

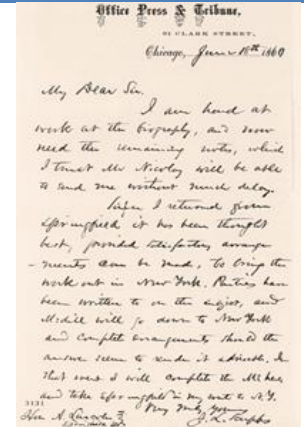


## "Writing Lincoln's Lives"

by Michael Burlingame

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/10/14/writing-lincolns-lives/>

Publishers scrambled to meet the great demand for information about the little known Republican candidate, who at first was often referred to as Abram Lincoln. Thurlow Weed's suggestion that Charles G. Halpine be given the task of writing a campaign biography came to nothing. The most informative of the thirteen campaign lives that did appear in 1860 were by William Dean Howells, a young Ohio journalist who was to achieve literary fame, and by John Locke Scripps, editor of the *Chicago Press and Tribune* and a good friend of Lincoln. For Howells, Scripps, and other authors, Lincoln prepared an autobiographical sketch which, though brief, was longer than the one he had drafted in 1859 for Jesse W. Fell. In this political document he said little about slavery, other than to reproduce his 1837 resolution denouncing the peculiar institution as based on "injustice and bad policy" and assert that his views had not changed since then. He devoted much more space to his Mexican War stand, correctly assuming that the Democrats would once again attack his record on that conflict.



Scripps to Lincoln  
June 18, 1860

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In addition to relying on that autobiographical sketch, Scripps sought to interview Lincoln about his life. At first the candidate was reluctant to cooperate, telling his would-be biographer: "it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence and that sentence you will find in Gray's Elegy: 'The short and simple annals of the poor.' That's my life, and that's all you or any one else can make of it."

Nevertheless he told Scripps much about his life that was then incorporated into the campaign biography, making it virtually an autobiography. Hastily the busy editor churned out ninety-six pages of copy, only to be instructed by his New York publisher (Horace Greeley's *Tribune*) to reduce it to thirty-two pages. After reluctantly making wholesale cuts, he apologized to Lincoln for the "sadly botched" final section, which was trimmed at the last minute. Amusingly he instructed the candidate that if he had not read Plutarch's *Lives*, he should do so immediately, for the biography asserted that he had read it in his youth!



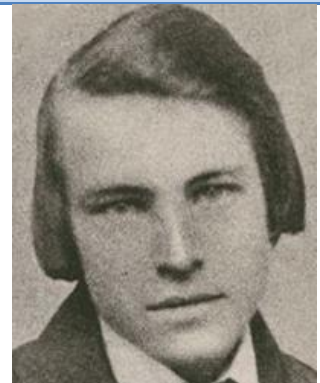
John Locke Scripps



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Earlier Scripps had written a 4000-word biographical sketch for the *Chicago Press and Tribune* which he used as the basis for his campaign life. That biography lacked a sentence that had appeared in his newspaper article: "A friend says that once, when in a towering rage in consequence of the efforts of certain parties to perpetrate a fraud on the State, he was heard to say 'They shan't do it, d—n 'em!'" Evidently it was thought advisable to play down Lincoln's capacity for anger, which was formidable. Like Scripps's biography, William Dean Howells's was enriched by interviews. They were conducted by a research assistant, James Quay Howard, who visited Springfield and talked briefly with Lincoln and at greater length with several of his friends. When the publisher, Follett and Foster of Columbus Ohio (who had issued the Lincoln-Douglas debates earlier that year) advertised it as an "authorized by Mr. Lincoln," the candidate protested vigorously. To Samuel Galloway he complained about Follett and Foster: "I have scarcely been so much astounded by anything, as by their public announcement that it is authorized by me." He had, he said, made himself "tiresome, if not hoarse, with repeating to Mr. Howard" that he "authorized nothing – would be responsible for nothing."



William Dean Howells

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[Lincoln] would not endorse a biography unless he thoroughly reviewed and corrected it, which he was then unable to do. He could not obey the advice of all his "discreet friends" to make no public statements while simultaneously approving a campaign life for his opponents "to make points on without end." If he were to do so, "the convention would have a right to reassemble" and name another candidate. To maintain deniability, Lincoln refused to read the manuscript of any campaign biography. He had his friends at the *Illinois State Journal* run a disclaimer and his secretary write letters of protest both to Howard and to Follett and Foster. That secretary was the industrious, efficient John G. Nicolay, a twenty-eight-year old, German-born journalist from Pike County who since 1857 had been clerking for secretary of state Ozias M. Hatch. A week before the Chicago Convention he had helped build support for Lincoln's candidacy in an elaborate article comparing his record on slavery with Henry Clay's, arguing that they were very similar. He probably did so at the suggestion of the would-be candidate, who may have written the piece.



Lincoln as a Rail-Splitter  
Illustration, 1884



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Since 1858, Nicolay had been writing occasional articles for the *Missouri Democrat* of St. Louis; he filed a long report on the Chicago Convention for that newspaper. Shortly after that conclave, Lincoln told Hatch: "I wish I could find some young man to help me with my correspondence. It is getting so heavy I can't handle it. I can't afford to pay much, but the practice is worth something." When Hatch recommended Nicolay, Lincoln found it easy to accept the advice, for he regarded the young man as "entirely trust-worthy" and had often conversed and played chess with him in Hatch's office, which served as an informal Republican headquarters. Nicolay had hoped to be given the task of writing a campaign biography and was "filled with jealous rage" when Howells was chosen. He was solaced when Lincoln hired him at \$75 per month, for he vastly admired his employer, who served as a kind of surrogate father to the orphaned Nicolay.

### LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

#### CHAPTER I.

It is necessary that every American should have an indisputable grandfather, in order to be represented in the Revolutionary period by actual ancestral service, or connected with it by ancestral reminiscence. Further back than a grandfather few can go with satisfaction. Everything lies wrapt in colonial obscurity and confusion; and you have either to claim that the Smiths came over in the Mayflower, or that the Joneses were originally a Huguenot family of vast wealth and the greatest blood; or that the Browns are descended from the race of Powhatan in the direct line; or you are left in an extremely embarrassing uncertainty as to the fact of great-grandparents.

We do not find it profitable to travel far into the past in search of Abraham Lincoln's ancestry. There is a

William Dean Howells'  
*Life of Abraham Lincoln*  
(1860)



## Further Reading

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## Document 1– Abraham Lincoln to George Ashmun, June 4, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34466>

### Source Citation –

Abraham Lincoln to George Ashmun, June 4, 1860, Springfield, IL, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 68, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

### Transcribed Text –

Hon: George Ashmun Springfield, Ills. June 4 1860

My dear Sir It seems as if the question whether my first name is ``Abraham" or ``Abram" will never be settled. It is ``*Abraham*" and if the letter of acceptance is not yet in print, you may, if you think fit, have my signature thereto printed ``*Abraham Lincoln*." Exercise your own judgment about this. Yours as ever,

A. LINCOLN.





## Document 2– Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Galloway, June 19, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34464>

### Source Citation –

Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Galloway, June 19, 1860, Springfield, IL, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 79-80, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

### Transcribed Text –

*Especially Confidential*

Hon: Saml. Galloway: Springfield, Ills.

My dear Sir June 19, 1860

Your very kind letter of the 15th. is received. Messrs. Follett, Foster & Co's Life of me is *not* by my authority; and I have scarcely been so much astounded by anything, as by their public announcement that it is authorized by me. They have fallen into some strange misunderstanding. I certainly knew they contemplated publishing a biography, and I certainly did not object to their doing so, *upon their own responsibility*. I even took pains to facilitate them. But, at the same time, I made myself tiresome, if not hoarse, with repeating to Mr. Howard, their only agent seen by me, my protest that *I authorized nothing*—would be *responsible for nothing*. How, they could so misunderstand me, passes comprehension. As a matter, *wholly my own*, I would authorize no biography, without *time*, and *oportunity* to carefully examine and consider every word of it; and, in this case, in the nature of things, I can have no such time and oportunity. But, in my present position, when, by the lessons of the past, and the united voice of all discreet friends, I am neither [to] write or speak a word for the public, how dare I to send forth, by my authority, a volume of hundreds of pages, for adversaries to make points upon without end. Were I to do so, the convention would have a right to reassemble, and substitute another name for mine. For these reasons, I would not look at the proof sheets. I am determined to maintain the position of truly saying I never saw the proof sheets, or any part of their work, before it's publication.

Now, do not mistake me. I feel great kindness for Messrs. F. F. & Co—do not think they have intentionally done wrong. There may be nothing wrong in their proposed book. I sincerely hope there will not. I barely suggest that you, or any of the friends there, on the party account, look it over, & exclude what you may think would embarrass the party—bearing in mind, at all times, that *I authorize nothing*—will be *responsible for nothing*. Your friend, as ever A.

LINCOLN



## Document 3– Abraham Lincoln to Richard W. Thompson, July 10, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34362>

### Source Citation –

John L. Scripps to Abraham Lincoln, July 17, 1860, Chicago, IL, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>.

### Transcribed Text –

My Dear Sir,

I send you by this day's mail a copy of the Campaign Biography.

You understand some of the difficulties under which it has been prepared. First, I labored two weeks after my return from Springfield upon the plan of making a pamphlet of 96 pages. Then Medill made the arrangement in New York for a pamphlet of 32 pages – and the Tribune people would consent to no delay. My only resource then was to condense here and omit there, instead of writing it over as I wished upon the plan of making a pamphlet of 32 pages. After I got to New York I had the printers estimate how much of my manuscript, with the accompanying extracts, it would require to make the 32 pages. I furnished the precise amount. As fast as the the pages were set up ~~it was~~ they were stereotyped. When the whole was in type, it was found we had 35 pages, and Greeley & Co, insisted upon having the 32nd page reserved for their advertisement. I then had to take ~~out~~ cut down four pages, and there were only about eight pages remaining to be stereotyped. I did the best I could, but you will see that both the account of your debates with Douglass [Douglas] as well as the conclusion, are sadly botched. There was no help for it. I have also reason to feel a little hard at some of my Springfield friends. Before I left there, I had the promise from some there of certain material which they could easily have furnished. I was to have it without delay. After waiting a week, I wrote. My letters have not yet been answered. However, I will not complain.

I believe the biography contains nothing that I was not fully authorized to put into it. In speaking of the books you read in early life, I took the liberty of adding Plutarch's Lives. I take it for granted that you had read that book. If you have not, then you must read it at once to make my statement good. I cannot expect that you will be greatly pleased with the performance. It fails very much of pleasing me, and of course I cannot hope any one will have a higher opinion of my own offspring than myself. But while I do ~~not~~ expect it to excite any positive gratification on your part, I shall be much pleased to know that there is nothing in it that is positively painful to you. More than this I cannot expect.

Very Truly Yours  
J. L. Scripps