Lincoln’s Pursuit of “Egalitarian Refinement”: Evidence from His Mahogany Sofa

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In the Jacksonville, Illinois, office of former U.S. Congressman Paul Findley sits a noteworthy piece of history: a sofa built for and used by Abraham Lincoln that dates to 1837 [Figure 1]. It is a large sofa, measuring nearly seven feet long—the perfect size for a tall man who liked to recline on his furniture while he read. Although its horsehair upholstery is tattered in places, its mahogany veneer is largely unravaged by time, and its spring upholstery remains in working order. Best of all, it is accompanied by two nineteenth-century documents that help to authenticate it: affidavits provided in 1886 by Jacob Ruckel, the cabinetmaker who built it, and John E. Roll, the sofa’s second owner (see Appendices). These documents are crucial links in establishing the chain of ownership of the sofa, beginning when Lincoln commissioned it in 1837 and ending with Findley’s purchase of it in 1978.1

Roll, the second owner, bought the sofa “for the purpose of securing a keepsake by which to remember his old friend,” presumably in 1861, when then-president-elect Lincoln sold much of his furniture in preparation for his move to Washington, D.C.2 Roll sold it in 1886 to

2. Jacob Roll affidavit, 12 May 1886, in the possession of Paul Findley, Jacksonville, Ill.
3. A notice in the 29 January 1861 Illinois State Journal advertised “A private sale—The furniture consisting of parlor and chamber sets, carpets, sofas, chairs, wardrobes, bureaus, bedsteads, stoves, china, Queensware, glass, etc., etc. at the residence, on the corner of Eighth and Jackson Streets, is offered at private sale without reserve. For particulars apply on the premises at once.” According to Roll family history, John Roll also purchased a mahogany bureau at the January 1861 sale. Katherine B. Menz, Historic Furnishings Report: The Lincoln Home (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Harper’s Ferry Center, 1983), section D.

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Figure 1. The “Lincoln Sofa,” built by Jacob Ruckel circa 1837, is today in the office of former U.S. Congressman Paul Findley, Jacksonville, Illinois.
John W. Keyes of Chicago, who kept it as part of the Lincoln Memorial Collection until 1894, when it was sold at auction by Stan Henkels. The buyers were William Potter and Lewis Clark Vanuxem; Vanuxem died in 1904, and in 1914 his heirs, along with Potter, donated the sofa to the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Findley bought the sofa from the Society in 1978 and displayed it in his Washington, D.C., congressional office until his retirement.

The import of this sofa is not immediately apparent; it seems to be just another piece of furniture Lincoln owned, remarkable only because Lincoln once relaxed there. And so it would be, had the sofa been purchased in 1847 or 1857, when Lincoln was an established lawyer with a home of his own and a secure place among Springfield’s social elite. In 1837, however, Lincoln was a stranger in Springfield, untried as a lawyer, unproven as a gentleman, and years away from marriage and homeownership. Sofas, at that time, carried connotations of affluence and refinement (as did all upholstered furniture) and were found only in the homes of the wealthy, where gentlefolk displayed their refined manners through upright and controlled posture while sitting. Why, then, did the man who moved to town on a borrowed horse with all his worldly belongings stuffed into two saddlebags buy such a monumental, expensive, and elegant a piece of furniture? And why did Lincoln custom-order a sofa long enough for him to stretch out fully, and proceed to ignore—or defy—nineteenth-century standards of deportment by reclining on his sofa in the presence of others?

Answering those questions provides insight into Lincoln’s construction of his self identity, both as a middle-class gentleman and a self-made man of the people. Lincoln’s purchase of the mahogany sofa is emblematic of his aspiration to the new, democratic brand of gentility that replaced older ideals of wealth and family connections in the first half of the nineteenth century, as expanding economic opportunities led to greater social fluidity and “becoming genteel by dint

4. Keyes apparently endeavored to authenticate much of what he purchased for the Lincoln Memorial Collection, as several items in the 1894 Henkels Catalogue sold with accompanying affidavits. For example, he solicited an affidavit from Laura Barker Perry in regards to a bureau he purchased from her for the Lincoln Memorial Collection (See Stan V. Henkels, Catalogue No 731. The valuable collection of autographs and historical papers collected by the Hon. Jas. T. Mitchell . . . Also the entire Lincoln memorial collection of Chicago . . . Catalogue compiled and sale conducted by Stan V. Henkels at the book auction rooms of Thos. Birch’s sons [Philadelphia, 1894]; Menz, Historic Furnishings Report, section D).

5. Henkels, Catalogue No 731.
of personal effort was a corollary to the American belief that economic progress was possible.”

This new idealization of both gentility and democracy blended into a concept historian Joyce Appleby termed “egalitarian refinement” and described as “an oxymoron that nicely captured the split personality of American society, with its yearning for the manners of the better sort and appreciation of the vernacular culture of ordinary folk.”

Lincoln’s purchase of a genteel piece of furniture and his subsequent, careless use of it captures the essence of egalitarian refinement. Lincoln recognized the importance of acquiring politeness and aspired to it even as he aspired to a successful career in law and politics; as one nineteenth-century etiquette manual observed, “In a republican country where one man’s opportunities for rising are as good as those of another, ambition will lead every rising man into society.”

Indeed, the relationship between gentility and professional success was reciprocal, with one bolstering the other, and both necessary to Lincoln to fulfill his ambition of rising to make his mark on the world among the “tribe of the Eagle.”

Ownership of an elegant item of furniture would communicate his gentility to all who saw it. Yet Lincoln was, by nature and inclination, a “natural gentleman”—historian Stow Persons’s term for men whose refinement came from inherent virtue, character, and ability and not from aristocratic birth.

Lincoln’s use of his sofa—which standards of the day would have deemed misuse—signal his refusal, whether conscious or unconscious, to resort to affecting behaviors or aping manners that did not come naturally to him.

In connecting Lincoln’s sofa to egalitarian refinement, this essay builds upon several excellent studies of gentility and middle-class culture, particularly works by Persons, Richard Bushman, Katherine C. Grier, and Joyce Appleby.

ine C. Grier, and Timothy Mahoney. By using a Lincoln object as a cornerstone of this argument, it is hoped that attention will be directed to material culture as a source of primary evidence for the study of Abraham Lincoln. Once used merely as illustration, material culture is now viewed as another valuable text. Analyzing objects, as Thomas Schlereth argues, sheds light on “the belief patterns of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are a part.” Viewed in that light, the body of material goods with a clear provenance to Abraham Lincoln becomes a rich and hitherto unexplored trove of primary evidence regarding his life. After all, his personal possessions did not simply fall into his ownership: each was a product of the time, society, region, and culture that produced it. As Jules Prown explains, “the configurations or properties of an artifact correspond to patterns in the mind of the individual producer or producers and of the society of which he, she, or they were a part.” Therefore, objects personally selected and used by Lincoln provide insight into the cultural assumptions central to his life.

In Victorian America, as today, objects held meanings beyond those associated with their construction and use. They served as silent signals of their owners’ values, taste, and class—a phenomenon Grier likens to a “nonverbal, expressive” language controlled by its own grammar: “owners of stylish furnishings . . . understood the symbolic, communicative possibilities of furnishings and consciously used them to make symbolic assertions that could be understood, with varying degrees of clarity and comprehension, by people who confronted them.” An individual’s purchases can therefore be viewed as “rhetorical statements expressing aspirations.”


Following that logic, Lincoln’s sofa can be viewed as a rhetorical statement expressing his aspiration to gentility. Part of the post-Revolutionary generation, Lincoln was reared in a culture of expanding economic opportunities, where social boundaries were fluid, and good character, motivation, and work ethic supplanted family fortune as the key to success. In this era of the “self-made man,” Lincoln took advantage of the opportunity to make something of himself, completing the transition from a rural laborer to an urban professional before his thirtieth birthday. But professional success was only one side of the coin: there was also the matter of social success—achievement of the elusive but crucial quality of gentility that, ironically, was placed within his grasp by the sweeping democratization of society in Jacksonian America.

In colonial America, gentility was within the purview of those who had always been the arbiters of taste and refinement—those born to wealth and privilege who drew upon their breeding and family fortunes as much as their individual talent for success in life. As Bushman explains, “gentility was the proper style of the gentry alone in the eighteenth century . . . lesser people might look on with envy, awe, or hatred, they might imitate and borrow, but they were onlookers, thought to be presumptuous if they assumed the manners or showed the possessions of a gentleman.” This gentility found its foundation in economic power and family ties and its expression in a style of living carefully modeled on that of the English gentry, with emphasis on grandeur and show. Because gentry manners of this era affirmed privileged status in a stratified society, they “tended to perpetuate subservience and were thus incompatible with the equalitarianism of democracy.”

The years following the American Revolution, however, witnessed what Persons described as “perhaps the greatest social transformation

16. Bushman, Refinement of America, xiii.
in American history,” as population growth, widespread property ownership, increasing literacy, and growing fervor for democracy wrought “the destruction of gentry leadership and the emergence of a mass society in which powers were dispersed to a degree hitherto unknown.”18 In the egalitarian culture left in the wake of Jacksonian democracy lay the unspoken promise that all men could develop refinement—though not all men would.19 Refinement could be fairly won through the development of good manners, attainment of a respectable profession, and acquisition of material tokens of gentility. As Bushman notes, “all who aspired to simple respectability had to embody the marks of genteel style in their persons and their houses.”20 To help Americans in their quest for refinement, a proliferating number of etiquette manuals delineated proper behavior.

The essence of antebellum American gentility is difficult to define and almost contradictory in nature. It was an amorphous but unmistakable quality, an alchemy of character, self-control, and self-presentation coupled with financial means and material luxuries designed to reveal inner nobility. On the one hand, gentility was an art in two senses of the word, a skill as well as an expression of artifice. For, as Halttunen noted, “a gentleman or lady’s perfect outward command of the laws of polite self-control could be the disguise behind which lurked an evil heart.”21 On the other hand, in keeping with the spirit of egalitarianism, true gentility could not be affected, but was evidenced from within, and therefore was accessible to everyone. James Fenimore Cooper saw this ideal in “the individual possessed of gentlemanly attributes of character without the cultivated refinements that came from membership in the social class of gentlemen.”22 Americans who aspired to gentility thus faced the challenge of cultivating the genteel requirements of “material display, polite behavior, and high culture”23 while remaining unaffected and sincere.

When Lincoln arrived in Springfield in the spring of 1837, he was unaffected and sincere but sorely lacking in the more genteel qualities of refinement. Joshua Speed, with whom Lincoln roomed for four years, characterized the second-term Illinois legislator as “a lawyer without a client, no money, all his earthly wealth consisting of the

18. Ibid., 4.
20. Bushman, Refinement of America, xiii.
21. Halttunen, Confidence Men, 92.
22. Persons, Decline of Gentility, 60.
23. Mahoney, Provincial Lives, 56.
clothes he wore and the contents of his saddle-bags.” Speed recalled that Lincoln rode into town on a borrowed horse, and, upon inquiring the price of bedding, found the cost of $17 to be dismayingly prohibitive. Lincoln requested that Speed credit him the sum until the end of the year, when he could determine whether “his experiment as a lawyer was a success.”24 Although history has shown that Lincoln’s “experiment” was, indeed, very successful, he could have no way of knowing that at the time. He would have, however, carried with him the memories of six distinct occupations in which he did not prosper and the burden of a financial obligation so large he dubbed it the “National debt.”25

Lincoln began his law career as the junior partner of John Todd Stuart. Stuart, who arrived in Springfield in 1828, had already built up a thriving law practice. John J. Duff noted that “there was not a lawyer in Springfield but would have jumped at the opportunity” to practice law with Stuart, whose reputation as a lawyer ensured that “there was a pressing demand for his services.” Indeed, the firm of Stuart & Lincoln soon found itself handling more cases than any other firm in town—sixty in July 1837 alone.26 As his caseload increased and his fees, although modest, began to accumulate, it became clear that Lincoln could consider himself a success, at least professionally. A promising lawyer and state legislator, he was at the top of what historian Kenneth J. Winkle calls “Sangamon County’s occupational ladder,” a position occupied by only 1.9% of the population, and one which Lincoln later acknowledged invited “confidence and honors” from the general population.27

Professional success, however, did not automatically equate social success. Daniel Walker Howe noted that only “the additional acquisition of politeness would convert the self-made man into a self-made gentleman.”28 Although engaged in an estimable occupation, Lincoln stood on the fringe of Springfield’s high society, lacking as he did the good breeding and easy manners enjoyed by members of the smart set. One such member later recalled Lincoln’s exclusion, explaining “the fact is that we considered ourselves a ‘tony’ crowd, and that Lin-

28. Howe, Making the American Self, 140.
Lincoln, although an extremely clever and well-liked fellow, was hardly up to our standard of gentility.”

Lincoln was sensitive to his social shortcomings. In May 1837 he admitted to Mary Owens, with whom he was involved in an uneasy courtship, “I’ve never been to church yet, nor probably shall not soon. I stay away because I am conscious I should not know how to behave myself.” Lincoln realized that, although he had established himself professionally, he had not yet made the leap from respected man to gentleman.

Still, gentility was within his grasp. Mahoney argued that, for those engaged in the creation of middle-class culture in the Middle West, the first step to establishing gentility “was to situate oneself in the networks of local society in which genteel people circulated.” In that respect Lincoln had the distinct advantage of a loyal circle of friends and colleagues who recognized and appreciated his character and abilities. Evenings would find “a sort of social club” of eight or ten men gathered around the fireside at Speed’s store, drawn by Lincoln’s conversation and storytelling.

Among his circle were prominent and rising young men such as Stephen Douglas and Edward D. Baker. His partnership with Stuart also provided him entrée into what Winkle called the “influential Todd-Edwards-Stuart clan,” whose members included Stephen T. Logan, another prominent attorney, and Ninian W. Edwards, Lincoln’s future brother-in-law (and son of the governor of the Illinois Territory), whose home became “the focus of Springfield’s budding social and cultural life.”

Many years later Edwards remembered Lincoln as a regular guest at his house on Aristocracy Hill, showing up “for 4 ys Every Sunday.”

The Edwards place may have been Lincoln’s first real glimpse into a genteel household furnished with the accoutrements of refined living. At New Salem, where he resided for six years previously, houses were modest one- or two-room dwellings. Furniture was sturdy and serviceable, constructed at home or by the local carpenter, with the occasional exception of finer pieces hauled west from a former home. Poor families had simple, rough-hewn furniture, while more prosperous families may have had finer pieces.

30. _Collected Works_, 1:79.
32. Speed, _Reminiscences of Lincoln_, 23.
33. Winkle, _Young Eagle_, 160, 163.
ous families might have rush-seat chairs, trundle beds, and perhaps a piece of case furniture. Tokens of refinement such as glass, pewter, china, or clocks were rare treasures in a society where, to use Bushman’s apt phrase, “gentility flecked lives without coloring them.”

The Edwards house, by contrast, spoke to a life steeped in gentility. Perched on a hill, the house was an imposing, two-story brick residence; its parlors, dining room, and bedrooms boasted a specialization and privatization of space not found in any dwelling in which Lincoln had thus far resided. Inside, light from whale-oil lamps bedecked in crystals glinted off mahogany and horsehair furniture while servants relieved the occupants of the most onerous household chores. At the Edwardses, Lincoln beheld a world of refinement, where people’s furnishings and manners were carefully controlled and constructed to signal worthiness. In that house, Lincoln surely sensed the inadequacy of his manners and possessions. However, to the young man who taught himself Euclid and English grammar from borrowed books by firelight, the chance to visit the Edwards parlor was one more course of study—a chance to observe and work to master the requirements of a genteel life.

Thus, Lincoln in 1837 was a young man on the make, but one who had not yet fully arrived socially. Years later, Edwards was to declare that “when he first came to the City . . . Lincoln was a mighty rough man.” Still, Lincoln was ambitious to “rise,” eager to “improve himself every way he can,” and shrewd enough to recognize that middle-class gentility and professional success were mutually dependent on one another. It was with knowledge both of his shortcomings and his potential that Lincoln contacted local cabinetmaker Daniel Ruckel and his brother, upholsterer Jacob Ruckel, sometime in 1837 with a request to manufacture a sofa for him. Jacob Ruckel later recalled that he had moved to Springfield from New York City in 1836, “where he engaged in the cabinet business, which he followed for six or seven years.”

An 1838 ad in the Sangamo Journal announced that D. E. & J. Ruckel’s

37. Herndon’s Informants, 446.
38. Collected Works, 1:497. Lincoln used these words when advising a young lawyer the best way for a young man to rise in the world, presumably based on his own experience.
39. Jacob Ruckel affidavit, 12 May 1886, in the possession of Paul Findley, Jacksonville, Ill.
cabinet furniture and upholstering establishment “will manufacture in a durable and superior style Sofas and Mahogany Parlor Chairs.”

The sofa the Ruckels created for Lincoln has the monumental, sculptural quality considered typical of furniture of the Late Empire style, which was popular in Jacksonian America. Although not as ornate or highly figured as urban, east coast interpretations of this style, the sofa nevertheless would have been considered quite fashionable. Its primary material is mahogany—a wood much sought-after for its appealing grain patterns—enhanced with mahogany veneer. The upholstery is of horsehair, a fabric that became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century as it was “durable, formal in effect, and . . . able to withstand hard use.” Perhaps most remarkably, the sofa features spring-seat upholstery, a technology only just introduced to American consumers in the 1830s, and one that would have been considered “a luxury—almost a novelty” at the time of Lincoln’s purchase. Significantly, Lincoln’s purchase bears a marked resemblance to the horsehair sofa in Ninian Edwards’s parlor on which Lincoln is reported to have courted Mary Todd.

As no receipt or bill of sale survives to record this purchase, the amount of money Lincoln paid remains a mystery. While a survey of Springfield probate records for 1837 and 1838 failed to reveal listing of a single sofa, contemporary evidence suggests that antebellum sofas could cost upwards of $50. In 1856, for example, Elizabeth Emma Stuart of Detroit noted that an acquaintance paid $65 for a sofa. Lincoln’s sofa was indeed a major purchase for the man who had been loath to part with $17 for a bedstead in April.

The makers of the sofa and the date of its manufacture are established by the two 1886 affidavits, taken when the sofa’s ownership passed from Lincoln’s Springfield friend Jacob Roll to John W. Keyes. Roll had been acquainted with Lincoln since 1831, when he helped to construct the flatboat Lincoln took to St. Louis, and Roll considered them “intimate friends from the year 1831 to the day of Mr. Lincoln’s death.” He asserted that he purchased the sofa as a keepsake reminder

of his old friend, and described it as “the old mahogany veneered, haircloth sofa, which Mr. Lincoln had use [sic] in his law office in Springfield, and which was made especially for Mr. Lincoln on his order,” further noting that the sofa was “made by hand by Daniel E. Ruckel and upholstered by his brother, Jacob Ruckel.” In his affidavit, Jacob Ruckel identified the same sofa as “one of the sofas upholstered and sold by him in the year 1837, and as the one ordered by and made for Abraham Lincoln.”

The idea of such a major purchase made at such an uncertain time of Lincoln’s life calls into question the accuracy of Jacob Ruckel’s memory in recalling the date of manufacture. However, although there is no way to conclusively verify 1837 as the date of construction, evidence suggests that it was at least manufactured between 1837 and 1839. Ruckel’s assertion that he arrived in Springfield in 1836 and practiced upholstery for six or seven years means that the sofa must have been constructed sometime between 1836 and 1843. As Lincoln clearly was not in possession of such a large item of furniture when he removed from New Salem to Springfield, this range can be modified to 1837 to 1843. Prior to 1838, the Ruckels had been in the cabinetmaking and upholstery business together with John B. Weber. In May 1838, however, they commenced a formal and exclusive partnership, advertising their intent to “carry on . . . as extensively as a generous public may require at the old stand of Weber, Ruckel & Co.” However, their firm lasted only eleven months, as a notice appeared in the April 12, 1839, issue of the Sangamo Journal indicating that Messrs. Hugh and Davis “purchased of D. E. & J. Ruckel their entire interest in the Cabinet Establishment formerly carried on by them.” It is reasonable to conclude, then, that Lincoln purchased the sofa sometime between his arrival in Springfield in April 1837 and the dissolution of the Ruckel brothers’ partnership in April 1839. Given the relative narrowness of the date range, there is no reason to assume that Ruckel’s date of 1837 is incorrect. If he was, indeed, off by a year or two, and Lincoln in fact purchased the sofa in 1838 or 1839, the fact remains unchanged that the purchase of such a major and luxurious item of furniture was significant for a young lawyer as yet without a permanent residence.

It might provoke skepticism to think that the same man whose hair and clothes were more often than not in disarray, and who would later

45. Roll affidavit.
46. Ruckel affidavit.
48. Ibid., 12 April 1839, p. 3, col. 6.
vex his wife with his ignorance of the finer points of etiquette, bought a status symbol before he bought a horse. However, few can dispute the notion that Lincoln yearned to improve himself and rise in the world. To truly “arrive” as a self-made man and indisputable member of the middle class, Lincoln would need to acquire the trappings of bourgeois respectability in addition to professional success as a lawyer and statesman. Lincoln understood as well as anyone that merely having the right friends was not enough; he would someday have to possess the right things—material evidence of gentility. Indeed, upon arriving in Springfield, he felt his material wants keenly, writing sadly to Mary Owens, “there is a great deal of flourishing about in carriages here.” Revealing his own insecurities, he continued on to warn her that if she married him “you would be poor without having means of hiding your poverty.”

Lincoln realized that the gap between his pioneer upbringing and the middle-class culture of Springfield’s leading citizens was evident in his lack of material goods and want of social polish. Truly successful men, he knew, owned certain emblems of their genteel status. They did not wear rough clothing or borrow horses for transportation or lodge above general stores. True gentlemen wore suits with ties, were husbands and homeowners and horse owners. With this knowledge in mind, Lincoln slowly but steadily accumulated the trappings of gentility, starting in the 1830s when he borrowed money from a neighbor before his first term in the state House of Representatives, explaining, “You must loan me money to buy Suitable Clothing for I want to make a decent appearance in Congress.” From there his ascent to gentility can be traced through a number of milestones. In 1837 he established himself in a respectable profession. By 1840, according to Wayne Temple, he probably owned a horse and had contracted to construct a buggy. In 1842 he married a member of Springfield’s elite who provided him not only valuable social connections but knowledge of proper etiquette. In 1844 he bought his own home, and in 1856 had it enlarged, nearly doubling its size.

It is significant that, when Lincoln gained his party’s nomination for president in 1860, hordes of newspapermen traveled to Springfield to scrutinize the house and its belongings, suggesting that viewing one’s material possessions could provide key insight into one’s

49. Collected Works, 1:78.
50. Herndon’s Informants, 73.
character. Reporters came away with the impression that the owner of the house at the corner of Eighth and Jackson Streets was an unpretentious yet dignified man who lived in a modest yet eminently respectable home. The New York Post, for example, deemed the house “just such a dwelling as a majority of the well-to-do residents of these fine western towns occupy. Everything about it had a look of comfort and independence.” The New York Herald declared the home “like the residence of an American gentleman in easy circumstances, and is furnished in a like manner . . . it is a comfortable, cosy home,” while the Utica (New York) Morning Herald noted “an air of quiet refinement pervaded the place.” A candidate for the highest office in the land, Lincoln had truly arrived as a gentleman, a fact reflected in his home and furnishings.

The purchase of the mahogany sofa in 1837 can be viewed as one more milestone on Lincoln’s path to gentility. There can be no doubt that, like all upholstered furniture, a sofa was a sign of refinement in 1830s Springfield. Although mechanization of the textile and cabinet-making industries would make upholstered furniture more generally accessible by the mid-to-late nineteenth century, in the early nineteenth century upholstery was “so expensive as to be a major symbol of wealth and status,” a connotation that would persist even when prices dropped. Indeed, among the citizens of rural Delaware in the 1840s, Bushman found that “only a tiny handful of people . . . possessed sofas or any upholstered furniture.” Spring-seat upholstery, like that in Lincoln’s sofa, was especially rare, and, because of the increased cost of construction, expensive. A means by which “technological progress could be harnessed inside a particularly traditional artifact,” spring-seat upholstery also spoke to the very notions of progress and improvement that Lincoln’s Whig party espoused on a national scale.

A sofa’s connotation of refinement came not just from its expense, but also from its status as the iconic piece of furniture of the best par-

52. Grier, Culture & Comfort, 105.
57. Bushman, Refinement of America, 231.
lor. As Grier has observed, the parlor served as the locus of Victorian domestic gentility: “setting aside a specific room for the purpose of social rituals and furnishing it for that use . . . became an activity that denoted membership in, or aspirations to belong to, the most important culture-defining group in nineteenth-century America.”  

The parlor was designed to show its inhabitants and their means and manners in the best possible light. Frequently the best room in the house, furnished most expensively, the parlor was reserved for social ceremonies, a place where refinement reigned as behaviors were carefully controlled and etiquette carefully observed. Seating furniture was a key component of a respectably furnished parlor, serving a double purpose: first, to display owners’ taste and means, and second, to highlight proper behavior by enforcing upright posture and thereby projecting gentility. A typical parlor suite might consist of a sofa, several side chairs, and perhaps a “gentleman’s” upholstered armchair constructed of mahogany, walnut, rosewood, or cherry and upholstered in horsehair or damask. Of those seats, the sofa was unquestionably the highest-ranking object, being both the most expensive and expansive. Elisabeth Garrett notes that in the second quarter of the nineteenth century “an expensively upholstered sofa challenged the hegemony of the daybed in the best parlors, and by the 1830s the sofa had become the icon of this apartment and all other furnishings were to support it in character.” When full parlor suites were beyond a consumer’s means, as in Lincoln’s case, Grier notes that a common recourse involved the effort to assimilate parlor culture “to the extent that their time, money, space, and understanding would allow. Depending on their resources and competence, the rooms they made ‘paraphrased’ the parlor ideal more or less exactly.”

In just such a way, Lincoln’s sofa paraphrased the suite of parlor furniture, and indeed the entire parlor, which he could not yet afford, acting as a shorthand signal to visitors that he nevertheless belonged to the culture of the middle-class. While it is possible that Lincoln placed the sofa in what Speed later described as their “large room,” I argue

59. Ibid., 64–65.
61. Ibid., 194.
64. Speed, Reminiscences of Lincoln, 22.
that the sofa was an item of furniture meant to be seen and would therefore have been placed in the more public venue of the law office, where clients and professional colleagues alike would have viewed it and understood its connotations. It doubtless would have caught visitors’ attention. Although sofas could be found in parlors of the best homes, they were far less common in law offices, as “professional arrangements remained Spartan, dingy, and even ‘uncouth’” in the mid-nineteenth century. In assimilating parlor culture, Lincoln was completing the transformation from “strange, friendless, uneducated, penniless boy” to gentleman, affirming that he was now as at home in the parlors of the social elite as he had once been at the fireside of hardscrabble farmers.

Even as Lincoln acquired social polish and genteel trappings, however, he remained unable or unwilling to completely let go of his humble roots. Stewart Winger points out that Lincoln “generally remained defiant in some of his attitudes towards bourgeois respectability. He was careless in his outward appearance, and he often insisted on warmly greeting people in defiance of Victorian customs of polite reserve.” Indeed, though Lincoln desired respectability, he balked at the thought of becoming aristocratic, growing upset when political opponents derided him as “the candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction.” A political moderate all his life, Lincoln was also, as it turned out, socially moderate, eschewing fashionable manners for sincere courtesy. The Hand-Book of Manners, published in 1844, encouraged its readers to find a similar balance between sincerity and excessive formality: “There is a golden mean in the art, which it should be every one’s object to attain, without descending to obsequiousness on the one hand, or to familiarity on the other. In politeness, as in everything else, there is the medium between too much and too little—between constraint and freedom: for civilities, carried to extreme, are wearisome; and mere ceremony is not politeness, but the reverse.”

Once again, Lincoln’s sofa becomes a metaphor for his uneasy, cautious acquisition of gentility; for although Lincoln invested in an un-

68. Collected Works, 1:320.
69. Hand-Book of Manners; or, Rules For the Regulation of Conduct (New York: J. Langley, 1844), 9.
mistakable emblem of refinement, by reclining on his sofa he made use of it in a decidedly unrefined manner. Etiquette manuals of the early nineteenth century were unanimous in declaring a person’s bearing a critical barometer of his social worthiness. The Illustrated Manners Book, for example, declared that “attitude, the simple pose of the body, is worthy of profound study. All other things being alike, you shall be able to distinguish a gentleman as far off as you can see him, by the position in which he stands. That position may reveal his whole character.”\textsuperscript{70} The Art of Good Behavior concurred, instructing its readers not to “lounge on sofas, nor tip back your chair, nor elevate your feet,” stressing that only “a vulgar fellow . . . tips back his chair to the great danger of its legs, rolls upon a sofa as if he were going to sleep, and cocks up his legs as if his heels felt comfortable only when higher than his head.”\textsuperscript{71} Self-control was a crucial element to the Victorian ideal of gentility, and those who wished entrance into polite society were advised that physical presentation was every bit as important as proper behavior and sparkling conversation.

Lincoln, however, as a rule favored physical comfort over propriety and was widely known to misuse seating furniture. Harriet Hanks, a relative who boarded with the Lincolns in the 1840s, later remembered “his usual way of reading was lying down in warm weather he Seemed to prefer the floor he would turn a Chair down on the floor and put a pillow on it and lie there [sic] for hours and read.”\textsuperscript{72} Such casual repose was not confined to the comfort of his own home, either. The sofa’s length of nearly seven feet (sofas of that time typically measured between six and six and one-half feet)\textsuperscript{73} meant that Lincoln would have been able to stretch his lanky frame on it. Indeed, Lincoln most likely had it constructed to his specifications for this purpose, as Jacob Roll noted that “this sofa is of extra length” because Lincoln was “unable to find one long enough for his use already manufactured.”\textsuperscript{74} Later, William Herndon (Lincoln’s third law partner) would recall

\textsuperscript{70} The Illustrated Manners Book; A Manual of Good Behavior and Polite Accomplishments (New York: Leland, Clay, 1855), 52–53.
\textsuperscript{71} The art of good behaviour, and letter writer on love, courtship, and marriage: a complete guide for ladies and gentlemen, particularly those who have not enjoyed the advantages of fashionable life: containing directions for giving and attending parties, balls, weddings, dinners, &c., including the necessary preparations and arrangements for the marriage ceremony (New York: Huestis & Cozans, 1850), 32, 57.
\textsuperscript{72} Herndon’s Informants, 512.
\textsuperscript{73} Menz, Historic Furnishings Report.
\textsuperscript{74} Roll affidavit.
seeing Lincoln reclining along the length of the sofa, one leg resting on a chair, while reading the newspaper.”

Lincoln’s habitual misuse of seating furniture raises interesting questions in light of his quest for refinement. Was he simply unaware of the proper etiquette of sitting? Even while attempting to establish himself socially, did he find some habits from his backwoods upbringing too hard to shake? Was Lincoln shedding the formalities of polite behavior in the comfortable realm of his home and law office and adopting what Kenneth Ames has called “a mode of self-presentation appropriate to egalitarian, informal environment”? The answer to all three questions is probably “yes.” Given his lifelong carelessness on some of the finer points of etiquette, Lincoln likely was, to some degree, unaware or uninterested in the minutiae of graceful behavior. However, the democratic ideals of the era made these oversights more acceptable than they would have been a generation or two before. In his insightful investigation of Victorian posture, Ames suggests that informal posture is a uniquely American expression, revealing “conscious American resistance at a variety of social levels to the authority of European courtly models and to the European social and political structures sustaining them.” That is to say, by rejecting stiff, upright postures, Americans were also rejecting the brand of hereditary and highly cultivated refinement of Europe and pre-Revolutionary America in favor of the socially fluid, republican brand of refinement of Jacksonian America.

Lincoln was also able to get away with lounging on his sofa because it occupied the masculine environment of his law office, where the strictures of formal etiquette were somewhat relaxed. In nineteenth-century America, women were the agents of refinement and civiliza-

75. Emmanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 176. Although Herndon recalled the sofa in a letter to Jesse Weik in 1887, Lincoln’s friend and fellow attorney James H. Matheny, when thinking back to Lincoln’s “old office above the Court Room,” mentioned only “a small dirty bed—one buffalo robe—a chair and a bench” (Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 251). While there could be any number of reasons Matheny did not mention the sofa (including the possibility that Lincoln moved it to his home when he set up housekeeping in 1844), perhaps the most logical explanation is that Matheny’s recollection was brief and episodic, and clearly not meant as an exhaustive catalogue of the law office’s contents. The sofa isn’t shown in the illustration of Lincoln’s law office that ran in the 22 December 1860 issue of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly*. Again, the sofa might have been moved to Lincoln’s home by this point, or the illustration was rendered from the perspective of the couch, thus omitting it from view.


77. Ibid., 196.
tion,” keepers of the home and mistresses of the parlor. Etiquette manuals of the period stressed that gentlemen must always display their best manners in front of ladies, who had an innate sensitivity to refinement. “In the presence of ladies, you are only silent, when listening to them. You never yawn, nor lounge on your seat, nor interrupt, nor contradict, but by insinuation—you never tell unpleasant news, nor make ill-timed observations,” one such book advised. In masculine spaces, such as taverns or places of business, however, it became acceptable to liberate oneself “at least for the moment, of . . . formal definitions of sitting, of socially reinforced patterns of self-control, and of self-conscious and artful deployment” of the body. In the Middle West, male socializing strengthened and affirmed what Mahoney has called a “male subculture” whose values differed somewhat from the “more feminized, domestic, and privatized version of middle-class ideology” of the East. Swapping stories or debating politics in the company of men, Lincoln’s lapses of attention to etiquette’s lengthy and complex demands for self-mastery were more tolerable, with his lack of social polish affirming his status as a self-made man. Of course, as many of Lincoln’s clients were women, one wonders if Lincoln paid extra attention to his manners when they were present in his office.

Ultimately, Lincoln’s sofa is a window into the ambition of a young lawyer at the start of his legendary rise to power, a silent witness to Lincoln’s mindset during those early years. Considering the purchase within Lincoln’s social and historical context leads to inferences that fill in the gaps where the written record is silent. For example, Lincoln’s decision to purchase a sofa in 1837 signals a degree of financial confidence, if not comfort. Although he had tried and rejected half a dozen careers in the previous six years, Lincoln felt secure enough in his new profession to anticipate both the income and the stability necessary for such a big-ticket purchase. Whereas in April 1837 Lincoln found the cost of a $17 bedstead to be beyond his means, the purchase of the sofa signaled a reversal of attitude, if not yet of fortune. The sofa, in effect, was a commitment to place: Lincoln was no longer able to contain his possessions in two saddlebags. Ownership of a large piece of furniture illustrates both the decision to put down roots and the confidence that those roots would flourish.

78. Ibid., 213.
81. Mahoney, Provincial Lives, 63.
The sofa also represents a kind of professional victory for Lincoln. Temperamentally unsuited and personally disinclined to manual labor, more fond of the stump and pen than of the axe and plow, Lincoln was once forced to do his reading and relaxing between menial tasks, occasionally incurring the wrath of his father, who would “slash him for neglecting his work by reading.” In the harsh world of the frontier, where survival depended on hard physical work, indulgence in reading and writing was often synonymous with laziness. As a lawyer, however, Lincoln left behind the life of menial labor to join what physician George Beard would one day call “brain workers,” people who represented the highest levels of civilization. Lincoln now depended on his ability to think, write, and speak for a living and had the luxury of doing his work from a sitting position and of stopping to recline on his sofa whenever he felt so inclined. The sofa, then, represented his ascendance to the top of the professional ladder, his transformation from a laborer into a lawyer.

Finally, Lincoln’s purchase and use of his sofa illustrates its owner’s careful dance with gentility as he deftly climbed Springfield’s professional and social ladder. Society demanded respectability but scorned affectation. Finding the proper balance between the two was the key to Lincoln’s success, politically as well as socially. As an aspirant to public office, Lincoln needed support from both factions of the divided Whig party in Illinois—those of wealth and family distinction, and the rising number of populists. Accordingly, he needed to earn the respect of the former without eliciting the scorn of the latter. While Lincoln’s purchase and use of his sofa was obviously not directly responsible for his successes or failures, the sofa can be seen as an accurate metaphor for Lincoln’s struggle to walk the line between gentility and dandyism. Ownership of the sofa served to signal Lincoln’s gentility by paraphrasing the parlor culture at its heart, while Lincoln’s casual repose affirmed his connection to the popular male subculture. By reclining on his sofa, then, Lincoln embraced the notion of egalitarian refinement, eschewing rigid formality for more natural behavior and thus coming to embody his era’s ideal of the natural gentleman.

82. Herndon’s Informants, 41.
Appendix 1: Affidavit of John E. Roll

State of Illinois
Sangamon County. } SS.

John E. Roll, first being duly sworn, deposes and says: That he was born June 19, 1814, at Green Village, Morris county, New Jersey; that he removed from that place in 1830, settling June 7th, of that year, in Sangamon town, on the Sangamon river, seven miles northwest of Springfield, Illinois, having traversed the distance from St. Louis to that place on foot; that he resided in said town, in a log cabin, two years, and there moved to Springfield, where he has since resided; That he was a plasterer by trade, which business he followed for thirty years, at the end of which time he went into the shoe business, owning two shoe stores in Springfield and one in Mason City, Illinois, and carrying a stock of about $75,000, which business he engaged in for a period of eighteen years.

Deponent further says that he became acquainted with Abraham Lincoln in February, 1831, having been employed to assist him in building the second flat boat ever constructed on the Sangamon river, or in the State of Illinois, earning by that labor about thirty cents a day; That Mr. Lincoln was employed at that time by a Mr. Offut, at a salary of fifteen dollars a month, which at that time was considered good wages for mechanics; That after Mr. Lincoln had completed his boat deponent was requested to accompany him, on the boat, as far down the Sangamon river as Lemmon’s Bend, at which point he bade him “good by,” and Mr. Lincoln proceeded on his trip, going to New Orleans, at which place he sold the boat and returning to Illinois, settled in New Salem, Menard county, and went into business. Deponent further says that Mr. Lincoln and he were intimate friends from the year 1831 to the day of Mr. Lincoln’s death, and that for the purpose of securing a keepsake by which to remember his old friend, he purchased the old mahogany veneered, haircloth covered sofa, which Mr. Lincoln had in use in his law office in Springfield and which was made especially for Mr. Lincoln on his order, he being unable to find one long enough for his use already manufactured. This sofa is of extra length and was made by hand by Daniel E. Ruckel, and upholstered by his brother, Jacob Ruckel, old residents of Springfield, Illinois.

Deponent further says that he has, on this 12th day of May, 1886, sold, transferred
And conveyed all his right, title and claim to the sofa above described to John W. Keys, of Chicago, Illinois, it being the identical sofa made for, owned and used by Mr. Lincoln, hoping that it may be well cared for and preserved as it is a sacred relic of the immortal patriot, Abraham Lincoln.

John E. Roll
Springfield
Illinois

Subscribed and sworn to before me
by the said John E. Roll, this
12th day of May, A.D. 1886.
(Seal) Wm. J. Schroyrn
Notary Public

Appendix 2: Affidavit of Jacob Ruckel

State of Illinois
Sangamon County. } SS.

Jacob Ruckel, first being duly sworn, deposes and says that he was born June 27, 1814, in New York city; that, in the year 1836, he removed to Springfield, Sangamon county, Illinois, where he engaged in the cabinet business, which he followed for six or seven years, after which he engaged in the wall paper business, in which he has continued until the present time.

Deponent further says that he has seen the sofa this day transferred from John E. Roll to John W. Keys and recognizes and identifies it as one of the sofas upholstered and sold by him in the year 1837, and as the one ordered by and made for Abraham Lincoln.

J. Ruckel
Subscribed and sworn to before me
by the said Jacob Ruckel, this
12th day of May, A.D. 1886.
(Seal) Alfred A North
Notary Public