The Meaning of Lincoln’s “Such a Sucker as Me”

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Henry Villard’s 1904 account of his 1858 meeting with Abraham Lincoln is a well-known tale about a beloved president:

He and I met accidentally . . . on a hot, sultry evening, at a flag railroad station about twenty miles west of Springfield . . . a thunderstorm compelled us to take refuge in an empty freight-car standing on a side track . . . It was then and there he told me that, when he was clerking in a country store, his highest political ambition was to be a member of the State Legislature. Since then, of course, he said laughingly, “I have grown some, but my friends got me into this business . . . I did not consider myself qualified for the United States Senate, and it took me a long time to persuade myself that I was. Now, to be sure,” he continued, with another of his peculiar laughs, “I am convinced that I am good enough for it; but, in spite of it all, I am saying to myself every day: ‘It is too big a thing for you; you will never get it.’ Mary . . . insists, however, that I am going to be Senator and President of the United States, too.” These last words he followed with a roar of laughter, with his arms around his knees, and shaking all over with mirth at his wife’s ambition. “Just think,” he exclaimed, “of such a sucker as me as President!”

We will never know how much, if any, of Villard’s report is genuine, but we delight in it because of its irony. We delight too because the story deftly captures Lincoln’s humility, his love of self-depreciating humor, and his wife’s ambition for him. So compelling are these elements—and the final line so perfect—that historical problems in the meaning of the word sucker pass us by almost unnoticed. Exploring these complexities, however, is important for our understanding of

Lincoln and his times as well as for assessing our own window on history.²

**Sucker: Illinois, Illinoisans, and Lincoln**

Recovering fully the subtleties of spoken language 160 years ago, especially of a word like *sucker*, is ultimately impossible, but nineteenth-century newspapers offer a continuous record of a significant body of everyday, public language—a body that offers a basis for exploring potential meanings of *sucker* in Lincoln’s day. This study relies on the Gale *NewsVault* proprietary collection of nineteenth-century U.S. newspapers, a collection offering full-text searching of facsimile copies of newspapers from a broad range of cities of various sizes across the nation. All conclusions about the meaning of the word *sucker* in this study derive from uses in the *NewsVault* sample for the twenty years prior to Villard’s reported meeting with Lincoln—that is, 1838

to 1858—but these conclusions are also informed by uses of sucker elsewhere in the *NewsVault* as well as by U.S. imprints in various publicly available electronic collections including, in particular, Wright American Fiction, Making of America, and HathiTrust Digital Library.  

Between January 1, 1838, and December 31, 1858, the word sucker appears in 618 of the surviving issues of U.S. newspapers in the Gale *NewsVault*. The list below shows the number and percent of its various uses:

**Uses of Sucker in the NewsVault**

1. a nickname for Illinois (*Sucker State*) or Illinoisan (*Sucker*): 252 issues or 40.8% of the total references

3. Gale *NewsVault*, searched February 2018 at http://www.gde.gale.com/products/gale-newsvault. In addition to examination of all *NewsVault* issues with hits on sucker 1800 to 1880 (2,700), this study is supported by examination of all hits on sucker in 200 titles in Wright American Fiction (1851–1875) at http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/TEIgeneral/welcome.do?brand=wright; all hits in 280 titles before 1870 in Making of America at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa grp/; and all hits in about 500 titles selected from the first 40% of 11,700 titles between 1830 and 1870 in HathiTrust Digital Library at https://hathitrust.org.

4. The number 618 includes plurals and suckerdom, but excludes proper names (e.g., James Sucker, Sucker Creek), classified advertisements for seersucker, hits from the *London Times* (included in the default options for 19th-century U.S. newspapers), and all subsequent hits from four different classified advertisements running continuously in issues of the same newspaper. Three newspaper issues are counted twice because the word sucker appears in two different, non-punning senses.

5. Nineteenth-century newspapers regularly borrow materials, especially from other newspapers, with the result that amusing tales and stories about Illinois suckers may hopscotch across the country for years, even decades, after first appearance. Any surviving issue in the *NewsVault* between 1838 and 1858 where the word sucker refers to Illinois or Illinoisans is included in the counts, even if the word appears in a reprinted item in a subsequent *NewsVault* newspaper elsewhere in the country. Rather than skewing the statistics, doing so records the total number of issues in the *NewsVault* using the nickname, a reflection in this case of widespread use and understanding. In puns when a drinker (sucker) or a baby (sucker) or a leech-like person (sucker) is also an Illinoisan (sucker), the pun counts as the nickname. In one instance, a Mississippi newspaper connects a certain person (sucker) to Illinois, but opens the possibility that he could be from some other “sucker state,” that is, those western and northern headwaters of the Mississippi that John S. Robb calls “land of the migrating sucker [fish],” John S. Robb, *Streaks of Squatter Life, and Far-West Scenes* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), 13. Normally, the context, explicitly or implicitly, makes clear when sucker means “Illinoisan,” but in 21 instances from nearby states, editors rely on the common understanding of readers. Sucker meaning “Illinois” or “Illinoisan” appears in 60% of the *NewsVault*’s papers with runs of five years or more. Because newspapers typically give the source for borrowed materials, the *NewsVault* shows that the nickname spread ➤
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2. of or relating to a leech-like person, office holder, or institution exploiting, cheating, deceiving, or living off others or the body politic; a base or lazy person, loafer, swindler, trickster, villain; often compounded, blood sucker: 83 or 13.4%

3. in the compound gone sucker, someone or something dead or helpless to prevent dying or coming to an end (11); of a drinker or drunkard dying or certain to die (16); of drunkards helplessly asleep, unconscious, or with no self-control (4); of office holders helpless to prevent the loss of their careers (12): 43 or 7.0%

4. of or relating to a drinker, all but exclusively of alcohol, a drunkard, sometimes compounded, rum sucker, molasses sucker, whiskey sucker, straw sucker: 38 or 6.1%

5. baby (9), compounded, done sucker (9); young, inexperienced, naïve, or untrained person; amateur (9); compounded, (old) swamp sucker (1): 28 or 4.5%

6. in various natural or mechanical applications: 155 or 25.1%
   a. fish species with mouth opening downward for bottom feeding: 50 or 8.1%
   b. side branch or scion of a plant: 36 or 5.8%
   c. sucking insect or its proboscis, especially of a mosquito or flea: 26 or 4.2%
   d. animal, chiefly birds with names ending in -sucker (e.g. sapsucker) and certain obsessive-compulsive horses (sucker, stump sucker, wind sucker): 20 or 3.2%
   e. leech, often compounded with blood-: 14 or 2.3%
   f. mechanical, piston-like, or other devices designed to suck: 9 or 1.5%

well beyond the newspapers actually included. Counting both the source newspapers and those in the NewsVault, newspapers in every state then in the union plus Mexico, Canada, Nebraska, and Kansas printed items relying on the nickname except Rhode Island, Michigan, Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama. Counting both the source and actual appearance, the highest totals were Ohio (77), Missouri (38), Wisconsin (37), New York (27), North Carolina (19), Illinois (16), Florida (15), Massachusetts (13), and Vermont (10).

6. Included in this category are instances of cider-sucker, those supporters and hangers-on of political figures drinking the hard cider often served at political events, and the comic character Flan Sucker who, in the several versions of the satiric retelling of the species crisis of 1837 and after, is a supporter and hanger-on of Middleton Flam.

7. A person long accustomed to living in remote areas and, while untutored, keenly experienced in the skills required for living there. The origin is probably South Carolinian, appearing in the NewsVault in a South Carolina newspaper (1854) and in all other collections consulted only in works by South Carolinian writer William Gilmore Simms.
Students of Lincoln and Illinois have long known that the word *sucker* is a nickname for Illinois (*Sucker State*) or Illinoisan (*Sucker*), but these meanings have been lost in our time, even to Illinoisans. Indeed, this once common meaning has been so completely lost that only one recent scholar has so much as raised the possibility that *sucker* in Villard’s story could mean “Illinoisan.” The use of *sucker* in the sense of “Illinois” or “Illinoisan” in *NewsVault* newspapers, however, is so common, exceeding by a factor of three all other potential meanings, that Lincoln’s supposed use in Villard’s account almost certainly meant “such an Illinoisan.”

This once-popular nickname appeared sometime before the end of the 1820s and seems to have derived from the sucker, a species of fish (6.a. above). The April 21, 1829, issue of the Washington *Daily National Journal*, reprinting an earlier article from the Galena (Fever River) *Miners’ Journal*, reports as follows about miners in and around Galena, Illinois:

> Many find it most convenient to come here in the spring, mine through the summer, and go below in the fall; and hence the
general appellation of Sucker [a similarly migratory fish] given to all such. The Illinoians were the first who received this appellative, which produced corresponding appellation for the citizens of many other States. . . . These nicknames are bestowed without any desire of producing unfriendly feelings, or of engendering sectional prejudices; but operate as a complete satire upon all such notions, remove all restraint and sweeten social intercourse.11

A few years later, Charles Fenno Hoffman echoed the Journal in an 1835 account of his travels in the Michigan Territory. He described making his way toward an inn fireplace and encountering a group of “wild-looking” fellows on their way to a wedding who invited him to have a drink: “There was a long-haired ‘hooshier’ from Indiana, a couple of smart-looking ‘suckers’ from the southern part of Illinois, a keen-eyed leather-belted ‘badger’ from the mines of Ouisconsin, and a . . . genuine wolverine, or naturalized Michiganian. . . . just the sort of sallad of society I have been long wishing to meet with.” Although other explanations of its origins come later, Hoffman, too, traces the nickname to the migratory sucker fish.12

The compound “Sucker State” with both Sucker and State nearly always capitalized is not only a popular but a fully normalized substitute for Illinois. This phrase appears in 60 NewsVault newspapers between 1838 and 1858. “Sucker [State],” indeed, occurs in connection with Lincoln himself when New York’s Weekly Herald reported on the governorship of Oregon: “Mr. Marshall, of the Hoosier State, would not have it; Mr. Lincoln, of the Sucker refused it.” That a distant New

11. “Wen-no-skick,” Daily National Journal [Washington, DC], April 21, 1829:2. Nearly every state in the union acquired a popular nickname during the period of this study. See, for example, “Nicknames,” New York Herald, August 16, 1858:2. By 1836 Illinois was also called the Prairie State.

12. A Winter in the West, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), 1:210–11. A later explanation for the nickname was this: “The term [for Illinoisan] . . . arose from . . . hunters and travelers carrying a hollow reed, and when in want of water, on the prairies, they had nothing to do but seek the burrowing hole of the land crab, at the bottom of which there is always water.” “Items,” Globe [Washington, DC], August 15, 1837:3; Thomas Ford, A History of Illinois (Chicago: S. C. Griggs, 1854), 67–69, supports the earliest explanation, does not mention the hollow-reed theory, but offers an alternate explanation, namely that wealthy southern slave owners called their poorer non slave-holding neighbors suckers when they moved to southern Illinois because they predicted that, like suckers removed from the tobacco plant, these transplants would also shrivel and die.
York City newspaper can, without explanation, substitute “Sucker” for Illinois shows this nickname was indeed common.\(^{13}\)

*Sucker* also appears in newspapers throughout the nation as an adjective and noun: “Illinois Sucker,” “Sucker from Illinois,” “venerable sucker,” “genuine Sucker,” “Sucker neighbors,” “Sucker friends,” “Sucker wag,” “Progressive Sucker,” “Sucker law,” “Sucker holes” (mines near Galena), “Sucker farmers,” “Sucker ladies,” “Sucker barns,” and so on. Lincoln himself used this familiar nickname when, in reference to the Illinois Whigs in 1844, he wrote that “the Suckers are willing to ‘divide the danger.’”\(^ {14}\)

Although Illinois newspapers from this period are not well represented in the NewsVault, those printed elsewhere show that Illinois businesses incorporated *Sucker* into their formal names: the Montpelier Vermont Watchman & State Journal reported the founding of an Illinois newspaper called *The Sucker*, and the New York Herald included a long list of the owners of the “Illinois Sucker Company,” touting a forty-wagon expedition near St. Joseph, Missouri, headed for Sutter’s Fort during the California gold rush. In 1860, two years after the end of our period, the Milwaukee Daily Sentinel reprinted a report from the St. Paul Pioneer that the steamship *Sucker State* with 10,000 bushels of wheat from Minnesota was headed for St. Louis.\(^ {15}\)

The word *Sucker* also, of course, attached itself to Lincoln. An 1848 report in the Boston Daily Atlas about Lincoln’s speech to the Whigs of Cambridge reads, “Mr. Lincoln, as many . . . readers need not be informed, and as many more, I trust, will see for themselves before election, is a capital specimen of a ‘Sucker’ Whig, six feet at least in

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13. “Our Washington Correspondence,” *Weekly Herald* [New York], October 6, 1849:318[6]. Reports on politics and election returns were especially likely to use “Sucker State.”


his stockings and every way worthy to represent the Spartan band of the only Whig district in poor benighted Illinois.” An article in the New York Herald the same month described how Lincoln amused his eastern audience with tales mimicking a “genuine Sucker.” In the brief addresses at the conclusion of the nominating convention of the Republican party in 1856 at which Lincoln had been a candidate for vice president, a speaker from the New Jersey delegation referred to Lincoln as the “tall Sucker,” saying he “knew him well, and a right worthy man he was.” In a September 1858 St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican, Lincoln and Douglas were “the tall Sucker and the Little Giant.” In four subsequent issues of the same newspaper during the month of August, Lincoln is dubbed the “tall Sucker.” In two News-Vault papers during the 1860 campaign for president, Lincoln is called “the distinguished Sucker.”

The word Sucker for the state of Illinois and its inhabitants disappeared as the word shifted to its current, more pejorative, usage. To be sure, our word sucker can, as it did in Lincoln’s day, mean “lollipop,” and we can use sucker loosely to mean almost anything, as when a framer of houses might tell his assistant, “I’ll hold while you nail that sucker down.” Typically, however, our word sucker denotes someone too easily taken in, someone foolish, and can be cruelly derisive. No such use of the word sucker appears in the NewsVault for the period 1838–1858. Indeed, the second most common meaning of sucker in the NewsVault relates not to those taken-in by deception but, remarkably, to those taking others in: “Of or relating to a leech-like person, office holder, or institution exploiting, cheating, deceiving, or living off others or the body politic; a base or lazy person, loafer, swindler, trickster, villain” (definition 2. above). In short, all odds indicate that if Lincoln

16. The stereotypical Illinois sucker in NewsVault stories and tales is “long” or “tall.”
said “such a sucker as me” in 1858, he meant “such an Illinoisan as me.”

Sucker: Other Meanings in Lincoln’s Time

The authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* complicates the foregoing assertions. In its origins and early uses, *sucker* has only the most innocent of meanings, namely, “a mammal before it is weaned, a child at the breast” (*OED*). Figurative uses of this innocent word begin to appear in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The first such development, or so the *OED* suggests, is “greenhorn, simpleton.” Significantly, the *OED* gives North America as the origin of this figurative new meaning, citing the May 29, 1838, Toronto *Patriot* for the first such use: “It’s true that pigs has their troubles like humans . . . constables catches ’em, dogs bites ’em, and pigs is sometimes as done-over suckers as men.” The *OED* includes two additional, early illustrations of what it takes as this same meaning: “You may think I’m a sucker,” from a San Francisco newspaper in 1857, and he’s “Goin’ out to stir up a boom, and sell his claim to some sucker” from a 1904 work by U.S. writer Elizabeth Robins.\(^\text{18}\)

The newspapers in the *NewsVault* show conclusively, however, that the development of our modern word is more complicated than the *OED*’s dates and examples imply. The *OED*’s first example, “done-over suckers,” does not so much suggest that humans and pigs are “greenhorns and simpletons” as that humans and pigs are both helplessly (like a “child at the breast”) at the mercy of forces beyond their control. If so, the *OED*’s earliest citation for *sucker*’s meaning “greenhorn, simpleton” is misleading. Further, the compound *done-over sucker* does not appear at all in *NewsVault*’s U.S. newspapers. What does appear, however, are two compounds, *gone sucker* and *done sucker*. These compounds appear exclusively in contexts like the humans and pigs from the Toronto *Patriot*, that is, when helplessly caught in larger, irresistible forces.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) *Oxford English Dictionary: The Definitive Record of the English Language*, http://www.oed.com, *sucker*. Subsequent references to the *OED* are for this same word. Carwardine, “Wonderful Self-Reliance,” applies the *OED*’s figurative sense of *sucker* to its meaning in Villard’s tale: “The term ‘sucker’—in the sense of greenhorn, or simpleton—was then [1858] in common use” (102).

\(^{19}\) The only example of “done-over sucker” appearing in any U.S. source consulted for this article appears in Harden E. Taliaferro, *Fisher’s River (North Carolina)* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 126, when a fictional character impressed to fill out a ship’s crew describes himself as a “done-over sucker.”
Gone sucker first appears in the NewsVault’s [Washington, DC] Daily National Intelligencer, and between 1838 and 1858, newspaper editors and storytellers reveled in this phrase, especially where puns on sucker were possible, applying it everywhere to drinkers, loafers, babies, Illinois babies, an Illinois groom, politicians, a city, a state, a hunter, animals, a fish, and so on. In every instance, the addition of gone to sucker brings a sense of being helplessly taken in, taken over, doomed by larger forces. The compound done sucker, similarly if more narrowly, plays much the same role. Echoing gone sucker, done sucker is part of a popular, brief newspaper filler and witticism about a child weaned: “I’m a done sucker,’ as the child said when his mother weaned him.” Appearing in nine newspapers during our period, this use of sucker remains faithful to its oldest meaning, “baby,” but with the addition of the word done, the baby is not only done sucking at the breast but also a helpless victim at the mercy of more powerful forces, very much, it would appear, like the “done-over pig” in the example from the Toronto Patriot.20

The OED is correct, however, that sucker eventually takes on the figurative meaning “greenhorn, simpleton.” When this use of the word sucker emerges in NewsVault newspapers, it designates a young person innocent, inexperienced, or “green,” “verdant,” and—difficult as it may be for us to remember—this use comes without pejorative implications. The earliest unmistakable example of this use in the NewsVault appears in 1849, when a young fellow—“a green ‘un, a sucker,” a Yankee “green enough for a Vermonter”—realizes he is about to be cheated in a fraudulent auction and turns the tables on the cheaters. Another instance of this use of sucker involves a pun on Illinois when a young woman (“Sucker”/Illinoisan), “verdancy in muslin,” turns the tables on a merchant preying on what he takes as her youth and inexperience. The focus throughout both these tales is on apparent youth and innocence, but both tales choose for their young protagonists the word sucker, originally and still commonly at the time a baby before it is weaned, as the phrase “done sucker” shows. As a result, these two stories memorably capture the dramatic conflict between youthful innocence and corrupt experience, between potential victim easily taken in and preying victimizer—components, to be sure, of our later word sucker. Sucker for an innocent or inexperienced young person appears in other contexts, but as works in the

Wright American Fiction collection suggest, young suckers—young innocents—in the hands of con-men out to fleece them is a leitmotif in the literature of the time.21 This innocent use of the word sucker begins to admit another figurative sense designating persons of any age untrained or “unscientific.” An 1855 article from the Richmond Dispatch, reprinted in the Augusta, Georgia, Daily Chronicle and Sentinel, distinguishes between two types of fighters: “An artist is a gentleman . . . a prize fighter . . . [who fights] scientifically. A sucker . . . bites and gouges, and mauls on all occasions, and is not a ‘scientific’ man.” A letter written to Lincoln in 1863 implies that this sense could be applied to the word sucker for Illinois: “I have believed that the best interests of the Country required that the rebellion should be speedily crushed & peace restored, and that this could only be attained by following [sic] up our blows upon the enemy, one after the other with rapidity, never giving them time to recover—You are aware that this is ‘Hoosier’ & ‘Sucker’ ‘tactics,’ but I have discovered that it is not West Point ‘Science’.22

This sense of “ordinary, inexperienced, amateur” as contrasted with “trained, experienced, professional” could well have brought resonance to Villard’s “such a sucker as me,” but a closely related figurative development emerged about the same time and, ultimately and finally, opened the way for the development of our typically pejorative word sucker. A long article from the Lowell Weekly Journal and Courier, appearing in the Concord New Hampshire Statesman, offers a full description of the so-called patent safe game as a means of informing “persons coming from the country, to our city, being ‘taken in and done for’” by sharpers. In the course of this public-service message, the article explicitly calls attention to the emergence of a new, specialized meaning for the word sucker when it points out that this game


perpetrated by con-men requires “a person called by them a ‘Sucker,’” a person “who appears to be a fit subject to play upon.” To the writer, those cheated of their money by this fraud are country innocents in the hands of villains, but to the crooks seeking a naïve victim, the person from the country becomes a member of a new class, someone likely to be taken in and deceived. That the writer pauses to define this term shows that this use of sucker exists in the underworld and that the then-standard word for “innocent, inexperienced, untutored” has been highjacked by con-men and crooks. Eight years later, and five years after the period of this study, an article about a “Paymaster Cook” murdered at a gambling house again carefully defines the special meaning of this word: “Cook was described as a ‘sucker’ among gamblers, that is, he was a card-player, but did not know all the tricks and traps in gambling, and consequently fell an easy prey to skilled ‘professionals.’”

The victimization of Paymaster Cook, however, anticipates the later, typical feature of our word sucker. While con-men in our day can use the word sucker to belittle potential victims, as in the OED’s 1904 citation above, we typically reserve the word sucker for those victims of fraud who have acted unwisely, who have been too easily taken in or too willing to collaborate in what becomes their undoing. Paymaster Cook, thus, was a victim, but he was out for a quick buck in a back room in a big game, not a place where a man responsible for paying the salaries of those doing an honest day’s work should be in the first place. Even the “honest, unsuspecting countrymen” taken in by the patent safe game in the prior example are, finally, not “honest.”


24. “Revelations of a Gambling Hell,” Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, April 4, 1863:2. The writer has apparently taken a good portion of his definition of sucker word for word from George W. Matsell’s Vocabulum; or, The Rogue’s Lexicon (New York: George W. Matsell, 1859), 117: “one who can play cards, but does not know all the tricks and traps in gambling.”
Skillful as the con may be, anyone taken in must be con-man enough to join crooks in what seems a certain bet with an ignorant third party. Unbeknownst to the country “sucker,” the third party is in on the scheme, and the inexperienced countryman is easily taken for a large sum of money. Paymaster Cook and the country innocents who fall for the patent safe game thus establish a pattern for what eventually becomes our word *sucker*—victims, but not merely young, innocent, or inexperienced victims, but victims whose own lack of due diligence, moral weakness, or folly makes them easy targets. However, throughout the period of this study and beyond, the mid-nineteenth-century word *sucker*—unlike our modern word—preserves a focus on the imbalance of power, on the essential unfairness of the competition between victim and the victimizer, but repetition of this pattern over the coming decades, especially when gambling is involved, results ultimately in our pejorative, often derisive word *sucker*.

Midcentury metaphors drawn from the easy-to-catch or to trap sucker fish may be a final mid-nineteenth-century development of the word *sucker* and a potential source of darkness in our modern word. In a tale from the 1849 Little Rock *Arkansas State Democrat*, a card-playing passenger “with lots of gold chains an’ fancy fixins on” wagers a boatman $100 that he can “turn Jack” the first time he tries. The boatman is no inexperienced ignoramus, however, and knowing that the fancy fellow intends to do no more than simply turn the deck over, not produce a jack, the boatman cleverly wins the bet, saying with fishing metaphors, “Next time you fish for a ’sucker,’ look out yew don’t ketch a ’catty,’ ef it’s on the Mississipp’y.” The tale about the young Yankee at a fraudulent auction makes the same connection between being taken in and fishing as well as a potential pun on the sucker fish when the young Yankee is described as “a green ’un, a sucker” for whom “the baits were at once set.”

25. In a work attributed to Gerritt M. Evans, *How Gamblers Win; or, The Secrets of Advantage Playing Exposed . . . By a Retired Professional* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1865; rev., 1868), the writer defines the specialized meaning of *sucker*, but appearing seven to ten years after the end of the period of this study (1838–1858), a note of cynicism rather than empathy enters when he equates *sucker* with *ignoramus* (81–82).

26. “Turning Jacks,” *Arkansas State Democrat* [Little Rock], December 28, 1849:1 “A Mock Auctioneer Taken In,” *Arkansas State Democrat*, August 31, 1849:1. The sucker fish can also be caught by hand, “Being an individual of not the most brilliant intellectual powers, the sucker fondly imagines that if his head be covered and his eyes darkened by a projecting rock or overhanging bank, he is safe from all danger,” Philip Paxton, *The Wonderful Adventures of Captain Priest* (New York: H. Long, 1855), 145.
In short, modern readers of mid-nineteenth-century texts must show more than usual sensitivity—even hypersensitivity—not to be misled, not simply to read-in our word *sucker* when the possibilities in Lincoln’s day are so different and so multifaceted. In matters touching on Lincoln and Illinois, nowhere is care more warranted.

*Sucker: Villard, Illinois, Illinoisans, and Lincoln in Historical Perspective*

For us, “such an Illinoisan as me” differs dramatically from “such a sucker as me” in Villard’s tale. Much of the charming irony, the surprise, the delight disappears, but much as the story loses, it gains by challenging us to abandon our inevitable presentism and returning us forcibly to the Lincoln of Illinois in 1858.

Lincoln was no sucker in our sense of the word, and however much he was aware of his humble origins, he was no “greenhorn” or “simpleton.” By 1858 he was an Illinoisan well aware of his potential liabilities in the larger world, especially for the highest office in the land, and Mary Lincoln was by all accounts improbably ambitious for him. Stripped of its dramatic irony and wonderful punchline, the mid-nineteenth-century meaning of *sucker* inevitably gives Villard’s account more of the hallmarks of an event grounded in its time and place and fewer marks of a story using a powerful word to attract attention to itself and to Lincoln as a storyteller. So grounded—and given the all-but-impossible odds of anyone achieving the highest office in the land—what reporter would have posted the story in 1858 or even 1868? By 1904, however, when Lincoln was a legend, an unremarkable story in 1858 had undergone at least partial transformation and would have permitted, at the very least, punning on *sucker* with its once ordinary but now new and sharper meaning. Wayne Whipple’s 1908 *The Story-life of Lincoln* suggests as much. After reporting Villard’s story, Whipple explains, “‘Sucker’ is a name applied facetiously to a resident of Illinois as ‘Hoosier’ is given to a native of Indiana.” In Lincoln’s day, of course, the name was clearly not facetious, or not necessarily so, and no explanation would have been necessary. With the word’s evolution and changes in audience, however, *sucker* now brought increased dramatic tension to the story. Even if the last line of Villard’s story is authentic, even if Lincoln spoke the exact words Villard reports, the story in 1904 had, willy-nilly, lost part of its
authenticity for an early twentieth-century audience steeped in new meanings for *sucker.*

Villard’s story in 1904 would doubtless also have lost ironies well-known to audiences in 1858. Illinois was, after all, part of the old Northwest Territory, and for the entire first half of the nineteenth century and beyond, much of the rest of the country viewed Illinois as far in the west, poor, primitive, and isolated from the more sophisticated cultures east and south. We have already met Charles Fenno Hoffman’s “wild looking” fellows going to a wedding in the early 1830s, and we have seen *The Boston Daily Atlas’s* 1848 note that Lincoln represented the only Whig district in “poor benighted Illinois.”

Unsurprisingly, the *NewsVault* for the period 1838–1858 is filled with dozens of memorable, sometimes satiric stories reflecting the life and character of the inhabitants of the Sucker State. Stories depicting Illinois’s economic and cultural isolation include a group of sucker neighbors making comic guesses about what “crittur” might be in a large box marked *piano forte,* and who, having never seen a carpet, carefully walk around a “handsome kaliker” lest they “spile it.” Comic stories about yokels from Illinois first visiting large cities include an obstreperous “hero from the Sucker State” in clothing a foot too short for his legs “made in his boyhood, of dingy, yellow linsey-woolsey” now pieced “with all colors . . . to keep pace with his body.” Reports of good-hearted Illinoisans lacking cultivated sensibilities include a Sucker just “out of his native grove” who offers a fellow traveler a toothpick, “a piece of a ‘yarb’ [herb] that grows on the prairie” with the added advantage that our Sucker has himself used it for two weeks and the pick is still in good condition. Stories of stubborn brickheads include an irascible Sucker farmer who opposes a railroad through his property because he thinks the cow-catcher is designed to carry

27. Wayne Whipple, *The Story Life of Lincoln: A Biography Composed of Five Hundred True Stories* (Philadelphia: J. C. Winston, 1908), 283. Henry Llewellyn Williams, *Lincolnicas: Familiar Sayings of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Putnam’s, 1906), 44, also recognizes that Villard’s *sucker* means “Illinoisan” as later writers and scholars typically do not. As early as 1886 Francis Fisher Browne in *The Every-Day Life of Abraham Lincoln* seems unaware that *sucker* is a nickname for Illinoisans. In choosing as a subheading “SOME QUEER CALLERS.—THE TWO TALL ‘SUCKERS’” for a report that “two tall, ungainly fellows, ‘Suckers’ as they were called” visited Lincoln, Browne does not indicate that the two callers were simply two of Lincoln’s fellow Illinoisans. See the Bison reprint, intro. John Y. Simon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 360.

off his cattle. An Illinois judge tells a man puzzled by a 1:00 AM summons that “A stands for after and M for morning.” A “Sucker stump speaker[’s]” oratory is described as a “queer compound of the b’hoyish [Irish] and the backwoods style.” A feature article contrasts political speeches by an Illinoisan and an Indianan in which the Sucker’s purpose is all but lost in nonstandard English, misused words, and digressions while the Hoosier’s is brief, clear, with classical allusion.

To be sure, the nation’s newspapers capture other traits of Illinoisans—stories of bravery and courage, of generosity and humanity, of freedom of spirit and love of life—but just as stories of hoosiers typically feature clever tellers of splendid tall tales, stories of suckers feature unsophisticated characters from the outback. If Lincoln spoke the words Villard attributes to him, Lincoln’s use of the less formal nickname “sucker” rather than “Illinoisan” doubtless evoked more of the railsplitter and stereotypical Illinoisan.

Furthermore, we know


30. That sucker for Illinoisan could, especially in the East, evoke only the uncultured outback, see Graham’s Illustrated Magazine, December 1856:568, and “Proceedings of the Third Day,” Daily National Intelligencer [Washington, DC], June 12, 1848:1. The many tales about back-country Illinoisans in the nation’s newspapers may also explain the OED’s choice of the word simpleton and probably contributed to a conclusion in an 1861 article: “A ‘sucker’ has already been explained to mean a native of Illinois, where the people are said not to be over-bright,” “Americanisms,” Blackwood’s Magazine, April 1861:435. This observation could also have been shaped by John Russell Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States (Boston: Little, Brown, 1860), 130, where Egypt is defined as “A nickname given to southern Illinois, according to some, on account of its fertility; according to others because of the mental darkness of its inhabitants.”
Lincoln was a full Illinoisan by 1858. If poverty was a mark of Illinois, Lincoln in his youth was among the most impoverished; if Illinoisans as a whole lacked education, Lincoln gained his only by dint of self-study and hard work; if comedy in the courts—indecorous as seen by the nation as a whole—was a mark of Illinois, Lincoln’s wit and love of stories added to it; if Illinoisans were known for unkept, ill-fitting clothes, Lincoln was no exception; if the Illinois dialect amused readers of the nation’s newspapers, Lincoln was known to have his share. In short, if Villard’s punch line is Lincoln’s in 1858, it was not without its delightful, gentle ironies: what possible chance might Lincoln have imagined he had of becoming president, coming from a state with third-class status, having a strong sense of limitations imposed by his origins, and knowing his very real cultural and regional attributes of speech, habits of dress, and the like? Yet, just such a genuine Illinois sucker as Lincoln did become president.

If changes in the meaning of sucker have transformed Villard’s story and distorted our window on the past, we have, most of us, been suckered—blinded by our present to an essential historical meaning now lost. Whether a genuine memory of an actual event or not, however, continuing to retell Villard’s story without explicitly warning readers about complexities in the meaning of the word sucker is ahistorical and perpetuates a con, wonderful as the irony and delightful as that con may be to a modern audience.