Figure 1. Ambrotype acquired in 2006 by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. From daguerreotype by Polycarp Von Schneidau, Chicago, Illinois, October 27, 1854. (Image enlarged; actual size 7.5 × 6.25 × 1.5 cm.)
Not Always Such a Whig: Abraham Lincoln’s Partisan Realignment in the 1850s

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Sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum recently purchased a copy of the second-oldest known photograph of Abraham Lincoln, taken in 1854. The dramatic image shows the Springfield attorney seated, clutching a Chicago newspaper while squinting intently at the camera. The hard stare, protruding cheekbones, and tousled, nearly spiked, hair vividly suggest the “lean and hungry look” of an ambitious self-made politician. Yet there is much more to this ambrotype than its remarkable portraiture. There is a fascinating backstory to its provenance, which reveals that the original daguerreotype had been destroyed and that this copy had been misdated for decades because of some self-promotional tampering by a wily newspaper publisher. Yet even more important, this image also provides direct evidence of some covert political action, arguably one of the more significant examples of visual evidence in the entire Lincoln canon. This photograph contains a key that might help unlock the mystery of Lincoln’s partisan strategy as the realignment of the 1850s began.

This might sound like too much hype for a single image, especially since few scholars acknowledge much mystery about Lincoln’s antebellum partisan evolution. The conventional wisdom still holds, as it has for generations, that Lincoln was a devoted Whig who approached the emerging Republicans with caution, fearful that he might be tossed into coalition with radical abolitionists or anti-immigrant Know-Nothings or even old Democratic rivals. The future president himself encouraged this sort of thinking through some deftly worded statements. In his stump speeches in 1854, he called himself “an old whig” and described his position against the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act as “good old whig ground.” “I think I am a whig,” he continued to claim as late as August 1855. When writing an autobiographical sketch for the 1860
campaign, the soon-to-be Republican nominee also made sure to mention that he was “Always a whig in politics.”

But these well-known comments, which have been repeated in numerous books and articles, need to be read carefully, and even then they tell only a fraction of the story. The best way to understand Lincoln’s behavior during the realignment is to look past his own words to seek out more elusive evidence that can better document his actions and put his statements into a more sophisticated context. Then the value of the recently purchased photograph emerges. The newspaper that Lincoln held above his lap was probably the Chicago Democrat, a strange choice for a man who was supposed to be the Whig candidate for state representative in Sangamon County. Adding to the unusual nature of the composition, it was George Schneider, editor of the Illinois Staats-Zeitung newspaper, who had enthusiastically arranged for the original daguerreotype to be taken after he had held some private talks with Lincoln. Additional investigation reveals that Lincoln was meeting with the German immigrant and noted political activist in Chicago at about the same time he was also negotiating with Sangamon County nativists over what was called “fusion” in their local electoral contests. All of this begins to suggest that Lincoln was not such a devoted Whig after all, nor much of a reluctant Republican, but rather that he leapt into the partisan realignment of the 1850s with both feet and with little regard for the old partisan rules of his earlier career.

This argument runs counter to modern Lincoln scholarship that has revived an appreciation for Lincoln’s abiding attachment to the Whigs, his first political party. The century after the Civil War was not kind to the memory of the short-lived Whig Party. Consequently, Lincoln’s association with the movement had become a minor footnote to his political career until major twentieth-century scholars such as David Donald, Gabor Boritt, Daniel Howe, Joel Silbey, and Robert Johannsen worked to reveal in creative and persuasive ways the deep impact that Whiggish ideology and culture had on Lincoln’s worldview from his earliest political days straight through to his White House years.2


But new and reinterpreted evidence suggests that, despite the early intensity of Lincoln’s Whiggery, he was more than willing to abandon the party by the early 1850s.

This story of Lincoln’s political realignment begins in earnest at the Springfield railroad depot on Wednesday, August 9, 1854. According to the editors of Lincoln Day-By-Day that date “marks Lincoln’s re-entry into politics.”

Lincoln’s brief meeting that afternoon with Richard Yates, a local Whig congressman, was pivotal, but not because it signified any “re-entry” into the political arena. “Re-entry” implies that Lincoln had retired from politics, a comment that surely owes too much to Lincoln’s autobiographical spin. In 1859 he recalled for a campaign biography that “I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again.”

It easy to see why Lincoln might have remembered his actions that way, and why it made sense to put his behavior in those kind of heroic, Cincinnatus-at-the-plow terms for nineteenth-century campaign purposes, but the truth was far more complicated.

Lincoln had completed his sole frustrating term in Congress in the spring of 1849, just after he passed his fortieth birthday. Yet within weeks following his return to Springfield, he was lobbying for a mid-level executive appointment that would have taken him right back to Washington. Lincoln did not seek the lucrative commissionership of the General Land Office merely for selfish reasons. He was convinced that the new Whig administration was about to make “an egregious political blunder” in the state of Illinois by rewarding a prominent Chicago attorney with a powerful patronage post that belonged in the hands of a more loyal partisan.


4. Collected Works 3:512. Another version of this line, written in the third person, appears in Lincoln’s June 1860 autobiographical sketch written for John Locke Scripps: “In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri compromise aroused him as he had never been before.” Ibid., 4:67.

5. Letters to Elisha Embree and Richard W. Thompson, May 25, 1849, ibid., 2:51. For the best published study of this episode, see Thomas F. Schwartz, “An Egregious Politi-
scramble for the job involved bitter accusations about lying, a desper-
ate last-minute journey to Washington, a tense conference with
President Zachary Taylor, and subsequent revelations that someone
on the inside had tampered with Lincoln’s recommendation files.
Moreover, all of this aggravation for the retiring congressman came
from a Whig president whom Lincoln had diligently supported at
convention over the aging Henry Clay, his longtime party hero and
“beau ideal of a statesman.”

The whole sordid affair served to sour the future president, not over politics in general, but more precisely
with the limitations of his beloved Whig Party.

Lincoln had always fought against the antiparty tendencies common
among the Whigs. By 1849, however, he seemed almost obsessed by
the need to build a more effective party structure. During the land-
office episode, Lincoln never once denied that his rival, attorney Justin
Butterfield, was qualified for the job. Instead he readily conceded the
point while urging everyone in that rare Whig-controlled administra-
tion (the second and last one for the national party) to remember that
the primary purpose of their appointment power should be to reward
loyalty. “Mr. Butterfield is my friend, is well qualified, and, I suppose,
would be faithful in office,” Lincoln acknowledged to the secretary of
navy, but “when you and I were almost sweating blood to have Genl.
Taylor nominated, this same man was ridiculing the idea.” After But-
terfield secured the appointment and rumors grew that Lincoln was
somehow working to defeat his confirmation, the former congressman
coolly informed Taylor’s secretary of the interior that “I opposed the
appointment of Mr. B. because I believed it would be a matter of dis-
couragement to our active, working friends here, and I opposed it for
no other reason.”

By using the word “here,” Lincoln meant Illinois, but others saw a
more parochial side to his comments. “I think the commissionership
should go north,” President Taylor had told one of Lincoln’s loyal
lieutenants, meaning Chicago. When Lincoln first heard this news,
he responded almost plaintively. "I am in the center," he wrote in a hastily composed memo to the president, "Is the center nothing?—that center which alone has ever given you a Whig representative?" But Lincoln was conveniently ignoring that his party had just lost that congressional seat to the Democrats while other Whigs were gaining ground in northern Illinois. Taylor saw what Lincoln would not yet admit: central Illinois was no longer the center of gravity for opposition to the state's entrenched Democratic Party. Settlers from the New England states and immigrants from Europe were steadily turning young Illinois into a microcosm of the nation, with a northern section that was more populated, diverse, and industrial struggling to assert political control over a once-dominant southern section that was almost entirely agricultural.

Lincoln and other central Illinois Whigs were in danger of becoming relics from a bygone party system. The new state constitution of 1848 had redrawn the legislative map, reducing the once all-powerful Sangamon County delegation from nine seats to merely two. Longtime Springfield political fixtures, such as Edward D. Baker (the namesake of the Lincoln’s third son) and Senator Stephen A. Douglas, were busy relocating to Galena, Chicago, or parts northwest. Whigs did manage to recapture Lincoln’s old congressional seat by 1850, but the new face of their party was Richard Yates, a younger man from Morgan County who had little use for the old Springfield ruling clique. The congressional victory was also overshadowed two years later by three unprecedented Whig victories in northern Illinois congressional contests. Most of those northern victories were the result of secret coordination between Whigs and what were called "Free Democrats"—former Liberty Party men, antislavery Democrats, and Free Soilers—an ad hoc coalition that anticipated the coming Republican Party. All those developments in the early 1850s conspired to send an unmistakable signal to downstate politicians like Abraham Lincoln. They would have to adjust to new political realities or withdraw from the arena.

Though Lincoln later portrayed his reaction as one of withdrawal ("I was losing interest in politics"), he remained engaged in critical ways.


9. Memorandum to Zachary Taylor, June [15?], 1849, ibid., 2:54.

Despite his disappointment over the land-office decision, Lincoln continued to pepper the Whig administration with letters (mostly ignored) recommending candidates for federal positions. He also served on some local party committees and state commissions. Though he skipped the 1852 national convention, Lincoln took to the stump for the national ticket, albeit somewhat reluctantly, owing, he reported “to the hopelessness of the cause.” He also accepted invitations to speak at memorial services following the death of Whig leaders such as Zachary Taylor in 1850 and Henry Clay in 1852—something he would not do for his own father, who died in 1851. All of this might sound pedestrian, but it was part of the normal routine for an antebellum party politician. In truth, the only reason to characterize this period as one of political “retirement” for Lincoln is because he wisely declined to battle Yates for the local congressional seat in either 1850 or 1852 and because he passed on the honor of losing a statewide race as the Whig nominee for governor in 1852.

Still, there is no denying that Lincoln invested more of his time between 1849 and 1854 on professional legal activities than partisan politics. Yet there was also little separation between antebellum law and politics. The legal circuit that Lincoln traveled was essentially the same as the political districts which he stumped. Many of the lawyers and judges who encountered him in the courtrooms later assisted or opposed him in the campaigns of the day. Moreover, the connection between law and politics was never as relevant for Lincoln’s career as during the 1850s. During that period, the state rearranged the circuit court boundaries and made most judgeships elective. Not long after his return from Congress, private attorney Lincoln thereby found himself riding in a new, sprawling, and much more politically minded Eighth Judicial Circuit that stretched northeastward from Springfield through Bloomington. In addition, during the 1850s, the Illinois Supreme Court also began holding sessions in Ottawa, eighty miles southwest of Chicago. As both a frequent circuit rider and a prominent appellate attorney, Lincoln thus increasingly found himself looking northward and making new friends in the state’s fastest-growing counties. Nothing could have benefited his flagging political career more.

Naturally, Lincoln passed over all of those complicated developments when trying to summarize his activities for the period. It was much easier and far smarter politically to craft his autobiographical narrative in more dramatic and principled terms. Nobody needed to know about demographic shifts in Illinois or about the endless intra-

party bickering of the declining Whigs. Instead, they wanted to hear how the repeal of the Missouri Compromise “aroused” Lincoln and set him into battle for the cause of freedom. But if Lincoln’s memory was accurate, then why do we have practically no evidence until August 1854 of his reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act or the repeal of the Missouri Compromise? Stephen Douglas, chairman of the Senate committee on the territories, had introduced his controversial measure to organize the former Louisiana Purchase territories in January. George Schneider, the editor of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* was leading mass protests in Chicago within a week. Not long after, the Illinois legislature held fierce debates in Springfield over the merits of the “Nebraska bill,” as it was then called. Various newspapers editorialized against the measure, which became law in May, and numerous towns across Illinois held raucous public meetings. Yet unless he quietly penned a few of the editorials for his local newspaper that we don’t know about, Lincoln essentially kept silent until the fall campaign was set to begin.12

All of these details about Lincoln’s so-called “retirement” from politics matter because they provide essential context for his August 9, 1854, meeting with Yates. They reveal him to be neither a happily devoted Whig nor a suddenly passionate antislavery crusader. He was instead a practical politician struggling to organize a chaotic era. Consider that the only reason we know about his encounter with Yates is because an annoyed Lincoln was compelled to lecture his congressman in writing over the lack of follow-through on their discussions. The tone of the letter was striking. “I am disappointed at not having seen or heard from you since I met you more than a week ago at the railroad depot here,” Lincoln wrote sharply on August 18, 1854. “I wish to have the matter we spoke of settled and working to its consummation,” adding, “I understand that our friend B. S. Edwards is entirely satisfied now, and when I can assure myself of this perfectly I would like, by your leave, to get an additional paragraph into the Journal, about as follows.” Lincoln then slyly provided draft text for an announcement touting Yates “as the Whig candidate for this congressional district” that was supposed to appear in the *Springfield Illinois Journal* claiming it had been done “without consultation with him” and which closed by suggesting there should be “unanimous acquiescence” to his nomination “without

12. Lincoln biographer Michael Burlingame plans to argue in a forthcoming study that Lincoln did produce dozens of anonymous editorials against the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the first six months of 1854. My reading of the *Illinois Journal* suggests a different conclusion. But regardless, it is fair to question how “aroused” Lincoln was if the only evidence of his opinion about the Nebraska controversy was offered anonymously.
a convention.” This is not a letter from someone re-entering politics, but stands as the kind of document seen only from an experienced and very self-assured party leader who had never really left the game.13

The real question is, Which party did Lincoln now represent? He was proposing to call for Yates’s reelection as a “Whig candidate” but without an official party convention. Why dispense with a convention? The local Democrats had just held theirs.14 The reference to Benjamin S. Edwards, a prominent Springfield attorney and son of the first territorial governor, suggests an intriguing possibility. Edwards was at that time a Know-Nothing, a prime patron of the state’s first official nativist newspaper, the Springfield Capital Enterprise. Nativism, or fear of immigrants, was an issue as arousing to many Illinois residents as the Nebraska bill was supposed to be for Lincoln. Edwards was also the brother of Lincoln’s brother-in-law and well acquainted with the future president. Lincoln, who always claimed to despise nativism, would later explain that his reluctance to take a public stand against local nativists was because they were “mostly my old political and personal friends.”15 Edwards would fit easily into that category. In his discussions with Yates, Lincoln was probably outlining a strategy for how to make covert fusion between the Whigs and Know-Nothings more workable. That would explain both the advantage of dispensing with party conventions and the need for deference towards Edwards.

Some further evidence for this behind-the-scenes fusion effort comes from the text of the Yates announcement as it appeared in the Journal just a few days later. Under the heading “Hon. Richard Yates,” the newspaper reported only that the incumbent “Has yielded to the solicitation of his friends and consented to be a candidate for re-election to Congress, subject to the decision of a convention should one be held.”16 In their annotation to Lincoln’s original letter, the editors of his Collected Works claim that the Journal announced Yates’s candidacy “in approximately the manner of Lincoln’s suggestion,” though any discerning political observer would immediately note which critical word was now missing. “Whig” party identification had suddenly vanished. That could not have been an accident, and coupled with the fact that the Whig party held no conventions that autumn for the congressional district or Sangamon County, it raises

15. Abraham Lincoln to Owen Lovejoy, August 11, 1855, Collected Works, 2:316.
a critical question about Lincoln’s partisanship at the very outset of the realignment.

Concurrent with the Yates announcement, the Journal also posted the names of Abraham Lincoln and his former law partner Stephen T. Logan as their recommended ticket for the county’s two state legislative positions. The Journal had been a Whig newspaper and still somewhat awkwardly proclaimed itself a Whig organ. But the decision to announce candidates without party labels or convention endorsements, to focus so heavily on the unpopularity of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and to bring forward a former congressman (Lincoln) and Springfield’s leading attorney (Logan) as local nominees for the General Assembly—all of those factors suggest an awareness that partisanship was already in transition and that carefully defined rhetoric and strong candidates would have to substitute for an absence of formal party organization in the coming campaign. In July, Springfield’s Democratic newspaper had accused the Whigs of “making up a new party” that included abolitionists and Know-Nothings. In response, the Journal had denied that charge, but in doing so made clear that the substance of the accusation—namely that Whigs were willing to “stand with anybody,” as Lincoln would later put it—was essentially true. “There is a movement among the people,” the newspaper acknowledged, “a spontaneous one—which Whigs cannot control.”

At least around Springfield, the most spontaneous “movement among the people” during this period was Know-Nothingism. The Know-Nothings had their roots in secret, anti-immigrant or nativist fraternal organizations that became popular across parts of the eastern United States after Irish and German immigration rates to the country had exploded during the 1840s. The largest of the groups was the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, which had been founded in 1849 by Charles B. Allen but was expanded more dramatically after James W. Barker took control in 1852. By the spring of 1854, Know-Nothings, as they often were called, were beginning to score stunning political upsets in eastern states such as Pennsylvania. They were less organized and powerful in Illinois, but by the early summer of 1854, state newspapers were taking notice of their presence. On June 10, 1854, the Chicago Literary Budget reported that “Some folks think pretty loud that there is a body of men somewhere around who are rather more than sum pumpkins... The name of Know-

Nothing is attached to them but nobody knows anything about such an organization. Travel from Dan to Beersheba and no such body of men can be found, but that there is something and somebody, somewhere and sometime, is quite certain.”\(^\text{18}\)

Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone, this was not merely a casual observation. The editor of the \textit{Literary Budget} was thirty-four-year-old William W. Danenhower, who soon became the official statewide leader of the nativist movement and also a political friend and ally of Lincoln’s. Danenhower’s name rarely appears in scholarship about Lincoln or Illinois in the 1850s, but he was an important figure during the realignment. Originally a Whig and a bookseller from Philadelphia, Danenhower had arrived in Chicago in August 1847. He soon began publishing his \textit{Literary Budget} as a vehicle to promote his bookstore. He was a cheerleader for nativism throughout 1854, and by the next year had become a leader among Chicago Know-Nothings. He helped the movement win the city’s mayoral contest in 1855—their single most impressive political achievement in Illinois—and then served as president of the statewide American Party during the 1856 election cycle.\(^\text{19}\)

When the nativist political movement collapsed following that election, Danenhower threw his support to Lincoln and the Republicans. During the Civil War, Danenhower moved to Washington and joined the administration as an auditor in the Treasury Department. Later, he became wealthy from real-estate investments in the district. A recently re-discovered letter from President Lincoln to Danenhower in March 1861 documents their curious relationship. After apologizing for having “turned you away without an interview” because of too much pressing business, the new president closed a short note to the former Know-Nothing leader with the careful phrase, “No less your friend than ever.”\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) William W. Danenhower to Alfred T. Andreas, February 19, 1883, Alfred T. Andreas Papers, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago. See also Cole, 68. See also Danenhower’s obituary in the \textit{Washington Post}, which does not mention his connection to the Know-Nothings: “Death of W. W. Danenhower,” May 29, 1894, p. 1.

It is unlikely that Lincoln and Danenhower were on such friendly
terms during the summer of 1854, but Lincoln was just as cognizant
of the Know-Nothing presence as Danenhower. Lincoln was not only
concerned about Benjamin Edwards and his state of mind on the con-
gressional race, but he also had to deal with several local nativists
who wanted to offer public endorsements in the congressional and
legislative contests. Lincoln’s running mate for the legislature, Ste-
phen Logan, was reported to be a Know-Nothing. Dr. William Jayne,
the Lincoln family physician and a local Know-Nothing leader, later
claimed that he was the one who had successfully convinced Lincoln
to put his name forward as a legislative candidate. Jayne’s recollection
is ambiguous, though, and makes no mention of the Know-Nothing
connection. It is also melodramatic and difficult to believe in places.
He recalls that Lincoln was “almost crying” over the decision and that
it was Mary Lincoln who had initially vetoed the announcement.21

However, another recollection by a lesser-known Springfield-area
nativist does ring true. Buried in the 1896 volume of the Iowa Historical
Record is an account from Richard H. Ballinger claiming that he met
with both Lincoln and Logan in the summer of 1854 as part of a Know-
Nothing endorsement committee that included Samuel Wolgamut
and a third figure whose name Ballinger could no longer recall. Logan
gave them a “pleasant interview” and accepted gratefully. Lincoln,
on the other hand, was much less enthusiastic. Ballinger admitted
that he could not remember all the words verbatim but reported that
Lincoln informed them that “they might vote for him if they wanted
to; so might the Democrats” but that “he was not in sentiment with
this new party.”22

According to Ballinger’s account, the candidate and experienced
attorney then proceeded to cross-examine the group. “Do [Native
Americans] not wear breech-clout and carry tomahawk?” Lincoln
asked innocently. “We pushed them from their homes and now turn
upon others not fortunate enough to come over as early as we or our
forefathers.” In characteristic fashion, Lincoln also shared a humorous

Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and State-
ments about Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 266.
22. Ballinger’s story is included as an excerpted letter in Noah Levering, “Recollec-
tions of Abraham Lincoln,” Iowa Historical Record 12 (July 1896): 495–7. Both Ballinger
and Wolgamut appear as regular voters in Sangamon County poll books from this
period. See Sugar Creek Poll Books, 1854, Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD),
University of Illinois at Springfield. Ballinger was the father of Richard A. Ballinger, the
Secretary of the Interior in the Taft Administration who became embroiled in a famous
controversy with noted conservationist Gifford Pinchot in 1909–10.
story to illustrate his point. “When the Know-nothing party first came up, I had an Irishman, Patrick by name, hoeing in my garden. One morning I was there with him, and he said, ‘Mr. Lincoln, what about the Know-nothings?’ I explained to him that they would possibly carry a few elections and disappear, and I asked Pat why he was not born in this country. ‘Faith, Mr. Lincoln,’ he replied, ‘I wanted to be, but my mother wouldn’t let me.’”

“I wished many times before Mr. Lincoln was through,” reported a chastened Ballinger, “that I had refused to serve on the committee.” While it is possible to interpret these recollected accounts as confirmation that Lincoln resisted the Know-Nothings and saw himself primarily as a Whig, that interpretation would miss an important nuance. Lincoln opposed nativism but worked with nativists. In other words, the meeting itself had significance. What Lincoln avoided in 1854 was any open fusion between Whigs and Know-Nothings, which he feared would alienate strongly antislavery German immigrants such as George Schneider and potentially divide the opposition forces. As his concern about Benjamin Edwards and his discussion with Ballinger indicated, he certainly did not ignore the Know-Nothings who considered him an ally. Lincoln may have even accepted a secret arrangement with Know-Nothings but was at the very least willing to play down, or even abandon, his Whig identity in order to forge a broad-based coalition with them that might finally defeat the Democrats and, in particular, their statewide leader and his longtime nemesis, Senator Stephen Douglas.

Evidence for this view of Lincoln’s practical and forward-looking attitude about the realignment comes from several different sources. Once Lincoln took to the stump in late August at Winchester, Scott County, he no longer focused on traditional Whig economic doctrines. Instead, he spent more than two hours discussing the “great wrong and injustice of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the extension of slavery into free territory.” A new focus meant new friends. Ten days later, Lincoln wrote to John M. Palmer, a Democratic state senator from Carlinville who had been loudly complaining about the “Nebraska test” which had been imposed on his party by Senator Douglas. Lincoln’s letter oozes with first-rate political seduction. “Had your party omitted to make Nebraska a test of party fidelity,” the former Whig leader claimed, “you probably would have been the Democratic candidate for congress in the district.” “You deserved it,”

Lincoln added, noting smoothly, “In that case I should have been quit, happy that Nebraska was to be rebuked at all events.” Lincoln admitted that he would have voted for the “whig candidate” but stated somewhat immodestly, “I should have made no speeches, written no letters; and you would have been elected by at least a thousand majority.” On the same day, Lincoln sent a quick note to a longtime local Whig leader from Palmer’s senatorial district, suggesting slyly that he “press Palmer hard” to give “an anti-Nebraska speech.” Five days later, Lincoln spoke to a “German Anti-Nebraska meeting” in Bloomington. Two weeks after that, he returned to Bloomington, crashed a Democratic meeting, and challenged Douglas to a joint debate. The senator declined, and angrily denounced Lincoln, the Know-Nothings, and what Douglas termed the “Black Republicans.” Lincoln responded that he “Knew Nothing in regard to the Know-Nothings,” even trying to deny that they existed, before calmly announcing that while Douglas “might call names and pander to prejudice,” he “would not bandy about such language.”

Throughout the 1854 campaign, Lincoln, ostensibly a Whig candidate in Sangamon County for the General Assembly, would continue to ignore both his district lines and old partisan ties in this manner. By the end of the contest, Lincoln had spoken in every northern Illinois congressional district except the northernmost one and had talked to meetings of nearly every possible partisan stripe. Not once during the general election campaign did Lincoln explicitly call himself a Whig, but rather “an old whig,” and even then it was a frame of reference he used sparingly. The omission of party labels was not insignificant. The wife of one legislative candidate recalled that during the contest Lincoln had advised her husband to “be all things to all men, as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove, but always as non-committal as truth will allow.” In that fashion, Lincoln was able to help direct the fusion of anti-Douglas and anti-Nebraska forces without having to publicly acknowledge doing so. At least within central Illinois, that was widely considered to be the shrewdest possible course.

Figures in other parts of the state were not nearly so reticent about fusion. A group of northern Illinois fusionists had met in Springfield in early October during the state fair and tried to organize an official

statewide anti-Nebraska or Republican party. Impressed by the power of Lincoln’s stump speech and probably already aware of his behind-the-scenes fusion efforts in central Illinois, the group had named him to their Republican State Central Committee without obtaining his consent. Several weeks later, after receiving official notice of his appointment, Lincoln politely demurred. He was always willing to “stand with anybody,” as he claimed on the stump, but he did not want to define exactly where they stood together as an organization until after the hurly-burly of the election contest had concluded.

Not everyone else in the downstate campaign was so disciplined. The *Capital Enterprise*, Springfield’s Know-Nothing newspaper, had endorsed Yates publicly, over Lincoln’s objections. During the final days of the campaign, Democrats consequently spread rumors among English-born immigrants that Yates was a Know-Nothing. Traveling around the district, Lincoln noticed the trouble and warned his candidate. “I learned that the English in Morgan county have become dissatisfied about No-Nothingism,” he wrote, in a subtle rebuke since Morgan was Yates’s home turf. A second, more hurried note followed the next day warning that there was definitely “a story which may harm you if not averted—namely, that you have been a Know-Nothing.” This sort of problem was exactly why Lincoln had been warning against open association with the Know-Nothings. German and English immigrants in central Illinois held a significant number of votes that might be lost to anti-Nebraska candidates if distracted by the nativism controversy. Lincoln urged Yates to have printed denials distributed in the largely foreign-born areas of the district just before election day.

Yates once again was slow to heed Lincoln’s advice, however, and ended up losing a close race. By contrast, Lincoln won his contest, along with Stephen Logan and dozens of other fusion or anti-Nebraska legislative candidates. The regular Illinois Democrats won the only statewide race (for treasurer), but lost their majority in the congressional delegation and their control of the legislature. The election results reveal an important story. Fusion was quite real. Lincoln and Logan were both elected with nearly identical majorities. These results clearly suggest that there had been coordination. If Lincoln had not been receiving

33. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon’s Life of Lincoln* (1888; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1983), 301. Lincoln received 2,143 votes while Logan received
support from local Know-Nothings, then he should have trailed Logan considerably. Perhaps the best evidence for the extent of the fusion effort in central Illinois comes from how the participants themselves reported the results. Writing to Orville Browning, an old friend and longtime Whig political leader from Quincy, Lincoln described their various political victories without invoking the word “Whig” once. “It looks as if Anti Nebraska will have the H. R.–the Senate doubtful,” he noted while describing the outcome for the legislative contests.\textsuperscript{34} The \textit{Journal} reported the results in equally forward-looking terms, specifically labeling Lincoln and Logan as “Fusionists” from Sangamon County.\textsuperscript{35}

Fusion was certainly real, but it was still regional. The treasurer’s race proved that anti-Nebraska forces had not yet figured out how to manage a statewide triumph. That would be Lincoln’s next great achievement. Almost immediately, he seized upon the good news from the polls to announce himself as a candidate for the U.S. Senate. In those years, state legislatures selected U.S. senators, and the legislative election returns clearly illustrated that James Shields, the incumbent senator up for reelection, was in deep trouble. Shields was an Irish Catholic immigrant who had been loyal to Douglas and his Nebraska bill. Nobody could have made an easier target for the fusionists.

Over the next few months, Lincoln would write dozens of letters, some using the Whig label and some quite consciously avoiding it. He dispatched loyal lieutenants—new friends from the northern end of the Eighth Judicial Circuit such as Judge David Davis and attorney Leonard Swett—to reach across party and regional lines and cultivate a broad coalition on his behalf. Some of Lincoln’s peers called him the Whig candidate for Senate. Others identified him as a Fusionist or Anti-Nebraska leader. More than a few considered him to be the Know-Nothing candidate. By the end of the canvass, Lincoln was writing freely in his notebooks about a “Republican organization” that held the key to his nomination as senator and included nearly all of the various party factions opposed to Douglas.\textsuperscript{36} By February 1855,
Lincoln had received nearly the entire “Republican” endorsement, with the exception of a few anti-Nebraska Democrats holdouts led by his previous top target for partisan conversion, state senator John Palmer. Without those Democratic votes, Lincoln could not win. Despite a host of intricate maneuvers, the new Republican organization simply could not move the anti-Nebraska Democrats. So the Republicans moved on their own, under Lincoln’s shrewd direction, electing Lyman Trumbull, the candidate of the anti-Nebraska Democrats, as the new senator from Illinois. By taking that action, Lincoln not only secured the first statewide Republican victory in Illinois but also established himself as the emerging party’s most important leader.

Yet anyone familiar with the scholarly literature on this period knows this is not at all how historians have described Lincoln’s partisan evolution. In Prelude to Greatness (1962), still the best book about this period in Lincoln’s career, Don Fehrenbacher writes that, “It was as a Whig, therefore, that Lincoln plunged into the unusual political campaign of 1854, and as a Whig that he became a candidate for the state House of Representatives.”37 Robert Johannsen goes even further in Lincoln, The South, and Slavery (1991), arguing that Lincoln saw the campaign against the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a way to “bring new life and energy to the Whigs, restore the tradition of leadership that had died with Clay and Webster two years before, and prepare the way for a glorious comeback in the presidential election of 1856.”38 Most historians have Lincoln “clinging” to his Whig identity until sometime in 1855 or 1856.39 Doris Kearns Goodwin writes that it was not until “early 1856,” when “Lincoln decided that Illinois should follow New York and Ohio in organizing the various anti-Nebraska elements into the new Republican Party.”40

The trouble with those interpretations is that they take some things too literally and others not literally enough. Fehrenbacher claims that Lincoln entered the 1854 contest as a Whig, but if so, it was without any Whig convention and only with an announcement from a newspaper that would soon label his victory as one by a “Fusionist.”

Johanssen might very well be correct about Lincoln’s personal desire for a Whig “comeback,” but there is nothing in Lincoln’s writing that documents the interpretation explicitly. Goodwin does not feel comfortable using the word “Republican” to describe Lincoln until 1856, but the conventions which she refers to in “organizing the various anti-Nebraska elements into the new Republican Party”—an editors’ meeting at Decatur and the statewide convention in Bloomington—absolutely refused to use the word “Republican” themselves. Both at Decatur and Bloomington, the “Republicans” in 1856 still called themselves “Anti-Nebraska.” They did not officially adopt the Republican label on a statewide basis until the famous “House Divided” convention in Springfield on June 16, 1858.

The lesson here might be that sometimes an obsession with labels can obscure the real picture. Nobody during this period, Lincoln included, was entirely consistent in the use of party identification. But if you read the words and actions of each figure carefully enough, then a clear pattern can emerge. From the beginning of the partisan realignment of the 1850s, Abraham Lincoln pursued a policy and an outreach strategy that was eminently Republican and never Whiggish. On policy, he was exclusive, speaking forcefully about the containment of slavery and little else. On strategy, however, he was relentlessly inclusive, aligning himself with Democrats, Know-Nothings, and Free Soilers whenever he could. Almost everything he did during this period contributed to the demise of the old Whig Party and toward the formation of the statewide Republican Party. There is no single document that fully spells out this plan in Lincoln’s own words, but the 1854 photograph might. That image of a seated Lincoln has beguiled historians and continues to hold at least two great mysteries relevant to the subject of this essay. First, When exactly was it taken? And second, Which newspaper was Lincoln really holding above his lap? For years, historians misdated the photograph to 1858, because someone, presumably publisher Joseph Medill, had altered one of the copies to show what appeared to be a masthead from the Chicago Press & Tribune (which had adopted its name in 1858 before becoming the Chicago Daily Tribune after 1860). Detective work by the late Lloyd Ostendorf subsequently proved that the format of the masthead in the image did not match the Press & Tribune masthead. In addition, the known photographer, Polycarpus von Schneidau, left Chicago after the death of his wife in August 1855 and did not return until he was dying himself in 1859.41 George Schneider, the man who arranged

for the photograph, always claimed that it had been taken in 1854. Currently, most scholars believe that the likeliest date of composition was either October 27 or 28, 1854, when Lincoln was in Chicago for a major anti-Nebraska speech. Yet according to Schneider’s daughter, the photograph was “taken in the presence of my father, August 9th 1854.” She recalled being told about the specific date and the exact circumstances. “Lincoln and he had dined together, walking down Lake St., a photographer recognized them and invited both of them to have their pictures taken and this one was the first copy.”

Secondhand recollections of this nature are notoriously untrustworthy, but suppose that the Schneider family tradition is correct. Suddenly, Lincoln’s “re-entry” encounter with Richard Yates on August 9, 1854, takes on an entirely new dimension. Perhaps Lincoln and Yates had conducted a final, private consultation at the Springfield depot after riding together that day on the newly opened Alton & Chicago Railroad line. Maybe they had been in Chicago earlier to represent central Illinois at a high-level meeting about statewide fusion. This is not the imaginative leap that it might at first seem. There were efforts to organize a secret meeting in Chicago in early August to discuss statewide coordination among the opponents of the Nebraska bill. We know about this because of a rarely cited letter from Congressman Elihu B. Washburne to Zebina Eastman, editor of the Chicago Free West. “The whigs in Congress from Illinois have talked over the very thing you suggest,” Washburne wrote to Eastman, an antislavery editor, in early July, “and we all agree with you that in our State we should discard all party names for the occasion and unite all the elements and make a straight-out fight against Nebraska and slavery extension.” Washburne went on to note that “We expect to be in Chicago, all at the same time, about the first of August and hope then and there to be able to consult all friends in regard to a general state movement against Nebraska.” Lincoln might have attended that gathering, perhaps even carrying his standard message about the value of “standing with anybody” while still remaining “as non-committal as truth will allow,” and then he might well have dined with George Schneider afterward in order to discuss strategies for winning over German voters. We just don’t know.

But the second mystery is even more significant. If not the Press & Tribune, then which newspaper was Lincoln holding above his lap?

42. Statement by Clara Schneider Berger, attached to ambrotype by Polycarpus von Schneidau, Lincoln in 1854, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.
43. Elihu B. Washburne to Zebina Eastman, July 5, 1854, Zebina Eastman Papers.
While attending a reunion for the Bloomington Convention in 1900, George Schneider told attendees that it had been the *Chicago Democrat* in Lincoln’s hand. The gathering was designed to recall the statewide anti-Nebraska Convention held in that city in May 1856, which the organizers of the reunion were promoting as the “birth” of the Republican Party in Illinois. Schneider attended, bringing with him a copy of the 1854 “relic” that everyone “viewed with deepest interest.” The aging editor (and now banker) recalled that he was having dinner (meaning lunch) with the Springfield attorney when a photographer “stepped in and asked permission to take Lincoln’s picture.” Schneider explained that the newspaper which Lincoln was reading was the *Chicago Democrat*, a journal owned by John Wentworth and very important to the fusionists because “Long John” had recently broken with Douglas over the Nebraska bill.44

The recollected stories from Schneider and his daughter are both tricky to use, yet generally consistent and believable, and each can be loosely corroborated. Photographer von Schneidau was an extremely well-educated immigrant from Sweden, who had been an army officer forced to leave his country because he married a woman of Jewish origins. Contemporary accounts of von Schneidau depict a handsome, cultivated man, just the sort who might be deft enough to recognize some potential customers and charming enough to win their consent for a picture.45 George Schneider was an exceptionally important figure that year, someone that Lincoln would have been determined to meet whenever he was in Chicago. And finally, we know just enough about Lincoln’s schedule in August 1854 to make a case for either dating of the photograph.

If we could only determine with certainty that Lincoln was holding a copy of the *Chicago Democrat* in 1854, regardless of whether it was in August or October, then it might well demolish the enduring portrait of Lincoln as a traditional Whig still clinging to his old partisan affiliation during the early phase of the great realignment. No old line Whig would have allowed himself to be photographed during that campaign holding a Democratic newspaper. But even without certainty on the composition of the critical image, it should be clear enough that Abraham Lincoln threw himself into the 1854 campaign not as Springfield Whig but as an aspiring statewide political leader with eyes on a bigger prize then rebuilding a dying local party machine. Whether or not the

realignment moment has been fully captured by a rare photograph, the pattern is hard to deny. Lincoln brought to the 1854 campaign the same kind of hard-edged discipline, sweeping ambition, and earnest attitude about slavery extension that would soon vault his new improbable Republican organization into both state and national power.