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Lincoln's Jumping Scrape
Mark 1:31

December 5, 1840 was a tough day for Mr. Lincoln. He and his Whig colleagues were trying to keep the Illinois House of Representatives from adjourning that day to protect the State Bank from a Democratic move to undermine it. While the rest of their party stayed away from the meeting, Lincoln and two of his associates showed up to monitor what was happening. Too late they realized that by voting on some earlier measures they had created a slim quorum. *The Illinois State Register* described what happened next in these words:

[Lincoln and his associates] came under great excitement and having attempted and failed to get out at the door, very unceremoniously raised the window and jumped out. Their quick escape did not work. With a quorum already recorded the House adjourned and the Whig effort to protect the State Bank failed.¹

This incident was more than a political failure for Lincoln. It was also a major embarrassment for a young politician. Lincoln's partner William Herndon called it an incident which Lincoln "always seemed willing to forget."² The editor of *The Illinois State Register* made the most of it. He noticed:

[Lincoln's] legs reached nearly from the window to the ground! [and that a resolution might be] introduced into the House this week...raising the State House one story higher...so as to prevent members jumping out of the windows! If such a resolution passes, Mr. Lincoln in the future will have to climb down the spout!³

Lincoln was still stung by these reports when he spoke on the House floor about a month later. Sunderine and Wayne Temple have described that interchange in these words:

Lincoln remarked that as his 'jumping scrape had become so celebrated it appeared necessary that he should say something about it.' At this, the Speaker of the House called Lincoln to order. Nevertheless, Lincoln continued, saying, 'that as to jumping, he should jump as he pleased and no one should hinder him.'⁴

Because this humorous story underlines the humanity of one of our greatest Presidents in such an entertaining way, the "Looking for Lincoln" program in our city could not resist making use of it. The problem is that "Looking for Lincoln" signs have to be placed where something happened and none of the original sources explicitly state where the House of Representatives was meeting the day Lincoln jumped. The new State House was not yet finished. The records indicate that the House began this session at First Methodist Church twelve days before the "jumping scrape." We don't know why they were not meeting in the larger Second Presbyterian building as they had the previous session during the winter of 1839-1840. We do know that their first action in this session was an unsuccessful effort to engineer a location switch with the Senate which was already moved into its new quarters in the State House. The record states that the members of the House were in agreement that First Methodist was far too small to accommodate their needs.⁵

Because there are no primary sources which establish that the House succeeded in its attempt to move to a larger building over the next twelve days, the historians employed by "Looking for Lincoln" have concluded that the jumping scrape took place at First Methodist Church.⁶ Approximately \$10,000

in federal grant money has funded a “jumping scrape” sign at the 5th and Monroe location of the original First Methodist building downtown. The designated historians have spoken. The federal government has spoken. The “Looking for Lincoln” program assures us that the location of the “jumping scrape” has now been determined. The case is closed.

Not so fast! It is part of the historical memory of this church that the “jumping scrape” took place at Second Presbyterian. According to the archivist at First Methodist there is no evidence that this incident was ever part of the memory of that congregation.⁷ Clinton Conkling (1843-1920), the prime mover behind the construction of Westminster’s present building in 1908 included the jumping scrape in his history of Second Presbyterian written in the early 1900s. But it may have been part of the oral history of the church much longer. Clinton’s father, James Conkling (1816-1899), moved to Springfield in 1840 and was a friend and political associate of Abraham Lincoln. James undoubtedly knew the details of the “jumping scrape.” While he did not write about it in his church history summaries he would have made sure that his son was not spreading a false story about their church. Clinton Conkling’s description of the jumping scrape follows the progression of events detailed in an 1896 *McClure’s Magazine* article written by his friend, J. McCan Davis, who was a noted journalist and Lincoln scholar. James Conkling was still living in 1899 after Davis’ article appeared in print and just a few years before Clinton put the story on paper. Both Conklings were prominent leaders in Springfield who loved history and loved this church. Given the scarcity of primary source documents their witness is compelling.⁸

The “Looking for Lincoln” people may have quit looking too soon. The Westminster anniversary committee has found a way to affirm the Davis/Conkling version of this story. We now have in production a sign which will be placed at the location where we believe the “jumping scrape” took place near Fourth and Monroe Streets. We need your help to pay for this project. Unlike the other sign ours will openly acknowledge that there is disagreement about the location of the incident. We don’t know the final cost yet, but we are confident that it will be substantially less than the \$10,000 our government spent on the other version of the story.⁹

At the same time, I do not want to be too hard on the historians who may have gotten the location of the “jumping scrape” wrong. The primary sources are meager. They have made a reasonable determination based on the limited documentary evidence available to them. That is what historians do.¹⁰ Moreover, we know something that they do not. We know that the Conklings have credibility. They were shaped by a narrative arc that was much more profound than any detail of history. What Clinton Conkling remembered about another incident provides a window into his soul. When he was a teenager a social gathering of his friends was disrupted because at the last minute the horse of one of these friends were not available. The horse was redeployed for a higher purpose. It was needed by a slave escaping to freedom.¹¹ These teenagers were learning what it meant to set their needs aside to serve those whose need is truly desperate. God was changing the world and they had a part in it!

The truth that shaped Conkling and his nameless friends was modeled by a nameless woman we encounter in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel. Jesus is in the city of Capernaum where he is just beginning his ministry. He goes to the home of Peter and Andrew. There he finds that Peter’s unnamed mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Her situation is thought to be dangerous. Jesus ignores the risk of catching her illness when he goes to her bed. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

When she is set free from her fever, she responds in a very interesting way. She gets up and serves those who are present. And the Greek word that is used for what she is doing is *diakonei*. She

becomes the first deacon. She knows that the grace of God has come into her life for a reason. It is a blessing that she is called to share with others. This is the story of this church. It is the narrative arc that shaped the Conklings and continues to work on us.¹²

Endnotes

1. This incident was also reported by *The Sparta Democrat* and referenced in the *House Journal*.
2. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Abraham Lincoln*, page 183.
3. This quote is cited by Sunderine (Wilson) Temple and Wayne C. Temple in *Illinois Fifth Capitol: The House That Lincoln Built and Caused to be Rebuilt (1837-1865)*. Phillips Brothers Printers, Springfield, Illinois, 1988, page 43.
4. *Ibid*, page 44
5. The Temples' book (cited above) describes the record of the opening of the session on 23 November 1840 at which John Logan moved, "That the Senate be respectfully requested to exchange places of convening with this House for a short time, on account of the impossibility of the House discharging its business in so small a place as the Methodist Church." Notice of this resolution was received by the Senate on 27 November but the leaders chose not to respond.
6. The Temples cite Warrant Number 6615 in the Auditor's Receipt Book for 1839-41 that the Methodist Church drew \$100 for the rent of its church while no other congregation received funds for this time period. This confirms the Methodist Church as the meeting place for at least part of that Session. Neither the newspaper accounts nor House minutes offer a specific location for the House on 5 December 1840, which leaves open the possibility that a move to a larger church might have occurred without surviving documentation.
7. This statement is based on a conversation between Westminster archivist Kathie Nenaber and First United Methodist archivist Bill Hosking.
8. Clinton Conkling's version of the story in his *History of Second Presbyterian* (written about 1910) and his article for the 1912 *History of Sangamon County* borrows language from the March 1896 article in *McClure's Magazine* by J. McCan Davis. Davis assisted Ida M. Tarbell in the 1896 publication of *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln* and the series of Lincoln articles for *McClure's*. A biographical sketch of Davis prepared for the Illinois Historical Society on the occasion of his death (co-authored by Clinton Conkling and H.W. Clendenin) states that Davis interviewed the surviving early friends of Lincoln for the book and articles that he did with Tarbell. This would suggest that Davis' version of the jumping scrape is grounded in the unpublished reminiscences of James Conkling and perhaps others with direct knowledge of the event. Davis cites the action of the House to request exchanging places with the Senate because of "the impossibility of the House discharging its business in so small a place as the Methodist Church." He then reports that the action was adopted and "the House moved over to the Second Presbyterian Church." Davis' account makes no reference to where the Senate was meeting or whether these bodies actually switched places. He probably knew the Senate was already in the State House and chose to remain in place. His assertion that the House

moved out of the Methodist Church is clearly based on his interviews with people who lived in Springfield at the time.

9. The text of the Westminster sign will describe the early buildings and abolitionist history of Second Presbyterian and will include the following reference to the “jumping scrape:”

It was in this building that a member of Second Presbyterian, Clinton L. Conkling (1843-1920), and noted Springfield journalist and Lincoln researcher, J. McCan Davis (1866-1916), reported an incident involving Abraham Lincoln. During the December 5, 1840 session of the House of Representatives, then Representative Lincoln made a hasty exit through a window of the church in an unsuccessful effort to prevent a legislative quorum. While historians disagree about the location of the legislative session on that day, it is certain that Abraham Lincoln did deliver a speech in this building on February 22, 1842. This was an address to the Springfield Washington Temperance Society where Lincoln called for “kind, unassuming persuasion” by the temperance movement, rather than the more typical heavy handed approach.

10. “Looking For Lincoln” historian Bryan Andreason’s lengthy and spirited defense of First Methodist Church as the location of the “Jumping Scrape” and savage critique of the “historical conjecture” that he finds in this sermon is on file in the Westminster archives. He misstates my argument as a defense of Second Presbyterian as the location of this incident, whereas my central point historically is that one cannot be sure where the “Jumping Scrape” happened.

11. Clinton Conkling’s *History of Second Presbyterian Church*, page 9 (written about 1910).

12. I am indebted to Westminster member Sabrina Holmes for her thorough search of the Illinois State Archives for primary sources on the “jumping scrape” and bringing the Temples’ book to my attention. I am also indebted to Westminster Administrative Assistant Ann Whalen for her discovery of the 1896 *McClure’s Magazine* article and information on J. McCan Davis.