



Springfield and Abraham Lincoln

Springfield, Illinois, was founded in 1821 when Zachariah Peter, William Drennan and Rivers Cormack drove a stake in the ground at a place described in the recorded transaction as “a point in the prairie near John Kelly’s field on the water of Spring Creek.”

By 1837, due in large part to the political maneuverings of a young politician named Abraham Lincoln, Springfield became the state capital. From that point the city’s history, and indeed its future, has been and will be inexorably tied to this famous American.

Before moving to Springfield in 1837, Lincoln lived in nearby New Salem, a thriving village on the banks of the Sangamon River. Lured by reports of rich black soil, the Lincoln family moved to the banks of the Sangamon River, a few miles from Decatur. Lincoln spent a year living with his family, but after a trip down the Mississippi, left and drifted back to New Salem.

From 1831 until 1837, a young Abraham Lincoln tried his hand at numerous endeavors. He clerked in Denton Offutt’s store, ran for the state legislature and lost, became storekeeper, postmaster, surveyor, and law student. In a second attempt in 1834, he was elected to the legislature. It was during this term in office that he influenced the move of the state capital to Springfield.

On April 15, 1837, Lincoln left New Salem to live in the flourishing new state capital. He began practicing law with John T. Stuart, a prominent Springfield attorney. In all, Lincoln had three partners. William Herndon, his last, eventually became his biographer. During the 25 years that Lincoln practiced in Illinois, he spent many days riding the Eighth Judicial Circuit and practicing in county court houses throughout central Illinois. Law eventually brought Lincoln a substantial income and provided a status and visibility that contributed to his success in politics.

In 1840 Lincoln met Mary Todd, a Kentucky belle who was then living with her sister in Springfield. After a stormy, sporadic courtship, the couple was married by the Rev. Charles Dresser in 1842, and settled at the Globe Tavern.

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Page 2
Springfield and Lincoln

The Lincoln's first son, Robert Todd, was born on August 1, 1843. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to a more suitable three-room cottage. The next spring, Lincoln bought Reverend Dresser's home on the corner of Eighth and Jackson streets for \$1,200 cash and a small lot worth \$300. The Lincolns occupied this Quaker-brown frame house, the only home they ever owned, for 17 years. It is here that three of their four sons were born and one died.

From 1847 until 1849 Lincoln served in Congress, but due to an unpopular position on the Mexican War, he was passed over for re-nomination. Upon returning to Springfield, he dedicated himself to enhancing an already successful law practice. But as the issue of slavery grew, Lincoln emerged again as a political figure.

In 1858, Lincoln challenged Steven A. Douglas for his Senate seat, and for three months the candidates debated the subject of popular sovereignty. Although Lincoln lost the election, the debates brought him wide attention and he became a national figure under serious consideration for the Republican presidential nomination.

At this time there was a split in the Democratic Party and the winner of the Republican nomination for the Presidency was sure to be the next President. Lincoln received that nomination on the third ballot at the Chicago convention in May of 1860. He was elected President on November 6th of that year.

On February 11, 1861, Lincoln stood on a platform at the Great Western Depot. In a voice filled with emotion, he shared his affection for the city where he had lived, worked and raised a family. Standing on the rain-swept platform he said, "My friends – No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. 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...To His care I am commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell." He left Springfield on that day, never to return in his lifetime.

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