Many readers of this journal are aware of the claim that only Jesus Christ has been the subject of more books than Abraham Lincoln has. Both scholars and authors of popular works expend no small amount of ink and energy diagnosing and debating the state of Lincoln letters. But what about the interpretations of Lincoln that exist outside book covers? A roundtable discussion that took up the subject of current and emerging trends in Lincoln-related public history was held over the course of three weeks in August and September of 2018, via a shared online document and follow-up emails. In this presentation of that conversation, some responses have been lightly edited for clarity.

Sarah Jencks of Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C., started the discussion. Ford’s remains one of the highest-profile Lincoln sites, nestled as it is in the heart of the capital and within walking distance of Pennsylvania Avenue, several Smithsonian museums, and the National Mall. The site is more than just exhibits sitting motionless in a historic building; Ford’s has been an operating theater since reopening in 1968, and the public historians there maintain a robust schedule of tours and programs that connect to the surrounding neighborhood.  

Also joining the conversation were two of the three hosts of The Railsplitter: The Abraham Lincoln Podcast. As of September 2018, the Railsplitter team had produced sixty-six hour-long episodes, about one per week. Statistics show over fifteen thousand downloads of the podcast episodes since the series debuted in June 2017. Railsplitter productions include thematic episodes such as “Abraham Lincoln and Education” (episode sixty-one), interviews with scholars such

1. The Ford’s Theatre performance schedule is available at https://www.fords.org/visit/historic-site/theatre/. Learn more about the site’s tours and historical programs at https://www.fords.org/visit/special-tours-events/.
as Ibram X. Kendi (episode eleven), and travel-and-tourist-themed editions such as the recent look at Lincoln sites in Springfield, Illinois (episode sixty-six). The “Railsplitters” are not averse to occasionally irreverent approaches to talking about the sixteenth president, as evident in the episode “Lincoln, the Civil War, and Star Wars,” in which the hosts imagine Lincoln and his contemporaries as Star Wars characters (episode twenty-seven). The show’s opening theme features a mash-up of Barack Obama invoking the mythos of Lincoln the humble railsplitter and the iconic line delivered by the time-traveling Lincoln of Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure (1989): “Be excellent to each other . . . and party on, dudes!”

Tim Townsend of the Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield rounded out the discussion. Tim is synonymous with the Lincoln Home; as historian and chief of interpretation, he developed and continues to coordinate the Spirit of Lincoln Youth Leadership Academy, an innovative outreach program that connects local youth with the historical interpretation of African American history relating to Lincoln and his world and legacy. The Lincoln Home is a centerpiece of the Lincoln heritage tourism industry, as evident in the over two hundred thousand annual visitors to the site. Yet a closer look at Lincoln Home visitor statistics demonstrate the challenges faced by public historians engaged in Lincoln-related work. Visitation crested in 2009, at 464,074, but has dipped to just over 200,000 in 2013 and most recently 232,265 in 2017. The fortunes of Lincoln Home visitor-ship are indicative of the ways that contemporary concerns impact the public’s engagement with Lincoln. For example, Steven Spielberg’s movie Lincoln (2012) likely contributed to robust attendance in 2013, while the state of Illinois’ budget impasse of 2015–16 harmed Springfield tourism in general.

Townsend also points toward possible bigger-picture and ongoing challenges to engaging a younger and more diverse audience. Other roundtable participants touch on this issue as well. Attracting new audiences—that, demographically, look more like the broad cross-section of American society—is needed both for a healthy perspective on historical interpretation and for long-term sustainability.

2. Learn more about The Railsplitter Podcast, download episodes, and subscribe at https://therailsplitter.podbean.com/.

3. Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Annual Park Recreation Visit (1972 to Last Calendar Year), National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics: https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/Park/LIHO
DEVIN, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SPRINGFIELD (UIS): In a few sentences, tell us who you are, your status as a Lincoln-focused public historian, and your path to being one.

SARAH JENCKS, FORD’S THEATRE: I am the director of education and interpretation at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C., a position I’ve held in similar form for more than eleven years. Before coming to Ford’s, I was a middle school history teacher and an arts education administrator, with a focus on theatre. I have a master’s degree in education, and as an undergraduate, I studied American civilization with a focus on the history of the arts in this country and a real emphasis on interdisciplinary thinking. This farrago of experiences and expertise has turned out to prepare me very well for my current role. The role of public historian, however, is one I have embraced since I took my job rather than beforehand.

DEVIN, UIS: Thanks for starting the conversation, Sarah. I’m curious to hear if any others among us took a less-than-traditional route to public history, and what unexpected interpretive strengths it developed. For me, years of retail and service industry experience probably helped me to be hired for my first public history job as an archives technician in the researcher services branch of the National Archives, just a stone’s throw from Ford’s Theatre.

MARY FINCHER, THE RAILSPLITTER: I am one of three cohosts on The Railsplitter: The Abraham Lincoln Podcast. I also have a Twitter account (“Civil War Fangirl” @miss_bellatrix) where I tweet about Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, as well as a blog about the same subject matter (https://cwfangirl.wordpress.com). I’ve been into Lincoln and the Civil War for thirty years now (since I was six). Being Canadian, I wasn’t taught Lincoln and the Civil War in school, but luckily my family let me embrace my passion, and I was lucky to have books to read about the subjects. Although I’ve been a member of Twitter for about ten years now, I began heavily tweeting about Lincoln and the Civil War only about four years ago. I joined the Railsplitter Podcast about a year ago. Although my university degree is in classical studies and anthropology, my passion for learning about Lincoln and the Civil War has always been something I’ve studied. Twitter and my blog, along with the podcast, have allowed me to dive deeper into the subject matter and learn so much more about it. I’ve learned not just through doing my own research but in discussions I have on Twitter and with my cohosts Nick and Jeremy on the podcast. The Lincoln community
on Twitter and Facebook is something that I’ve very much come to embrace and learn so much from.

JEREMY, THE RAILspliTTER: I am another of the “Railsplitters.” I cocreated the podcast and cohost it with my pals Mary and Nick. I have a master’s degree in teaching and one in educational leadership, and I am a doctoral candidate in curriculum and instruction with a primary focus on culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracist education. I am the curriculum director for a high school in Illinois and spent seven years as an American history teacher before that. I have been a Lincoln enthusiast as long as I can remember, as every good Illinoisan should be. Significant events for me are a family trip to Civil War battlefields when I was ten and my forty-plus trips to Springfield as an adult. I have thoroughly enjoyed connecting with the Lincoln community as the quasi-historian, quasi-journalist, and full-on enthusiast that podcasting has allowed me to be.


DEVIN, UIS: Thanks for the introductions. As for me, I’m an assistant professor of United States and public history at the University of Illinois Springfield. I’ve been here since 2015, after completing my doctorate at Loyola University Chicago. While my “traditional” research interests run toward twentieth-century urban and political history, I am at heart a public history generalist. Before joining academia, I worked at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and did a stint at the Pritzker Military Library and Museum in Chicago. These days, I serve on a number of advisory boards and boards of directors, including the Abraham Lincoln Association. Like many in the profession, Lincoln and the Civil War were my gateway into a life of history work. Family legend holds that on my first visit to the Lincoln Memorial as a tot, I went out of my way to “correct” some probably arcane interpretive details offered by the park guide. If that now-retired interpreter is reading: I’m sorry.

Enough about me; let’s learn more from our roundtable. Generally speaking, what do you think are the most important and interesting recent trends in interpreting Lincoln and Lincoln’s world for the public?

SARAH, FORD’S THEATRE: The most important Lincoln-related book I’ve read recently is John E. Washington’s They Knew Lincoln, which Kate
Masur heroically persuaded Oxford University Press to reissue last winter. I bring it up because the thing that I am most excited about as we interpret Lincoln and his world for the public is how Lincoln can be a starting point for understanding so much more about his world. He both made the world he lived in and was certainly made by it. *They Knew Lincoln* is a memoir and an oral history of the African American men and women who worked for, lived near, and admired Lincoln during his lifetime, with a particular emphasis on the world of Civil War Washington. It gives us insight into Lincoln, but more important to me, it paints pictures of people who—because they knew Lincoln—come to stand for the many more whose life stories go unremembered and untold in public history.

DEVIN, UIS: That seems like an important point, about Washington and Masur’s effort to use Lincoln’s life as a starting point to discuss much more. Lincoln biographies are legion, and Spielberg’s film gave us a close look at the man himself. Now, perhaps, the historiographical and interpretive pendulum is swinging back toward the world of Lincoln as opposed to the inner workings of Lincoln. But I’m not a Lincoln scholar, so other thoughts?

JEREMY, *The RailSplitter*: I think two recent watershed moments for the public engagement with Lincoln are Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals* and Spielberg’s (come on, we really mean Day-Lewis’s) *Lincoln*. I heard much more dialogue, interest, interpretation, and misinterpretation around those releases than any others of the past few decades. I distinctly remember people overstating the degree to which Lincoln worked with his rivals because they saw the book’s title on best-seller lists as well as folks connecting with all of Lincolniana based on the last few months of his life as shown by Hollywood. I am a fan of both works, but I find the conundrum of being excited about people talking about Lincoln while tolerating oversimplification of a complicated man to be fascinating.

The most important recent development in the public understanding of Lincoln? For me, without question, it is the phenomenon of two distinctly different political platforms laying claim to him. Whether the left can lay claim to him is debatable, but I believe it is vital to his legacy for historians to clearly articulate the path of Lincoln’s Republican Party and how it became what it is today. There’s a ton of public interest around Lincoln as a Republican, and I feel historians can do great work in drawing those lines.

MARY, *The RailSplitter*: I agree with Jeremy about an increased interest in Lincoln following the movie *Lincoln* and Goodwin’s *Team of
Rivals. Another event that sticks out as having rekindled an interest in Lincoln is the 150th anniversary of his assassination in 2015. Coverage of that commemoration was so well done, and places like Ford’s Theatre made excellent use of social media to allow access to a wide variety of audiences.

Jeremy raises an excellent point about two different political parties laying claim to him. There is much discussion about this debate, and I see it as something that can make more people want to learn about Lincoln and, in turn, the history of both parties.

DEVIN, UIS: What are some of the advantages and disadvantages to teaching about Lincoln at public history sites, compared with traditional “book” histories?

MARY, THE RAILSLITTER: I think a huge advantage is having social media. You can reach a much wider audience than before. It allows for great discussions. It’s not just a one-on-one thing as it is with a traditional book (although I firmly believe books are still needed and reading them is just as important as it ever was). People are able to be engaged with Lincoln and his history, be it on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Another advantage is you are able to engage people who may not be inclined to pick up a book and read it. Or people who just have a mild interest in Lincoln but have not read a book about him. They could come away from the experience wanting to know more about Lincoln and then read a book. From there they would hopefully want to seek out more information.

One disadvantage with the podcast specifically is that not everyone listens to podcasts. There is a similar disadvantage with physical sites too, in that people have to travel there. Distance and money can keep people from visiting, but with the advent of social media, the world is becoming a smaller place.

DEVIN, UIS: Tell us about some recent or planned programs at your sites. How did they come about? What do you hope to accomplish with them?

MARY, THE RAILSLITTER: On the podcast, we recently did an episode called “Hot Takes.” The three of us each picked an idea or question to do with Lincoln and then got the others’ opinions on it. For example, mine was: how do you go about making book recommendations about Lincoln? The result was a great discussion about Lincoln books, which ones we’d recommend and why, and other factors to consider, such as does the person want to just focus on one aspect of his life. We enjoyed doing the episode. For next time, we’re going to find out from our listeners who like us what to discuss for a
“Hot Takes” episode by posting the question on Facebook as well as Twitter. What we hope to accomplish with this is discussions on social media about Lincoln.

We also plan on doing our “Railsplitter Book Club” again sometime soon. The three of us will read a book about Lincoln, we encourage our listeners to read along with us, and we look at a few chapters each episode. While we haven’t picked our next book, with our first one, David J. Kent’s *Lincoln: The Man Who Saved America*, we were able to have the author on our show for the final episode about the book. We hope we can do this again with the next book we pick. What we hope to accomplish is to get people reading about Lincoln and maybe read a book about him that might not be well known.

**Sarah, Ford’s Theatre:** We are in the midst of creating our first ever comprehensive interpretive plan, in partnership with our colleagues at the National Park Service. It has been an invigorating and exciting process that has gotten us thinking deeply about what stories we tell here on Tenth Street.

**Tim, Lincoln Home:** Activities that are part of our Spirit of Lincoln Youth Leadership Academy have taken place since Abraham Lincoln’s 204th birthday on February 12, 2013. The goal of this initiative is to inspire area youth, junior high to high school age, with a message of empowerment and hope by presenting the stories of challenges that have been faced and overcome by those who have come before us. The academy’s goal is to reach students who could most use a positive message of courage and hope. The academy organizers want the participants to understand that positive life lessons can be found in the past. The Spirit of Lincoln Youth Leadership Academy also organizes a youth employment program that features the role of the United States Colored Troops and African American women in the fight for freedom. The employment program began in 2014 with four employees, and by 2018 the number had grown to twelve.4

“Journey to Greatness: Character Lessons from the Past” is an interactive lesson designed to help third- through fifth-grade students discover how the challenges they might face today, such as fear, prejudice, poverty, not fitting in, or anger, can be overcome by

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4. To learn more about the Spirit of Lincoln Youth Leadership Academy, including insight into the 2016 season, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmUfjmvyCwg and www.nps.gov/liho/learn/kidsyouth/academy.htm.
Devin Hunter

learning how heroes from our past (Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Martin Luther King Jr.) overcame similar challenges when they were young. A new animated 3D version of the project is available from iTunes or Google Play stores under “NPS Journey to Greatness.”

The Illinois Freedom Project is a web-based, youth-focused multimedia project that provides resources to teach the interconnected story of slavery to freedom through the lens of people, places, and events in Illinois, from eighteenth-century French settlements through early twentieth-century Chicago. The website features videos that illustrate the many places that relate to the Illinois freedom story and captures reactions from young people as they learn about these stories and places. The goal of the project is to teach history and inspire youth by presenting stories of victory through adversity.

DEVIN, UIS: Thanks for this rundown of some of the innovative programming coming out of the National Park Service, Tim. I know that these have taken a lot of effort and planning to get off the ground. Would any of you like to give us some insight into recent and current challenges that your sites have faced?

JEREMY, THE RAILSPLITTER: A challenge we face as podcasters is building an audience and finding an identity. We are not historians. We’ve done extensive reading of and about Lincoln; we know our stuff, but we’re pros in other fields. The tech boom has given us and many others a platform to create a new layer in discourse about specific topics. We have generated a nice following because we have such a well-defined niche, but we are always looking to reach more ears. We have found that a lot of folks want to listen to us chat about the same person for an hour every single week. This is an encouraging sign that there is room between academia and casual history buffs for enthusiasts like us.

MARY, THE RAILSPLITTER: I definitely second Jeremy on that challenge we face as podcasters. At times, it can feel quite intimidating with the academia that is out there, but another encouraging aspect is just how accepting the Lincoln community has been. Academics and enthusiasts (like myself and my cohosts) are all part of this community. I find the way in which the members of that community

5. For more information about “Journey to Greatness,” visit www.nps.gov/liho/forteachers/journey-to-greatness.htm.
6. For more information on the Illinois Freedom Project, see www.nps.gov/liho/historyculture/the-illinois-freedom-project.htm
work together helps overcome this challenge of finding where we
fit in as enthusiasts. Knowledge is shared and discussed in a way
that allows people to learn something.

DEVIN, UIS: Have you been able to sense any shifts in the interest of
visitors? What are some of the trends in the questions and comments
that you are getting?

MARY, THE RAILSPLITTER: I think what is happening outside the world
of Lincoln contributes to where our listeners’ interests lies. The same
goes for visitors to physical sites. With the most recent U.S. election,
I saw more discussion and articles about which party does Lincoln
truly belong to. Like anything, I believe the world of Lincoln is
cyclical—trends will come and go.

DEVIN, UIS: Conventional wisdom holds that most visitors to Lincoln
sites and consumers of popular Lincoln history tend to fall into one
of two categories: school-aged children on field trips and middle-
class people over the age of fifty. How do you think your approach
can bridge this divide, to connect with age groups and demo graphic
sis not known to be interested in Lincoln and Lincoln’s world?

MARY, THE RAILSPLITTER: I think because we are a podcast, we can
reach a wide demographic that a few years ago might not have been
able to be reached. There are such a variety of topics to cover about
Lincoln that can appeal to different areas of interest. For instance,
quite a few people love the fact Lincoln owned a dog. We were very
lucky a few weeks ago to have the author Matthew Algeo as a guest
on our show. He wrote _Abe & Fido_, which is a book about Lincoln’s
dog. We hope topics like this, that look into more of Lincoln as a
person, will spark an interest outside the typical demographic that
consume popular Lincoln history.

Podcasts, Twitter, and Facebook are accessible to a wide variety
of people. On Twitter and with my blog, I’ve come to know many
people around my age (mid-thirties) who are extremely interested in
Lincoln and the Civil War. I think if we can keep that engagement
utilizing these tools we didn’t have a few years ago, then we will
see that demographic shift. With having guests on our show too,
from employees of museums to scholars to authors, it helps brings
what they’re doing to more people. Networking is so important in
the field of public history, and I think working together will also
help the demographic shift.

DEVIN, UIS: What types of programs or emphases would you most
like to see develop in the field of Lincoln-related public history?
Why do you think these have been slow to develop? What will it take for them to emerge?

Tim, Lincoln Home: As a “Lincoln industry” we often operate under the impression that we are nationally very popular and therefore very important. I would argue that to the majority of America we are neither. In my nearly thirty years working in Springfield I have been part of countless conferences, special programs, and commemorative events that were great Lincoln events but routinely reach the same limited audiences. When the question is raised about why more people don’t attend these programs, the conclusion often focuses on the fault of the public who just don’t appreciate the importance of Abraham Lincoln. We should really be looking at the types of programs we are presenting. That is not to say there is anything wrong with the more traditional Lincoln programs or that they should not be presented. But we need to understand that many of the programs we develop, sometimes at considerable expense, appeal to an audience whose hobby and passion are the study of Abraham Lincoln. That is a very small segment of America.

We should be able to answer the “so what?” question with any program or initiative we develop. If someone asks why we do what we do, or “so what?,” we should have a better answer than “because Abraham Lincoln was a great man and you should appreciate him.” We should have programs that place Lincoln in context with his community and nation. We should talk about the issues and struggles he and the nation faced and how those issues and struggles predated Lincoln and, in some cases, survived beyond him.

If we truly want to broaden our reach, we need to broaden our stories and the types of programs we present as well as where and how we present them. We need to tell the stories of what happened before Lincoln, and why and where and with whom. Also, what happened after Lincoln, and why and where and with whom. This would not diminish the Lincoln story but would rather put Lincoln in a much richer context and therefore make the stories of his accomplishments much more compelling. We should continue to talk about the greatness of Lincoln, but we also need to talk about many others who also did great things, some of whom never heard of Abraham Lincoln. We are working on a variety of programs with state historic sites at Springfield, the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area, and many other community partners that we hope will help improve relevancy and broaden our audience.
MARY, THE RAILSPLITTER: I would love to see networking continue between sites, podcasts, Twitter, and blogs. Through working together, the strengths of each can be better utilized, and I believe more people can be engaged. For instance, an employee of a museum can be on a podcast to promote their latest exhibit or what has been happening at their site, or a blogger can review a new Lincoln book.

I agree with what Tim has said about the “so what?” question. This is an excellent point, and I believe it can be applied to the podcast I’m part of as well as Twitter. There is a definite need to help keep Lincoln relevant in our ever-changing world. While those of us who study Lincoln on a near-daily basis know that he is timeless, we need to be able to show that relevance to people who may not yet have an interest in him. We have to help create that interest for people and put him in a context that reaches a wide audience. Again, this goal gets back to why working together and utilizing our strengths are so important. Forming these partnerships is very important in the field of public history.

DEVIN, UIS: What challenges do you see on the horizon, for your site or more generally?

MARY, THE RAILSPLITTER: Having worked in museums for a few years prior to my current job at a library, I know money is always a challenge at any site. I do see this task as continuing in the future. With Twitter, a blog, and the podcast, money is thankfully not really an issue. Content could be a challenge though. Just like an actual site with visitors, we have to keep our listeners’ interests piqued. This is why social media is such a great tool to utilize in this instance. Having the Railsplitter Facebook Group as well as the Twitter account allows us to interact with our listeners. And according to many museum sites I follow, this is the case with them too for interacting with visitors (or potential visitors).

I think with anything to do with public history, be it at a physical site or through Twitter, a blog, or a podcast, another challenge is to stay on top of the latest trends in social media as well as finding out what your visitors want to see. Also, staying on top of the latest research about Lincoln is important and to make sure that anything new that visitors would find interesting gets added to any display or interpretation. If necessary staff are not available for this updating, keeping up could be a challenge.