
James Adams of Springfield, Illinois: The Link between Abraham Lincoln and Joseph Smith

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Historians Richard L. Bushman and Bryon C. Andreasen have searched for evidence to connect the life of Joseph Smith with Abraham Lincoln.¹ Circumstances place Smith actually in Springfield, Illinois, on two occasions—in early November 1839 (while en route east to Washington DC), and again during the last week of December 1842 and the first week of January 1843 (during his hearing before federal judge Nathaniel Pope). At the same time, Lincoln was an elected representative from Sangamon County to the state legislature (he voted in favor of the Nauvoo Charter), and a Springfield lawyer in the Eighth Circuit District Court of Illinois. Yet, historical evidence is not conclusive whether either man tipped a hat to the other. It has been well-argued that Lincoln and Smith lived separate lives.²

However, such an argument fails to recognize the role of Democrat James Adams in the lives of Lincoln and Smith. Both men not only knew Adams, they spoke of him in public places and wrote of him in newsprint and private correspondence. Honest Abe characterized Adams as “a forger, a whiner, a fool, and a liar.”³ Smith touted Adams as a pillar of society. Without the juxtaposition of these two men, the life of Adams may not be worth much mention except as a side note. But with Lincoln and Smith expressing divergent opinions, the life of James Adams takes on greater significance. This paper will (1) introduce known facts of Adams’s life that pre-date his conflict with Lincoln, (2) discuss Lincoln’s partisan political power fight with Adams, (3) present reasons for Smith’s affection towards Adams as a father figure, and (4)

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examine the arguments of Lincoln and Smith in an attempt to assess the true character of James Adams.

James Adams—Early Life and Career

James Adams, son of Parmenio and Chloe Adams, was born on January 24, 1783, in Simsbury Township, Hartford County, Connecticut. By age twenty-six, he had married Harriet Denton.⁴ He and his wife resided in Orange County, New York, where daughters Lovenia (b. 1812) and Lovenia Eliza (b. 1813) were born.⁵ In Orange, Adams joined the Masonic Washington Lodge No. 220, where he was raised to a Master Mason on June 1, 1813. That same year, he moved his family to Onondaga County, New York, where he served as a justice of the peace in Lysander Township.⁶ During his tenure with the court in Onondaga, two additional children were born into his family—Charlotte (b. 1815), Lucian B. (b. 1816).⁷

Adams associated with the 16th and later the 23rd Infantry Regiment of the New York State Militia. On July 8, 1816, Governor Daniel D. Tompkins appointed him “Colonel of the 172nd Regiment of Infantry in the New York State Militia.” Later, Governor DeWitt Clinton appointed him “Brevet Brigadier General of the Forty-Fifth Brigade of Infantry in the New York State Militia on September 5, 1817” before advancing him to “Brigadier General of the 48th Brigade of Infantry on April 24, 1818.”⁸

Adams referred to himself as “General Adams” by the time he and his family moved to Oswego County, where their last child, Vienna, was born (b. 1818).⁹ In Oswego, he was admitted to the New York State Bar on October 11, 1817 and appointed by Governor Clinton as Commissioner of Roads for the Westmoreland and Sodus Bay Turnpike Company.¹⁰

Given his notoriety, it may have shocked a few county folk when John Grant Jr., district attorney for the Court of General Sessions at Oswego County, filed on October 6, 1818, the court case *The People vs. James Adams* on the charge of forgery. In the indictment, Adams was depicted as “a person of evil name and fame, and of a wicked disposition” and charged with “contriving and intending” to defraud Donald McDougal Stewart out of “lot No. 72, of the town of Hannibal (now town of Granby in Oswego County) in the county of Oswego.” The indictment claimed that on December 20, 1816, Adams forged Stewart’s signature, causing “great damage” to Stewart and “the people of the State of New York, and their dignity.”¹¹ Adams slipped away from Oswego before a verdict in the pending case was rendered.¹² While this move has the outward appearance of guilt, it may reflect his fears of not receiving a fair trial.

Adams did not flee the state immediately, as some have supposed. He went to Baldwinsville in Onondaga County and worked as a clerk in the J. C. Baldwin mercantile enterprise until June 1820, when he left New York bound for Illinois. By spring 1821, Adams had settled in Springfield, Sangamon County, Illinois, and by August of that year he was licensed as a counselor-at-law.¹³ Resident E. Iles recalled, “On his arrival here, [Adams] professed to be a lawyer, and as such he was frequently employed. At that time he was considered a tolerable good one—as a counselor I have heard no objections made by his clients; and for a time, as a citizen, no particular objection was raised against him.”¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln held a different view: “When [Adams] first came to this country, he attended to improve himself upon the community as a lawyer. [He] carried the attempt so far as to induce a man who was under a charge of murder to entrust the defense of his life in his hands, and finally took his money and got him hanged.”¹⁵

Adams, ignoring such comments, soon became a part of Springfield society. He affiliated with the Masonic Sangamon Lodge No. 9, where he served as Grand Secretary and Grand Chaplain. When the Springfield Lodge No. 26 formed, he was named “Master” before assuming “the Junior Warden’s station.”¹⁶ In addition to his Masonic involvement, by 1823 he had gained the support of the Democratic Party, terminated his law practice, and accepted an appointment and confirmation by the state senate as justice of the peace for Sangamon County. Two years later, in 1825, he was selected by the state legislature as the judge of probate in Sangamon County.¹⁷ Although it has been purported that he interrupted his probate service to fight in the Winnebago and Black Hawk Wars of 1827 and 1831, Illinois archivist Wayne C. Temple indicates that “such is not the case.” Further: “Only in 1831 did he even draw seventeen days salary as an inspector of troops. Even then he remained a civilian. In those days, inspectors were gentlemen with political influence who were employed by the State of Illinois to examine or even compile muster rolls, etc.”¹⁸ Adams ran as a non partisan candidate for governor of Illinois in 1834, but without success. Minor offices like recorder of deeds in Sangamon County in 1835 also eluded him.

Lincoln’s Vilification of Adams--Partisan Power Politics

With all of this said, perhaps if the Illinois General Assembly had not passed legislation on March 4, 1837, that “provided for the election of probate justices of the peace within the counties of the state,” the conflict between Lincoln and Adams may never have ensued. Adams’s hold on the judicial seat was iron tight until the election process of 1837. Since he had served by that time as probate judge for twelve years, the election appeared to be a mere

formality of the democratic process, but it proved to be much more. Anson Gordon Henry,¹⁹ Lincoln's close friend, physician, political promoter, and the State House Commissioner, ran against Adams on the Whig ticket. Historian Paul M. Angle holds that Henry had "a capacity for making two bitter enemies for each warm friend," and like a lamb, Lincoln followed his lead.²⁰

In the political fray that followed, Honest Abe disclosed what he believed was the reason for Adams's sudden move from New York, and raised the issue of Adams's alleged fraud to voters in Sangamon County. Lincoln's eagerness to vilify Adams led to one of the "bitterest personal and political fights that Springfield ever witnessed."²¹ The fight was not a one-time verbal bashing at a town hall, or a dramatic scene that took place on the courthouse steps. It was much more public and vindictive. The battle was thrashed out and widely publicized in the popular capitol city newspapers—the *Springfield Republican* and *Sangamo Journal*.

Lincoln, feigning reluctance to defame the character of Adams, began his attack by printing the forgery indictment pending against Adams in Oswego County, in the Whig, *Sangamo Journal*. "We would willingly have suppressed the publication of this transcript, could we have done so consistently with the duty we owed to ourself and the community," confessed Lincoln.²² Then, as if a caged animal poised to attack, he excoriated Adams as a "forger, a whiner, a fool, and a liar."²³ Lincoln questioned Adams's right to hold two properties, the first being the property of the late Joseph Anderson. Lincoln claimed that Adams, while acting as the attorney for Anderson, wrongly acquired ten acres that rightfully belonged to Anderson's heirs, and that Anderson never sold the property to Adams. Lincoln further claimed that Adams based his right of ownership on a spurious deed.²⁴ Lincoln's knowledge of the real estate transaction stemmed from his being legal counsel for the widow and son of the deceased. In the *Legal Suit of Widow v. Adams to the People*, widow:

Mary Anderson, being solemnly sworn, do say, that in the life time of my late husband, Joseph Anderson, I had frequent conversations with him relating to a certain tract of land in Sangamon county, near Springfield, which he [has] claimed as belonging to him, and which is now claimed by Gen. Adams; I never heard from him that he had transferred it to any one. I do not believe he ever did; and I further believe if he had done so, I should have known it,—and that he never concealed any contract that he made from me.²⁵

Lincoln queried, "Is it probable that a man having but little property, making but few trades, would dispose of a tract of land without communicating it to his wife? That he should conceal it from her on his death bed?"²⁶

The second property in question was land once owned by the late Andrew Sampson, a former partner of Adams's. Lincoln claimed that Sampson was a

poor man and would never have agreed to the terms of the deed Adams held. "I thought it strange that [Sampson] should lease all the property which he had to Adams, for the long term of ten years, and for the pitiful sum of ten dollars," penned Lincoln, "and bind himself, too, to pay for all the improvements which he, Adams, might see proper to put up in the mean time."²⁷

Adams made a feeble attempt to reply to Lincoln's charge by calling Lincoln a Tory. Lincoln hammered back that Adams was a turncoat—a Tory, himself. "The 'old soldier' gives us an account of his feats of chivalry," he declared. "This is all very well, for if he should not tell of them they might be entirely lost to the world."²⁸ To Lincoln, Adams's military prowess was not only exaggerated, it was far from the truth, as was his ownership of the properties in question.

An angry Lincoln sent six letters deriding the character of Adams to the *Sangamo Journal* under the pen name "Sampson's Ghost."²⁹ In the first letter, published on June 17, 1837, Lincoln, writing as Sampson's Ghost, claimed that "Gen. Adams has always been opposed to Springfield, as well as her citizens," opposition that openly smacked of political jockeying.³⁰ Seven days later, Lincoln demanded that Adams tell "by what authority he holds possession of the property he now lives upon."³¹ The *Springfield Republican*, the Democratic newspaper siding with Adams, assured its readers that "we have been authorized to say, Gen. Adams will, in due time, answer the communications."³²

Meanwhile, Sampson's Ghost was relentless in drumming the issue of real estate fraud:

I again call upon the General to explain to the citizens of this county by what authority he holds possession of two certain lots of ground in Springfield, upon which he now resides. If he will answer this question fairly, without equivocation, and then the people choose to make him Probate Justice of the Peace, I will acknowledge that Sampson never owned one foot of ground in Springfield. . . . I consider that there is nothing unreasonable in these requests.³³

Judge Adams did not attempt to vindicate himself, but this did not stop Lincoln from claiming that the judge had written a response. On July 15, 1837, Sampson's Ghost wrote, "The 'Old Soldier' writes most eloquently in praise of himself; for it is well known that no other person cares enough about him to write such a mess of stuff for his benefit." He then reminded Adams that:

I last week called upon the "old soldier" to say if he was willing to refer the People of this County to the old citizens of Springfield, to learn the truth in regard to the manner in which he obtained the lots on which he now resides. But he has shunned the answer. I now ask him to publish the lease which he is said to have obtained from me in my

life time He certifies most valorously for his uprightness and good standing: all very proper for the same reason.³⁴ July 22, 1837, an exasperated Sampson's Ghost penned, "[I] have asked him to explain the manner in which he came into possession of Sampson's property. . . . I must again ask you to give some account of your trade with me."³⁵ Adams failed to respond. One week later, Sampson's Ghost bid farewell to the readers of the *Sangamo Journal*: "My labors have now nearly ceased. I have only sought to promote inquiry. All I ask—all I want is that TRUTH SHOULD PREVAIL. And before I am charged as a slanderer, I wish all the evidences in the case to be fairly, freely and fully examined."³⁶ Thus, through a series of accusatory letters, Lincoln succeeded in raising suspicion about the real estate dealings and character of James Adams to the readers of the *Sangamo Journal*.

With only two days remaining until the election of 1837, Lincoln was far from done. He drew up a handbill outlining Adams's flaws and distributed it throughout the county. It was the handbill that irked James Adams into making a decisive response: "TO THE VOTERS OF SANGAMON COUNTY. I hope my friends will pardon me for condescending so low as to notice briefly this dirty stuff."³⁷ He then quoted his son-in-law Peter S. Weber³⁸ and his son Lucian Adams as character witnesses and concluded "with much apparent confidence of his success on the pending law suit, and the ultimate maintenance of his title to the land in question."³⁹

Adams won the election without Lincoln's vote, Anson Gordon Henry's vote, or the support of the *Sangamo Journal*. Adams received 1,025 votes, Henry 792, and the general was commissioned on September 11, 1837, as the newly elected probate judge of Sangamon County.⁴⁰ On December 23, 1837, the *Sangamo Journal* reported Adams's reelection as "a source of deep mortification to us."⁴¹

The charge of real estate improprieties facing Adams remained front and center long after the votes were counted. Although the *Springfield Republican* expressed hope that "this controversy will now stop," editors of the *Sangamo Journal* refused to desist. "If Gen. Adams is innocent, we would wish to see the fact as clear as the sun at noon-day."⁴² On Sunday, July 14, 1839, Adams handed Lincoln letters of guardianship to the lands in question.⁴³ The letters proved beyond doubt that Adams had the right to possess the properties. Charges of fraudulent business dealings against him were dismissed. But the dismissed charges did not prove noteworthy and were ignored by the major capitol newspapers.⁴⁴

Lincoln lost face for his adamant stance against Adams, but Adams lost much more. His scars from the public inquisition ran deep. He and Lincoln never mended their relationship. Mutual avoidance was the norm for their remaining years in Springfield. When Adams ran for reelection in 1839, Lincoln voted against him, but only at the ballot polls, not in the press.⁴⁵ According to Lincoln historian Harry E. Pratt, the "bitter political feud" waged against

Adams was one “in the early career of Abraham Lincoln which he probably wished later could be forgotten.”⁴⁶ One of the more humorous tales Lincoln concocted about Adams still survives.

“Good evening, friend,” said Lincoln; “how far is it to Springfield?”

“Well, I guess it’s about five miles,” the other answered.

“Are you just from there?”

“I am.”

“What’s the news there?” Lincoln asked.

“Well,” the Springfielder replied, “there’s nothing of any account but a sad accident that happened the other day—you don’t know General Adams?—Well, the General went to stoop down to pick some blackberries, and John Taylor’s calf gave him a butt right—”

“You don’t say so! And did the General die?”

“No, by God, but the calf did!”⁴⁷

Judge Adams—Father Figure to Joseph Smith

By the time Joseph Smith was contemplating his journey to Washington DC in October 1839, Lincoln’s barbs at Adams were all but over. Neither local newspaper was willing to continue discussing the alleged forged property deeds or the character of one of Springfield’s most noted citizens. Adams had been elected probate judge for another term and was hailed as a founder of the Springfield Lodge of Freemasonry. When the Grand Lodge of Illinois was established at Jacksonville on April 6, 1840, Adams was “elected Right Worshipful Deputy Grand Master.” Conspicuously absent on the rolls of the Springfield Masonic Lodge was the name of Abraham Lincoln.

After arriving in Springfield during the first week of November, a city rife with freemasonry and hard-biting politics, Joseph Smith paused on his appointed journey to converse with men in the capitol. During his four-day stint, he learned of a prominent county official inquiring after him. Smith recorded that the official, who was none other than General James Adams, “sought me out.” The Prophet initially lodged at the home of Brother John Snider, but he spent considerable time at the Adams residence. Of the judge’s hospitality, Smith penned, “he took me home with him, and treated me like a father.”⁴⁸ Had Smith found a father figure well-placed in political circles who commiserated with his sufferings and would provide needed assistance? The answer appeared to be affirmative. One of his first acts of kindness included writing a letter of introduction and recommendation in behalf of Joseph Smith and his companions to U.S. President Martin Van Buren.⁴⁹

It is no small matter that soon after his meeting with the Mormon Prophet, the judge was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which he insisted be kept secret from friends and enemies in Spring-



James Adams home site, southwest corner of Fourth and Jefferson, Springfield, Illinois, October 2005. Joseph Smith spent time in Adams's home on two occasions—in early November 1839 (while en route east to Washington DC), and again during the last week of December 1842 and the first week of January 1843 (during his hearing before federal judge Nathaniel Pope). The Illinois State Capitol can be seen in the background.

Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

field.⁵⁰ This is understandable, given his political status in the community. Furthermore, Adams may have felt that he could help the Mormon cause if those in the political arena remained unaware of his religious affiliation. However, his later visits to Nauvoo may have tipped his hand, but none in Springfield seemed the wiser.

Between 1840–43, Judge Adams lived a dual life in Springfield and Nauvoo. His life in the state capitol remained much the same—real estate entrepreneur, judge, family man, and a commissioner for the Springfield Marine & Fire Insurance Company. His life among Latter-day Saints was another story. In 1840, he was appointed trustee of the University of the City of Nauvoo. That same year, he performed vicarious baptisms in the Mississippi River for his deceased daughter, Charlotte; his father, Parmenio; an uncle, and a grandmother.⁵¹ On October 2, 1841, Hyrum Smith gave him a patriarchal blessing, declaring him to be of the tribe of Judah.⁵² After the blessing, Adams served as proxy for eighty-three baptisms for the dead, most of which were for distant relatives. However, three were conspicuous—one being former U. S. Presi-

dent John Adams. The other two were the late Andrew Sampson and Joseph Anderson, the very men whose conveyance of property was questioned in Adams's bid for reelection in 1837.⁵³

On Wednesday, May 4, 1842, Adams was invited, along with Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, Newel K. Whitney, and other leading Latter-day Saints, to be one of the first nine men to receive the temple endowment. Of that sacred occasion, Smith's published history records:

In council with General James Adams, of Springfield, Patriarch Hyrum Smith . . . instructing them in the principles and order of the Priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, setting forth the order pertaining to the Ancient of Days.⁵⁴

The fact that Joseph Smith included Adams in this inner group of his closest associates indicates the high degree of trust, confidence, and spiritual affection that existed between the two men.

James Adams also played a central role in expanding the Latter-day Saint practice of masonry in Nauvoo.⁵⁵ On August 6, 1842, the Prophet and a number of brethren accompanied him to the river community of Montrose, Iowa Territory. There, Adams organized the Masonic Lodge of the Rising Sun.⁵⁶

Following the assassination attempt against ex-Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs by an unknown assailant in May 1842, Missouri authorities issued extradition papers against Joseph Smith to force him to return to Missouri to face charges as an accomplice. Although provisions in the Nauvoo Charter allowed Smith to be tried in Nauvoo's municipal court, upon the advice of attorneys and judges, Joseph Smith agreed to be tried in U. S. District Court in Springfield. One who encouraged the Mormon leader to agree to the Springfield trial was none other than James Adams. On December 17, 1842, Adams penned, "My Son:—It is useless for me to detail facts that the bearer can tell. But I will say that it appears to my judgment that you had best make no delay in coming before the court at this place for a discharge under a habeas corpus."⁵⁷ Perhaps because of Adams's counsel, Smith complied.

During the seven days of legal proceedings that followed (December 31, 1842–January 5, 1843), Joseph Smith lodged at Adams's Springfield home.⁵⁸ Adams and William Law each put up the sum of \$2,000 to post bail.⁵⁹ While waiting for the legal process to run its course, the Prophet discoursed freely in the Adams home on Mormon teachings and doctrines. Speaking on the subject of the millennium, Joseph Smith remarked:

Christ and the resurrected Saints will reign over the earth during the thousand years. They will not probably dwell upon the earth, but will visit it when they please or when

it is necessary to govern it. There will be wicked men on the earth during the thousand years. The heathen nations who will not come up to worship will be visited with the judgments of God, and must eventually be destroyed from the earth.⁶⁰

On Monday, January 2, 1843, in the judge's home, Smith predicted he would not go to Missouri "dead or alive."⁶¹ The next day he prophesied that "no very formidable opposition would be raised at my trial on the morrow."⁶² Both prophecies were fulfilled. On January 5, 1843, Smith secured his freedom from all charges and journeyed back to Nauvoo.

Five months later, Joseph Smith and James Adams entered into a business partnership. On May 12, 1843, Smith penned, "Purchased half of the steamer *Maid of Iowa*, from [Levi] Moffatt."⁶³ Adams purchased the other half on May 23, 1843, in exchange for 1,760 acres of land north and south of Nauvoo transacted. On that date, Smith sold to James Adams for "consideration" (meaning no money passed between the men) nine properties totaling 1,760 acres. One property was Lot #14 in the city of Nauvoo, prime real estate near the temple construction site. Another property was farmland on the outskirts of Nauvoo. The seven additional properties were large tracts of farmland located in Pontoosuc, Hancock County.⁶⁴ The next day, May 24, 1843, Smith recorded, "I bought eleven quarter-sections of land from Judge Adams."⁶⁵

On May 28, Smith met with Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, Judge Adams, Bishop Newel K. Whitney and William Law "in the upper room [of the brick store] to attend to ordinances and counseling." On this occasion, Smith also "prayed that James Adams might be delivered from his enemies."⁶⁶ Who were the enemies he was referring to? Did Lincoln, Henry, or other Springfield politicians take up the sword again? Enemies aside, later that day, his wife, Harriet Deaton Adams, was sealed to him, and he entered into plural marriage.⁶⁷

Although he entered the political arena in Hancock County and won the election of probate justice of the peace on August 7, 1843, four days later, on August 11, 1843, he died of cholera in Nauvoo. The *Times and Seasons* reported his passing:

It is with regret that we announce the death of our respected brother, Gen. Judge Adams, of Springfield. He joined this church some time ago in the above place, and had come to Nauvoo for the purpose of arranging matters preparatory to his removal to this place. He was attacked by the cholera morbus, and died on Friday night, the 11th inst. He has left an amiable family, and a large circle of acquaintances, by whom he was greatly respected, to mourn his loss. Peace to his ashes.⁶⁸

He was buried with full Masonic honors on August 16 in the Old Pioneer Cemetery in Nauvoo.

Although Adams intended to move his residency to Nauvoo, his widow had other plans. She remained in Springfield, where she enjoyed her status as a respected member of the community. It was said of her, “Mrs. Adams [was] a very respectable, and a very worthy old lady.”⁶⁹ She died on August 21, 1844, in Springfield, about one year after her husband’s death.

The estate of James and Harriet Adams was executed by their son, Lucian. Significantly, Adams’s Springfield properties, once in the estates of Joseph Anderson and Andrew Sampson, were not problematic.⁷⁰ The same could be said for his other landholdings held in Illinois, Missouri, Texas, and New York. However, the judge’s Nauvoo properties and his partnership with Joseph Smith proved difficult. After months of negotiating with Mormon leaders, Lucian Adams finally sold the Nauvoo properties to the LDS Church for a consideration of “one dollar.”⁷¹

As to the partnership with Joseph Smith and the *Maid of Iowa*, it appears that at least on one occasion, Smith made a transfer of a small portion of Adams’s expenses in their partnership to the executor. Evidence of that attempted transfer is noted in a letter that Smith wrote to Lucian Adams:

Nauvoo City Oct—2nd 1843

Mr. Lucian Adams

Dear Sir I have furnished the Steam boat the one hundred dollars you agree to Send me as well as in every thing else and Set her a running and She is like to do well She is now at St. Louis I am owing the bearer of this line Seventy five dollars in cash which I want you to pay him for me and I will apply it on you[r] Share of the boat I am most respect[f]uly you[r] Obedient Servant

Signed Joseph Smith⁷²

The executor was to pay the designated \$75 to the bearer of the letter, George Stewart. It is not known whether he complied.

Joseph Smith spoke of Judge Adams at a general conference held on October 9, 1843. Reporting on the proceedings of the conference were clerks Willard Richards and William Clayton. According to Richards, the congregation “listened with profound attention to an impressive discourse from President Joseph Smith, commemorative of the decease of James Adams, Esq., late of this city, and an honorable, worthy, useful and esteemed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Both Richards and Clayton reported that Smith spoke on the principle of death: “All men know that they must die. And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our de-

parture hence.” Then, as if those listening had failed to comprehend his words, Smith said, “Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject.” He then revealed the eternal standing of his friend and partner, James Adams: “Patriarch Adams is now one of the spirits of the just men made perfect; and, if revealed now, must be revealed in fire; and the glory could not be endured.” Smith paused, as if musing over the trials that Adams had endured, before saying, “It should appear strange that so good and so great a man was hated. The deceased ought never to have had an enemy. But so it was.” He then gave an explanation as to why Adams was hated: “Wherever light shone, it stirred up darkness. Truth and error, good and evil cannot be reconciled. Judge Adams had some enemies, but such a man ought not to have had one.”⁷³

To Joseph Smith, Adams had “been a most intimate friend.” The Prophet recalled, “I anointed him to the patriarchal power—to receive the keys of knowledge and power, by revelation to himself.”⁷⁴ Joseph then assured his listeners, “[Adams] has had revelations concerning his departure, and has gone to a more important work. When men are prepared, they are better off to go hence. Brother Adams has gone to open up a more effectual door for the dead.”⁷⁵

Lincoln’s Opinion of James Adams vs. Joseph Smith’s

Two of the most influential Americans of the nineteenth century held extreme, divergent views of the same man. To Abraham Lincoln, James Adams was “a forger, a whiner, a fool, and a liar.”⁷⁶ To Joseph Smith, he was a pillar of society in this life and the next. Was Honest Abe or the Mormon Prophet the truth sayers? At stake is the remembered reputation of James Adams.

Lest the politically laced trap of Lincoln ensnare my readers, two critical issues must be recounted. First, Lincoln’s arguments failed to sway voters in Sangamon County to replace Adams as the probate judge. Second, Lincoln failed to convince the judge of the *Legal Suit of Widow v. Adams to the People* to rule in favor of Anderson’s widow and her son. Consider Joseph Smith’s assessment of the character of Adams. Smith never attempted to answer how he formed his opinion of the judge. To him, there was no need to establish a basis or foundation for the man’s imperfections. Smith did not hesitate to declare Adams a good man, one who had been saved in the kingdom of God, and “if revealed now, must be revealed in fire; and the glory could not be endured.”⁷⁷

Did the opinion of the Mormon Prophet in the 1840s trump the opinion of attorney Lincoln in the 1830s? Had Adams changed so much through the years that he merited the status of a Saint? Although Lincoln is acclaimed as

one of America's greatest politicians and presidents, his motive in this instance appears less than noble. He stooped to character assassination in the volatile political atmosphere of Sangamon County, where bitter partisan power politics found him a receptive player. In contrast, Joseph Smith defined the man as good, even great. Viper or Saint? This is the question. Adams sought and held onto political power over an eighteen-year period and during that process made enemies, none more famous than Abraham Lincoln. Jabs at his character left him personally scarred, but politically triumphant. By the late 1830s, he lost interest in waging more battles in the hard-biting politics of Sangamon County. He wanted something more, something better. It was not easy for him to embrace Mormonism, as evidenced by his insistence that his baptism be kept secret. Yet, an endowment, a patriarchal blessing, proxy baptisms for deceased loved ones, a marriage sealing, and plural marriage attended his final years. These sacred ordinances were far cries from the bitter partisan politics of the viperous environment of Springfield. It is little wonder that Adams was making plans to move to Nauvoo before his death. At an October 1843 conference, hundreds listened as Joseph Smith mourned his loss.

A direct link between Lincoln and Smith would be a significant historical discovery for Mormon and Lincoln researchers. Perhaps in the recesses of an obscure archive their efforts will be rewarded. Until then, there is little to go on except the life of James Adams. To date, he is the strongest link that unites these two great men of the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. Foremost among LDS scholars interested in a Lincoln/Smith connection is Bryon C. Andreasen, research historian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois. For information about Andreasen's interest in Lincoln, see R. Scott Lloyd, "Land of Lincoln," *Church News*, May 7, 2005, 8–9. See also Richard Lyman Bushman, "Abraham Lincoln and Joseph Smith," *Joseph Smith and the Doctrinal Restoration*. W. Jeffrey Marsh, ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2005), 89–109.

2. The Eighth Circuit District of Illinois extended from Springfield north to Mason County. See *Postville Courthouse* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, 2002).

3. Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 151.

4. Harriet Denton was born on January 31, 1787. See International Genealogical Index (IGI), Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. The first daughter, Lovenia, was born September 13, 1811, and died October 5, 1812. The second daughter, Lovenia Eliza, was born May 3, 1813. She married Peter S. Weber at Springfield, Illinois. She died on September 5, 1838. See John Carroll Power,

1876 History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois (Springfield, Illinois: Edwin A. Wilson, 2000), 76; International Genealogical Index; Adams Family Bible Record, manuscript, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

6. Membership Records of the Grand Lodge, Free & Accepted Masons, of the State of New York, as cited in Wayne C. Temple, "James Adams and Abraham Lincoln," *Illinois Lodge of Research* 16 (September 2007): 8.

7. Charlotte Baldwin Adams was born May 2, 1815, and died January 10, 1832. Lucian Boneparte Adams was born December 10, 1816. He married Margaret A. Reed on March 14, 1824 at Springfield, Illinois. They were the parents of four children. Lucian was an attorney, United States Commissioner in the Federal Court, police magistrate, and notary public. He died on February 17, 1882, from typhoid fever and pneumonia. See Power, *1876 History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois*, 76; and International Genealogical Index.

8. James Adams's Commissions, Adams Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

9. Vienna Margaret Adams was born July 10, 1818. Vienna married Charles G. McGraw in Springfield. She died on February 12, 1844. See Power, *1876 History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois*, 76; and International Genealogical Index.

10. Adams Papers.

11. Sampson's Ghost, "To the Editor of the Journal," *Sangamo Journal*, November 25, 1837, 2.

12. The *Chicago Democrat* announced that "Gen. Adams left the State of New York while an indictment for forgery was hanging over his head." When Adams did not appear to answer the charge of forgery, the charge was dismissed on August 23, 1823. See Sampson's Ghost, "To the Editor of the Journal," *Sangamo Journal*, December 23, 1837, 2.

13. "Roll of Attorneys," Illinois State Archives, Springfield, Illinois, as cited in Temple, "James Adams and Abraham Lincoln," 8.

14. Sampson's Ghost, "To the Editor of the Journal," *Sangamo Journal*, October 7, 1837, 2.

15. Sampson's Ghost, "To the Editor of the Journal," *Sangamo Journal*, October 28, 1837, 2.

16. John C. Reynolds, *History of the M. W. Grand Lodge of Illinois Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons* (Springfield: H. G. Reynolds, Jr., 1869), 78, 123–25, 142, 152–54; also *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Illinois . . . 1840–1850* (Freeport Journal Printing, 1892), 3–5, 9, as cited in Temple, "James Adams and Abraham Lincoln," 9.

17. On April 9, 1825, John McLean, Postmaster General of the United States, appointed Adams Postmaster of Peoria, Peoria County, Illinois. See Adams Papers.

18. Temple, "James Adams and Abraham Lincoln," 8.

19. Anson Gordon Henry (1804–1865) served as co-editor with Lincoln of the Whig newspaper, *The Old Soldier*, before moving to Oregon and later Washington state where Lincoln later appointed him Surveyor General of the state. After Lincoln's assassination, Henry attended Mary Lincoln until she moved out of the White House. See Henry Luthin Reinhard, *The Real Abraham Lincoln: A Complete One Volume History of His Life and Times* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), 56, 90, 662.

20. Paul M. Angle, *Here I Have Lived: A History of Lincoln's Springfield, 1821–1865* (Chicago: Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, 1971), 65.

21. Angle, "Here I Have Lived," 65.

22. A. Lincoln, "Letter to the Editor," *Sangamo Journal*, November 25, 1837, 2.

23. Burlingame, *Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, 151.

24. "In May, 1837, Mary Anderson and her son, Richard, widow and child of the

late Joseph Anderson, came to Springfield to take possession of and sell ten acres of land owned at the time of his death (or so they believed) by their respective husband and father, who had resided in Fulton County. The property lay a few miles north of Springfield.” Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, 61.

25. Mary Anderson, Statement, “Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of October, 1837. BENJ. S. CLEMENT, J. P.” *Sangamo Journal*, November 18, 1837, 1.

26. “Benj. S. Clement, J. P.,” *Sangamo Journal*, November 18, 1837, 1.

27. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, November 18, 1837, 1.

28. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1837, 3.

29. Historian Michael Burlingame questions whether Lincoln wrote the series of anonymous letters in the *Sangamo Journal*. He qualifies his stance with “it seems likely.” See Burlingame, *Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, 151.

30. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, June 17, 1837, 3.

31. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, June 24, 1837, 2.

32. *Illinois Republican* editors, as reprinted in “Communication,” *Sangamo Journal*, September 16, 1837, 2.

33. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 8, 1837, 2.

34. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1837, 3.

35. A. Lincoln, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1837, 2.

36. Sampson’s Ghost, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 29, 1837, 2.

37. “To the Voters of Sangamon County,” *Sangamo Journal*, August 19, 1837, 2.

38. Peter S. Weber (1817–1853) came to Springfield in 1837. After marrying Lovenia Adams, the couple moved to LaSalle, Illinois. Lovenia died on September 5, 1838. Peter married twice more before moving to St. Louis in 1850. Still later he moved to New Orleans, where he died from yellow fever. See International Genealogical Index.

39. Lincoln quoted Adams in A. Lincoln, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, October 28, 1837, 2.

40. Joseph E. Suppiger, *The Intimate Lincoln* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), 78.

41. *Sangamo Journal*, December 23, 1837, 2.

42. *Sangamo Journal*, November 11, 1837, 1.

43. “Lincoln, Stuart, and Logan received no compensation for their legal services in behalf of Mary and Richard Anderson.” Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, 62.

44. “When [Lincoln] later had the chance to sue Adams on behalf of the heirs of the original Sampson, he turned it down flat.” See Suppiger, *Intimate Lincoln*, 79.

45. Adams ran against Robert L. Wilson for Probate Justice of the Peace in Sangamon County in 1839. Adams received 1,183 votes, Wilson 1,145. Adams was commissioned to office on August 26, 1839. Executive Register, III, 152, Illinois State Archives, as cited in Temple, “James Adams and Abraham Lincoln,” 11.

46. Harry E. Pratt, “Lincolnia Notes,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 48 (1955): 456.

47. Angle, “*Here I Have Lived*,” 69–70, as cited in Temple, “James Adams and Abraham Lincoln,” 11.

48. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:20 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

49. James Adams to Martin Van Buren, November 9, 1839; see Lucy Fish West, ed. *The Papers of Martin Van Buren: Guide and Index to General Correspondence and Miscellaneous Documents* (Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwick-Healey, 1989).

50. In a letter to his wife Vilate Kimball, written on October 24, 1839, "Heber C. Kimball predicted Adam's imminent baptism after meeting him in Springfield." *History of the Church*, 4:20.

51. Adams did not reveal the name of the uncle or grandmother for whom he performed vicarious baptismal work. Susan Easton Black and Harvey Bischoff Black, *Annotated Record of Baptisms for the Dead, 1840–1845, Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois*. 7 vols. (Provo, Utah: Center for Family History and Genealogy, Brigham Young University, 2002), 1:22, 25.

52. *History of the Church*, 4:20.

53. See Black and Black, *Annotated Record of Baptisms*, 1:20–41.

54. *History of the Church*, 5:1–2.

55. Adams encouraged Lucius N. Scovil and other Freemasons in Nauvoo to submit a request in June 1841 for a lodge to Masonic leaders in Springfield. The Nauvoo masons had sought endorsement from the Bodley Lodge at Quincy, Illinois. When Bodley's members declined, James Adams spoke with Abraham Jonas of the Columbus Lodge in Springfield and encouraged Jonas to be the sponsor. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "Freemasonry in Nauvoo," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:527–28. For a more complete historical treatment of Adams's role in Nauvoo Masonry see Kent L. Walgren, "James Adams: Early Springfield Mormon and Freemason," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 75, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 121–36.

56. *History of the Church*, 5:85. It was on this same occasion that Joseph Smith predicted the Latter-day Saints would eventually go to the Rocky Mountains.

57. James Adams to Joseph Smith, December 17, 1842, in *History of the Church*, 5:206.

58. See *History of the Church*, 5:211–32.

59. *History of the Church*, 2:213.

60. *History of the Church*, 5:216.

61. *History of the Church*, 5:216.

62. *History of the Church*, 5:219–20.

63. *History of the Church*, 5:386. This small stern-wheeler steamboat first made its appearance on the Mississippi River in October 1842. It was built by Levi Moffit of Augusta, Iowa, and was operated by Dan Jones, an experienced riverboat captain. A May 3, 1843, entry in *History of the Church* indicates that Joseph Smith "directed a letter to be written to Gen. James Adams, of Springfield, to have him meet the *Maid of Iowa* on her return from St. Louis, and arrange with the proprietors to turn her into a Nauvoo ferry boat, which letter was written the same hour," evidence that plans were in the works for the two men to purchase the steamer.

64. According to the record book kept by Hancock County Circuit Court Clerk J. B. Bakenstos, Adams made "goodwill" land purchases on May 29–30, 1843. The purchases were not recorded until June 12, 1843. See Hancock County Index, Book L, 261, Hancock County Courthouse Archives, Carthage, Illinois.

65. *History of the Church*, 5:406. On May 29, Adams presented Joseph Smith with the deed for the eleven quarter sections. See *History of the Church*, 5:413. No official Hancock County record exists of this transaction.

66. *History of the Church*, 5:412.

67. The name of Adams's plural wife was Roxena Higby Repsher (Repshire). Roxena had previously married Daniel Mayhope Repsher on February 22, 1821. She had apparently separated from Repsher by the time of her marriage to Adams. See Gary James Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841–44," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 5.

68. "Obituary," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 18 (August 1, 1843): 287.

69. *Sangamo Journal*, October 28, 1837, 2.

70. The former Anderson property was sold "to one Lewis." "The Adams estate received the Lewis money from the sale of the disputed land, and not a dollar ever went to the widow Anderson and her son." As the years passed, the title to the property "became vested in the city of Springfield." City leaders designated part of the Anderson/Adams property as the Oak Ridge Cemetery. Ironically, this cemetery later served as Lincoln's last resting place. Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, 62.

71. The executor of the James and Harriet Adams estate, Lucien B. Adams, sold the said property on November 28, 1844, although the transaction was not officially recorded until May 24, 1845. See Hancock County Land Records Index, Book N, 453, Hancock County Courthouse Archives, Carthage, Illinois.

72. Joseph Smith to Lucian Adams, October 2, 1843, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Library.

73. *History of the Church*, 6:50–51.

74. *History of the Church*, 6:51–52.

75. *History of the Church*, 6:51–52.

76. Burlingame, *Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, 151.

77. *History of the Church*, 6:51.