Well-educated, fat, lazy, reliable, utterly worthless, happy, and impractical genius—all of these words have been used in the literature on Abraham Lincoln to describe John “Jack” Kelso. Just exactly who was Jack Kelso and what kind of person was he? About the only thing all of the authors agree on is that Kelso had some degree of influence on Lincoln during his years in New Salem. He is the friend credited with introducing Lincoln to the poetry of William Shakespeare and Robert Burns, amongst others.

It can be documented that Kelso and his wife, Hannah Turner Kelso, came to New Salem from Adair County, Kentucky, in 1831 with Hannah’s sister Nancy and her husband Joshua Miller. Miller bought two lots from James Cameron and his wife, and then built a double house that the Miller and Kelso families shared. Miller also built a smithy and served as the town’s blacksmith for the nine or ten years that the two families lived in New Salem.

While Miller was a trained and skilled craftsman, earning a living in a manner consistent with other craftsmen in the village, his brother-in-law Kelso was an anomaly, in some respects a throwback to the earlier frontier period of western settlement. One of Miller’s grandsons believed that Kelso had been a schoolteacher while he lived in Kentucky. It would explain his love of poetry and ownership of books, but there is no documentation to prove this. By all accounts, Kelso did not have steady employment and did not want a regular job. Thomas Reep’s description of the man seems to be the most balanced: Lincoln “loved to go fishing with Jack Kelso, one of those peculiar, impractical geniuses—well educated, a lover of nature, with the soul of a poet and all of a poet’s impracticability, and who could recite Shakespeare and Burns by the hour.” Kelso and his wife had no children. To make a living, they occasionally kept a boarder, and Jack did odd jobs at which he was exceedingly handy. He did not seek and could not keep any steady employment. He loved to fish and to hunt and could catch fish when others failed and always had his smokehouse filled with venison when winter set in and a surplus of venison hams for sale. From Kelso, Lincoln learned to appreciate and understand the finer sentiments and shades of poetical expression and so “grew in wisdom and understanding.” Reep expands this description by adding that Kelso “knew the wild plums grew largest and the wild grapes thickest, and was an adept at coursing the honey bee and robbing a bee tree of its honey. . . . No one at New Salem lived better than he, nor was any family more forehanded. He led a happy and contented life.” T. G. Onstot also commented on his contentedness: “He had no children and
President’s Column
by Donald R. Tracy

The global mission of the Abraham Lincoln Association is threefold—to observe and celebrate Lincoln’s birthday; support Lincoln landmarks; and facilitate Lincoln study and scholarship. In the past, we have done this through our annual February 12 banquet, refurbishing the Old State Capitol, and publishing Lincoln scholarship, including the most important reference ever, the eight-volume Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Today, we fulfill our mission by continuing the February 12 banquet, supporting the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and making the Collected Works and Lincoln Day By Day accessible to the entire world through our web page.

The question now, however, is what should our future be? That issue will be the focus of a board of directors’ retreat on February 13.

One suggestion that has already received considerable attention is a proposal to revise the Collected Works to include Lincoln writings found since its publication in 1953 and incoming correspondence. If you have any suggestions for specific goals and objectives for the Association as we approach the 200th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, please write to me at the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1 Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62701, or email me at dtracy@bhslaw.com.

Thanks also go out to Dr. Robert Eckley for his expertise and enthusiasm in helping us establish an endowment; to Greg Walbert for his redesigning our banquet invitation; and to Jim Patton for all of his extra work, necessitated by the relocation of the banquet from the Renaissance Springfield Hotel to the National City Bank atrium.

Please send your banquet reservations in early this year and bring some friends. We would like to have as many people as possible experience the enjoyment of a grand banquet and an outstanding speaker—Doris Kearns Goodwin.

continued from previous page
which he could recite by the hour.” Albert Beveridge was even less complimentary. In a footnote he states: “Kelso appears to have been utterly worthless; but it is said that he could ‘recite Shakespeare and Burns by the hour.’” Carl Sandburg introduces the element of alcohol: “It was said that when other men were lushe from drinking they wanted to fight but Kelso would recite Shakespeare and Burns.” Even grandnephew Henry Cook recognized Kelso’s problem with physical labor in a 1938 letter to New Salem researcher Fern Nance Pond: Aunt Hannah “made a baby of him [Kelso] and did practically all the work and he seemed willing for her to do it for he was not fond of work.”

Whatever Jack Kelso’s personal habits and lack of ambition, his influence on Lincoln seems to be universally recognized. They were both active in the local debating society, and Kelso joined the Petersberg Lyceum soon after it was formed in 1838. Pond, based on notes from the original records of the Lyceum, recalls Kelso’s first debate before that group: Kelso “had his chance to try his forensic powers at a regular meeting on March 14, 1840, when he and Bennett Day debated the subject, ‘Have Congress the Constitutional right to reject petitions?’ They took the negative against their fellow members of the affirmative, C. P. Hours and A. I. Davidson. The judges decided the negative won the debate; whereupon, Kelso and partner were ‘given applause.’”

The New Salem literature appears to be full of stories about Kelso—his friendship with Lincoln, as Lincoln’s assistant on surveying jobs, the court case concerning the ownership of a hog, and his penchant for reciting good literature. All paint him as a very colorful character. It is interesting to note that in Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln, Kelso is listed in the index eleven times and Miller’s name does not appear.

If contemporary primary sources are checked, Kelso appears to have been a conscientious citizen. He voted in almost every election while he lived at New Salem. He served on juries and witnessed deeds. He also served as an appraiser for livestock found on someone else’s land, and in March of 1840, he served on an official panel that judged that the site for the new dam on the Sangamon River would threaten “no dwelling house, out house, garden or orchard,” according to the Menard County Commissioners records. When William Greene, another New Salem inhabitant, responded to questions from William Herndon, he remembered that “Kelso came to Salem in the year 1828 and remained there some 8 or 9 years then moved [to] Mo. . . . [He] is an excellent reliable man.” These hardly seem the actions of the town bum or loafer.

So why is there such broad interpretation of Kelso’s character? He did not fit the mold of the other men of New Salem. It was founded as a commercial center, and he was not a merchant such as Sam Hill, not a professional man such as either of the doctors, and he did not have a trade like Onstot or Miller. He chose to support his family by hunting and gathering the fruit of the land much as the first

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Member News

Wayne C. Temple of the Illinois State Archives is the recipient of the Archbishop Richard Chenewrench Trench Award for Outstanding Public Service. It is an international award given to only two individuals annually. Our congratulations to Dr. Temple on this notable achievement. Professor James E. Davis of Illinois College continues to receive laudatory reviews for his Frontier Illinois. Michael Burlingame of Connecticut College is the first Ralph G. Newman lecturer at Lincoln College. The lecture series was established in memory of the late manuscript/book dealer who was a longtime trustee of the college. The lecture is offered in the spring and autumn. Cullom Davis, Director of the Lincoln Legal Papers, is scheduled to speak sometime in March/April 2000. Davis was the featured speaker at the autumn Lincoln Club of Delaware meeting. William C. Harris and Harold Holzer were on a Lincoln panel at the Southern Writer’s Festival in Nashville televised live by C-SPAN. Congratulations to Illinois State Representative Kurt Granberg for being one of four 1999 inductees into the Samuel K. Gove Legislative Internship Hall of Fame. Every two years, the Hall of Fame inducts former legislative interns who have gone on to outstanding careers in public service.

We regret to report the passing of members Janet W. Meyer, Sally Dietz, Alice Schlipf, Mrs. Marshall Luthringer, and Wayne Morgan.

Please send member news to Thomas E. Schwartz, Abraham Lincoln Association, 1 Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62701.

Welcome New Members


Plan to Attend!

The Abraham Lincoln Association will be celebrating the 191st anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birth with their traditional symposium and banquet. The festivities begin with book signings by Allen C. Guelzo, Michael Burlingame, and Mark S. Reinhart in the Old State Capitol at 11:30. The theme of the 2000 symposium is “Lincoln’s Reputation.” The speakers will be Hans L. Trefousse, Bruce Tap, and Bryon Andreasen, with comments by John Sellers and Kim Matthew Bauer as moderator. Following the symposium will be a roundtable discussion on continued on page 6
“in short, he is *married!*”: A Contemporary Newspaper Account

by Thomas F. Schwartz

The autumn of 1842 witnessed two major events in Lincoln’s life—his aborted duel with James Shields and his marriage to Mary Todd. While the two incidents are standard fare for any Lincoln biography, it is unusual for them to appear in a contemporary newspaper account.

On November 19, 1842, Winchester, Illinois’ *Battle Axe, and Political Reformer* ran the following story: “Lincoln, who was to have been flayed alive by the sword of Shields, has given up the notion of dueling, and taken up one no less fatal to bachelors than the sword is to animal existence—in short, he is *married!* ‘Grim visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,’ and now he capers nimbly in a lady’s—don’t recollect the rest of the quotation.” The writer quotes from William Shakespeare’s *King Richard III*, act 1, scene 1, which begins with the famous line: “Now is the winter of our discontent.” Scene 1 continues: “Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front; / And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds / To fright the souls of fearful adversaries, / He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.” James Monroe Ruggles, the editor of the *Battle Axe*, most likely wrote the piece. After Ruggles learned the newspaper business in Winchester, Illinois, in 1846 and became a successful merchant. He was elected to the Illinois Senate in 1852 as a Whig. Ruggles knew Lincoln through Whig politics. When Lincoln sought the senatorial seat in 1855, Ruggles was bedridden, suffering from severe illness. Ruggles’s biographer, P. L. Diffenbacher, claimed that Ruggles’s loyalty to the Whig party and friendship with Lincoln were so strong that he “caused himself to be carried, on a cot, into the hall of representatives, and there cast his vote for his party leader, Mr. Lincoln, for whom he always entertained the warmest friendship and admiration.”

The newspaper account is unusual in two respects—it connects the duel and the marriage in a manner similar to the comical nature of the terms of the Lincoln/Shields duel itself, and it places the marriage in the context of Lincoln’s political life, not in a more reserved private sphere. Perhaps this is why Mary Todd insisted that Lincoln cease joking about his brief encounter with dueling.

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*Mary Turner is the director of the Illinois Association of Museums.*
From April, 1859, to February, 1865, Richard Bickerton Pernell, Lord Lyons, served as the British minister in Washington. A man of great reserve and attentive to diplomatic proprieties, Lord Lyons, except for official dinners or receptions, rarely came into contact with Lincoln. His main contact with the administration was through Secretary of State William H. Seward. Still, Lyons occasionally and confidentially expressed an opinion of Lincoln. Upon Lincoln's elevation to the presidency, Lyons dismissed him as a crude, "well-meaning," westerner who "has not hitherto given proof of possessing any natural talents to compensate for his ignorance of anything but Illinois village politics." Though sympathetic to Lincoln's cause, Lyons may never have changed his opinion of the President, at least until after his martyrdom.

Lincoln probably found Lord Lyons cold and remote, which perhaps partly explains why he rarely sought the minister's company. An account of a meeting at the White House between the two men on May 18, 1863, provides a glimpse of this relationship and Lincoln's refusal to take seriously Lord Lyons's formality. The story of this meeting appeared in the Boston Watchman and was reprinted by the Cincinnati Daily Gazette on January 6, 1865. The Watchman introduced the story with a commentary on the president's "fund of humor."

"Mr. Lincoln has a fund of humor, which, though not always dignified, is harmless. . . . [His humor] is ever apt and ready, and doubtless among all the wearing sorrows of his public life has afforded him relief when he would otherwise have broken down under his heavy load. This jocoseness is sometimes grim and sarcastic. It is always playful, yet is never abusive, and seldom wounds. Often it is nicely adapted to the place and occasion, and it used with great effect. It is one form of that humor that is not uncommon in New England, especially in rural districts, and which, in a higher and more cultivated development, adorns the pages of Holmes, Lowell, and others of our literary men. About two years ago, when the Prince of Wales was soon to marry the Princess Alexandra, Queen Victoria sent a letter to each of the Sovereigns, informing them of her son's betrothal, and among the rest to President Lincoln.

Lord Lyons, her ambassador at Washington, and who, by the way, is unmarried, requested an audience of Mr. Lincoln that he might present this important document in person. At the time appointed he was received at the White House in company with Mr. Seward."

"May it please you Excellency," said Lord Lyons, "I hold in my hand an autograph letter from my royal mistress, Queen Victoria, which I have been commanded to present to your Excellency. In it she informs your Excellency that her son, his Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, is about to contract a matrimonial alliance with her Royal Highness the Princess Alexandra, of Denmark."

H.R.H. The Prince of Wales

After continuing in this strain for a few minutes, Lord Lyons tendered the letter to the President and awaited his reply. It was short, simple and expressive, and consisted simply of

continued on next page
Santa Abraham?
by Thomas F. Schwartz

Abraham Lincoln witnessed the evolution of Christmas from a solemn religious observance to a secular celebration using the imagery of St. Nicholas and Kris Kringle to celebrate the virtues of caring for the less fortunate and exchanging gifts and good will with family, friends, and neighbors. Throughout most of Lincoln's life, New Year celebrations were closer to the festivities that we now associate with Christmas. Secular writings such as Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol (1843), Clement Moore's “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (1823), and Kris Kringle's Book (1842), all helped to popularize the ideas that are now generally referred to as the “spirit of Christmas.” Thomas Nast, the cartoonist who is best known for developing the visual image of Santa Claus, first presented Old Saint Nick on the cover of Harper's Weekly on January 3, 1863, forever etching the image in the American mind.

Lincoln never disclosed his own feelings about the holiday. When he lived in Springfield, he often spent Christmas writing letters and conducting business. But artists used Lincoln and the Santa Claus image to advance the Union cause. The two cartoons, “Santa Claus Visits Uncle Sam,” taken from Phunny Phellow, December, 1863 (this page), and “Santa Claus Lincoln,” taken from Comic Monthly, December, 1864 (see next page), illustrate different expressions of support for the Lincoln Administration. The first shows a Santa Abraham placing Union victories in the stocking of the United States. The second cartoon shows a triumphant Santa Abraham, fresh from his reelection victory and trumping Jefferson Davis's attempt at achieving a compromise peace with a war-weary North. Davis is shown ailing in bed as Union military efforts all but assure the ultimate destruction of the Confederacy.

Plan to Attend!

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“What's New With Lincoln?” Members of the panel will be Michael Burlingame, Allen C. Guelzo, and Mark S. Reinhart, with Thomas F. Schwartz, as moderator.

The Association is pleased to welcome noted author and presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin as the banquet speaker. Elmer Gertz, the famed civil rights lawyer, will be the recipient of the Lincoln the Lawyer Award. The banquet will be held in the National City Bank atrium. Tickets are $40 per person (tables of ten). For banquet reservations contact Linda Culver at 217.747.5501.

Lord Lyons and Abraham Lincoln

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these words: “Lord Lyons, go thou and do likewise.”

The Watchman concluded with this remark: “We doubt if any English ambassador was ever address in this manner before, and would be glad to learn what success he met with in putting the reply in diplomatic language when he reported it to her Majesty.” Lord Lyons did not act on Lincoln's admonition to him; he never married.

* William C. Harris is a professor of history at North Carolina State University.
The Abraham Lincoln Association Endowment

by Robert S. Eckley

The Board of Directors took action at its October 8 meeting to establish an endowment fund. The purpose of the fund is to undergird the Association’s activities in perpetuating the understanding of Lincoln and, in particular, to enable it to fund ongoing research directed toward this objective.

Currently, there is a need to revise and expand the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, as well as to revise *Lincoln Day By Day* and add newly available information. Both of these projects were initiated and sponsored by the ALA. Recent joint sponsorship of the Lincoln Legal Papers project and the undertaking of the Electronic Lincoln Library have necessitated separate fund-raising activities to enable the Association to finance them.

No major capital campaign is contemplated; however, the Association would like to invite members to consider this need, and for those able and willing to do so, to incorporate it in their current giving or estate planning. Assistance to the donor’s legal counsel in finding appropriate ways to arrange such gifts or bequests can be found through the ALA Endowment Committee.

Inquiries are welcome, and should be directed to the Treasurer of the Abraham Lincoln Association.

“In Santa Claus Lincoln,” Comic Monthly, December, 1864

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Please enroll me as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association in the category indicated:

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Read a Good Book Lately?

The Abraham Lincoln Association is pleased to offer two new Lincoln books at reduced prices. “For A Vast Future Also”: Essays from the Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association is a compilation of the best articles on Lincoln’s presidency published by the Association over the past twenty-five years. Edited by Thomas E. Schwartz, the book features such noted Lincoln authorities as Don E. Fehrenbacher, James M. McPherson, T. Harry Williams, John Hope Franklin, Phillip S. Paludan, and William E. Gienapp. Fourteen essays explore three main themes: Lincoln and the Problems of Emancipation; Lincoln and Presidential Politics; and The Lincoln Legacy. The book is available in hardcover or paperback.

Allen C. Guelzo’s Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President offers the first intellectual biography of the Sixteenth President. Demonstrating that Lincoln was indeed attuned to the intellectual debates and writings of his time, Guelzo explores the complete landscape of Lincoln’s intellectual development.

Both books are being offered to Association members at a drastically reduced cost until February 28, 2000. To order copies, please fill out the form below (or a photocopy) and return it to the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1 Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62701.

Please send me _____ hardcover copy(s) of “For A Vast Future Also” at $24.60 (includes shipping and handling). Illinois residents must pay $26.17 to include sales tax. Retail price $35.00.

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For the People
A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association
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