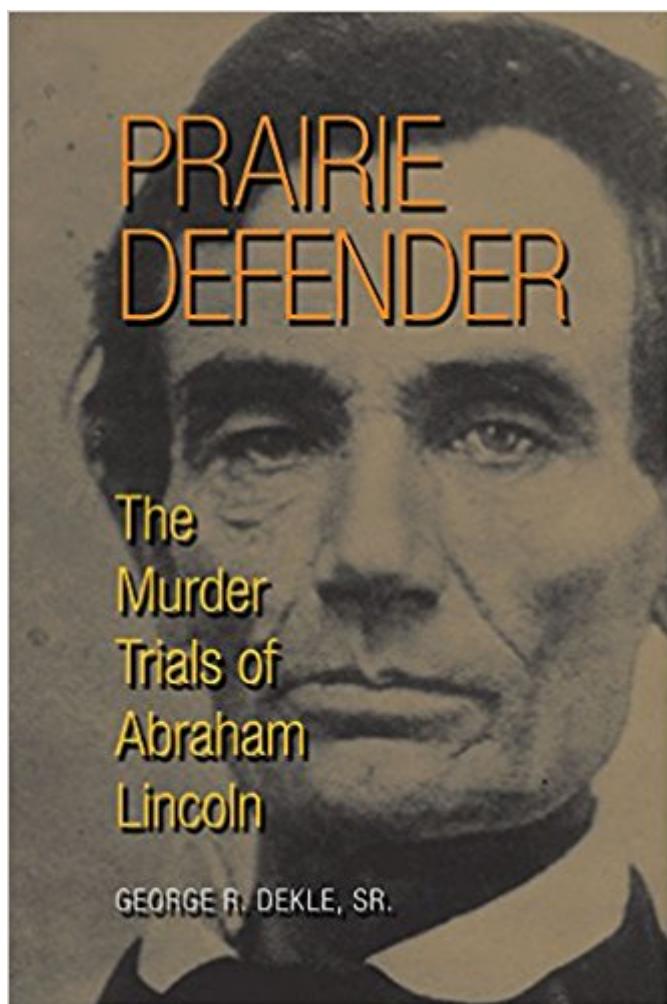


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# Prairie Defender: The Murder Trials Of Abraham Lincoln



## Synopsis

According to conventional wisdom, Abraham Lincoln spent most of his law career collecting debt and representing railroads, and this focus made him inept at defending clients in homicide cases. In this unprecedented study of Lincoln's criminal cases, George Dekle disproves these popular notions, showing that Lincoln was first and foremost a trial lawyer. Through careful examination of Lincoln's homicide cases and evaluation of his legal skills, Dekle demonstrates that criminal law was an important part of Lincoln's practice, and that he was quite capable of defending people accused of murder, trying approximately one such case per year. Dekle begins by presenting the viewpoints of not only those who see Lincoln as a perfect lawyer whose only flaw was his inability to represent the wrong side of a case but also those who believe Lincoln was a less-than-honest legal hack. The author invites readers to compare these wildly different stereotypes with the flesh-and-blood Lincoln revealed in each case described in the book, including an axe murder suit in which Lincoln assisted the prosecution, a poisoning case he refused to prosecute for \$200 but defended for \$75, and a case he won by proving that a supposed murder victim was actually still alive. For each case Dekle covers, he first tells the stories of the feuds, arguments, and insults that led to murder and other criminal activity, giving a gripping view of the seamy side of life in nineteenth-century Illinois. Then he traces the course of the pretrial litigation, describes the trials and the various tactics employed in the prosecution and defense, and critiques the performance of both Lincoln and his adversaries. Dekle concludes that Lincoln was a competent, diligent criminal trial lawyer who knew the law, could argue it effectively to both judge and jury, and would use all lawful means to defend clients whether he believed them to be innocent or guilty. His trial record shows Lincoln to have been a formidable defense lawyer who won many seemingly hopeless cases through his skill as a courtroom tactician, cross-examiner, and orator. Criminal defendants who could retain Lincoln as a defense attorney were well represented, and criminal defense attorneys who sought him as co-counsel were well served. Providing insight into both Lincoln's legal career and the culture in which he practiced law, *Prairie Defender* resolves a major misconception concerning one of our most important historical figures. *Â*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With over sixteen thousand books published about Abraham Lincoln is there need for another? Emphatically yes! And this contribution to understanding Lincoln proves it. The author describes succinctly that Lincoln was a first-rate attorney, especially in criminal cases. While murder cases were not a large part of his practice, Lincoln's defense of those charged with murder demonstrates that he was skilled in the art of cross-examination and clever in convincing juries. Much of this proficiency came from his empathy—putting himself in the place of another and experiencing what they were feeling. This noble and effective quality in Lincoln's character is shown repeatedly in this volume.

Frank J. Williams, retired chief justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and founding chair of the Lincoln Forum

Not just an important addition to Lincoln legal literature, this book is a must read for all lawyers, Lincoln historians, and legal scholars. Dekle relates the stories of Lincoln's major homicide cases in scholarly detail and provides anecdotal background to the trials, describing life in the nineteenth century. A lawyer himself, Dekle is able to analyze Lincoln's trial work in a way that will enable the modern lawyer to understand those trials, and his superb writing will make the book enjoyable to all readers regardless of their legal interests.

Travis H. D. Lewin, professor emeritus, Syracuse University

Only an experienced criminal lawyer could have written this engaging book. The case-by-case study of Lincoln's murder trials is not a rehash of earlier volumes about Lincoln the lawyer. It is an original, in-depth analysis of Lincoln's trial strategies, tactics, and techniques that offers fresh insights into his ability as a trial lawyer. This book is a must read for anyone interested in evaluating Lincoln as a trial attorney.

Guy C. Fraker, author, Lincoln's Ladder to the Presidency: The Eighth Judicial Circuit "Prairie Defender" is an impressively researched, exceptionally well written, informatively organized and presented work of seminal scholarship. The result is a unique and singular study that will prove to be an outstanding and appreciated contribution to community

and academic library 19th Century American History collections, in general, and Abraham Lincoln supplemental studies reading lists in particular. Highly recommended." ---Willis M. Buhle, in A Midwest Book Review

For thirty years, George R. Dekle, Sr., worked as an assistant state attorney in the Third Judicial Circuit of Florida, where he prosecuted hundreds of homicide cases, and for the past ten years he served as the director of the prosecution clinic at the University of Florida Law School. He is the author of *The Last Murder: The Investigation, Prosecution, and Execution of Ted Bundy and Abraham Lincoln*—the Most Famous Case: The Almanac Trial.

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