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Bulletin 86 - The Lincoln-Douglas Debate

S. E. Thomas
Eastern Illinois University

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Number 86

October 1, 1924

Eastern Illinois State Teachers College

—AT—

CHARLESTON

Lincoln - Douglas Debate

*A narrative and descriptive account of the events of the day of the
debate in Charleston*

—By—

S. E. THOMAS

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, EASTERN ILLINOIS STATE TEACHERS
COLLEGE

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CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

October 1, 1924

Lincoln-Douglas Debate

The fourth joint debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, held in Charleston, Coles County, Illinois, on September the eighteenth, eighteen hundred and fifty-eight


A narrative and descriptive account of the events of the day of the debate in Charleston

—By—

S. E. THOMAS

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, EASTERN ILLINOIS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE

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FOREWORD

This paper was read at the semi-centennial celebration of the Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1908. It was prepared at the request of the programme committee. The assigned subject was a narrative and descriptive account of the events of the day of the debate in Charleston. It was printed in the current issue of *The Charleston Daily Courier*.

The reasons for reprinting it are that (1) after eighteen years requests for copies are received; (2) some librarians and historians have urged that it be printed in more durable form; (3) some teachers in the public schools find it not only interesting because of the particular event but also useful in furnishing concrete material illustrating political campaign methods of the time. Indeed in this latter respect it seems to be somewhat unique in that it gives a rather complete account of an important campaign event.

The sources for the paper were: (1) accounts of the event in contemporary newspapers [excerpts of practically all that is of importance in these may be found in Edwin Earle Sparks's *Edition of The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, published by the Illinois State Historical Library, 1908]; (2) letters from eleven persons who were present at the debate; (3) personal interviews with more than fifty persons who were present; and (4) local traditions. The writer spent an interesting summer vacation collecting and sifting the material. Persons familiar with such sources need not be reminded of their difficulties. Many of the persons interviewed are now dead. No new evidence has come to light which would make necessary the change of any material statement in the paper. Some typographical errors have been corrected and a few statements clarified.

The statement under the portrait of Lincoln, the frontispiece to Sparks's edition, should be noted. "Evidence seems to show that the negative was made at Charleston, Illinois, during the Campaign of 1858." What that evidence was is not known to the writer. Mrs. Colonel A. H. Chapman, an old friend of the Lincoln family and at whose home Lincoln had supper that night, told the writer that there was no photograph gallery in Charleston at that time; that she asked Lincoln for his photograph while he was at her home that day. He replied that he had none, but would have some taken in the near future. She received the photograph some months later by mail. The writer has seen the photograph she received and it is identical with the one reproduced in Sparks's volume.

There is no dispute as to how Lincoln came from Mattoon to Charleston the morning of the debate. The contemporary papers all agree and the writer has the statement of the man who drove the carriage in which he rode. There is a question as to how Douglas made the trip that morning. Early in the writer's investigation he accepted as true that Douglas and Mrs. Douglas rode in a carriage at or near the head of the procession from Mattoon. The three contemporary newspapers which mention it state or imply that they did. These are the *Illinois State Register* of September 23, the *Chicago Times* of September 21, and *The New York Evening Post* of September 21. Their accounts do not bear evidence of careful observation of details. Dr. William E. Barton in his address, "Lincoln and Douglas in Charleston," delivered in Charleston on September 18, 1922, and published in 1922, states that "Lincoln and Douglas . . . drove over on the morning of the debate, each at the head of a great procession." It was surprising on interviewing surviving members, including the chairman of the Charleston reception committee, none of whom knew or remembered what these papers had said fifty years before, that not one of them gave such an account, and so far as they remembered agreed on a different story though no one of them when interviewed knew what the others had said. The members of the Mattoon committee understood that Douglas and Mrs. Douglas would come

to Charleston on their special train in which they were traveling during the campaign, and some of the members understood that they did come by train. The chairman of the Charleston reception committee and other members were sure that they met Douglas and Mrs. Douglas at the station in Charleston when they arrived on their special train, took them in a carriage, marched westward, met the procession from Mattoon, turned and at the head of the joint procession marched back to the public square in Charleston. This evidence is so clear and definite and conflicts so sharply with the contemporary newspapers that it seems to the writer impossible to affirm with assurance that Douglas came from Mattoon to Charleston in a carriage at the head of the procession.

Mention should be made of the granite marker erected since this paper was written. The marker attempts to perpetuate a wrong date and not the true location of the platform. The date on the marker is September 28 instead of September 18. The platform was approximately two hundred feet southwest of the location of the marker. The fence marking the east line of the fair grounds, as they existed at that time, was on a line connecting what is now the north and south gates.

Charleston, Illinois, 1926

S. E. Thomas

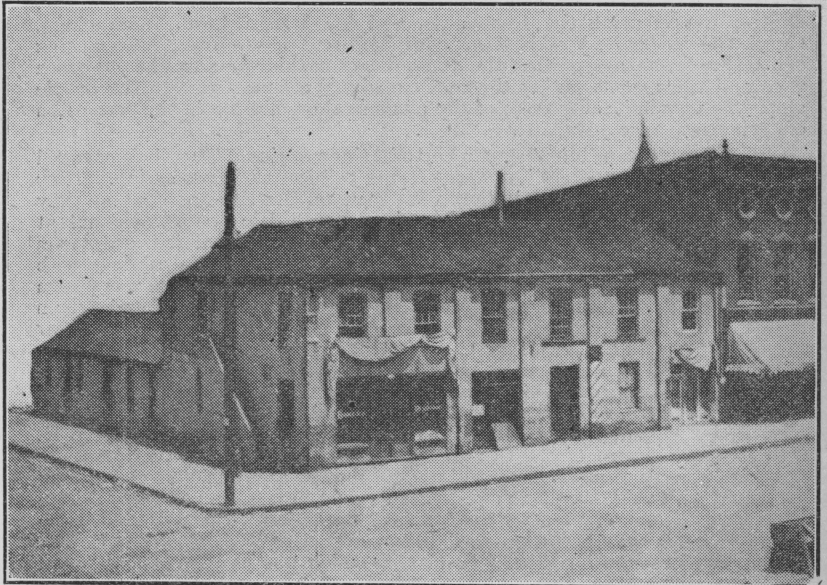
When the sun rose over the autumn tinted prairies of eastern Illinois, Saturday, September the 18th, 1858, it looked down upon a scene of unusual activity and eager anticipation. The two recognized political leaders of the state were to meet in joint debate in the little city of Charleston to discuss the great question which was stirring the souls of men. Friday evening found Charleston crowded with eager partisans and all abustle with elaborate preparation for the great event. Saturday was a clear hot day. Earliest dawn found the highways fifteen and twenty miles away marked here and there by clouds of dust following the progress of the distant farmers with their families in the big wagons slowly making their way to Charleston. Starting from every point of the compass these pioneer farmers gradually converged on the main highways and formed nearly continuous processions into Charleston from early morning until long after noon. At many of the more important local centers they formed organized processions under the leadership of some prominent fellow citizen and advanced with fife and drum playing and with flags and banners flying. But the people came not only in wagons; they came on horse back, on foot, on regular passenger trains, on freight trains, and on special trains. One special train of eleven coaches came from Indiana. Long before noon the streets were densely packed by dust-begrimed, eager, enthusiastic, vociferous partisans of "Old Abe" and "The Little Giant."

Sunrise had found Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas in Mattoon. Both the Democratic and Republican clubs of Mattoon were arranging mammoth processions to come to Charleston and had appointed a joint committee to arrange for the respective processions so as to avoid conflicts. This committee, composed of Tracy Kingman, James T. Smith, Dr. Dora and Dr. Bridges, representing the Democrats, and Ira James, John Cunningham, Charles Dole, T. N. Woods, G. M. Mitchell and J. W. True, representing the Republicans, agreed that the Republicans should come by the old south road and the Democrats by the north road. Word was sent to the people along the way informing them of the plans so they might join the procession of their party as it advanced.

The Republicans left Mattoon early in the morning. They had engaged the "Bowling Green Band" of Terre Haute to head their procession. They advanced to the residence of Simeon W. True on the Kickapoo, where they were joined by numerous delegations from south Kickapoo and Pleasant Prairie which Mr. True had assembled. Mr. Lincoln did not leave Mattoon with the procession but started a short time afterwards in a carriage with James T. Cunningham, Deck Dole and J. W. True. This carriage was drawn by a splendid span of cream colored horses which were owned and driven by Mr. True. The carriage with Mr. Lincoln overtook the procession near the Kickapoo and led it to near Cossel's Creek where it was met by a large delegation from Charleston. Most of the Charleston delegation or reception committee were mounted on horses and were led by Thomas A. Marshall and H. P. H. Bromwell. Some of the other members were Dr. W. M. Chambers, Albert Compton, Wm. Harr, W. W. Bishop, A. C. Mitchell and J. E. Curd. Two features of the Charleston delegation deserve special mention. One was a large float covered with white muslin and silk and elaborately decorated with wild flowers, drawn by six or eight horses, and carrying thirty-two young women representing the States of the Union. These young women were dressed in white, and on their blue velvet caps wore wreaths of green and a silver star; each carried a banner on which was inscribed the name of the state represented. There was a large banner on one side of the float bearing the motto, "Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way, Our Girls Link-on to Lincoln, Their Mothers Were for Clay." A banner on the other side of the float bore the inscription in large letters, "Lincoln, Oglesby, Marshall and Craddock." This float turned near the top of the hill west of the fair grounds before it met Mr. Lincoln and was ready to return with him into

Charleston. The other feature of the Charleston delegation was the representation of Kansas. Miss Eliza Marshall, now Mrs. J. W. True, dressed in pure white, the skirt long and flowing, the jacket a beautiful creation made in New York City, the cap similar to those worn by the young women in the float, and riding a white horse, "Old Whitey," represented Kansas seeking admission to the Union. The word "Kansas" was inscribed in large letters on a banner attached to the right side of her horse. On another banner attached to the saddle was inscribed the motto "I Will Be Free." Miss Marshall rode in advance of the procession as it came out to meet Mr. Lincoln. During the proceedings of the rest of the day she rode immediately behind the float carrying the thirty-two young women representing the states.

When the Charleston delegation met Mr. Lincoln, Mr. True surrendered his team and place in the carriage to the leaders of the Charleston delegation who took charge of the entire procession. The team was driven the rest of the way by Mr. James T. Cunningham. This fact probably gave rise to the tradition that the team was owned by Mr. Cunningham. The procession entered Charleston about eleven o'clock and moved east on Madison Street across Sixth to Seventh, then south on Seventh to Monroe, then west on Monroe to the corner of Monroe and Sixth. At this point the formal reception took place, Hon. H. P. H. Bromwell delivering the address of welcome. Mr. Lincoln, standing in a carriage, replied, thanking the people for their most cordial welcome and for "this beautiful basket of flowers," referring to the young women in the float which stood near. The procession then dispersed. Mr. Lincoln made his headquarters at the Capitol House where he and many of the Republican leaders took dinner. The Capitol House, then run by Mr.



THE CAPITOL HOUSE

This building was constructed about 1843 and was torn down in 1900. It stood on the northwest corner of the square facing south where the Scherer block now stands. The corner room was occupied by Byrd Monroe's dry goods store in 1858. The remainder of the building to the right and the second story was known as the Capitol House, sometimes called the Johnston House. Lincoln stopped here. The Bunnell House where Douglas stopped stood directly across Sixth Street to the west on the site of the National Trust Bank.

Johnston, stood where the Scherer Block now stands, on the corner of Sixth and Monroe and fronted south, the entrance being the second door east of the corner.

The Democratic procession left Mattoon early in the morning and advanced along the north road. The most striking feature of this procession was a band of thirty-two couples of young men and young women mounted on horseback and gorgeously attired. "Sixteen of these carried the national colors on hickory sticks, and the other sixteen carried the same colors on ash sticks, thus (as was pointed out to Mr. Douglas) furnishing a beautiful illustration of the union between the Whigs and Democrats when our country was endangered by the agitation of sectional men in 1850." It is impossible at this date to say positively that Mr. Douglas did not drive from Mattoon to Charleston, with the Democratic procession. In spite of the assumption of the *Chicago Times* and the *Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, both Democratic papers, that he did come with the procession, there are good reasons for believing that Mr. and Mrs. Douglas came from Mattoon to Charleston on their special train. It was the understanding of the joint committee of the Democratic and Republican clubs of Mattoon that Mr. and Mrs. Douglas would come on their special train. And when the accounts appeared in these papers at the time it was remarked by both Democrats and Republicans that it was either an error or a willful misrepresentation on the part of the papers. Mr. Douglas' special train on which he traveled over most of the railroads of the State during the campaign was made up of a baggage car, several coaches, and a flat car at the rear, on which was mounted a small cannon, a brass six-pounder, which was often used to announce Mr. Douglas' arrival in a town.

The Charleston committee probably met Mr. and Mrs. Douglas at the station, and with them in a carriage drawn by a fine team the committee moved westward until it met the large procession from Mattoon. The combined processions with Mr. Douglas' carriage at its head then entered Charleston and followed the same route that had been taken by the Lincoln procession a few minutes earlier to the corner of Sixth and Monroe where Mr. Douglas was formally received. Orlando B. Ficklin delivered the address of welcome to which Mr. Douglas made a fitting response. The procession then dispersed.

Mr. and Mrs. Douglas made their headquarters at the Union House or Bunnell House which stood where the National Trust Bank now stands on the corner of Sixth and Monroe Streets.

The life and color of the scene was much intensified by the numerous brass bands, fife and drum corps, and by the hundreds of flags and banners. The hotel, the business houses, and the residences were gaily decorated. The different delegations often brought a brass band, always brought numerous flags, a fife, a snare drum and a bass drum. Of the mottoes on the banners we have a record of but few. In addition to those already mentioned the following are of interest: "Edgar County good for five hundred majority for the 'Little Giant;'" "This government was made for white men—Douglas for life;" "Abe, the Giant Killer," "Support Abraham Lincoln, the defender of Henry Clay." The chief decoration of the day was a gigantic banner eighty feet long hung across the street from the court house to a high building on the west side of the square and graced at each end with a large American flag. On one side was inscribed, "Coles County Four Hundred Majority for Lincoln." On the other side Charles Briggs, a local painter of more than ordinary ability, had painted a life-size picture of Lincoln as a young man standing in an old yawl-like Kentucky wagon driving a team of three yoke of oxen. The picture bore the legend, "Old Abe Thirty Years Ago."

Another feature which attracted considerable attention was a team of five or six yoke of oxen hitched to a large wagon on which a platform had been built and on this had been placed a large rail cut. As the wagon was driven

around the square two or three tall, stalwart men were busily engaged with the old fashioned maul and gluts splitting rails. A banner attached to the wagon bore the inscription, "Vote for Honest Abe, the Rail Splitter, the Ox Driver and Giant Killer." The oxen were driven by Matt Glassco, a man near Lincoln's own height, and when they passed Lincoln at the northwest corner of the square he remarked to Mr. Glassco, "You, too, are up in the world some." The idea of the ox team and rail splitting as a political appeal expanded wonderfully for during the campaign of 1860 Matt Glassco and others drove a team of thirty-two yoke of oxen hitched to an immense wagon to a Republican rally at Mattoon.

After dinner the crowd proceeded to the fair ground. Mr. Douglas and Mr. Lincoln were both accompanied by large organized escorts. It would be interesting to know definitely how many persons were present to hear the debate. The lowest estimate found, made at the time by a man present who was accustomed to estimating large crowds, places the number at 10,000, but he adds, "I think that there were as likely 12,000 as 10,000." Others present estimated the crowd at 10,000, 12,000, 15,000 and even 20,000. A raised platform approximately 18 by 30 feet in dimensions had been erected for the speakers. This platform was very probably located just about where the west end of the east amphitheatre now stands. Rough board seats had been provided for part of the audience, but a very large majority had to stand. The crowd was massed principally to the north, east and south of the platform. The platform faced approximately east, but the speakers addressed all parts of the audience. In addition to the speakers and reporters a number of the leaders of both parties were seated on the platform. Of these we can name O. B. Ficklin, T. A. Marshall, Wm. Harr, John M. Easton, H. P. H. Bromwell, W. W. Craddock, John Monroe, Bird Monroe, Col. James Monroe, Dr. Ferguson, Dr. Trower, Dr. Van Meter, Jacob I. Brown, U. F. Linder and Alex. Dunbar; from north of Charleston, John Winkelblack and Jim Wheatley; from other parts of the state, R. J. Oglesby and Uriah Manly; Tom Brewer, of Toledo; Dr. Kile, George Reeves, Hiram Sanford and W. F. Dole of Paris; W. L. Haydon, Wm. Middlesworth, Anthony Thornton, Shelbyville; Caleb Garret and Maldon Jones of Tuscola; Dr. Wm. Epperson and Dr. Pierce of Arcola; Dr. Rutherford of Oakland; W. W. Willshire and Peter Vorhis of Greenup; James T. Cunningham, John Cunningham, Elisha Linder, Eben Noyes, Deck Dole, Charles Dole, Houston L. Taylor, J. T. Smith, Tracy Kingman, Frederick G. True, Simeon W. True, Edmund W. True and James M. True, of Mattoon; Guy Ashmore and Lovell Wilhite of Ashmore; Levi C. Warren, Tom Nelson, Dick Thompson and John P. Usher, of Indiana.

After the speakers had taken their places on the platform two incidents occurred which reveal the strong feeling of the more enthusiastic partisans. Some of the more ardent Republicans attempted to plant a large banner near the front of the platform on which Lincoln was represented as having Douglas down on the ground. It bore the inscription, "Lincoln Worrying Douglas at Freeport." The Democrats regarded it as offensive, and a number of them advancing passionately demanded its removal. Mr. Lincoln noticing the commotion and banner requested its removal, saying, "Let us have nothing offensive to any man here today." Just about the time Mr. Lincoln rose to begin the debate, a group of Democrats crowded to the front of the platform and raised a large banner on which appeared a caricature of Mr. Lincoln and a negro wench and bearing the inscription, "Negro Equality." This was regarded as insulting by the Republicans who loudly demanded its removal. When this demand was not heeded Joe Dole and Ed True jumped off the platform and tore the banner down. This almost caused a riot. Both Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas helped to quiet the commotion.

Mr. Lincoln opened the debate at fifteen minutes before three o'clock in the afternoon, and according to agreement made when the joint debates were

first arranged for spoke one hour. Mr. Douglas then spoke for one hour and thirty minutes. Mr. Lincoln then spoke thirty minutes closing the debate.

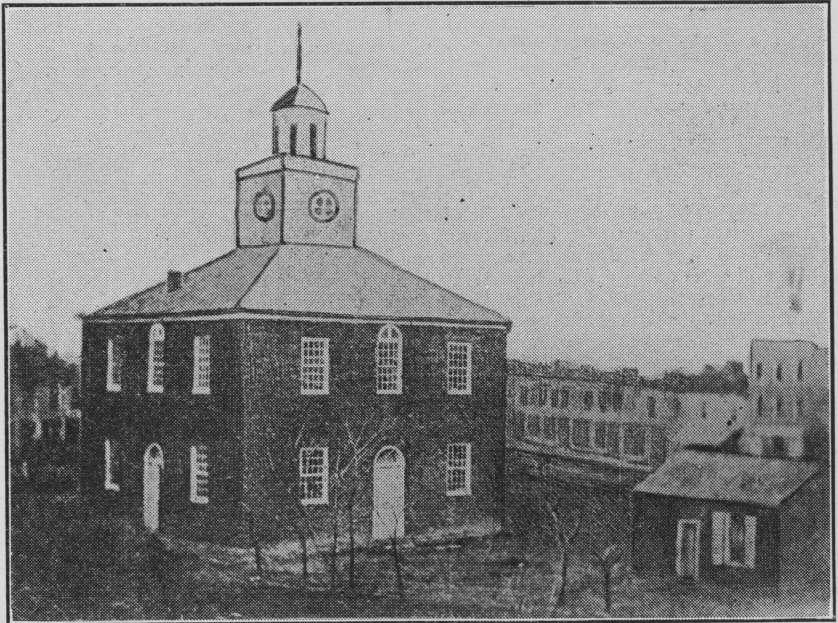
It is no part of the purpose of this paper to discuss the subject matter of the debate. But one incident occurred during the debate which ought not to be omitted. I refer to the so-called "Ficklin Incident." I stop here to discuss this incident for two reasons. In the first place both Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Ficklin have been so often misquoted and misrepresented; in the second place, because the complete history of the incident has never been written. In his opening address at Ottawa, August 21, Mr. Douglas had said, "Whilst in Congress, he (Lincoln) distinguished himself by his opposition to the Mexican war, taking the side of the common enemy against his own country." The *Chicago Times* elaborated this statement into the charge that Mr. Lincoln had voted against the supplies for the army. In his address here at Charleston, Mr. Douglas said: "If Mr. Lincoln is a man of bad character I leave you to find it out; if his votes in the past are not satisfactory, I leave others to ascertain the fact; if his course on the Mexican war was not in accordance with your notions of patriotism and fidelity to our own country as against a public enemy, I leave you to ascertain the fact." Mr. Lincoln turned to Mr. Marshall who sat near him and in an undertone asked him to send to his private library for the volume of the Congressional Globe which contained the official record of his votes in regard to the Mexican war. Mr. Marshall replied that he had already sent for the volume. In his closing speech Mr. Lincoln said, "Judge Douglas in a general way, without putting it in a direct shape, revives the old charge against me in reference to the Mexican war. He knows, too, that in regard to the Mexican war story the more respectable papers of his own party throughout the State have been compelled to take it back and acknowledge that it was a lie." Here Mr. Lincoln turned to the crowd on the platform and selecting Hon. O. B. Ficklin, a Douglas Democrat, led him forward and said: "I do not mean to do anything with Mr. Ficklin except to present his face and tell you that he personally knows it to be a lie. He was a member of Congress at the only time I was in Congress and he knows that whenever there was an attempt to procure a vote of mine which would indorse the origin and justice of the war, I refused to give such indorsement and voted against it; but I never voted against the supplies for the army and he knows as well as Judge Douglas that, whenever a dollar was asked, by way of compensation or otherwise, for the benefit of the soldiers, I gave all the votes that Ficklin or Douglas did, and perhaps more." Mr. Ficklin then said, "My friends, I wish to say this in reference to the matter. Mr. Lincoln and myself are just as good personal friends as Judge Douglas and myself. In reference to this Mexican war my recollection is that when Ashman's resolution (Amendment) was offered by Mr. Ashman of Massachusetts, in which he declared that the Mexican war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President, my recollection is that Mr. Lincoln voted for the resolution." Mr. Lincoln said, "That is the truth. Now you all remember that was a resolution censuring the President for the manner in which the war was begun. You know they have charged me with voting against the supplies, by which I starved the soldiers who were out fighting the battles of their country. I say that Ficklin knows it is false." Mr. Ficklin was not a man easily stampeded. He had not said all that Mr. Lincoln wanted him to say; he did not say that Mr. Lincoln voted for the supplies. However he did not deny Mr. Lincoln's statement that he knew the charge was false. The volume of the Congressional Globe having been brought to the platform Mr. Lincoln then read his votes on the various questions connected with the Mexican war from the official record. This effectively silenced the charge.

Another incident that occurred during Mr. Lincoln's closing address which possibly ought to be mentioned was his slight altercation with Mr. Jacob I. Brown, Douglas postmaster of Charleston. Mr. Lincoln was recapitulating his reasons for indorsing the veracity of Lyman Trumbull, when

Mr. Brown asked, "What does Ford's History say about him?" Mr. Lincoln replied: "Some gentleman asks me what Ford's History says about him. My own recollection is that Ford speaks of Trumbull in very disrespectful terms in several portions of his book, and that he talks a great deal worse of Judge Douglas. I refer you, sir, to the history for examination."

Nothing has been said of the attitude of the vast, mixed audience toward the speakers. The people had gathered to hear a great issue discussed by great leaders and gave the speakers their closest attention. So quiet was the great audience that persons sitting on the east and south fences could hear practically everything that was said. However, the suppressed enthusiasm frequently burst forth in vigorous applause when either speaker made a telling hit or expressed a sentiment which met approval. The applause was quickly suppressed, however, for the people were eager to hear and knew that the time of the speakers was limited.

"When Mr. Lincoln had concluded the debate three cheers were given spontaneously by the vast crowd; after which the people poured out of the



The first court house built in Coles County, erected in 1835 at a cost of \$5,000. It stood in the middle of the public square where the present court house stands. Some of the prominent men who appeared as attorneys in this old court house were Lincoln, Douglas, Trumbull, Shields, Logan, Palmer, McClernand, Connelly, Yates, Oglesby, Ficklin and Linder.

gates, the carriages and bands of music formed in procession, and marched back to town." Most of the farmers, getting their scattered wagon loads together, started at once for home, some of them to travel long weary miles arriving at home late at night.

Charleston was crowded during the night. Local party leaders of both parties from all the neighboring counties were here to confer with their chiefs. After supper the Democrats met for a party rally in the old court

house where they were addressed by Hon. U. F. Linder, Mr. Merick of Chicago, and by Mr. Douglas. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas very probably remained the rest of the night at the home of Hon. O. B. Ficklin.

The Republicans assembled for their party rally at the southwest corner of the court house yard where Hon. R. J. Oglesby addressed them for about two hours. In the meantime Mr. Lincoln had had supper at the home of Mr. A. H. Chapman on West Jackson Street and had then gone to the home of Mr. T. A. Marshall who then lived where the Richter block now stands on West Monroe Street. Here the party leaders assembled after the speaking on the square for an informal reception and conference. The "Boys" came too and serenaded Mr. Lincoln. The enthusiastic supporters of Mr. Lincoln did not disperse until after midnight when they left him to the gracious hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Marshall. And the events of the great day in Charleston were a part of history.

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