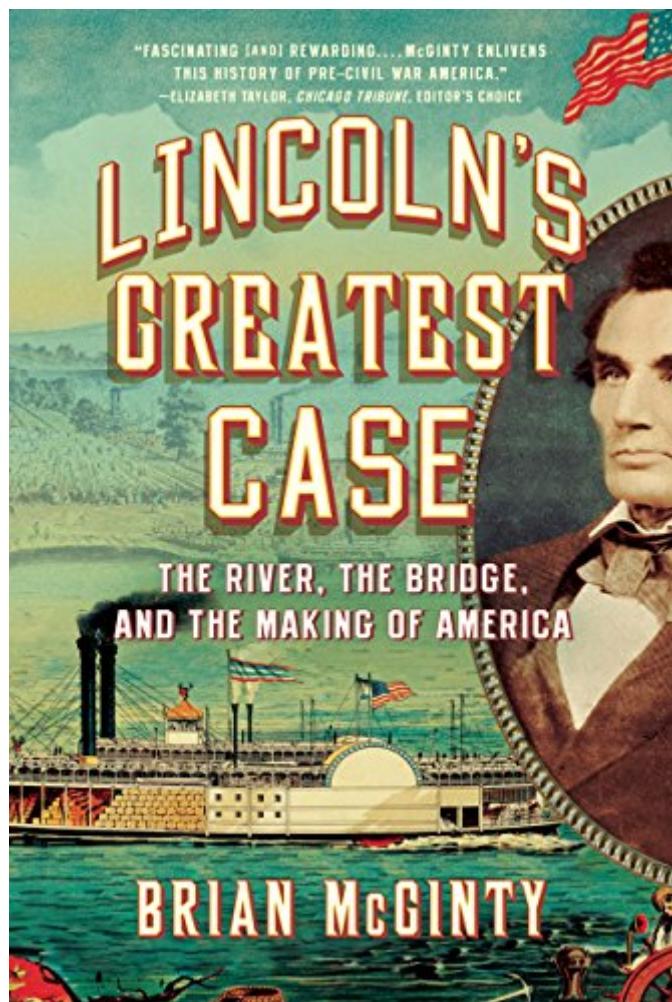


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# Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, The Bridge, And The Making Of America



## **Synopsis**

The untold story of how one sensational trial propelled a self-taught lawyer and a future president into the national spotlight. In May of 1856, the steamboat Effie Afton barreled into a pillar of the Rock Island Bridge, unalterably changing the course of American transportation history. Within a year, long-simmering tensions between powerful steamboat interests and burgeoning railroads exploded, and the nation's attention, absorbed by the Dred Scott case, was riveted by a new civil trial. Dramatically reenacting the Effie Afton case "from its unlikely inception, complete with a young Abraham Lincoln's soaring oratory, to the controversial finale" this "masterful" (Christian Science Monitor) account gives us the previously untold story of how one sensational trial propelled a self-taught lawyer and a future president into the national spotlight.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Picked up a copy of "Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, The Bridge and the Making of America" at my local bookstore last week. It was definitely an impulse purchase. I found the book to be at once quite informative and highly entertaining. I had never heard of the steamboat "Effie Afton" nor of the tragic accident that occurred on the Mississippi River beneath the railroad bridge at Rock Island,

Illinois in 1856. The issues involved in the litigation would have far-reaching implications for the future of transportation in this nation. I thought Brian McGinty did a workmanlike job of presenting both sides of the argument that pitted the St. Louis based steamboat interests against the rapidly emerging railroad interests. Now given the title of the book I was a bit surprised that there was not more in the book about the role played by Abraham Lincoln in this case. Nevertheless, I found "Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, The Bridge and the Making of America" to be a terrific read. History buffs and general readers alike should enjoy this one. Recommended.

On May 6, 1856, the steamboat Effie Afton struck a pillar of the Rock Island Bridge across the Mississippi and sank. The owners of the Effie Afton sued the owners of the bridge, seeking to have it removed as a hazard to navigation. The suit was part of a pattern, of steamboat interests seeking to undermine or even stop the spread of the railroads across the nation. And among the attorneys hired for the case was a capable young lawyer from Illinois with the name of Abraham Lincoln! Overall, I found this to be a surprisingly interesting book. The author does a great job of presenting the facts about the case, and what it meant to the future of the country. It follows what happened in a chronological order, weaving the facts into a very interesting story. My one and only complaint is that though the title references Abraham Lincoln, in truth very little is known about his involvement in this case. The records of the trial were lost in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, so the only things known about the trial come from newspaper articles, which do not focus on Mr. Lincoln. But, that said, this is an interesting book, and I am very glad that I read it. It does discuss an interesting time in American history, and the war between steamboat and railroad interests.

Author & attorney Brian McGinty, writes legal history including two previous Lincoln books that focus on law while he was in the White House. Lincoln's Greatest Case: The River, The Bridge, and the Making of America, is almost a prequel to the prior entertaining and educational books. This book (also entertaining and educational) focuses on one of the last trials the Great Emancipator was in before his election and the Civil War. In 1856 the first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River was built between Arsenal Island and Davenport, near Rock Island. The method and manner in which it was built made the steamboat captains think it was built to favor railroads at the expense of steamboats. It pitted the rivals Chicago vs Saint Louis as railroad vs steamboat or more generally North vs South. Just a short time after the bridge was opened the steamboat Effie Afton collided with the bridge, caught on fire, and thus damaged the bridge. The steamboat owner sued the bridge and thus the railroad. Defending the railroad (and thus, in a way- the North) was one Abraham

Lincoln. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court. (Read the book to find out who won!). In a twist of fate, Jefferson Davis was in favor of having the bridge torn down and sided with the steamboats. Thus, in a way this trial pitted the President of the USA vs that of the CSA. Lincoln based his defense mostly on common sense, not legal technicalities: "What is reasonable skill and care?" • Lincoln asked. "This is a thing of which the jury are to judge. I differ from the other side when it says that they are bound to exercise no more care than was taken before the building of the bridge. If we are allowed by the legislature to build the bridge, when a pilot comes along it is unreasonable for him to dash on heedless of this structure which has been legally put there." • Very readable, recommended for those who enjoy US History or legal wranglings.

Lincoln's Greatest Case is about much more than the right to construct a bridge across a navigable waterway. While the case set an important legal precedent, the effect was no less than the transformation of the nation's fulcrum of commerce from north-south and river-based to east-west and rail-based. This important work, in a logical and readable manner, argues that the North won the Civil War as the result of becoming independent of the South for inland transportation while simultaneously expanding its footprint with the opening of the West. Henry Posner  
III Chairman Iowa Interstate Railroad (successor to the Rock Island railroad)

For anyone interested in legal history, the history of Illinois and the growing United States, the history of the cauldron brewing towards full boil of the Civil War, Greatest Case is very worthwhile. The writing style is approachable, but might have gotten a bit more aggressive editing to remove duplications. However, those are tiny issues compared to the view of the era and the forces at work provided.

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