

COLLECTION HIGHLIGHT: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE CHESTER COUNTY TIMES



The Chester County Times was published in this building at 28 West Market Street in West Chester. An 1860 article in the newspaper introduced Abraham Lincoln to many Pennsylvanians and contributed to Lincoln's election as president that year.

Abraham Lincoln's life and presidency is a story familiar to every American and one of the great stories of personal achievement in American history. Less familiar is the story of how Chester County figured in Lincoln's success in the presidential election of 1860. Documents in CCHS' collection tell the story.

When the Republican nominating convention met in Chicago in May 1860, Lincoln was more widely known in the midwest than in the populous east, and he was not favored to win the nomination of his party. Better known candidates such as William H. Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Pennsylvania's Simon Cameron had strong support. Seward appeared to be the front-runner. Lincoln supporters knew that Pennsylvania would be a key state in the win, but this required turning support from Cameron to Lincoln. Lincoln's backers conducted a large-scale publicity campaign that portrayed him as a moderate, even conservative, candidate in the hope that he would be an acceptable second choice if Seward could not win the nomination. The strategy was successful: Lincoln won the Republican nomination on the third ballot.

Joseph J. Lewis of Chester County played a critical role in introducing Lincoln to the people of Pennsylvania. On February 11, 1860, a two-column article on the life of Lincoln appeared in the *Chester County Times*, a weekly newspaper published in the brick building at 14 E.

(now 28 W.) Market St., West Chester. Although unsigned, it was written by Lewis and was the first biographical information about Lincoln to appear in print. Lewis' article was based on a letter Lincoln wrote to Jesse W. Fell in 1859 in answer to Fell's request for background information. Lewis and Fell were both delegates to the Republican convention and avid Lincoln supporters.

Jesse W. Fell, then a prominent Bloomington, Illinois, lawyer, was a native of Chester County and maintained an active correspondence with his old friends back home. In 1872 he reminisced about his role in the campaign: "In the fall of 1858, during the discussions between Senator Douglas and Mr. Lincoln, I had occasion to visit the Middle and Eastern States and as the whole country was then agitated by the slavery question, ... I was frequently applied to for information in reference to Mr. Lincoln. I did what little I could to satisfy so laudable a curiosity, not thinking at first that anything further would come of this discussion ... than his election to the Senate. At length ... an impression began to form, that by judicious efforts, he could be made the Republican candidate for the presidency in 1860."

Later that year Fell told Lincoln about his idea to "get up a well-considered, well-written newspaper article, telling the people who you are, and what you have done, that it may be circulated not only in this state, but elsewhere and thus help in manufacturing sentiment in your favor." He went on to say that he didn't know much about Lincoln's background and asked him to give details that could be used to build Lincoln's image as a man of popular origin, of acknowledged ability, an opponent of slavery, with no radical ideas to offend voters.

Lincoln answered Fell's request with a three-page letter. His straightforward account began, "I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky." It went on to relate how his paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, "who was quaker, went to Virginia from Berks County, Pennsylvania" about 1781 and was killed there by Indians. From Virginia the family moved to Kentucky where they settled. The letter told of Lincoln's simple life and country education, his legal career, and ended with a description of his appearance: "If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly, lean in flesh, weighing on the average, one hundred and eighty pounds, dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and grey eyes, no other marks or brands recollected."

Fell, believing that the letter would "pay," made some additions to Lincoln's own account and forwarded it to his

friend Joseph J. Lewis, an influential lawyer and politician in Chester County. Lewis rewrote the account and submitted it to the *Times* to coincide with Lincoln's birthday. Lewis' notes list the points he wanted to emphasize: "his person — his home," "farmer," "flatboat in Ohio," "hard work, axe, plow, rifle," "friend of Clay 1844," "1846 to cong.," "1858 debate between Dug. [Douglas] & L.," and "Honest Old Abe."

Lewis turned the information that Lincoln supplied in his letter into a potent publicity device. Throughout the country, as political biographers and newspapers looked for information about the Republican candidate, they picked up Lewis' article. On May 19, the day after Lincoln's nomination, Lewis told Fell, "The Chicago papers have paid me the compliment of taking over my editorial practically entire." It was printed in Horace Greeley's influential *New York Tribune* the same day. Copies of the article were widely distributed to influential editors in other states.

Lewis hoped that Lincoln's mention of his Pennsylvania ancestors would win support, and the point was not lost on Chester County readers. On June 5, 1860, another West Chester newspaper, *The Village Record*, announced: *THE LINCOLNS IN CHESTER COUNTY RELATED TO 'OLD ABE'* and went on to say that "if Old Abe, as they all call him, should chance to get elected President and has the courage and pluck of his Chester County name-sake, he would make short work of these men who come up from the South to dissolve the Union." President Lincoln was aware of his debt to Lewis and, in March 1863, appointed him commissioner of internal revenue to administer the new federal income tax. Lewis held the post until 1865 when he resigned to return to West Chester.

CCHS has several documents that tell this fascinating story. One of Joseph J. Lewis' original *Chester County Times* articles along with his handwritten notes, a copy of Lincoln's letter to Jesse Fell, and Fell's 1872 account of the letter were given to the Society so that the details told here would be preserved for future generations of Chester Countians. Lincoln's original letter was given to the Library of Congress in 1947 by a great-grandson of Jesse Fell. Incidentally, another of Fell's great-grandsons was the 1952 and 1966 Democratic party candidate for president, Adlai E. Stevenson.