eloquent and moving words Abraham Lincoln ever uttered about any community were those “few and simple words” he spoke on the rear platform of the railroad car that lay waiting on the morning of February 11, 1861, to take him to Washington, to the presidency, and ultimately to his death. As his "own breast heaved with emotion" so that "he could scarcely command his feelings sufficiently to commence" (in the description of James C. Conkling), Lincoln declared that "No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting." To leave Springfield was to leave the only real home he had ever known. His professional life had been bound up in Springfield; he had married, raised a family, and been elected to Congress from Springfield; he had refused offers to relocate to Chicago and (so it was rumored later) even New York City to remain in Springfield. "To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything," Lincoln said. [excerpt]

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Photograph of Abraham Lincoln, May 20, 1860, probably by Preston Butler
Come-outers and Community Men: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of Community in Nineteenth-Century America

ALLEN C. GUELZO

The most eloquent and moving words Abraham Lincoln ever uttered about any community were those “few and simple words” he spoke on the rear platform of the railroad car that lay waiting on the morning of February 11, 1861, to take him to Washington, to the presidency, and ultimately to his death. As his “own breast heaved with emotion” so that “he could scarcely command his feelings sufficiently to commence” (in the description of James C. Conkling), Lincoln declared that “No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting.” 1 To leave Springfield was to leave the only real home he had ever known. His professional life had been bound up in Springfield; he had married, raised a family, and been elected to Congress from Springfield; he had refused offers to relocate to Chicago and (so it was rumored later) even New York City to remain in Springfield.2 “To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything,” Lincoln said.


2. According to David Davis, in 1849 Grant Goodrich had proposed that Lincoln join his law firm in Chicago, but Lincoln declined; after the Cooper Union address in Feb. 1860, Erastus Corning, one of the directors of the New York Central Railroad, was rumored to have offered Lincoln the position of general counsel for the railroad; see David Davis to William Henry Herndon, Sept. 19, 1866, in Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln, eds. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 349 (hereafter cited as Herndon’s Informants), and John W. Starr, Lincoln and the Railroads (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1927), 126–31.
Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.

But well-known as these kindly and affectionate words are, it is often overlooked that Lincoln said them in a very peculiar context—the moment he was leaving Springfield, never to return alive. Nor was this the first time that Lincoln expressed his sense of debt to communities after he had left those communities behind him for good. In the brief autobiographical sketch he composed for John Locke Scripps in 1860, he recalled harder times in his youth in New Salem, how he had been beaten in his first run for the state legislature and had been beaten down even more sorely by the business failure of his employer, Denton Offutt. Nevertheless, even though “he was now without means and out of business,” Lincoln “was anxious to remain with his friends who had treated him with so much generosity.” And he did—but for only two-and-a-half years, until the opportunity of learning and practicing law in Springfield beckoned. Lincoln’s departures from the two communities that had nurtured him were framed in soft words, but he still left them. In fact, Lincoln seems to have had the most admiring things to say about communities when he was just at the point of severing his ties to them.

The odd context of Lincoln’s comments about Springfield and New Salem situate Abraham Lincoln at a peculiar point in one of the most unsettling cultural dilemmas of American life, and that is the way we define, exalt, and (alternately) mourn the idea of community in American life. With the rise of what is frequently called the “new communitarianism,” the tone in which we discuss this dilemma has increasingly become one of mourning, because it is now anxiously suggested in the popular work of sociologists, political theorists, and philosophers as widely dispersed as Ami-tai Etzioni, Robert Bellah, Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel that American society has lost any meaningful sense of community, and with it, any sense of genuine human relationships, of social health, of cultural sanity. We have become a nation of utterly self-centered, self-seeking individualists, a heartless society that wrecks every non-tangible, non-financial human connection. Neighborhoods are accidental throw-togethers of

strangers who hardly know each other, and who will probably not live there long enough to get that knowledge. Education, welfare, even old-age care, are fobbed off onto 401K plans and faceless government agencies and bureaucrats. Our single most distinguishing feature is not our name, our family, the place we were born, but an integer—our Social Security number. We have lost a sense of “we-ness,” Etzioni charges, and exchanged the restraints and supports of community for a model of society that more closely resembles a “den of thieves.” Modern society, declares MacIntyre, appears like nothing so much as “a collection of citizens of nowhere.” “We Americans tend to think that all we need are energetic individuals and a few impersonal rules to guarantee fairness,” complains Bellah, “anything more is not only superfluous but dangerous—corrupt, oppressive, or both.” But the price for the decay of community, Bellah warns, is staggering:

Our institutions today—from the family to the school to the corporation to the public arena—do not challenge us to use all our capacities so that we have a sense of enjoyable achievement and of contributing to the welfare of others... And the malaise is palpable: a loss of meaning in family and job, a distrust of politics, a disillusion with organized religion.

What we need, Bellah argues, is “a dramatically new level of democratic institutionalization, not only in America but in the world.”

But the jeremiads of Etzioni, Bellah, and other “new communitarians” are not actually all that new. The nineteenth-century founders of scientific sociology—Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Emil Durkheim, and especially Ferdinand Tonnies—all contrasted the new industrial nation-states of the late 1800s with their medieval and traditional predecessors, and usually to the disadvantage of the former. Tonnies gave this contrast its classic (and ominously Manichaean) form in 1887 by speaking of the pre-capitalist, pre-industrial, pre-urbanized world as a Gemeinschaft (a “community” dominated by folkways, religion, and consensus) and the new industrial Europe as a Gesellschaft (a “society” typified by individualism, formal law, and a concern with rights). But the dread of los-


ing a sense of community is already apparent from the very first Anglo-American settlements in North America, where colonists who had been uprooted from traditional societies full of traditional geographical and cultural markers were now jumbled together in a hostile and unfamiliar landscape where it was no longer possible to assume that the conventional rules of social interchange could be practiced or enforced. Governor John Winthrop had not even gotten his boatloads of Puritan colonists into Massachusetts Bay before he felt it necessary to warn his contentious and theologically opinionated charges that

We must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluitics, for the supply of others necessities, we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality...always having before our eyes...our Community as members of the same body...6

And of course they didn’t. They disobeyed Winthrop’s injunction to be a single settlement—“a city on a hill”—and scattered over the landscape; and far from agreeing to live in communities, govern themselves by some form of common consensus, and subordinate private interests to the good of the whole, Winthrop’s settlers displayed an extraordinary penchant for mobility, debate, and entrepreneurial land-development.7 In fact, from the 1970s onward, no question has bedeviled early American historians more often or more loudly than whether pre-Revolutionary America was predominantly a system of local, consensus-based, agrarian communities based on self-contained systems of subsistence agriculture and yeoman farmers, or a socially fluid field of self-seeking entrepreneurs and cash-crop farmers, each seeking a place of advantage in the new international commercial capitalist markets of the British empire.8

Nowhere has the complaint over the disappearance of American community generated more fury among historians than among those whose scholarly bailiwick is Lincoln's own lifetime. In his monumental 1991 survey, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846*, Charles G. Sellers painted a picture of the American Republic at the close of the War of 1812 as a society divided, in large measure, by its transportation: out beyond the immediate environs of the large east-coast port towns, the American Republic had developed into rural communities of yeoman republicanism, where American farmers took advantage of the cheapness of western land and the near-absence of serious taxation to set themselves up as independent patriarchs, growing on as little as twenty acres everything a family could need in terms of food for themselves and their animals and the raw materials for clothing and shelter, dealing in barter for whatever else was needed and in cash money and interest not at all, and “abundantly meeting human needs for security, sociability, and trust” through neighborly reciprocity and sexually-segregated participation in male honor-sports and in female supervision of domestic production and child-bearing. These communities came at a price, as Sellers admits, “in patriarchy, conformity, and circumscribed horizons,” and they were terrifically vulnerable whenever land came up short and children numerous, or whenever the blandishments of market exchange could find ways to invade the trans-Appalachian interior, as it did by the introduction of steamboats, canals, and finally railroads, all of them bearing the gifts of the market and tempting yeoman farmers to abandon self-sufficiency to develop single-crop cash agriculture and buy manufactured store goods rather than making their own. The serpent in Sellers’s garden is market capitalism, and as if echoing the new communitarians’ concern for the atomization


and alienation of modern American society, Sellers frankly depicted the Whig program of “internal improvements” and market development as the first step toward the current crisis of community where “competitive stress intensifies, the fruits of free-enterprise autonomy sour with job flight and social breakdown, environmental disaster looms, politics gridlocks, and huckster-driven media increasingly dominate public consciousness.”

In the Jacksonian era, the most obvious antidote lay in a host of what Nathaniel Hawthorne (in The House of Seven Gables) called “community-men and come-outers”—“reformers, temperance-lecturers, and all manner of cross-looking philanthropists”—who arose to re-create pre-capitalist communities through experiments that would be proof against the market’s temptations, from Robert Owen’s experiment in Lincoln’s own southwestern Indiana at New Harmony in the mid-1820s to George Ripley’s Brook Farm in 1841, the Northampton Association for Education and Industry in 1842, and one hundred and sixteen others before 1859, dedicated more-or-less generally (as was the Northampton Association) to making “ourselves and friends happier—to get rid of the competition so omnipresent and oppressive” in American society. But in the case of Abraham Lincoln, there is no sense that a need for any such antidotes was at all felt, no sense in fact that Lincoln felt any abiding or supervening loyalties to agrarian communities or any particular dread of competitive individualism. Unlike the communitarians, Lincoln viewed wage labor and cash exchange as symbols of freedom, and he defined slavery not so much as a system of racial injustice but as an economic arrangement whose object was to compel men to labor without wages. “I used to be a slave,” Lincoln remarked in 1856. “We were all slaves at one time or another,” but “now I am so free that they let me practice law.”


Above all, he repeatedly cast social relations, not in terms of community, but in terms of competition, as "the race of life." If what the new communitarians—and the old ones, too—feared was the emergence of a society that looked like Michael Douglas’s Wall Street, Lincoln feared a society that looked like Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street, a society in which established elites played on the populist resentments of an agrarian proletariat—white or black, it made no difference—in order to repress the dynamism and mobility of a market-driven middle class. In all the major works of the new communitarians—Etzioni, Taylor, Bellah—the name of Abraham Lincoln makes no appearance. There is good reason for that.

Abraham Lincoln diverges from the communitarian ideal in American life on four major levels—the personal, the ideological, the practical, and the professional—and all of them in fact made him a much more controversial political figure in his own time than he is often understood to be. At the most personal level, though, Lincoln was a poor candidate for communitarianism simply because he fit so poorly the temperamental model of a person willing to be restrained by communal standards or to encourage the predominance of community in social life. The twenty-two-year-old Lincoln who in 1831 planted himself in New Salem as Denton Offutt’s clerk had, at least at first, all the makings of a fun-loving, high-spirited member of the local “b’hoys.” He made himself popular with his remarkable memory for rollicking stories and his sheer physical strength, and although he was “as ruff a specimen of humanity as could be found,” he was easily remembered for being “full of Highlarity and fun, which made him companionable, and rather Conspicuous among his associates.”

And yet, even in his New Salem days, while Lincoln “never Seemed to be rude,” he also “Seemed to have a liking for Solitude.” He already seems to have had the sense that “he was the superior of all” and allowed himself to be “governed by his intellectual superiority,” and that fueled both a single-minded concentration on self-improvement and the peculiar conviction that (as


Orville Hickman Browning observed) there was “a predestined work for him in the world . . . that he was destined for something nobler than he was for the time engaged in.”16 Consequently, whatever reputation Lincoln won for frontier “familiarity”—John Mack Faragher’s phrase for the essential ingredient of egalitarian community in early Illinois—he also developed a strain of aloofness and separateness that became even more apparent once he embarked on the reading of law and moved to Springfield.17 “While he was down there at New Salem I think his time was mainly given to fun and social enjoyment and in the amusements of the people he came daily in contact with,” recalled Stephen T. Logan. “After he came here to Springfield however he got rid to a great degree of this disposition.”18

Lincoln did not, of course, get rid of all of that “disposition” for “familiarity” when he moved to Springfield in 1837. Lincoln possessed, even at the beginning of his professional career, a surprising charm, a transparency of expression and intention that inspired trust and encouraged sponsorship. “Lincoln was the favorite of everybody—man, woman, and child—where he lived and was known,” Herndon recalled, “Lincoln was a pet, faithful and an honest pet in this city . . . .” So even though Lincoln “was a poor man and must work his way up,” Herndon recollected that Springfielders tripped over each other to help and assist Lincoln. “He never saw the minute, the hour, nor the day that he did not have many financial friends to aid him, to assist him, and to help him in all ways. His friends vied with each other for the pleasure of the honor of assisting him . . . they almost fought each other for the privilege of assisting Lincoln.”19 From the moment he walked into Abner Ellis’s store and struck up an immediate friendship with what turned out to be another ambitious Kentucky-born store clerk, Joshua Speed, Lincoln became the magnet for “eight or ten choice

spirits” among Springfield’s budding community of lawyers and civil servants—James Matheny, Milton Hay, Evan Butler, James Conkling, “and other habitues of the court-house”—who met either in Ellis’s store or Matheny’s office “once and sometimes twice a month.” Springfield became, in effect, the college that Lincoln never attended. “There was scarcely a day or an hour when a knot of men might not have been seen near the door of some leading store, or about the steps of the court house eagerly [discussing] a current political topic—not as a question of news for news . . . but rather in the nature of debate or discussion,” Milton Hay recalled forty years later, and Hay particularly remembered that “it was always a great treat when Lincoln got amongst us—we would always be sure to have some of those stories of his for which he had already got a reputation.”20

But none of that “familiarity” translated into a secure place in the Springfield community for Lincoln. “Mr. Lincoln was not a social man by any means,” warned Judge David Davis, “his Stories—jokes &c. which were done to whistle off sadness are no evidences of sociality.”21 Herndon agreed: “Mr. Lincoln was not a social being . . . he was rather cold—too abstracted—and too gloomy. . . . Mr. Lincoln only revealed his soul to but few beings—if any, and then he kept a corner of that soul from his bosom friends.”22 The same man with the reputation for outrageously funny (and occasionally outrageously lewd) stories was simultaneously “a man of quite infinite silences,” who held even his closest associates at arm’s length, who “was thoroughly and deeply secretive, uncommunicative, and close-minded as to his plans, wishes, hopes, and fears.” Herndon was inclined to attribute this to Lincoln’s political ambitions. “His ambition was never satisfied; in him it was consuming fire which smothered his feelings.”23

Mr. Lincoln never stopped in the street to have a social chat with anyone; he was not a social man, too reflective, too abstracted; he never attended political gatherings till the thing was organized, and then he was ready to make a speech, willing and ready to reap any advantage that grew out of it, ready

21. David Davis (Herndon interview, Sept. 20, 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 348.
and anxious for the office it afforded, if any in the political world.  

Others attributed Lincoln’s personal remoteness to simple temperament. James Matheny believed that “Mr. Lincoln’s fancy—Emotion, & Imagination dwindled” during his Springfield years, “that is to Say his reason & his Logic—swallowed up all his being . . . became dominant. . . . Mr. Lincoln grew more abstracted—Contemplative— &c. as he grew older.”  

There was no question for John Todd Stuart, Lincoln’s first law partner, that Lincoln’s “Mind [was] of a metaphysical and philosophical order,” and (as Milton Hay put it) “ran to mathematical exactness about things.” “Did Mr. Lincoln rule himself by the head or heart?” Herndon asked. “He was great in the head and ruled & lived there.” And Lincoln himself left little room for doubt that reason and logic, rather than communal habits of the heart, were his pole-stars in his 1842 address to the short-lived Washington Temperance Society chapter in Springfield: “Happy day, when, all appetites controlled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected, mind, all conquering mind, shall live and move the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail fall of fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!” But Elizabeth Todd Edwards, his sister-in-law, put Lincoln’s withdrawnness in simpler terms. “I knew Mr. Lincoln well,” she told Herndon bluntly. “He was a cold Man—had no affection—was not Social—was abstracted—thoughtful.”  

Lincoln’s withdrawnness made him virtually the opposite of what might be expected of a “community-man.” Herndon declared that “Mr. Lincoln was a riddle and a puzzle to his friends and neighbors among whom he lived and moved. . . . The man was hard, very difficult to understand, even by his bosom friends and his close and intimate neighbors among whom he associated.” It was, in fact, Lincoln’s friends who were most baffled by the shield he erected behind the seeming sociability. David Davis was nettled by how Lincoln “never asked my advice on any question” ex-

25. James H. Matheny (Herndon interview, Nov. 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 432.
29. Herndon to C. O. Poole, Herndon-Weik Papers, group 4, reel 9, 1880.
cept “about money affairs and how to put out his money,” and “never thanked me for anything I did.” Ninian Edwards, Lincoln’s brother-in-law, agreed that “Lincoln was not a warm-hearted man” who often “Seemed to be ungrateful” even if he really “was not.”

Jesse Dubois, who had served as a fellow Whig with Lincoln in the state legislature in the 1830s, who promised Lincoln that “I am for you against the world” in 1854 and who managed Lincoln’s nomination in Chicago in 1860, was furious when Lincoln refused to listen to Dubois’s patronage nominations, and even more pointedly refused to help Dubois obtain either the Illinois Republican gubernatorial nomination in May 1864 or the Department of the Interior. “Lincoln is a singular man and I must Confess I never Knew him,” Dubois wrote angrily to Henry C. Whitney a week before Lincoln’s death:

He has for 30 years past just used me as a plaything to accomplish his own ends: but the moment he was elevated to his proud position he seemed all at once to have entirely changed his whole nature and become altogether a new being—Knows no one and the road to his favor is always open to his Enemies whilst the door is hermetically [hermetically] sealed to his old friends.

This might, in Dubois’s case, have been written off to simple political disappointment, since Lincoln did in fact reward a large number of his political backers with patronage plums (including Whitney, who obtained an army paymastership). But many of those backers were not necessarily his friends. John Todd Stuart agreed that Lincoln “did forget his friends—that there was no part of his nature which drew him to do acts of gratitude to his friends.” And even David Davis, who was eventually singled out by Lincoln to fill Justice John McLean’s seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, complained that Lincoln used “men as a tool—a thing to satisfy him—to feed his desires &c.”

There is at least one particular sense in which Lincoln could not have been “a very social man” even if he had been inclined to it,

30. Ninian Edwards (Herndon interview, 1865–1866), and David Davis (Herndon interview, Sept. 19, 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 346–47, 446.
32. Dubois to Henry Whitney, Apr. 6, 1865, in Herndon’s Informants, 620.
33. John T. Stuart (Herndon interview, June 1865), and David Davis (Herndon interview, Sept. 20, 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 63–65, 351.
and that concerned the most intimate community he belonged to, his marriage with Mary Todd Lincoln. Although the Lincoln marriage was suspected almost from the start for being “a policy Match all around,” the fact is that all of Lincoln’s attempts at marriage were, in more than a few respects, policy matches. His sadly abortive love match with Ann Rutledge as well as his rebound proposal to Mary Owens were, whatever the quotient of affection in them, both potential marriages-up for Lincoln—Ann Rutledge, of course, belonged to the first family of New Salem (and while that may not have been very much of a social climb from Lincoln’s later perspective, it certainly was from New Salem’s) and Mary Owens was not only “jovial” and “social” but “had a liberal English education & was considered wealthy.”

His marriage to Mary Todd was also a match with a deeply emotionally troubled woman, whose “spells of mental depression” and mental instability drove her into shrieking fits and physical abuse of her husband and children, and turned the Lincoln marriage into what Herndon called “a domestic hell on earth.” The difficulties of that “hell” have usually been described in terms of the private agonies Lincoln suffered; what is often missed is how much of a liability Mary could be to Lincoln’s standing in the Springfield political and social community. Neither David Davis nor John Todd Stuart could ever remember when they had been “asked to dinner” at the Lincoln home, and Herndon believed that “Lincoln as a general rule dared not invite anyone to his house, because he did not know what moment she would kick Lincoln and his friend out of the house.” Herndon exaggerates this, since the Lincolns did do a substantial amount of political entertaining; but what is true is that Lincoln spent inordinate amounts of time appeasing outraged domestic help (and their parents) and irritated storekeepers who had been the victims of Mary’s temper and penuriousness. Even in the White House, Lincoln was “constantly under great apprehension lest his wife should do something which would bring him into disgrace.”

34. John Todd Stuart (Herndon interview, June 1865), and L. M. Greene (Herndon interview, May 3, 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 63–65, 250.
35. O. H. Browning (John Nicolay interview, June 17, 1875), in Burlingame, Oral History of Abraham Lincoln, 1; Herndon to C. O. Poole, Jan. 5, 1886, Herndon-Weik Papers, group 4, reel 9, 1885.
The result was that, outside of the circle of his immediate friends, Lincoln was by no means Springfield’s most admired citizen. In the legislative elections that followed the great debates of 1858, Douglas Democrats easily defeated Lincoln Republicans in both Springfield and Sangamon County, and Lincoln’s losses there and in neighboring Morgan county are what tipped the scale against Lincoln in the Senate election that followed in January 1859. In the 1860 presidential election, Lincoln outdistanced Douglas by only sixty-nine votes in Springfield, while losing Sangamon County by more than four hundred. Springfield voters rejected Lincoln’s policies and party by giving big majorities to Democratic legislative candidates in the by-election of 1862; and in the 1864 presidential race, Lincoln carried Springfield over McClellan by only ten votes, while McClellan took all of Sangamon county by almost four hundred votes.38 “Mr. Lincoln was not appreciated in this city, nor was he at all times the most popular man among us,” Herndon wrote. Part of this was political, that Lincoln “had the courage of his convictions and the valor of their expression” in a state where he was, all of his life, a spokesman for a minority party; but another part was that Lincoln “was not a social man, not being ‘hail fellow well met.’”39 What Lincoln loved was not individuals or communities but ideas, especially political ideas. “He had no idea—no proper notion or conception of particular men & women,” Herndon wrote, “He scarcely could distinguish the individual.”40 “In dealing with men, he was a trimmer, and such a trimmer as the world has never seen,” Leonard Swett told Herndon, “Yet Lincoln never trimmed in principles—it was only in his conduct with men. . . .” Lincoln “felt no special interest in any man or thing—Save & Except politics,” recalled John Todd Stuart. He “loved principles and such like large political & national ones, Especially when it leads to his own Ends—paths—Ambitions—Success—honor &c. &c.”41

It was those ideas, fully as much as his temperamental remoteness, that decisively distanced Abraham Lincoln from the glorifi-

41. Leonard Swett to Herndon, Jan. 17, 1866, and John T. Stuart (Herndon interview, June 1865), in Herndon’s Informants, 64–65, 165.
cation of community life and communal values, especially when they came in the form of the local agrarian community so beloved of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democrats. It was “the cultivators of the earth,” the freeholding yeomen who supplied their own needs and wants and controlled their means of production apart from dependence on markets and cash exchange, who were looked upon by the Jacksonians “as the great and perennial foundation of that Republican spirit which is to maintain and perpetuate our free institutions.”42 And consequently, the Democratic Review believed in 1839 that

The farmer is naturally a Democrat—the citizen may be so, but it is in spite of many obstacles. . . . In the city men move in masses . . . in the country, on the other hand, man enjoys an existence of a healthier and truer happiness, a nobler mental freedom, a higher native dignity. . . . And to live he must labor: all the various modes by which, in great congregations of men, certain classes are ingeniously able to appropriate to themselves the fruits of the general toil of the rest, being to him alike unknown and impracticable. Hence does he better appreciate the true worth and dignity of labor, and knows how to respect, with a more manly and Christian sympathy of universal brotherhood, those oppressed masses of the laboring poor. . . . And hence, as we have said above, the farmer is naturally a democrat.43

And it would have been difficult to find a better example of the Jacksonian yeoman farmer than Thomas Lincoln. Although Thomas Lincoln was hardly the “ne’er-do-well” or “poor white trash” that Lincoln’s first biographers painted him as being in order to greater magnify his son’s achievements, it is true that he was a classic subsistence farmer who was ambitious mostly to produce by himself no more than what his household required. One of his neighbors remarked simply that Thomas Lincoln “was satisfied to live in the good old fashioned way; his shack kept out the rain; there was plenty of wood to burn . . . the old ways were good enough for him,” while other neighbors explained that Thomas Lincoln


“never planted more than a few acres” because “they wasn’t no market for nothing unless you took it across two or three states. The people raised just what they needed.”

Thomas Lincoln evidently saw no reason why his son would not follow him in these classic agrarian patterns. “I was raised to farm work,” Lincoln remembered in 1859, which meant (as he explained to John Scripps a year later) that “A. though very young . . . had an axe out into his hands at once; and from that till within his twen
ty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument—less, of course, in plowing and harvesting seasons.” It also meant that as Lincoln grew into adolescence, Thomas loaned his son out to neighboring farmers as part of the incessant borrowing and swapping of rural subsistence networks of exchange, and pocketed for his own use whatever small change Abraham had been paid (which was not much, given the paucity of cash in circulation on the frontier). But instead of inuring his son to the traditional patterns of Jeffersonian yeoman agriculture, the experience only alienated young Abraham. Lincoln often remarked in later years that “his father taught him to work but never learned him to love it”—or at least not the kind of work his father intended for him. What he did cherish was a memory of a very different sort of work, of two men hurrying down to the ferry-landing on the Ohio River where Lincoln kept a small cock-boat, hiring him to row them out mid-stream to intercept an oncoming steamboat, and each rewarding him with “a silver half-dollar” which they “threw . . . on the floor of my boat.”

Gentleman, you may think it was a very little thing, and in these days it seems to me a trifle; but it was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. . . . The world seemed wider and fairer before me.

Abraham Lincoln had met the cash economy.

Once having met it, Lincoln saw it at once as his ticket to advancement and status. He never entertained any romantic affection for

46. John Romine (Herndon interview, Sept. 14, 1865), in *Herndon’s Informants*, 118.
landholding and agriculture—his address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in 1859 was frankly dismissive of any reverence for farmers and traditional farming methods—and he indulged very little in the mania for land speculation that made so many of his friends, like David Davis, so wealthy. He left his father’s farm to enter on the life of what he hoped would become a great commercial town in New Salem, and moved again to become part of the professional life of what became a great city. In what really amounts to his most savage criticism of yeoman agrarianism in favor of a wage-labor economy, Lincoln chided his step-brother, John D. Johnston, for not producing cash-crops “merely because it does not seem to you that you could get much for it.” Lincoln’s recommendation to Johnston was, in effect, to abandon subsistence agriculture and enter himself into the cash-labor market:

You are in need of some ready money; and what I propose is, that you shall go to work, “tooth and nails” for some body who will give you money [for] it. Let father and your boys take charge of things at home—prepare for a crop, and make the crop; and you go to work for the best money wages, or in discharge of any debt you owe, that you can get.

As a state legislator, Lincoln regularly voted against the granting of pre-emption rights to squatters, supported to its dying breath the Illinois State Bank and the agricultural liquidations it executed after the Panic of 1837, and struggled to ensure that the sale of federally owned lands in Illinois would support commercial and transportation projects. As Olivier Fraysse remarks, “The small landowner threatened with seizure, the squatter who sold his clothes to keep his rights of pre-emption from falling into the hands of speculators, had trouble recognizing one of their own kind in Lincoln.”

48. “Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” Sept. 20, 1859, in Collected Works, 3:472–73. “I presume I am not expected to employ the time assigned me, in the mere flattery of farmers, as a class,” Lincoln began. “My opinion of them is that, in proportion to numbers, they are neither better nor worse than other people. In the nature of things they are more numerous than any other class; and I believe there really are more attempts at flattering them than any other; the reason of which I cannot perceive, unless it be that they can cast more votes than any other.”


Lincoln’s indifference to yeoman agrarianism was rooted in his distaste for what he regarded as the claustrophobia of agrarian communities. “Individuals held the sacred right to regulate their own family affairs,” Lincoln reminded his hearers in 1854; “the legitimate object of government” is only “to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves. . . . In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government”—and one might as well also say, community—“ought not to interfere.”\(^5^1\) And in contrast to the static nature of social relations in rural communities, Lincoln praised the competitiveness that characterized market relations, especially when they involved the use of wage labor. “I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers CAN strike when they want to,” Lincoln told a crowd in New Haven during the 1860 shoemakers’ strike.

What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don’t believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. . . . Then you can better your condition, and so it may go on and on in one ceaseless round so long as man exists on the face of the earth!\(^5^2\)

Lincoln was, in the largest sense, a classical nineteenth-century liberal, and he not only shared the classical liberal cultural commitments to rationality, individualism, personal rights, and progress, but the backbone of his reading in the 1840s and 1850s was in the basic texts of liberal political economy: “[John Stuart] Mill’s political economy, [Henry] Carey’s political economy. . . [John Ramsey] McCullough’s political economy, Wayland, and some others.” (Herndon particularly remembered that “Lincoln ate up, digested, and assimilated” Francis Wayland’s 1837 textbook *The Elements of Political Economy*).\(^5^3\) He tempered this with a strong overlay of moral principle, but then again, the Whig party itself embodied a

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unique compromise of evangelical Protestant moralism with opportunism. Lincoln, in that respect, was the perfect Whig. 54

It was this embrace of the transformation of the American economy into a cash-based market economy that brought Lincoln into opposition to the Democrats as early as his first political stirrings in 1832, and into the forefront of the Whig party once Henry Clay had re-organized his “national Republican” schism from the Democrats as a national party in 1834. Where the Democrats thought of the yeoman farmer as the bulwark of republican independence, the Whigs, prompted by the disastrous example of the War of 1812, were convinced that a nation of subsistence farmers and unprotected manufacturing was a sitting duck for the great industrial capitalist powers of Europe, beginning with Great Britain. “Our republican system demands and requires protection to our republican laborers,” cried the American Whig Review in 1851, and by protection the Whigs meant Henry Clay’s “American System” of national bank finance, tariff-protected industry, commercial (rather than subsistence) farming, railroads, and free wage labor. 55 Lincoln found in Clay his “beau ideal of a statesman,” his “favorite of all the great men of the Nation,” and even as late as his own presidency, he still described himself as an “old-line Henry Clay Whig.” 56 Stephen Logan found Lincoln was “as stiff as a man could be in his Whig doctrines,” and Joseph Gillespie, his long-time political ally, described him as an advocate “for a National Currency, Internal Improvements by the general government, and the encouragement of home manufactures. On this latter subject I have heard him make arguments greatly more powerful and convincing than anything I have ever heard or read.” 57 His highest ambition, as he

55. “Unity of the Whigs: Their Principles and Measures,” The American Whig Review 8 (September 1851):18. Curiously, only six hours after making his farewell speech in Springfield, Lincoln was praising the “great changes within the recollection of some of us who are the older,” which allowed him to move from “my home in Illinois where I was surrounded by a large concourse of my fellow citizens, almost all of whom I could recognize, and I find myself far from home surrounded by the thousands I now see before me, who are strangers to me.” “Speech at Lafayette, Indiana,” Feb. 11, 1861, in Collected Works, 4:192.
56. J. Rowan Herndon (Herndon interview, May 28, 1865), in Herndon’s Informants, 8; John Minor Botts, in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln, 37.
57. Logan (John Nicolay interview, July 6, 1875), in Burlingame, Oral History of Abraham Lincoln, 36; Gillespie (Herndon interview, Jan. 31, 1866) in Herndon's Informants, 188.
told Joshua Speed, “was to become the De Witt Clinton of Ills.”—
to imitate, in other words, the New York canal pioneer who opened
up the rural hinterlands of New York to the competitive forces of
the international markets.58 And even with the threat of secession
and civil war hanging over him in 1860, Lincoln still insisted that
“the question of Slavery” should not serve as a distraction from
“the old question of tariff—a matter that will remain one of the
chief affairs of national housekeeping to all time—the question of
the management of financial affairs; the question of the disposition
of the public domain”—in short, the entire Whig domestic agen-
da.59 He was, as he once described himself, “always a Whig in pol-
itics,” and that committed him ideologically to a nationalist politi-
cal mentality, rather than to the localism and diversity so beloved
of Democratic agrarianism, and later on, the clamor for “popular
sovereignty” and “states’ rights,” both of which were, so to speak,
the nineteenth century’s ultimate expressions of Democratic com-
munitarianism. What Lincoln praised “Harry of the West” for in
his 1852 eulogy of Clay was precisely Clay’s placing of the prin-
ciples of the republican ideology above the demands of local, and
even national, community:

He loved his country partly because it was his own country,
but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with
a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, of human lib-
erty, human right and human nature. He desired the prosper-
ity of his countrymen partly because they were his country-
men, but chiefly to show to the world that freemen could be
prosperous.60

It was not that Lincoln pulled shy only of agrarian community;
that much might be explained purely in terms of his Whiggism and
his sympathies for a commercial and industrial economy. Even in
Springfield, Lincoln showed little enthusiasm for entering into the
broad variety of community-based societies and activities that the
Illinois capital afforded. He was, of course, instrumental in engi-
neering the transfer of the state capital from Vandalia to Spring-
field in the first place, and served briefly on the Springfield town
board in 1839 and 1840, largely (one suspects) to oversee the
smooth completion of the transition he had done so much in the

58. Joshua F. Speed to Herndon, 1865–1866, in Herndon’s Informants, 476.
legislature to produce. He also shows up occasionally on the organizing committees of receptions and cotillions, serving as guest of honor and toastmaster at a dinner for a neighboring fire company in 1858, commemorating the centenary of the birth of Robert Burns at a gala dinner (at which a large number of “mysterious-looking bottles” circulated freely), and serving as one of the eleven managers of the state Colonization Society in 1857 and as a featured speaker at the Colonization Society’s annual January meetings throughout the 1850s.61

But the Colonization Society was, in large measure, an adjunct of Lincoln’s Whig political activities, and Paul Simon’s study of Lincoln’s state legislative career has warned us not to overvalue Lincoln’s role in the transfer of the state capital above those of the other Sangamon country legislators.62 And what is significantly missing in Lincoln’s life in Springfield is any but the most tangential involvement in the most obvious forms of community organization. He never ran for any town office once Springfield was duly incorporated in 1840. And although he addressed the Washington Temperance Society chapter in 1842, and was clearly proud enough of it to mention it twice in letters to Joshua Speed, it is not clear just how Lincoln was involved with the Washingtonians.63 A petition Lincoln signed for use of the Hall of Representatives for a temperance lecturer in 1845 makes it clear that the event was being sponsored by “private contribution,” not by a society; an inquiry from a temperance society member in 1860 received only the answer that he had “never held the ‘cup’ to the lips of my friends,” and made no mention of having belonged to a temperance society.64 Certainly by the later 1850s Lincoln retained no memberships in temperance societies, since he responded to teasing from Stephen Douglas about alcohol by insisting that “No, I am not a member

63. Lincoln’s 1842 eulogy for Benjamin Ferguson, a “much-respected member” of the Washingtonians, suggests that he may have been a member at least up until the time the Springfield Washingtonians were dissolved and absorbed into the Sons of Temperance in 1845; see “Eulogy on Benjamin Ferguson,” in Collected Works, 2:268.
of any temperance society; but I am temperate in this that I don’t drink anything.”65

He also declined to join any of Springfield’s churches, despite his reasonably cordial but distant relations with the Springfield clergy. Although he paid for a pew rental for his family at Springfield’s First Presbyterian Church, the Reverend G. W. Pendleton wrote with ill-disguised irritation that Lincoln “often goes to the railroad shop and spends the sabbath in reading Newspapers, and telling stories to the workmen, but not to the house of God.”66

He went to the old school church [wrote Charles Ray, speaking of First Presbyterian’s “Old School” theological affiliation]; but in spite of that outward sign of assent to the horrible dogmas of the sect, I have reason from himself to know that his “vital piety,” if that means belief in the impossible, was of the negative sort. I think that orthodoxy, if that means the Presbyterian doxy, was regarded by him as a huge joke; but he was far too kindly and cautious to challenge any man’s faith without cause.67

He also declined to join fraternal societies such as the Masons, despite the fact that Masonic membership offered important political advantages. “Mr. Lincoln I do not think belonged to any Secret Society,” recalled Abner Ellis, “neither Masonic or Oddfellows. I once heard Judge Denney ask him if he was Not a Mason And his answer Was I do not belong to any society except it be for the Good of my Country.”68

But even the good of his country did not draw Lincoln into the one community organization where he could actually have brought some valuable experience, and which had already proven its political usefulness to him, and that was the local militia. Springfield’s first militia company was organized in 1835, and another was recruited the following year by Lincoln’s close political friend and ally, Edward Dickinson Baker. But despite Lincoln’s own service in the Black Hawk War (which brought him for the first time into

68. Abner Y. Ellis to Herndon, Jan. 30, 1866, in Herndon’s Informants, 178.
contact with influential Illinois anti-Jacksonians like John Todd Stuart and Orville Hickman Browning) and despite his willingness to give “warm, thrilling, and effective” speeches at recruitment rallies for the Mexican War in 1846, there is no record of Lincoln’s ongoing involvement in any of Springfield’s military companies.69 To the contrary, Lincoln was more likely to lampoon them:

We remember one of these parades ourselves here, at the head of which, on horseback, figured our old friend Gordon Abrams, with a pine wood sword, about nine feet long, and a paste-board cocked hat, from front to rear about the length of an ox yoke, and very much the shape of one turned bottom upwards; and with spurs having rowels as large as the bottom of a teacup, and shanks a foot and a half long. That was the last militia muster here. Among the rules and regulations, no man is to wear more than five pounds of cod-fish for epaulets, or more than thirty yards of bologna sausages for a sash; and no two men are to dress alike, and if any should dress alike the one that dresses most alike is to be fined, (I forget how much). Flags they had too, with devices and mottoes, one of which latter is, “We’ll fight till we run, and we’ll run till we die.”70

To be sure, Lincoln had political reasons for shunning the Masons, the militia, and a number of the churches. Masonry, as a “secret Society” was publicly deplored by the Whigs as an example of dark Democratic conspiracy-mongering, and Illinois Masons like Stephen Douglas gave the Masons a definite Democratic flavor; and Lincoln later claimed that most state militias were political instruction schools for the Democrats. “Antislavery men, being generally much akin to peace,” he told John F. Seymour, brother of Horatio Seymour, New York’s Democratic governor, in 1863, “had never interested themselves in military matters and in getting up companies, as Democrats had.”71 He also tended to judge the clergy by

69. Donald W. Riddle, Congressman Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957), 11. While still in New Salem, Lincoln received a second commission in the Illinois militia from Governor John Reynolds in Dec. 1832, but no record survives of any service under this commission, and it may have quietly expired in 1834; see Wayne C. Temple, “Lincoln’s Military Service after the Black Hawk War,” Lincoln Herald 72 (Fall 1970), 87–89.
their political affiliations, and even G.W. Pendleton admitted that one reason why Lincoln skipped out on services at First Presbyterian in 1860 was that “the pastor is afflicted with Douglas proclivities.” Even so, it cut Lincoln off from three of the most important community organizations in Springfield.

There were, however, at least two communities in which Lincoln did obtain an important place, the Illinois Whig party and the professional brotherhood of his fellow lawyers on the Eighth Judicial Circuit. He began his political life in Illinois almost at the same time as the Whig party was being organized, was five times a successful Whig candidate for the state legislature, a Whig presidential elector, a Whig congressman, and almost a Whig senator in 1855. But in addition to his place on numerous Whig tickets, Lincoln also was heavily involved in the construction of local Whig clubs and the organization and mobilization of Whig political cadres “to organize the whole State so that every Whig can be brought to the polls. . . .”72 He labored selflessly as a stump speaker and campaign manager, not only for the Whigs, but after 1856 for the new Republicans, managing congressional campaigns for Richard Yates and Archibald Williams, brokering the nomination of William Bissell for governor, and pacifying inter-party quarrels between Norman Judd and “Long John” Wentworth in Chicago, and between Chicago and downstate Republicans (like David Davis).73 One reason why Lincoln wielded so much heft within the Republican party was the visibility and name recognition he had purchased on the long swings through the Eighth Judicial Circuit he had taken as a trial lawyer from the organization of the Eighth Circuit in 1841 until the great senatorial debates of 1858. “In my opinion I think Mr. Lincoln was happy—as happy as he could be, when on this Circuit—and happy no other place,” David Davis recalled, “This was his place of enjoyment.”74 And among the “fraternity of the bar,” Lincoln developed some of the most satisfying personal relationships he ever enjoyed in his life: Ward Hill Lamon, Leonard Swett, Henry C. Whitney, Lawrence Weldon, and of course the rotund David

74. David Davis (Herndon interview, Sept. 20, 1866), in Herndon’s Informants, 349.
Davis. “Following the court around on the circuit was, no doubt, one of the greatest pleasures Lincoln enjoyed.”

But to reach for Lincoln’s party work as a Whig or his legal business around the circuit as the last evidence of communitarian longings on Lincoln’s part is quite a stretch indeed. After all, the Whig party represented the triumph of nationalism over local community, of rationalism and commerce over passion and agrarianism; and in practical terms, it actually netted Lincoln comparatively little in hard results. His term in Congress, which he might have hoped would be the prelude either to major national officeholding under a Whig president, Zachary Taylor, or to the Senate, fizzled under layers of Whig indifference. “In 1840 we fought a fierce and laborious battle in Illinois, many of us spending almost the entire year in the contest,” Lincoln complained, “The general victory came, and with it, the appointment of a set of drones . . . who had never spent a dollar or lifted a finger in the fight.” He found himself with so little leverage at the national level that he was forced to tell an office seeker who wanted his endorsement, “You overrate my capacity to serve you. Not one man recommended by me has yet been appointed to any thing, little or big, except a few who had no opposition.”

It would stretch matters even more to the breaking point to cast the Eighth Circuit as a kind of surrogate community for Lincoln. Whatever good fellowship Lincoln enjoyed in David Davis’s travelling court, the fact was that it was traveling—it was rootless, professional, and so careless of commitment that lawyers on the circuit (including Lincoln) regularly combined and opposed each other in case after case and in place after place. Above all, the legal profession came to be, in the same years that Lincoln was coming to maturity as a lawyer, the principal enforcement of abstract contract, of national commerce, and of market relations—becoming, in the wickedly accurate phrase of Charles Sellers, “the shock troops of capitalism.” Although the romantic legend of Lincoln as a lawyer offers us a vision of a community counselor—defending Duff Armstrong pro bono for the sake of his father’s memory, “skinning” Erastus Wright for mulcting a Revolutionary war widow, browbeating Judge E. Y. Rice into unwillingly admitting testimony to acquit Peachy Harrison—the bulk of Lincoln’s law prac-

tice, not to mention its most profitable aspects, had moved by 1856 into the state supreme court and the federal courts, and was devoted to the service of precisely those agents of the markets which were most lethal to rural and local communities: the railroad corporations, the banks and insurance companies of Sangamon, McLean and Morgan counties, and even at least one St. Louis venture capital firm.  

Lincoln’s single greatest fee was won by the verdict he obtained for the Illinois Central Railroad, denying the power of a local community—in this case, McLean County—to tax the railroad’s property. He took no fee for freeing Duff Armstrong, but by the same token, Henry C. Whitney “never found him unwilling to appear in behalf of a great ‘soulless corporation.’”80

On virtually every important level of his life Abraham Lincoln showed only the thinnest interest in the protection or encouragement of communitarian attitudes or values; to the contrary, he resented the deadening hand of localism as a restraint on independence, reason, ambition and talent. Even the word community turns up comparatively infrequently in Lincoln’s surviving writings—less than a hundred times in the eight volumes of his Collected Works—and usually in only the most conventional and unspecific usage.81 It would be a caricature to suggest that Lincoln’s Whiggish individualism meant that he had no recognition of the interdependence on others or of the validity of community norms; in fact, when Peter Cartwright challenged Lincoln’s fitness for office

80. Whitney to Jesse Weik, 1887–89, in Herndon’s Informants, 733. Mark E. Steiner argues in “Abraham Lincoln and the Antebellum Legal Profession” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1993), that Lincoln’s legal practice was so broadly spread that he cannot be characterized as promoting a “market revolution.” “Far from allying with corporations, Lincoln was ready to serve any client, whether an individual or a corporation, whether the argument worked for or against the prevailing economic powers, and even whether the argument he would have to make was consistent with arguments he had made before.” This much, however, was true of nearly every antebellum lawyer who hoped to survive by his fees in the highly competitive civil litigation environment of central and southern Illinois; it also begs the question of Lincoln’s high-profile affiliations in the 1850s with Illinois railroad corporations, both as counsel and lobbyist with the Bissell administration. Steiner’s dissertation is, nevertheless, the best survey of Lincoln’s legal practice available.
in 1846 on the grounds of religious infidelity, Lincoln deftly side-stepped the infidelity charge and averred that “I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feeling, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live.”

By the same token, Lincoln’s liberalism did not consist in an indifference to people or to people’s beliefs—as he demonstrated repeatedly in pressing on Stephen Douglas the immorality, rather than merely the inutility, of slavery. Lincoln’s opposition to slavery always contained substantive moral judgement. “I have always hated slavery,” he declared in his great debates with Douglas in 1858; and in 1854, he explained, “I object to it because it assumes that there CAN BE MORAL RIGHT in the en-slaving of one man by another.”

Douglas Democrats, ironically, set tremendous store by community decision making, but then denied that there were any necessary moral underpinnings to that process. For Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, the rights of black people were “a question which each State in this union must decide for itself.” This was because “our government was formed on the principle of diversity in the local institutions and laws, not that of uniformity.” But it never occurred to Lincoln to argue that slaveholders were individuals with rights to do with their so-called “property” as they pleased and to take it wherever they wanted; that governments had no business making moral judgements about slavery, and should provide only a neutral framework for the enjoyment of slaveholders’ rights. That would be to suggest, as Lincoln remarked, that “there is no right principle of action but self-interest.” He believed that, concerning the “first rules” of public life, “there is no just rule other than that of pure morality and pure abstract right. . . .”

Given Lincoln’s lack of religious profile, it was not always clear just what constituted the basis of Lincoln’s moralism, apart from the general Whig ideological fondness for moral rhetoric. Certainly, one part of this moral loathing for slavery was Lincoln’s tendency to associate slaveholding with hedonistic lifestyles. He told


Joseph Gillespie that slavery “was the most glittering ostentatious & displaying property in the world” and was “highly seductive to the thoughtless and giddy headed young men who looked upon work as vulgar and ungentlemanly.”87 And in his 1842 temperance society address in Springfield, Lincoln spoke of the “victory” of Reason arriving only “when there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth”—implying that slavery and drunkenness were twins. Another, larger claim for moral indignation was that slavery violated natural law. “The ant who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest, will furiously defend the fruit of his labor, against whatever robber assails him,” Lincoln wrote in 1854. Slavery, which robbed the slave of the fruit of his labor, was just as much an outrage on the part of the human laborer. This was “so plain, that the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master, does constantly know he is wronged.”88 And even if the Bible had nothing explicit to say against slavery, Lincoln believed that natural theology did. “I think that if anything can be proved by natural theology, it is that slavery is morally wrong.”89

But Lincoln distinguished sharply between the self-evident morality that natural theology might be capable of revealing a basis for community order and merely licensing communities to discover and enforce any order for themselves merely because they were communities. “There is no contending against the Will of God,” Lincoln believed, “but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases.” He was not eager to turn that determination over to town councils, county overseers, and, worst of all, the Senate Committee on Territories.90 Lincoln was a nationalist, not because he believed national government was a better communitarian agency than local government, but because nationalism provided him with a court of appeal and a stage of opportunity beyond the constraints and confinements of localities and regions. Lincoln refused to concede that his identity was, as Michael Sandel puts it in defining the communitarian self, “always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. . . .”91 In contrast to the organic rhetoric of romantic or postmodern communitarianism, Lincoln believed that the uni-

87. Gillespie to Herndon, Jan. 31, 1866, in Herndon’s Informants, 183.
89. “Speech in Hartford,” in Collected Works, 4:3.
versalist premises of American politics were intended to help Americans transcend the pettiness of their local origins. “Half our people . . . have come from Europe—German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian,” Lincoln argued in 1858, “But when they look through that old declaration of independence,” they find principles that transcend the communities of one’s birth, whether another country or another state of the Union. “They find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’ and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men . . . and that they have a right to claim it as though they were . . . flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration.”92 For Lincoln, political and civil rights, not considerations of the general good, were not only central to the protection of a republican society but foundational to any form of natural social arrangement.

But why, then, as he stood on the rear platform of his train in the drizzle and slush of that February morning, did he believe that he owed Springfield “everything”? Paul Angle once answered that question with a series of questions of his own. “Could Lincoln . . . have attained high standing at the bar if he had not resided at the one city in the state where the high courts sat?” In all likelihood, no, since Springfield and the Eighth Circuit sat athwart all the major commercial development of the 1850s in Illinois. “Could he have become a power in Illinois politics if the legislature and the courts had not drawn the political leaders to his home at regular and frequent intervals?” Only possibly, since so much of his political work was coterminous with his circuit work. “Could he have held to his faith in political democracy if he had not lived in a city where economic opportunity was a fact?” Plainly, no, but this was to define Springfield in something other than communitarian terms, in fact as something other than a community or a village and more like a springboard for Lincoln’s ambitions.93 It was no exaggeration, therefore, for Lincoln to express his sadness at departing from Springfield, because unlike other communities he had known—Little Pigeon Creek, New Salem—Springfield had not swaddled him with communitarian demands. Springfield, in that respect, suited Lincoln because it was so much like Lincoln himself, unburdened with expectations for a collective life and eager for growth and opportunity. It had stood back, sometimes all too willingly, and

93. Angle, Here I Have Lived, xiv.
allowed him the room he craved to grow and to strive. “Lincoln was not a very social man,” Herndon wrote in 1874. “He was not spontaneous in his feelings; was, as some said, rather cold.” But it was the coldness of God’s lonely man, “rather reflective, not cold.” For all the coldness, “take him all in all, he was as near a perfect man as God generally makes.” All Lincoln wanted from community was the opportunity to test that perfection to its limits; Springfield gave him that, and gave him to the nation.

94. Herndon, Jan. 15, 1874, in Hertz, Hidden Lincoln, 83.