

## John R. Eden's Acquaintance with Abe Lincoln

John R. Eden came to Illinois from Indiana in 1852, age 26. He had qualified to practice law in Indiana, but when he came to Illinois he had to re-qualify by passing an oral bar examination. Mabel Martin George wrote a history of the Meeker and Eden families which appears in the *Compendium of Materials* relating to John R. Eden, at 351 et seq. In her account, Mabel passes along the family story about John R. Eden's trip to Vandalia to submit to the oral examination. (373) Three lawyers were to conduct the examination, one of whom was Abe Lincoln. The other two were named Springer and Chapman. Lincoln said he was tired and asked the other two men if they would conduct the examination without him. They did. Eden passed. Not long after that, John R. Eden received his certificate to practice law, and one of the signatures was Lincoln.

Father told me and others in the family the story of Eden's oral bar examination, and said that at one time he had the signed certificate in his office safe. I remember him telling me that an autograph collector had been in town and came to see him, asking to see the certificate. Father said he showed it to him, then put it back in his office wall safe, saying he would not sell it. The man left. Father usually did not lock his wall safe during the day, but kept the door ajar. Later when Father looked for the certificate it was gone.

Eden began to practice law in Sullivan in 1853. For the next seven years, he would have had many occasions to run into Lincoln as they both practiced law in Central Illinois court houses.

In 1858 when both Senator Douglas and Abe Lincoln spoke in Sullivan on the same day as part of their candidacies for the U.S. Senate, John R. Eden introduced Douglas. Lincoln and his procession walked past the Court House on their way to the park area on the north side of town where Lincoln was to speak. The disruption that occurred at that time was reported in several newspapers, and the reports are summarized in I.J. Martin's "The Lincoln-Douglas Speeches in Sullivan." See, in particular, *Illinois State Register*, September 28, 1858, where Senator Douglas reportedly stated, "a gentleman at my side says that he [Lincoln] was in the procession up to the time when a fight seemed likely to ensue, when he turned round and went in the other direction." See also *Notes on the History of Moultrie County and Sullivan, Illinois*, I.J. Martin, 1990, at 35.

On February 8, 1864, John R. Eden sent a letter to his wife, Roxanna, at the end of which he wrote: "I was up today to see Uncle Abe. No incident occurred worthy of note." This letter was quoted by John George in his "Political Biography" of John R. Eden, p. 46. *John R. Eden, Compendium of Materials*, at 448. George cites "John R. Eden, Washington, D.C., February 8, 1864, to Roxanna Meeker Eden, Sullivan, Illinois, in the possession of Judge Robert Martin, Sullivan, Illinois." Several other letters written by John R. Eden were also reported as being in possession of Judge Martin. These are:

December 13, 1863, to Roxanna  
December 16, 1863, to J.B. Titus  
January 2, 1864, to Roxanna  
March 6, 1864, to Roxanna

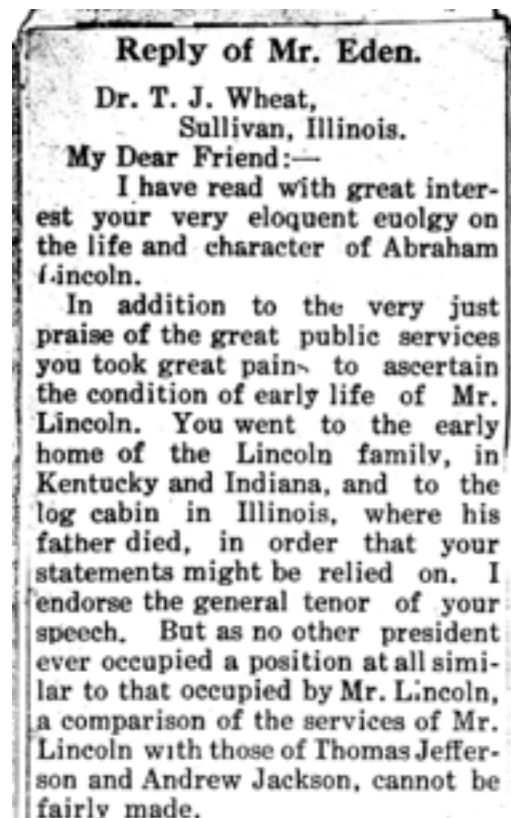
March 29, 1864, to Jonathan Meeker  
April 13, 1864, to Roxanna

This file of John R. Eden's letters was not found after Father's death in 1970.

On March 28, 1864, John R. Eden was on his way to Washington. He was scheduled to give a speech at Charleston, in Coles County. Alcohol flowed freely, and hostilities between Union soldiers and "Copperhead" civilians occurred. Nine people were killed. Eden cancelled his speech and headed on to Washington. In her history of the family, Mabel George (granddaughter of John R. Eden) wrote that a few days later Eden was "summoned to appear" before Lincoln, who supposedly rebuked him for his part in the riot. In her account, Eden waited until Lincoln had concluded his lecture, and then told him that he had not spoken, that there had been no Democratic rally that day, and that drunken soldiers had broken up their meeting with gunfire. Lincoln then supposedly said: "Mr. Eden, if I have misjudged you, I am sorry. I will look into this matter and we will discuss it again." They shook hands and Eden left. *John R. Eden, A Compendium of Materials*, at 387. The riot in Charleston is well documented. But I have read no other account of the subsequent meeting of Eden and President Lincoln. Mabel's family stories have some historical basis, but she invented some of the details — perhaps including this supposed meeting.

After Lincoln's assassination in 1865, John R. Eden served another four terms in Congress, and continued to practice law in Sullivan and other Central Illinois towns.

About four decades after the assassination, a minister in Sullivan, Dr. T.J. Wheat, published an article in one of the local newspapers about Lincoln, and praised his public service. John R. Eden replied to Wheat's letter. Though Eden was a Democrat and he and Lincoln were thus political adversaries, Eden referred in his reply to Lincoln's "great public services," and wrote that, "By his wisdom his persistence and his patriotism he saved the republic and his memory cannot be too highly honored." Here is the clipping containing his reply:



**Reply of Mr. Eden.**  
Dr. T. J. Wheat,  
Sullivan, Illinois.  
My Dear Friend:—  
I have read with great interest your very eloquent eulogy on the life and character of Abraham Lincoln.  
In addition to the very just praise of the great public services you took great pains to ascertain the condition of early life of Mr. Lincoln. You went to the early home of the Lincoln family, in Kentucky and Indiana, and to the log cabin in Illinois, where his father died, in order that your statements might be relied on. I endorse the general tenor of your speech. But as no other president ever occupied a position at all similar to that occupied by Mr. Lincoln, a comparison of the services of Mr. Lincoln with those of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, cannot be fairly made.

Jefferson was the greatest political philosopher this country or any other has produced. He was the author of the Declaration of Independence upon which Mr. Lincoln formed his platform. In his inaugural address he enunciated the doctrine of civil and religious liberty, and until today the great mass of the American people are striving to enforce the law of equal rights advanced by him. "Equal and exact justice to all, special privileges to none."

Andrew Jackson had the greatest military capacity of any American. He was the only officer we ever had, who, in a fight with Indians instead of wounding a few and killing very few could simply wipe out their war parties, and compel their leader to sue for peace. With the militia of Kentucky and Tennessee and a single regiment of regulars, he successfully defended our southern coast from the most formidable British army that ever attempted to invade the United States and at New Orleans with his riflemen he defeated a British army more than double his number that had aided in the final defeat of the great Napoleon.

As president he defeated the first serious attempt at secession, by delivering in public the declaration "the union it must and shall be preserved." The secessionists knew he meant what he said. Mr. Lincoln's services consisted in carrying to success the greatest war of Modern time for the preservation of the republic, which Jefferson did so much to establish and Jackson did so much to defend. He had unlimited means in men and money and almost insurmountable political difficulties to meet.

By his wisdom his persistence and his patriotism he saved the republic and his memory cannot be too highly honored.

I do not join you in criticism of the Democratic Presidents Polk and Buchanan. But as I fully concur with your estimate due to the memory of Lincoln I need not point out wherein I think you erred as to the democratic presidents.

Very truly yours,

John R. Eden.

