ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS

Lincoln v. Chloroform Insanity

During a dispute over a property boundary in June of 1855, Isaac Wyant was shot by a gun-wielding man named Anson Rusk. According to one witness, after surgical amputation of his arm, Wyant emerged from his chloroform anesthetic “ever after morbidly fearful that Rusk would kill him . . . and complained greatly about his head and exhibited many signs of being unsettled in his intellect.” Wyant would not just return home—he would return fire . . . at the county clerk’s office. Rusk expired from the four gunshot wounds that Wyant inflicted. In 1857 a wild-haired young attorney named Abraham Lincoln (above) assisted in prosecuting the murder case now titled People v. Wyant. Unfortunately for Lincoln, Wyant’s defense attorney would prevail by convincing the jury that surgical chloroform had driven Wyant insane. Wyant would be committed to a mental hospital, and, 3 years later, Lincoln would be committed to running for the presidency of the United States. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. This image also appears in the Anesthesiology Reflections online collection available at www.anesthesiology.org.)

George S. Bause, M.D., M.P.H., Honorary Curator, ASA’s Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology, Park Ridge, Illinois, and Clinical Associate Professor, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. UJYC@aol.com.