

Lincoln's Admission to The Bar



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This month's front cover features a photograph of an entry in Circuit Court records of 1836 attesting to Abraham Lincoln's good moral character as a step in his admission to the bar. Actually, three steps were involved in his admission.

The first was an order by Judge Stephen Trigg Logan, entered in the Sangamon County Circuit Court Record, Volume C, Page 173, in Springfield, Illinois, on March 24, 1836, which stated: "It is Ordered by the Court that it be certified that Abraham Lincoln is a person of good moral character." The precious volume is now kept in the archives at Sangamon State University in Springfield.¹

Lincoln's next step was to pass the bar examination on September 9, 1836, in Springfield. Historians generally agree that a very informal oral question and answer procedure was followed in administering the examination.

The final step to admit Lincoln to full standing as a member of the bar occurred March 1, 1837 when his name was written down on the roll of attorneys in the Supreme Court office at Vandalia, then the state capital. Lincoln's name is listed today in the Supreme Court Clerk's office in Springfield in two places, a simple card file containing his name and date of admission, and in a bound volume record (see accompanying illustrations). The original record containing Lincoln's name disappeared many years ago, according to Clell Woods, present Clerk of the Supreme Court.

Two days after receiving his license, Lincoln participated in his first case, in Springfield. According to biographer Benjamin Thomas, the case actually was three related suits, docketed as *Hawthorn v. Wooldridge*, which involved failure of the defendant to furnish the plaintiff with two yoke of oxen to break prairie, and refusal to permit access to a tract of land on which he had granted the right to raise a crop. Lincoln lost on one count and settled the other two out of court.

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¹ Now the University of Illinois at Springfield