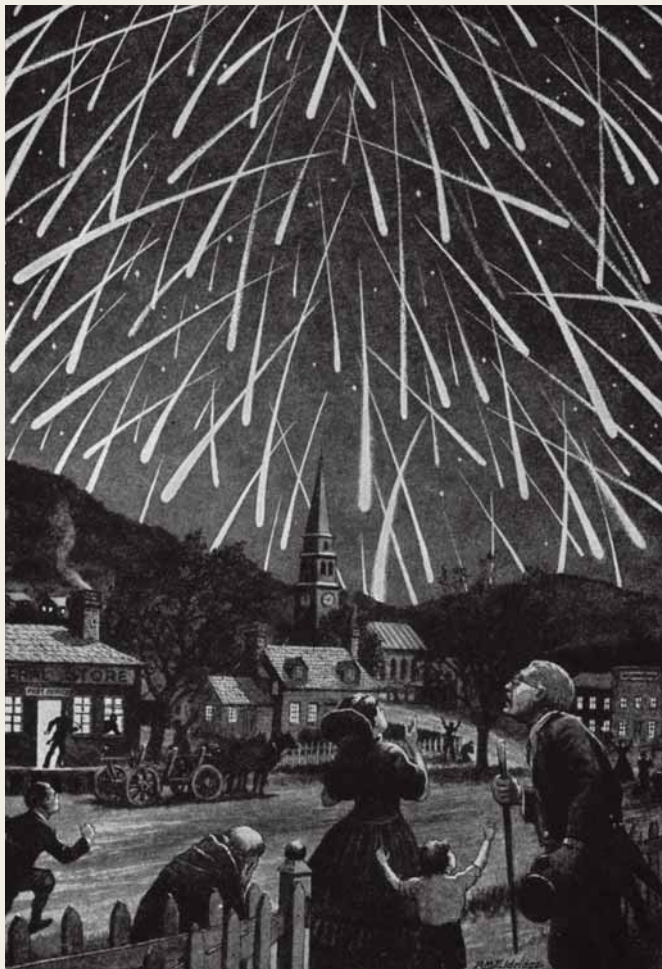


ABE LINCOLN AND THE LEONIDS



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The meteor storm of November 12–13, 1833, caused an innkeeper to awaken Abraham Lincoln and exclaim that the “day of judgment” had come. This illustration of the 1833 Leonids by R. M. Eldridge, depicting the shower as a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, appeared in an early 20th-century book, *Bible Readings for the Home*. Right: A manuscript page in the handwriting of Walt Whitman preserves Lincoln’s eyewitness description of a great meteor shower — almost certainly the 1833 Leonids.

THE GREAT LEONID METEOR STORM ON THE MORNING OF November 13, 1833, dazzled North Americans with a celestial spectacle they would never forget. From Canada to Mexico, the streaks of light filling the sky and the shouting in the streets roused people from their beds to witness what many assumed was the end of the world. Recently we discovered a document indicating that one of the eyewitnesses was a future U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln.

Startled from his slumber early one morning, a young Lincoln beheld the sky filled with falling stars and fireballs. Decades later the battlefield flames of the Civil War rekindled in him a memory of those fiery heavens. During one of the darkest times of the war, President Lincoln related an anecdote about the meteor shower and the fixed stars as a metaphor for the state of the Union. We found this tale not in any biography of Lincoln, but rather in the collected works of the American writer Walt Whitman (1819–92), a contemporary of Lincoln’s who lived in Washington during the Civil War. Whitman eventually published the story under the heading “A Lincoln Remi-

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he, "I boarded for a time with a
Deacon of the Presbyterian Church.
One night — I was roused from my sleep
by a rap at the door. I heard the Dea-
con's voice exclaiming 'Arise, Abraham
the day of judgment has come'. I sprang
from my bed & rushed to the window
and saw the stars fall in great showers.
But looking back of them in the heavens
I saw all the grand old constellations
— which I was so well acquainted
fixed and unmovable and true in
their places. The Gentlemen, the
world did not come to an end then,
nor will the Union now"*

One witness to the 1833 Leonid meteor storm used the story to good effect years later.

By Donald W. Olson and Laurie E. Jasinski

niscence” in a volume titled *Specimen Days & Collect* (1882):

As is well known, story-telling was often with President Lincoln a weapon which he employ'd with great skill. Very often he could not give a point-blank reply or comment — and these indirections, (sometimes funny, but not always so,) were probably the best responses possible. In the gloomiest period of the war, he had a call from a large delegation of bank presidents. In the talk after business was settled, one of the big Dons asked Mr. Lincoln if his confidence in the permanency of the Union was not beginning to be shaken — whereupon the homely President told a little story. “When I was a young man in Illinois,” said he, “I boarded for a time with a Deacon of the Presbyterian church. One night I was roused from my sleep by a rap at the door, & I heard the Deacon’s voice exclaiming ‘Arise, Abraham, the day of judgment has come!’ I sprang from my bed & rushed to the window, and saw the stars falling in great showers! But looking back of them in the heavens I saw all the grand old constellations with which I was so well acquainted, fixed and true in their places. Gentlemen, the world did not come to an end then, nor will the Union now.”

The narrative does not reveal a year for this dramatic meteor shower, but it offers two clues. Lincoln was “a young man in Illinois” and “boarded for a time with a deacon of the Presbyterian church.” A review of Lincoln biographies suggests that the event probably dates from his days in New Salem, when he did not own a house but instead “boarded round here and there” (Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years*, 1926). Lincoln lived in this village from 1831 to 1837, where he worked at a variety of jobs

Abraham Lincoln (1809–65). This 1928 painting by Frank E. Schoonover depicts the future president as a young man in New Salem, Illinois.



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as a shopkeeper, rail-splitter, postmaster, and surveyor. That he was a boarder between 1831 and 1837 makes it likely that the meteor shower in the story is the famous Leonid storm of 1833, but to be certain it is necessary to determine precisely when Lincoln lived with a Presbyterian deacon.

Lincoln historians have identified several families with whom he resided in New Salem. Benjamin Thomas (*Lincoln’s New Salem*, 1934) gave the religious affiliations for many of the households, allowing us to rule out almost all of the possibilities. The most likely remaining candidate was Henry Onstot, the town cooper (bucket and barrel maker). He was a Cumberland Presbyterian, very active in church affairs. His son, T. G. Onstot, compiled a lengthy volume titled *Pioneers of Menard and Mason Counties* (1902), which provides the last piece of the puzzle.

By describing a real-estate transaction involving a log cabin known as the Rutledge Tavern, Onstot’s book pins down Lincoln’s whereabouts in the latter part of 1833. The Rutledge family left New Salem in early 1833. The book states that thereafter, “my father, Henry Onstot, moved in and occupied it from 1833 till 1835” and “had for a boarder Abraham Lincoln.” When Lincoln was short on cash, Onstot took some “iron well-bucket hoops” in trade for rent “while he kept the tavern in New Salem in 1833.”

This accumulated evidence makes it virtually certain that Lincoln saw the 1833 Leonids, a memorable experience that he later called upon to illustrate his abiding faith in the Union. Whitman’s passage preserves an account by one of America’s greatest presidents of his reaction to one of history’s greatest meteor storms.

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