

Abraham Lincoln

EDITED by ROY EDGAR APPLEMAN
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
1942 • (Revised 1956)

p. 16

THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE: PROLOGUE TO DESTINY

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln was the Republican, and Stephen A. Douglas the Democratic, candidate for United States Senator from Illinois. Douglas was serving as Senator at the time and was seeking reelection. Shortly after the campaign started, Lincoln, in a letter written at Chicago, July 24, challenged Douglas to a joint debate on the issues before the people. Douglas accepted and suggested that there be a joint meeting at one prominent point in each congressional district in the State, excepting the Second and Sixth, where each had already spoken. Douglas named seven places.

The great issue was over slavery and its constitutional and legal place in the Nation. The Dred Scott Decision, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the extension of slavery into the Territories, were the points on which the great debate dwelt. Douglas was considered the leader of the Democratic Party. His great talent and power in debate were acknowledged throughout the land. Compared with him, Lincoln was unknown beyond the borders of his own State. The political and forensic contest waged by these two men in Illinois that year caught the attention of the entire Nation. After its close the name of Lincoln, for the first time, was not altogether unfamiliar in the country at large. Douglas traveled over the State during the debate in a special train equipped with a brass cannon. Lincoln traveled as an ordinary passenger in a common coach, and there were times when he could not even find a seat.

Close reasoning, iron logic, clear exposition, and honesty marked Lincoln's speeches. They may still be cited as masterpieces of political discussion. Yet Douglas won the contest, as he was returned to the Senate by a close vote of the State Legislature.

In the first selection given below an old friend of Lincoln's tells about riding with him on the way to the first debate at Ottawa.

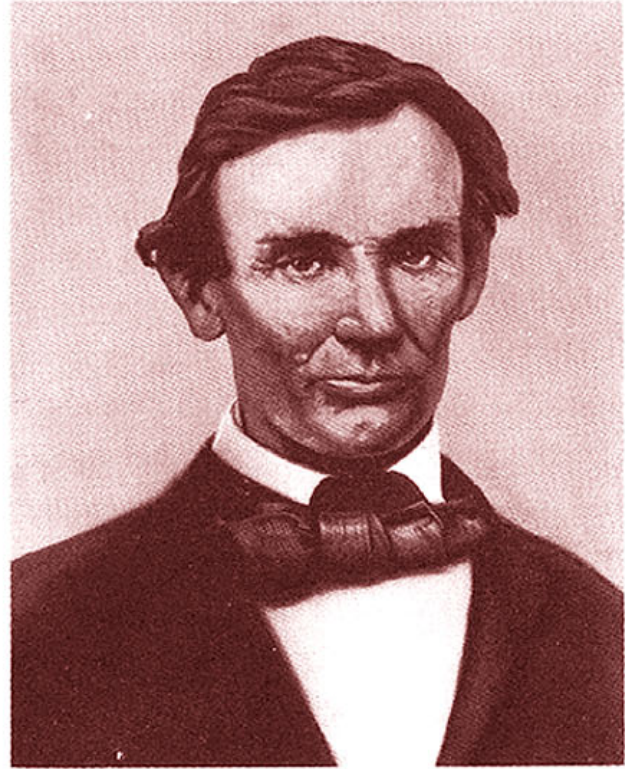
I went from Chicago via the morning train, which reached Ottawa at noon. Lincoln got on board at Morris. The humblest commercial traveler did not travel so unostentatiously; he was entirely alone, and carried his little baggage in his hand. He did not have a director's car, with a great retinue of flunkies and parasites and a platform car with a cannon on it, as his distinguished competitor did. He sat with me throughout the journey; and I am thus enabled to know for myself that this remarkable man exhibited not the slightest trace of excitement or nervousness at the threshold of one of the fiercest political contests in this or in any other country. We talked about matters other than the impending debate. I merely alluded to that as we approached the goal for the contest to which he calmly and indifferently replied, that he was fully prepared.

OldMagazineArticles.com



Stephen Arnold Douglas. Douglas was Lincoln's rival in Illinois and national politics. At the time of the series of debates in 1858 Douglas was United States Senator from Illinois and the recognized head of the Democratic Party.

He was a ready resourceful speaker. Senator Fessenden once said of him, "You may drop him in the middle of a morass, from which escape seems impossible, and before your back is turned he will have built a corduroy road across it, and be at you again and at you harder than ever." Reproduced from a print of a daguerreotype.



An interesting portrait of Lincoln made at the time of his debates with Douglas. It shows him as he appeared when his fame first burst the bounds of Illinois. This was the man against whom Douglas was matched in the Illinois Senatorial Contest of 1858. The portrait was made by C. Jackson at Pittsfield, Ill., October 1, 1858, just after Lincoln had finished making a two-hour speech in the public square. Reproduced from a print after the original ambrotype.