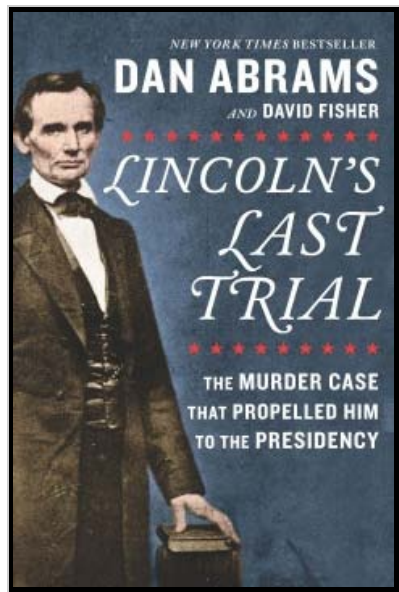




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Lincoln's Last Trial: The Murder Case that Propelled Him to the Presidency

by Dan Abrams, David Fisher

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From the Publisher: "Makes you feel as if you are watching a live camera riveted on a courtroom more than 150 years ago." —Diane Sawyer The true story of Abraham Lincoln's last murder trial, a case in which he had a deep personal involvement—and which played out in the nation's newspapers as he began his presidential campaign At the end of the summer of 1859, twenty-two-year-old Peachy Quinn Harrison went on trial for murder in Springfield, Illinois. Abraham Lincoln, who had been involved in more than three thousand cases—including more than twenty-five murder trials—during his two-decades-long career, was hired to defend him. This was to be his last great case as a lawyer. What normally would have been a local case took on momentous meaning. Lincoln's debates with Senator Stephen Douglas the previous fall had gained him a national following, transforming the little-known, self-taught lawyer into a respected politician. He was being urged to make a dark-horse run for the presidency in 1860. Taking this case involved great risk. His reputation was untarnished, but should he lose this trial, should Harrison be convicted of murder, the spotlight now focused so brightly on him might be dimmed. He had won his most recent murder trial with a daring and dramatic maneuver that had become a local legend, but another had ended with his client dangling from the end of a rope. The case posed painful personal challenges for Lincoln. The murder victim had trained for the law in his office, and Lincoln had been his friend and his mentor. His accused killer, the young man Lincoln would defend, was the son of a close friend and loyal supporter. And to win this trial he would have to form an unholy allegiance with a longtime enemy, a revivalist preacher he had twice run against for political office—and who had bitterly slandered Lincoln as an "infidel...too lacking in faith" to be elected. Lincoln's Last Trial captures the presidential hopeful's dramatic courtroom confrontations in vivid detail as he fights for his client—but also for his own blossoming political future. It is a moment in history that shines a light on our legal system, as in this case Lincoln fought a legal battle that remains incredibly relevant today.

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Dan Abrams, David Fisher

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What We Say

Well, it wasn't his last trial and didn't really "propel" him to the Presidency. Nonetheless, "Lincoln's Last Trial" is an interesting look at one of Abraham Lincoln's last trials which undoubtedly added to the fame that already had him pegged as an underdog choice for the Republican Presidential nomination, if and when more likely candidates like William Henry Seward faltered. Authors Dan Abrams and David Fisher make full use of the written record, which in this case includes a detailed court transcript. That was very unusual for the time -- stenography was still a novelty. But thanks to Lincoln's growing fame a steno man was called in for this trial. Our hero in this book is that court recorder, Robert Hitts. He worked the Lincoln-Douglas Debates with scrupulous care and the actual record of the words from those debates proved revolutionary. People could read what Lincoln and Douglas actually said, rather than someone's interpretation of their arguments or at best a summary of them. Hitts became a very minor celebrity in his own right and Lincoln -- knowing how a good transcript widely circulated was key to his growing popularity -- was happy to see him arrive in court. With a combination of letters, diaries, biographies, newspaper accounts and most of all court transcripts, we see the trial through Hitts's eyes while a particularly compelling murder case unfolds. It happened to involve young men Lincoln knew well -- a man who studied law and worked in Lincoln's firm and another young man from the area. A rough altercation led to a stabbing and now here was Lincoln defending the person who had killed a promising young talent. It was quite dramatic and interest was high. This isn't a glorified reprinting of the transcript; the authors add context and color and useful legal analysis. But it's rather dry, straightforward nature is perhaps inevitable given the restrictions on what information they have available. Frankly, a play or film would be far more compelling. Luckily for us, all the lawyers involved were excellent and the back and forth reveals sharp minds and the evolving trial system of the time. Remember, transcripts were a new idea...and so was trial by a jury of one's peers, the idea of self-defense as justification and so much more. Dedicated fans of Lincoln or the legal system will find a good deal to appreciate. -- Michael Giltz

What Others Say

"Dan Abrams and David Fisher write the heart-pounding pulse of history. Abraham Lincoln: the dusty shoes, the weary eyes, the Jedi mastery of a jury in a true case of life and death. So pull up a chair. This book not only brings a rare transcript to life, it makes you feel as if you are watching a live camera riveted on a courtroom more than 150 years ago." —Diane Sawyer -

"You didn't know that Abraham Lincoln was the defense lawyer in a notorious murder case on the eve of his presidency? Neither did I. But Dan Abrams and David Fisher tell the remarkable tale in Lincoln's Last Trial, and the story is both compelling on its own terms and a lesson about some eternal truths about criminal justice." —Jeffrey Toobin, author of American Heiress -

"The authors give readers a moment-by-moment account of the murder trial, which featured a well-liked young victim, a claim of self-defense, [and] a deathbed admission... Lincoln enthusiasts will find the illumination of his preternatural legal skills a worthy subject; casual readers will find the centerpiece murder trial an engrossing legal thriller." —Publishers Weekly -

"Legal affairs journalist Abrams and coauthor Fisher illuminate a key marker on Abraham Lincoln's path to the White House... The transcripts reveal Lincoln at his best, fighting for a cause he believed in with brilliance and passion—qualities that would serve him so well as president." —Booklist -

"Abrams and Fisher quote generously from Hitt's transcript to bring into sharp focus the witness-by-witness testimony and courtroom proceedings." —Library Journal -

"We all know the story of Abraham Lincoln the wartime president, the defender of the Union, and the emancipator of the slaves. But Abraham Lincoln, the defense lawyer? Dan Abrams and David Fisher recount the engaging story of Lincoln's last trial, occurring on the cusp of the Civil War. An entertaining book filled with twists and turns and tailor-made for Civil War buffs." —Jay Winik, author of April 1865 and 1944 -

"Lincoln's wartime leadership overshadows his life as a lawyer. But you can't understand one without the other. In this rich and previously unexplored corner of history, the authors take you inside the courtroom to watch Abraham Lincoln - at the height of his powers as a lawyer and on the edge of eternal fame - as he tries a thrilling murder trial to a jury." —Chris DeRose, New York Times bestselling author of The Presidents' War, Congressman Lincoln, and Founding Rivals -

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