

# Lincoln and the Land Question

Unknown author, with excerpts from Robert H. Browne, *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*, 1907

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LINCOLN was early employed in Danville and Springfield in helping the settlers in their struggles against the extortions and stealings of the land sharks. His name was a terror to the infamous crew who as soon as a settler filed his claim filed counter claims and compelled the bonafide settlers to yield up a fee to retain their land and thus save litigation. Other tricks were resorted to which made it a series of battles between the homeseekers and the designing and grasping men who sought to victimize them. Said Lincoln:

"I respect the man who properly named these villains land sharks. They are like the wretched ghouls who follow a ship and fatten on its offal."

He, more than any other man at the time, helped to break up this system. These homeseekers were his special consideration. He served them for small fees, frequently for no fee at all.

Through this early experience, Lincoln was learning the land question. What he saw of the evils of land speculation and the greed born of private control of natural opportunities made vivid object lessons. Nor were they lost upon that wonderfully observant mind. As one cannot be a voluntary beneficiary of an evil social institution and maintain the same attitude toward it, he shrank with a moral instinct that was part of the genius of the man from direct participation in it.

Offered the opportunity by his friend Gridley, eager to help him, of the purchase of a quarter section of land, which his friend assured him would double in price within a year, Lincoln said:

"I am as thankful to you and appreciate what you do for me in so many unselfish ways that no one knows of save myself. Nevertheless, I must decline this kind offer of yours, which would no doubt profit me and harm no one directly, as I view it. I have no maledictions or criticisms of those who honestly buy, sell, and speculate in land, but I do not believe in it, and I feel for myself that I should not do it. If I made the investment, it would constantly turn my attention to that kind of business, and so far disqualify me from what seems my calling and success in it, and interfere with the public or half public service, which I neither seek nor avoid." (Vol. 2, p. 85)

Lincoln saw the oppression to which the masses of men were everywhere subjected. That keen brain and tender heart were alive to the sufferings of mankind due to economic injustice. That he sensed the cause is made plain in words that are unmistakable. That he would have led the movement for the restoration of the rights of men to the earth they inhabit, and that he would have brushed aside the subtleties of some of our later day single taxers and gone straight to the heart of the problem, is also clear from what he had to say, and from what we know of his statesmanlike courage and the peculiar directness of that keen and penetrating intellect.

But the question of chattel slavery lay like a stone in the way. That removed, the monster of land monopoly was to be overthrown. And that there may be no doubt of the keenness of his apprehension of the nature of that struggle the following words furnish conclusive proof:

"On other questions, there is ample room for reform when die time comes; but now it would be folly to think we could undertake more than we have on hand. But when slavery is over and settled, men should never rest content while oppression, wrongs, and iniquities are in force against them." (Vol. 2, p. 89)

That Lincoln saw the absurdity of treating the planet as private property is proved by these words:

"The land, the earth God gave to man for his home, sustenance, and support, should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society, or unfriendly government, any more than the air or water, if as much. An individual, or company, or enterprise requiring land should hold no more than is required for their home and sustenance, and never more than they have in actual use in the prudent management of their legitimate business, and this much should not be permitted when it creates an exclusive monopoly. All that is not so used should be held for the free use of every family to make homesteads, and to hold them as long as they are so occupied." (Vol. 2, pp. 89-90)

Lincoln saw the land question. He would have dealt with it in the big way. There would have been no half-way treatment. He would have announced the freedom of mankind, the New Declaration of Emancipation, by announcing, as he does so plainly, that there is no such thing as private property in land, any more than in the air and water.

He had no doubt of the principle he laid down. Of the method to be pursued, he was not so certain. He said:

"A reform like this will be worked out sometime in the future." (Vol. 2, p. 90)

He knew the movement would meet with opposition and he knew the kind of opposition it would meet. He characterized those who would oppose it in terms which will seem to some of the more timid souls amongst us as shockingly offensive.

"The idle talk of foolish men, that is so common now, will find its way against it, with whatever force it may possess, and as strongly promoted and carried on as it can be by land monopolists, grasping landlords, and the titled and untitled senseless enemies of mankind everywhere." (Vol. 2, p. 90)

It is pleasant to know that the spirit and mind of Lincoln are of us and with us. He was a man who dealt with elemental things. He saw the land question, saw it clearly; he saw the miseries that come from treating land as unrestricted private property, and he would have dealt summarily with the evil institution, and in this he expected to have the opposition of "the senseless enemies of mankind everywhere."

Robert H. Browne, *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*: Library of Congress E457 B883 1907 in Google Books at [http://books.google.com/books?id=I9hBAAAIAAJ&pg=PA63&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=I9hBAAAIAAJ&pg=PA63&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Browne read law with Davis, Lincoln and Gridley at Bloomington, Ill., which is how he might have had access to private conversations of Lincoln with Gridley, which are the source of the Lincoln quotes in this essay.