The Court Archive:
Abraham Lincoln and Bar Associations

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In January 2019, the Illinois Supreme Court held ceremonies to install a portrait of Abraham Lincoln in the second floor hallway of the Supreme Court Building. The Illinois State Historical Society honored Lincoln by providing 30 x 40 portraits to every courthouse in Illinois as part of its Illinois bicentennial commemorations. The Society's project was supported by the Illinois State Bar Association, the Illinois Judges Association, and their respective foundations.

No formal bar associations existed in Lincoln's time as the Chicago Bar Association was not founded until 1873 and the Illinois State Bar Association until 1877. However, Lincoln and legal colleagues met as bar associations on an ad hoc basis for specific reasons. Lincoln participated in at least five bar association meetings to eulogize recently deceased members of the bar and judiciary.

In the 1840s, Lincoln was asked to help draft tributes for James Taylor, the recently deceased sheriff of Menard County, and for William Wilmot, a recently deceased attorney from Tazewell County. Lincoln chaired both of the committees for these fellow circuit colleagues.

In 1850, Lincoln participated in a bar association meeting to recognize the life and public service of Nathaniel Pope. Pope died in 1850, and Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Samuel Treat chaired the committee, of which Lincoln was a member, to honor Pope for his thirty years of service as the only federal judge in Illinois. Pope was instrumental as a territorial delegate to Congress for extending the northern border of Illinois to its present location to incorporate the Galena lead mines into Illinois, as well as a small abandoned outpost at the mouth of the Chicago River that Pope expected would become a major transportation port.

In addition to recognizing Judge Pope, Lincoln participated in two other bar association meetings in the 1850s to commemorate the lives of David Campbell, Eighth Circuit State's Attorney, and Charles Welles, long-time Springfield attorney, both of whom had died. Lincoln's partner William Herndon was involved in a bar association meeting to ask the legislature to create a city court in Springfield with concurrent jurisdiction as the circuit court to relieve the backlog of circuit cases.

Lastly, Lincoln's death was subject of a bar association report that offered its tribute at the April 1865 term of the Illinois Supreme Court (37 Ill. 7). On May 3, the Illinois Supreme Court met at the Supreme Court Building in Ottawa (now the 3rd District Appellate Courthouse), where former Justice John Caton noted that while "poets sing his praises, and orators proclaim his greatness as a public man, it becomes us, his professional brethren, who knew him better than strangers could know him, to speak of him as we knew him in his profession."

Justice Sidney Breese followed by commenting on Lincoln's honesty and professionalism in the courtroom and how his innate skills and personality were perfectly suited for leading the nation during the Civil War. Chief Justice Pinkney Walker accepted the resolutions and tributes put together by an ad hoc bar association and adjourned the Court so that they could travel to Springfield to participate in Lincoln's funeral on May 4.

In a fitting bookend to the story of Lincoln's participation in and subject of bar associations, his portrait now hangs in the Supreme Court Building with the support of several bar associations that no longer meet on an ad hoc basis, but have become an important support and professional organizations for the career of Lincoln's choosing.