

DUSTY ROADS



by Dean Karau

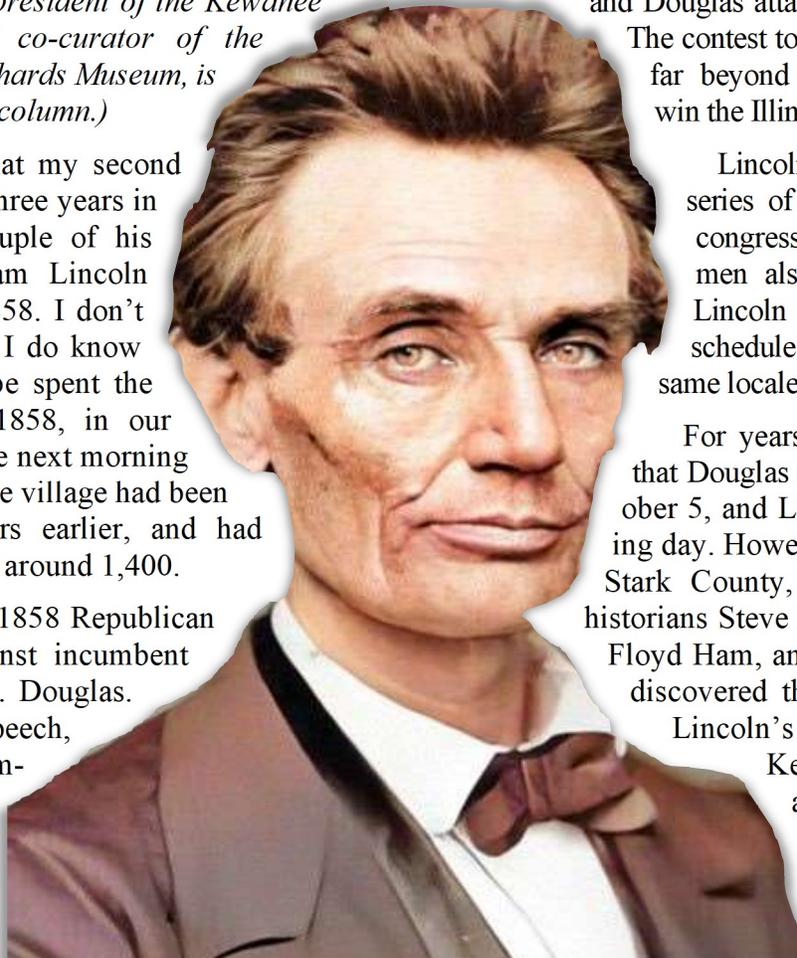
October 2020

The Day When Abraham Lincoln Spoke in Kewanee He Gave a Speech “Full of Vim and Stories Which Kept the Crowd Laughing and Cheering”

(Larry Lock, former president of the Kewanee Historical Society and co-curator of the Robert and Marcella Richards Museum, is co-author of this week’s column.)

Family lore has it that my second great-grandfather, only three years in the country, took a couple of his children to see Abraham Lincoln speak in Kewanee in 1858. I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know it’s true that Honest Abe spent the night of October 27, 1858, in our hometown, and spoke the next morning before leaving. Wow. The village had been founded only four years earlier, and had grown to a population of around 1,400.

Lincoln received the 1858 Republican nomination to run against incumbent U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas. In his acceptance speech, Lincoln spoke the immortal words, “[a] house divided against itself cannot stand.” Thus, the election was framed around slavery,



and Douglas attacked Lincoln as a radical. The contest took on national importance far beyond determining who would win the Illinois senate seat.

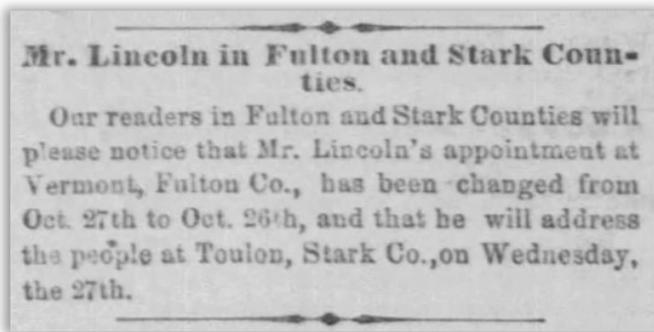
Lincoln challenged Douglas to a series of debates in seven Illinois congressional districts. But the two men also spoke separately, with Lincoln often noting Douglas’ schedule and then speaking in the same locale the following day.

For years, Lincoln historians said that Douglas spoke in Toulon on October 5, and Lincoln spoke the following day. However, local Henry County, Stark County, Toulon, and Kewanee historians Steve Morrison, Don Schmidt, Floyd Ham, and co-author Larry Lock, discovered that the correct dates for Lincoln’s presence in Toulon and Kewanee were October 27 and 28.

But how did all of that come to pass?

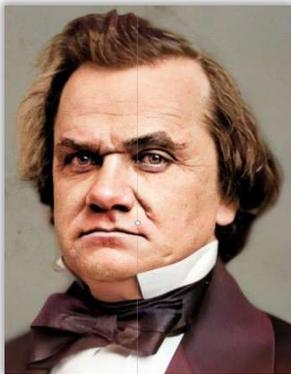
October 1858 turned out to be a dreary month in most of Illinois, with rain falling regularly as the prairies and the trees turned to their autumn colors. Not an auspicious time to be traveling around the large state.

In mid-October, Stark County pioneer and later Civil War general Thomas J. Henderson wrote his friend Lincoln to advise him that Douglas had scheduled an event at Toulon, the Stark county seat with a population of about 1,700, for October 26. He said that it was imperative for Lincoln to rearrange his schedule to speak there the following day. Lincoln replied to confirm that he would do so.



October 19, 1858, Chicago Daily Press & Tribune

Hand bills in Kewanee announced that Douglas would speak in Toulon the afternoon of Tuesday, October 26, and then in Kewanee that evening.



Douglas spoke in Toulon, bare-headed and in a light rain. He then traveled the muddy road to Kewanee and spoke that evening on the porch of Cutter Hall at the northeast corner of Tremont and Third Streets before moving on the next morning.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday Lincoln gave a speech in the rain in Vermont, southeast of Macomb, standing under an umbrella while addressing a crowd of more than 1,000. He returned to the Randolph House in Macomb for the evening.

The next morning, Lincoln boarded the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy train for Kewanee, arriving after Douglas had left. He was met by Henderson and his carriage, and they made their way to Toulon under a cloudy sky with intermittent rain. Henderson delivered Lincoln to the Virginia Hotel, and he commented later that he would “*never forget the very interesting and beautiful ride with Mr. Lincoln from*

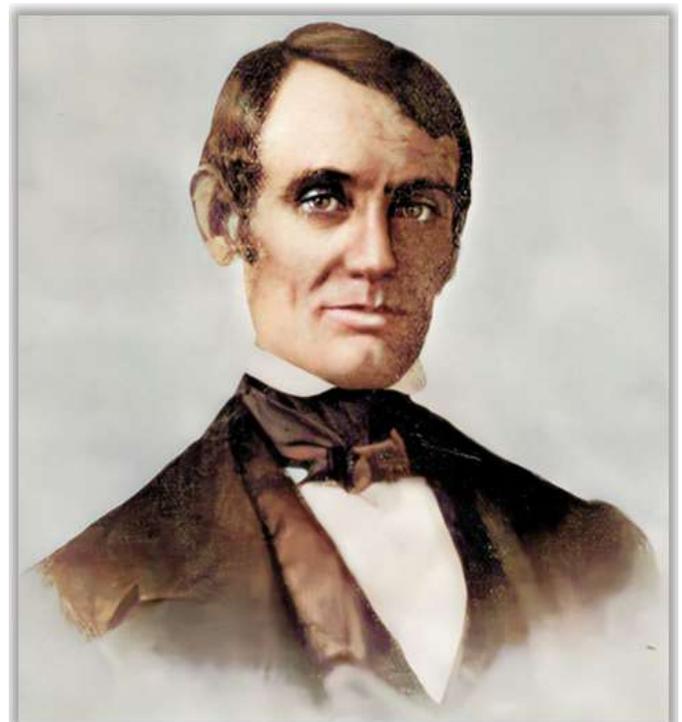
Kewanee to Toulon.” In the afternoon, Lincoln spoke in the town square as the audience stood in the rain.



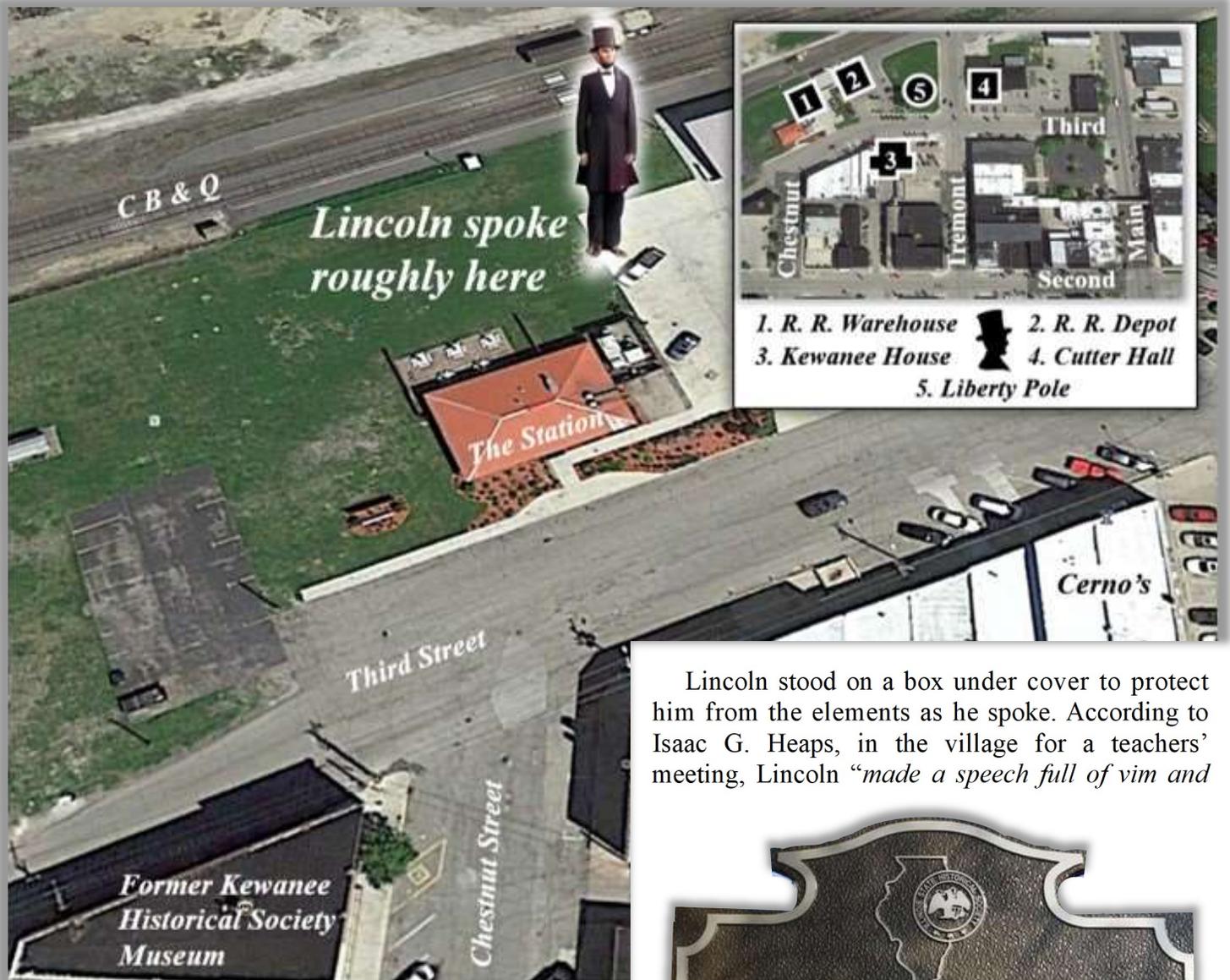
Sketch of Lincoln traveling by carriage during campaign (Kansas City Star, February 8, 1959)

Henry Miller of Kewanee drove to Toulon and brought Lincoln back to Kewanee in a buggy, another wet ride. Along the way, Saxon Postmaster Charles Robson loaned Miller and Lincoln a lantern as the storm increased and darkness set in. Lincoln’s election committee paid Miller \$6.00 for his efforts.

It was likely still raining when Miller arrived with Lincoln in Kewanee later that evening. There is much speculation as to where Lincoln spent the night. Since Lincoln wanted to catch the morning train to Chicago, he very well could have stayed in the Kewanee Hotel, located across from the depot on Third Street. But others, including newspaper columnist and historian Dave Clarke, believe it



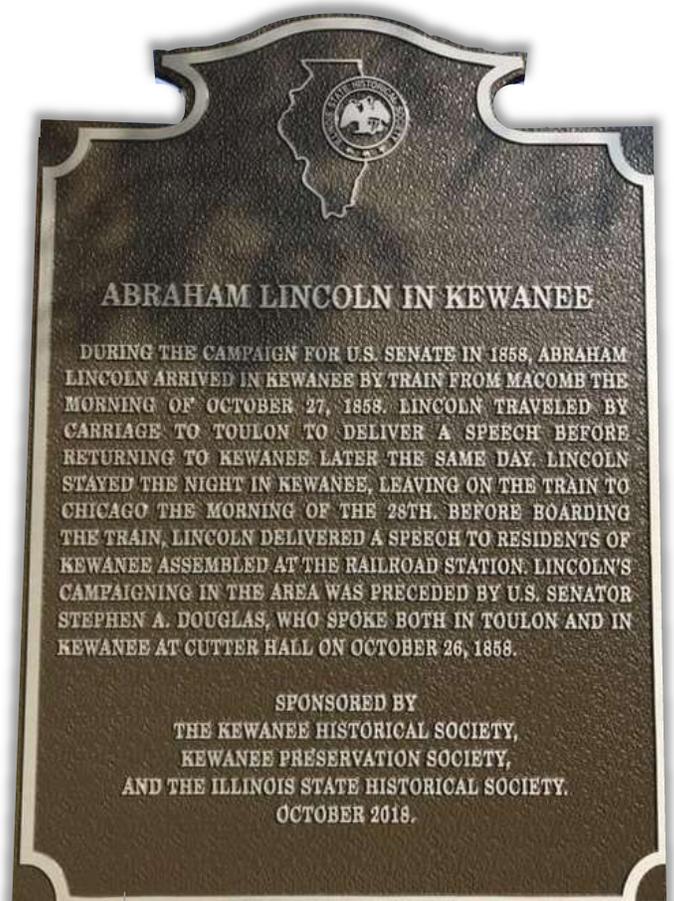
Earliest confirmed photographic image of Lincoln ca 1846



Lincoln stood on a box under cover to protect him from the elements as he spoke. According to Isaac G. Heaps, in the village for a teachers' meeting, Lincoln *"made a speech full of vim and*

makes the most sense that Lincoln, with his election organization strapped for cash, would have stayed with fellow founding member of the Illinois Republican party and friend Henry Gilman Little in Little's well-appointed home in Wethersfield on Division Street, just west of Tenney.

In any event, the next morning word had spread that Lincoln was in Kewanee and, since the train would not arrive for a while, Lincoln was urged to make a speech. Because it was raining again, Lincoln walked across the muddy and water-filled street to the warehouse near the depot. ("Depot" is a misnomer. It consisted of a narrow board platform along the track without covering. The adjacent water tanks and warehouse provided a modicum of protection from a storm. It was only later that a real, passenger depot was built.)



stories which kept the crowd laughing and cheering. . . . When the train pulled in amidst a great surging, cheering crowd, he took the train, bidding the crowd goodbye.”

Lincoln went on to Chicago to meet with supporters while Kewaneeans went about their daily business on a rainy fall day. But they were warmed with the events of the last two days when they had heard the issues of the nation framed by two Illinoisans who would, in two short years, vie for the presidency of the United States, a country which soon

would be torn asunder by a civil war. Although Douglas won the 1858 election for his Senate seat, his stature as a national leader of the Democratic Party was diminished. In contrast, Lincoln lost the election but won acclaim as an eloquent spokesman for the Republican Party.

October 27 and 28 were days to remember for those who heard the famous orators speak in Kewanee, as well as for us today.

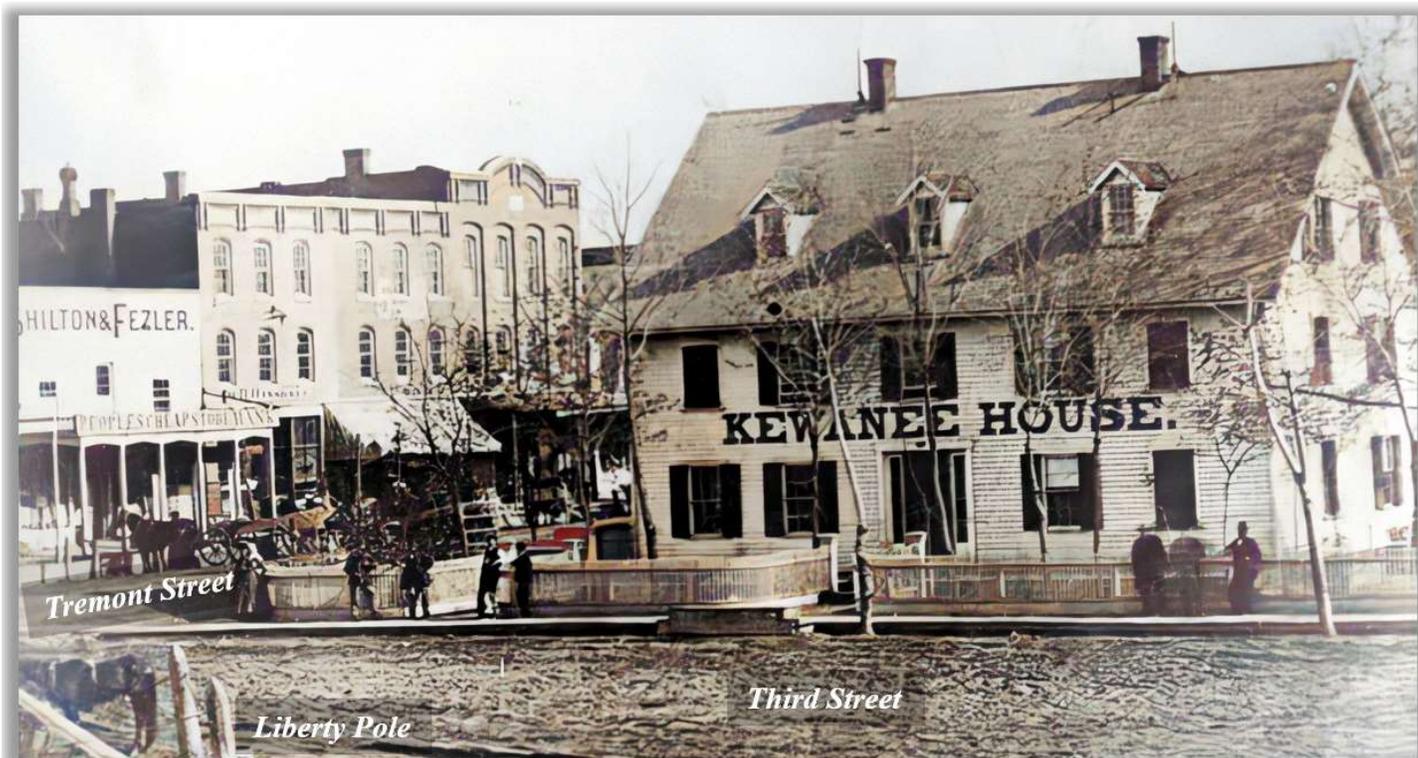
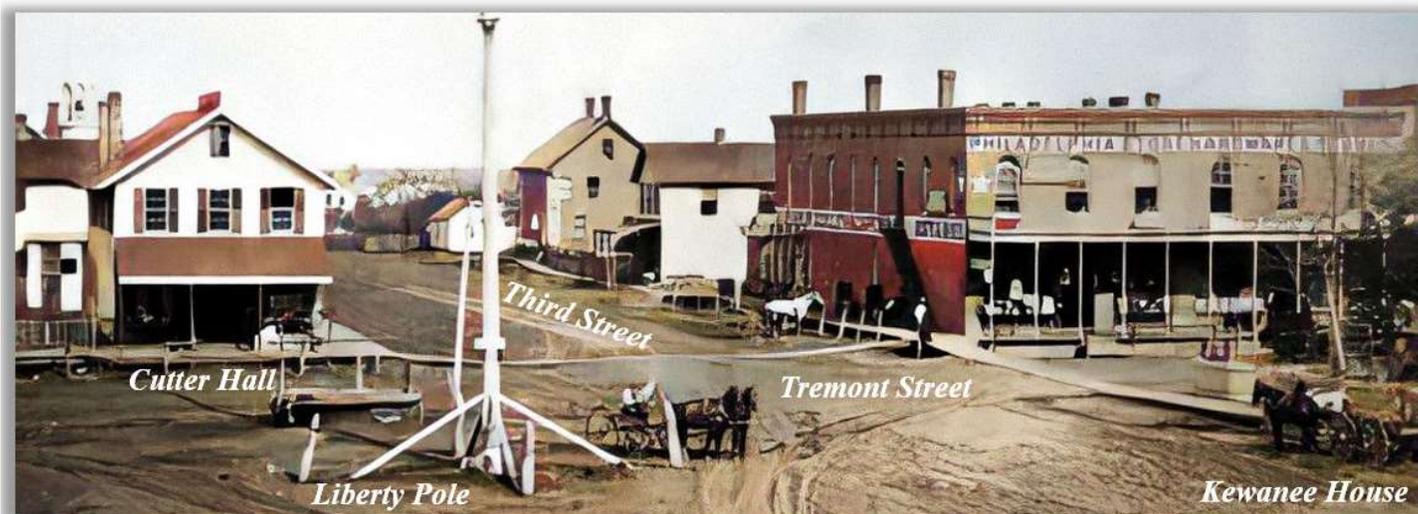


Photo taken before 1874 from R. R. Depot looking south, Lincoln's view from the location of his



Photo, ca 1860s, taken from atop R. R. Depot looking east, Lincoln's view the morning of his impromptu speech in Kewanee. The Philadelphia Store was not there when Lincoln visited, only wood buildings.

(When Postmaster Robson's lantern was returned by Lincoln through Kewanee's postmaster, it remained with the Robson family until Robson's great-grand-

son donated it to the Kewanee Historical Society in 2004. You can see it on display at the museum when it opens in the spring of 2021.)



Abraham Lincoln's likely view of Kewanee in the rain while standing on a box as he spoke with his back to the railroad depot/warehouse area before boarding his train to Chicago on October 28, 1858.