



The Jury in Lincoln's America (Law Society & Politics in the Midwest)

Stacy Pratt McDermott

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2013 Award of Superior Achievement from the Illinois State Historical Society.

In the antebellum Midwest, Americans looked to the law, and specifically to the jury, to navigate the uncertain terrain of a rapidly changing society. During this formative era of American law, the jury served as the most visible connector between law and society. Through an analysis of the composition of grand and trial juries and an examination of their courtroom experiences, Stacy Pratt McDermott demonstrates how central the law was for people who lived in Abraham Lincoln's America.

McDermott focuses on the status of the jury as a democratic institution as well as on the status of those who served as jurors. According to the 1860 census, the juries in Springfield and Sangamon County, Illinois, comprised an ethnically and racially diverse population of settlers from northern and southern states, representing both urban and rural mid-nineteenth-century America. It was in these counties that Lincoln developed his law practice, handling more than 5,200 cases in a legal career that spanned nearly twenty-five years.

Drawing from a rich collection of legal records, docket books, county histories, and surviving newspapers, McDermott reveals the enormous power jurors wielded over the litigants and the character of their communities.



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