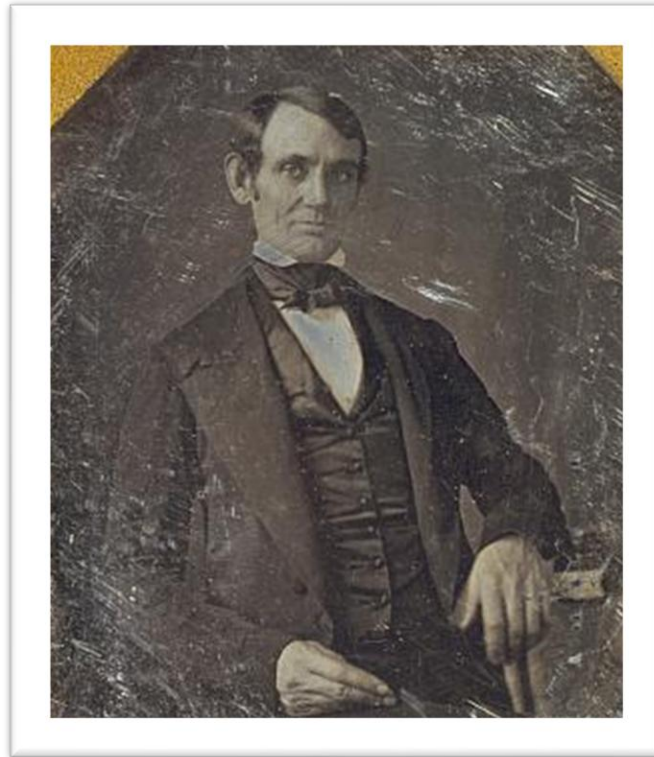


# IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress  
Lincoln as a young lawyer

## Lincoln Defends Iowa Preacher

When Nixon “Nick” Denton died in January 1878, his friends in Manchester, Iowa, reminded people of a story Nick liked to tell about an encounter he had with a man who became president of the United States.

Nick had been involved in the building of the Illinois Central Railroad (ICRR) through Iowa in the 1850s. He had been hired by the company to survey land, and he was superintendent of construction of the lines. He had a sterling reputation, and a newspaper described him as “one of the noblest looking men in the state.”

During the early years of railroading, cattle and other livestock often wandered onto the tracks. It became a problem for many Iowa farmers when their animals were killed by the massive moving machines. There was often friction between the livestock owners and the rail companies when farmers tried to convince the railroad to pay for the damages.

When a central Iowa Methodist minister’s two cows were killed by an ICRR train, he sued for damages. The company decided to use the incident as a “test case” and directed Nick to go to Springfield, Ill., to hire a lawyer named Abraham Lincoln. The company was certain \$500

in gold coins would convince the young lawyer to take the case and ultimately teach that preacher a lesson.

Nick traveled to Springfield and went to Lincoln's office. In his meeting with the lawyer, Nick told Lincoln that the railroad company wanted to retain him as counsel "in that Methodist minister's cow case."

"I am sorry you didn't come yesterday, Nick, for I have been retained by the preacher," the future president said.

Nick continued to make his plea on behalf of the ICRR. He explained how important this case was for the company. And as he spoke, Nick pulled two buckskin bags from his pockets. Placing them on the table in front of Lincoln "with a startling chink," Nick said, "Mr. Lincoln, the president of the company authorized me to hand you this retainer of \$500 to take our case."

According to Nick, Lincoln—"flushed with anger"—jumped to his feet and replied, "Nick Denton, I have given my promise to that preacher, and the Illinois Central hasn't money enough to buy me away from his side."

"I don't know that I shall ever get a dollar from him—but I'll do my best to make your company pay for those cows," Lincoln continued.

Whenever Nick told the story, he admitted that he had never felt so "mean and small" as he did at that encounter with the future president.

And Nick, a lifelong Democrat, admitted that in the election of 1860 he voted for the Republican candidate for president—Abraham Lincoln. His reason for switching parties: He said Lincoln was "the noblest man in America."

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