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LINCOLN AT THE BAR: EXTANT CASE FILES FROM THE U.S. DISTRICT AND CIRCUIT COURTS, SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS 1855-1861



This collection consists of the extant files of cases from the records of the U.S. District and Circuit Courts at Springfield with which Abraham Lincoln has been identified as legal counsel, and date from 1855 to 1861. The 122 case files reproduced here include civil actions brought under both statute and common law, admiralty litigation, and a few criminal cases.

Date Range: 1855-1861

Content: 3,550 images

Source Library: National Archives (U.S.)

Detailed Description:

Source Note: Record Group 21: Records of the District Courts of the United States, National Archives-Great Lakes Region, Chicago, Illinois, M -1530.

Abraham Lincoln was first licensed to practice law on September 9, 1836, in Springfield, and was entered on the roll of attorneys of the Illinois Supreme Court on March 1, 1837. He joined the practice of John T. Stuart, a well-established Springfield attorney, a few weeks later. Lincoln was admitted to practice in the United States District and Circuit Courts on December 3, 1839, after they were moved from Vandalia to Springfield. Lincoln's law practice continued for nearly twenty-five years, interrupted only by his term in Congress 1847-1849, until he left Springfield in January 1861 to assume the presidency. In addition to the federal district and circuit courts at Springfield and Chicago, Lincoln also practiced in the Illinois state courts, the Illinois Supreme Court, and the United States Supreme Court.

Despite this extensive practice, much of the official record of Lincoln's law practice is no longer extant. Both court house fires and the theft of Lincoln documents, which began before his death, substantially diminished the surviving documentation.

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at Chicago. The existing records of the Springfield court, including Lincoln's court work, were transferred to Chicago with Drummond and later were destroyed in the great fire of 1871 as were the records of the Chicago court. The records of the Springfield court reproduced here are the only case files identified with Lincoln that survive in the official records of the federal district and circuit courts.

The 122 case files reproduced here include civil actions brought under both statute and common law, admiralty litigation, and a few criminal cases. District court files and circuit court files are separate series, each numbered and arranged chronologically. Most documents within the case files are arranged by date of filing; undated documents are placed at the end of the file. Types of documents found in the case files include complaints, indictments, pleas, recognizances, depositions, affidavits, subpoenas, writs, orders of the court, petitions, warrants, bonds, jury verdicts, and other papers filed with the courts.