

Introduction: Lincoln and Internal Improvements

Some of my fondest childhood memories are of our family vacations. Every year in the summer, we would hitch our pop-up camper to the Buick Electra and head out to explore America by car. From our home in northwest Indiana, we would explore 30 of the 50 states from 1964 through 1971, traveling first on mainly two-lane U.S., state, and county highways, and later on many of the interstates. In these trips, my parents' interest in the history of the country meant that we saw many of the monuments, memorials, and historic sites throughout the states.

More than one of our trips took us southwest along Route 66 into Lincoln country. We camped at New Salem State Park and learned about the pioneer life in what was the U.S. western frontier in the early 1830s. My father had a keen interest in Lincoln, and he would often read stories aloud to me and my siblings about Honest Abe. One of my prized possessions was a small metal coin bank that was a copper-colored bust of Lincoln. Abe's nose was a lighter color than the rest of the bust, since it was considered good luck to make a wish while rubbing Lincoln's nose.

However, it was not until I started researching Lincoln in 2008 in preparation for this book, and my related PowerPoint presentations on Lincoln, that I realized the connection between Lincoln and the very roads we traveled in my youth was more than simple geography. As a state and national politician and as a lawyer, Lincoln stood up for the need to support and nurture internal improvements. In his first campaigns and service in the state legislature, he supported government ownership and/or subsidies for bridges,

railroads, navigational improvements, and roads.

Some of the early projects backed by the Illinois legislature were boondoggles, overreaching the state's capacity under its commerce and population of the time to utilize or properly build the necessary infrastructure. Undaunted by the missteps, Lincoln continued to support such projects as the Illinois & Michigan Canal, railroad franchises and land grants, and the national legislation necessary to create the transcontinental railroads.

The cities and towns along the waterways and original railways were beneficiaries of the boost to commerce created by the transportation corridors. These municipalities were thus the first to be served by the building of our automobile highway network. Thus, a linear connection exists between our Illinois National Scenic Byways and the internal improvements Lincoln championed.

This book concentrates on the Illinois stretches of Route 66, the Great River Road, and the Lincoln Highway, since these are the roads with which I am most familiar. They form a triangle that can help the traveler delve deeply into the history of the state and the lands where Lincoln lived. Similar journeys are available along the Dixie Highway, the National Road, the Illinois & Michigan Canal Corridor, and the Illinois River Road. There is a legacy to Lincoln that lives in the concrete and asphalt on which we are transported to the historic sites that celebrate him. I hope this book helps to connect the man to his continuing contributions, and to his dedication to internal improvements.

What have we done to Abe?

Abraham Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, and he died on April 14, 1865. During his lifetime, he often made self-deprecating jokes about his looks or accomplishments, and his political adversaries depicted him in unflattering ways.

Everything changed after his assassination, when his martyrdom transformed him into legendary, larger-than-life status. On the centennial of his birth, he was enshrined on the nation's coinage when the U.S. Mint introduced the first Lincoln Penny.

Many companies attempted to capitalize on his legend to lend a sense of quality to their products. The Lincoln Highway and the Lincoln brand of automobiles both were meant as tributes to the importance of his contributions to the nation, but they also were attempts to market the products as somehow connected to the positive aspects of the Lincoln legend: honesty, patriotism, and sincerity.

Frank Lloyd Wright's son John created Lincoln Log toys in 1916, and Frank himself became a devotee of the Lincoln Zephyr automobile in 1940.

In 1955, the state of Illinois adopted "Land of Lincoln" as its official slogan. The cultural references to Lincoln remained either positive compliments to his legacy or usage of that legacy to help sell goods. It is likely that Mr. Lincoln would have found such usage of his name odd and



The U.S. Mint introduced the Lincoln Penny in 1909. The "wheat back" was replaced on the back of the coin with a view of the Lincoln Memorial in 1959.



Frank Lloyd Wright's 1940 Lincoln Zephyr sports the rear-mounted spare tire cover that would become the hallmark of the Lincoln Continental after World War II. Wright considered this car the most beautiful automobile ever made. Photo by Eric Y. Minoff



Frank Lloyd Wright's son John invented Lincoln Logs in 1916. The original kits had plans for building a "Lincoln" cabin as well as "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Kits were made from wood until the 1970s.