

# Blackburn COLLEGE

## PRESS RELEASE

For more information, please contact  
Peter T. Oswald, Director of  
Public Relations and Marketing  
peter.oswald@blackburn.edu  
217-854-3231 x4336

### **A Notable Success at Blackburn College: Harry Pratt and Lincoln Scholarship**

**by Tom Emery**

**Carlinville, IL, March 11, 2012**—Among scholars of Abraham Lincoln, few stand taller than Harry Pratt, whose work in the mid-twentieth century remains highly respected. Pratt's brilliant career began with a teaching position at Blackburn College.

Pratt's four years at Blackburn from 1930-34 were a springboard to greater fame, as he ascended to the coveted positions of Illinois State Historian, Director of the Illinois State Historical Library, and executive secretary of the prestigious Abraham Lincoln Association. Along the way, he published several works of Lincoln research that are considered among the best Lincoln studies of all time.

Born on Dec. 16, 1901 in Cambridge, Ill., Harry Edward Pratt graduated from the University of Illinois in 1923. He taught high school in Ohio and Wyoming before returning to his alma mater, where he earned a master's degree in 1927 and his doctorate in history in 1930. His doctoral thesis was on David Davis of Bloomington, whom Lincoln appointed to the Supreme Court in 1862.

At Illinois, Pratt studied under Dr. James G. Randall, a revered figure in Lincoln studies. Considered by modern Lincoln scholar Mark Neely as "the greatest Lincoln scholar of all time," Pratt became a sort of "unofficial research assistant" to Randall and formed a close relationship with his mentor that would last a lifetime.

In 1930, Pratt came to Blackburn as Dean of the College and an instructor in history. His fine manners, work ethic, and academic ability quickly endeared himself to the Blackburn community. A 1956 article in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* by Benjamin Thomas, a contemporary of Pratt and himself an acclaimed Lincoln scholar, noted that Pratt was "beloved for his friendly interest in the students' problems, and his enthusiasm made history live in and out of the classroom...he made lasting friendships with members of the faculty and student body."

In 1934, Randall wrote of "his most responsible position at Blackburn," adding that, "I know from Blackburn students as well as from various other sources that he has made a notable success there."

In addition to his academic achievements at Blackburn, Pratt involved himself in many other aspects of

campus life. A high school basketball star and tennis player at Illinois who had seriously considered a coaching career, Pratt served as head men's basketball coach at Blackburn from 1930-33. In his final season, Pratt's squad went 14-5, a mark that would not be matched for forty years.

But Pratt's influence was felt far beyond Carlinville. His work was becoming increasingly known in the field of Lincolnia, and he was forming relationships with some of the greatest Lincoln scholars of all. Among them was Carl Sandburg, whom Pratt invited to deliver a lecture at Blackburn.

Sandburg's appearance was in Blackburn's newly-completed Clegg Chapel on Dec. 12, 1932. Admission to the event was twenty-five cents. Pratt and Sandburg maintained a close friendship, and in a 1950 letter, Sandburg reflected on their relationship: "we have each traveled long and winding paths in the same field since so long ago we talked those hours when I was your overnight guest at Blackburn..."

While at Blackburn, Pratt also corresponded with Allan Nevins, who won the first of his two Pulitzer Prizes for his 1933 biography of Grover Cleveland. Pratt also was a contributor to various historical serials, including the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, and established himself as a collector of Lincoln- and Civil War memorabilia. In 1932, he donated thirty-eight Civil War letters to the Illinois State Historical Society.

Pratt was clearly on the rise, but his time at Blackburn would soon end. In 1933, he was "most interested" and "very anxious to secure the position" of assistant in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. To his disappointment, Pratt did not get the job. The following year, he left Blackburn to accept a position at Illinois Wesleyan University.

In 1935, Randall again wrote of his former student that Pratt "is one of the keenest and most energetic young historians whom I know. He is really quite remarkable for what he has done since he got his doctorate in 1930."

Others certainly took notice. In 1936, Pratt accepted the position of executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, a renowned Springfield-based organization that remains a foremost champion of the sixteenth President's legacy. With the ALA, Pratt edited and contributed to the Association's house publication, the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, and helped create "an enormous mass of information about Lincoln" in the files of the Association.

During this time, Pratt published *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln*, which Thomas called "a truly original contribution to our knowledge of Lincoln." The work created a painstaking analysis of the oft-debated personal financial health of Lincoln and remains a well-respected contribution to Lincolnia. In 1939, he served as historical consultant on Darryl Zanuck's motion picture *Young Mr. Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda and directed by John Ford.

After briefly teaching at Ball State in Indiana, Pratt returned to Illinois to accept the highly regarded position of Illinois State Historian. Concurrent was the directorship of the Illinois State Historical Library,

and Pratt was clearly in his element. Thomas admiringly wrote that “it was as though Harry Pratt had been foreordained for the position...already well-versed in Illinois history, his knowledge of it now became encyclopedic.”

Randall echoed Thomas’ thoughts, writing in 1949 that “in the mastery of an immense amount of information in the Lincoln field, I know of no one who equals Dr. Pratt. He has the facts, the ‘know-how,’ and the background.”

Under his direction, the library doubled its collection of Lincoln manuscripts and re-affirmed itself as a national Lincoln repository and research center. During Pratt’s tenure, the ALA was embarking on its exhaustive nine-volume *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, which sought to re-print all available letters of Lincoln. Pratt’s “personal help and counsel...aided greatly in bringing the Collected Works to reality,” and legions of Lincoln scholars since are in his debt.

Twice married, Dr. Pratt suffered a coronary thrombosis on April 15, 1955 – the anniversary of Lincoln’s death. It would not be the only coincidence of Pratt’s final days. He suffered another heart attack – this one fatal – on Feb. 12, 1956, the 147th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth.

Harry Pratt was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, “in the shadow of Lincoln’s tomb.” It is a fitting tribute to Pratt’s towering legacy in Lincoln scholarship and the study of Illinois history.

Founded in 1837, Blackburn College is a four-year, Presbyterian-related, co-educational liberal arts college located in Carlinville, Illinois. One of the seven work colleges in the U.S., Blackburn is the only one with a student managed Work Program. Blackburn was recently ranked by U.S. News as the 2012 #2 Best Value College in the Midwest; and placed #65 in The Washington on Monthly’s ranking of Baccalaureate Colleges. The school remains the most affordable, residential liberal arts college in the state.

###