HONORING CONNECTICUT’S ROLE IN ABOLISHING SLAVERY, 150 YEARS LATER

RESOURCE GUIDE TO ACCOMPANY THE 2012 MOVIE, “LINCOLN”

FROM THE OFFICE OF CONGRESSMAN JOE COURTNEY
SECOND DISTRICT OF CONNECTICUT
JANUARY, 2015
HONORING CONNECTICUT’S ROLE IN ABOLISHING SLAVERY, 150 YEARS LATER

On January 31st, 2015, the United States of America will celebrate the 150th anniversary of one of its greatest contributions to the cause of human rights: passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing human slavery within its borders. The 13th Amendment resolved forever a hotly-contested moral defect in the founding of the nation, which permitted the ownership of African slaves by American citizens. Passage occurred on the cusp of the end of the most violent conflict in American history—the Civil War—which most historians agree was primarily fought over this very issue.

No doubt, the 150th observance will be a time of great reflection and celebration that—despite the horrible reality of the War, America was able to eliminate the “peculiar institution” of slavery, preserve the Union, and adopt the slavery prohibition into the bedrock foundation of the nation’s legal system: the U.S. Constitution.

In Connecticut, we have much to commemorate on this important milestone. Our state contributed greatly to the cause of abolition. The literary work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Greeley, and David Ruggles, an African-American abolitionist printer and writer who also played a role in the Underground Railroad; and the outspoken leadership of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the United States Navy under President Lincoln, and Prudence Crandall, who boldly opened the doors of her classroom to African American girls, lent power and clarity to the arguments opposed to slavery. The military service of thousands of men and boys to the Union cause was spectacular, from the highest rank of officers to enlisted infantrymen. More than 4,000 Connecticut soldiers lost their lives to the horrors of combat, disease, and imprisonment in Confederate camps during the course of the War. Connecticut soldiers saw action in all of the major battles that caused massive loss of life.

By the time President Abraham Lincoln decided to press Congress for passage of the 13th Amendment, a majority of Connecticut citizens had cast their votes to elect him twice, in 1860 and 1864. At the same time, opposition candidates amassed a substantial minority in the contest, and elected a Democratic House member from New Haven as part of the state’s four-member House delegation.

When the yeas and nays were counted during the roll call vote on the 13th Amendment on January 31st, 1865, Connecticut’s House and Senate delegates stood firm in their support for abolition. Their principled votes reflected President Lincoln’s support among Connecticut citizens and the sacrifice of thousands of their state’s sons for the Union effort.

As the 150th anniversary approaches, it is important to share the accurate record of the role of the Connecticut House delegation in adopting the 13th Amendment, particularly because much of the public discourse around this period of our history will be influenced by the 2012 movie, “Lincoln.”
CORRECTING THE RECORD ON CONNECTICUT’S 13TH AMENDMENT VOTES IN “LINCOLN”

Steven Spielberg’s 2012 movie “Lincoln” was a great cinematic achievement that earned numerous awards, and its success has brought the dramatic story of the abolition of slavery in America to life for a new generation. As an educational tool for teachers to illustrate that period of United States political history to students, the movie is an important contribution to the historical record, and will shape the perceptions of young Americans who learn from it. In particular, by focusing on the struggle to pass the 13th Amendment to the Constitution by a 2/3 “super-majority,” the movie brought to life the legislative process in Congress, the arena of American democracy. The plot of the movie focuses on President Lincoln’s efforts to persuade, cajole, and horse-trade with a divided House of Representatives to win passage on January 31, 1865 by a vote of 119 to 56.

As the movie demonstrates, the motivation of Members of Congress is a mix of high-minded principle, personal loyalty (and jealousy), and—inevitably—personal ambitions and gains. President Lincoln and his team are shown to be both committed abolitionists and pragmatic head-counters. The stakes could not have been higher – victory would abolish America’s “original sin” of slavery, which corrupted the democratic foundation of our country; defeat would have undermined Lincoln’s presidency and the cause of the Union.

In portraying the events leading up to the vote, the movie went to great lengths to accurately depict this epic Congressional struggle. As such, it is crucial that one glaring inaccuracy in the film—which stands in stark contrast to the countless historical details rendered with painstaking precision—be corrected. According to the movie, two members of Connecticut’s delegation, during a climactic scene in which passage of the 13th Amendment was anything but certain, vote against the amendment. Two fictitious Connecticut legislators—unlike most of the historically accurate names of the other congressmen portrayed in the movie—are shown casting their votes against the amendment, drawing out the suspense of the roll call vote. This portrayal, which explicitly identifies “members” from Connecticut, is utterly false.

In fact, all four of Connecticut’s representatives voted for the 13th Amendment, supporting the abolition of slavery in the United States. For history students and other viewers in Connecticut, who will undoubtedly wonder how their state’s record on the 13th Amendment could be so incongruous with its position in the Civil War, setting the record straight is a matter of honor to those from Connecticut who sacrificed so much for the cause of abolition. They should be proud of the courageous votes cast by Connecticut’s delegation at this most uncertain time in the history of our great nation.

To further that end, this resource guide contains short biographies of the four Connecticut congressmen who served in the 38th Congress in Washington.
CONNECTICUT’S CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION
38TH CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

Biographies of
John Henry Hubbard (1804-1872)
James E. English (1812-1890)
Henry Champion Deming (1815-1872)
Augustus Brandegee (1828-1904)

Connecticut Map reflecting 1864 Congressional District Borders
John Henry Hubbard (1804-1872)

John Henry Hubbard was born in 1804 in Salisbury, Connecticut. A lawyer by trade, he served in the Connecticut state senate from 1847 to 1849. In 1863, he was elected to Congress to represent the Fourth Congressional District, encompassing the western end of Connecticut. Hubbard served two terms, and cast an historic vote in support of the 13th Amendment. President Lincoln nicknamed Hubbard “Old Connecticut.”

In addition to his support of the 13th amendment, Hubbard was a staunch supporter of the Freedmen’s Bureau, established by Congress in 1865 to help former black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War.

In a passionate speech given on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives on February 4, 1866, Hubbard declared:

Another object is to give them an opportunity to learn to read and to protect them reasonably in their civil rights. They ought not to be left to perish by the wayside in poverty and by starvation when the country so much needs their work. It is not their crime nor their fault that they are so miserable. From the beginning to the present time they have been robbed of their wages, to say nothing of the scourging they have received. I think that the nation will be a great gainer by encouraging the policy of the Freedmen’s Bureau, in the cultivation of its wild lands, in the increased wealth which industry brings, and in the restoration of law and order in the insurgent States.

I feel proud of my country when I behold it stretching out its strong arm of power to protect the poor, the ignorant, the weak, and the oppressed. I see in it the prosecution of a righteous purpose which cannot fail to secure the favor of Heaven. I see in it that which will bring my country a richer revenue of honor than all the eloquence of her forums or the glory of her battle-fields. I see in it infallible evidence that the nation is fast becoming what it was intended to be by the fathers- the home of liberty and an asylum for the oppressed of all the races and nations of men.
James E. English rose from humble beginnings in Connecticut. From working on a Bethlehem farm at age 11, to becoming a master carpenter by age 21, English’s work ethic propelled him to success in business and in political life.

English served on the Board of Selectmen in New Haven from 1847-1861 and was a member of the Common Council 1848-1849. In 1855 English was elected to the Connecticut state legislature, and the following year he was elected to the State Senate where he served three terms. In 1860, English was nominated by the Democratic Party to serve as Lieutenant Governor, but was not elected. The following year, however, he successfully campaigned for the Second Congressional District seat, representing south central Connecticut—including the city of New Haven—in the 37th Congress. During his four years in Congress as a member of Lincoln’s opposition party, he served on the Committee of Naval Affairs and the Committee on Public Lands. Despite their party differences, English also became close friends with President Lincoln, and on the day of the vote, English left the side of his seriously ill wife to cast a critical ‘yes’ vote for the abolition of slavery.

After English cast his vote in support of the 13th Amendment, he said, “I suppose I am politically ruined, but that day was the happiest of my life.” Fortunately, his worries were short-lived, and he went on to be elected governor of Connecticut twice, and also served two years in the U.S. Senate.

After leaving office, English enjoyed a successful career in the lumber business. He later became involved with the Goodyear Metallic Rubber Shoe Company of Naugatuck—a partnership that lasted for 39 years.
HENRY CHAMPION DEMING (1815-1872)

Henry Champion Deming was born in Colchester, Connecticut in 1815. He was an outspoken opponent of slavery in his public life, and enlisted as a colonel in Connecticut’s 12th Regiment during the Civil War. He began the first of his two terms in Congress in March of 1863, elected as a Republican representing the First District, including central Connecticut and Hartford. The same month Deming was elected, he authored an indictment of the South’s secession—and its embrace of slavery—in The Hartford Daily Courant:

*Slavery I have always hated morally. I have deemed it my duty, in the course of my political career, to defend what I regarded as its political rights under the Constitution. But when the rebels themselves took slavery from beneath the wings of the constitutional compromise, and immediately placed it outside of the Constitution, they absolved me from being any longer its apologist or defender. They have themselves destroyed their cherished institution by their own act, and I have no tears to shed over its grave.*

During his time in the House of Representatives, Deming was an active member of the Committee on Military Affairs and served as the Chairman of the Committee of expenditures in the War Department. Deming was on ‘intimate terms with Lincoln” and an outspoken opponent of slavery.

Following the assassination of President Lincoln, Congressman Deming was elected as a representative of fellow members of Congress at the funeral. He gave Lincoln’s eulogy at a service at Allyn Hall in Hartford, Connecticut.

After serving his second term in Congress, he held the position of Collector of the Internal Revenue.
Augustus Brandegee was born in New London on July 12, 1828 into “an old Connecticut family”. His grandfather, Daniel Deshon, was a prominent figure in the Revolutionary War, commanding the armed vessel Defense. Augustus’ son, Frank Brandegee went on to became a U.S. Senator in 1905.

A lawyer by trade, Augustus Brandegee was admitted to the bar of New London County in 1851. He gained a reputation of being “fair to his opponents… [and] honest with the court.” He was elected to represent the State Legislature in 1854 where he served until 1858. In his final term Brandegee was the Speaker of the House.

Brandegee, a Republican, was elected to the U.S. House of Representative for the 3rd Congressional district in 1863—encompassing eastern Connecticut, including New London and Windham counties—and became one of the most popular orators of the Republican party as well as a close friend of President Lincoln. He served two terms in the House, and was a member of the House Committee on Naval Affairs. On March 2, 1867—during Brandegee’s final year in Congress—he succeeded in attaching a rider to the Naval Appropriations Act, which established SUBASE New London by authorizing the secretary of the Navy to take receipt of the land for the installation.

Brandegee was a staunch supporter of anti-slavery efforts. According to David Collins of The New London Day:

Brandegee was said to be a close friend of Lincoln’s and spent a lot of time with the president during his time in Washington. He was hailed as a great civic leader at his large funeral in 1904 and remembered in newspaper editorials around the state as "a star of the first magnitude" and "one of the great leaders of the Republican party."

Brandegee is still remembered today on a plaque in New London that recalls his role in freeing a slave who was a stowaway on the 103-foot schooner Eliza S. Potter, on an 1858 voyage from Wilmington, N.C., to Noank. Discovered on the ship en route, the slave was turned over to customs authorities in New London and, under the federal Fugitive Slave...
Act, which required slaves be returned to their owners, was expected to be sent back South. Instead, Brandegee, then a police judge, interceded in the case and cited Connecticut's "Personal Liberty Law," a state law he helped enact, and one at odds with the federal slave act.

Judge Brandegee emancipated the stowaway. "Do you want to be a slave or free?"
Brandegee was said to ask the man in some accounts from the time. "Free," the man was said to reply, before fleeing down New London's Bank Street. It is believed the freed slave eventually made his way to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

CONCLUSION

As the record plainly shows, each of these members of Congress were principled, longstanding opponents of slavery, whose votes in favor of the 13th Amendment were acts of conviction. While the question of whether to expand slavery to new territories tore the country in two, and generated debate and opposition even within Union states, Connecticut’s record of political support for Lincoln, as well as the sacrifice the state made in blood and treasure during the Civil War, show that these men acted as true representatives of a state committed to the Union cause.
Members and Votes of the Connecticut Congressional Delegation on the

13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Joint Resolution of Congress – Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

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<td>Augustus Brandegee</td>
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<td>Henry C. Deming</td>
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<td>James E. English</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
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<td>John H. Hubbard</td>
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THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE:

CONTAINING

THE DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

OF

THE FIRST SESSION

OF

THE THIRTY-EIGHTH CONGRESS.

BY JOHN G. RIVES.

CITY OF WASHINGTON:
PRINTED AT THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE OFFICE.
1864.
trines when they may become convenient to them. That has not been my course of policy or my habit of conduct from my youth upward in the public life of the country. I say this much, and there are men of the Republican party high in office to-day who may have been well aware in health at this time that we have not been for my maintaining them in their young manhood when it happened to be my opportunity. Therefore I have been myself, and I have seen much of them.

But we are undertaking now here to antagonize them, and we are undertaking it in this manner: immediately the ascendant white race of the South where they belong; and what must be the result? We hear with contrition the present position. It comes from those persons who go as missionaries and who go as agents of the employment of the Government, for the purpose of taking care of these people. Along the shores of the Mississippi they are wandering without food to support their animal, lost people, men, women, and infants. You are facts that have been said to the country, and with which every man in the Senate is conversant. It may be within our pleasure to make these evils more complete. It may be within the pleasure of our ignorance to say these things are true and just and right; but nature revolts at the affirmation; truth gives it a firm denial. I will not admit that I am less the friend of the people of the African race than any other gentleman on this floor. I believe that the conditions I have occupied our pur view before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock; but it must be done by just and wise policy, and not by a continued and unnecessary struggle for or demanded by the day, but sought for by a greedy appetite which, maddened with a present passion, may yet see that what they fear may not be within their grasp to-morrow. Against all such policy and all such conduct I shall protest and denounce, and I shall protest and denounce in the name of justice and of law and of truth and of religion.

The VICE PRESIDENT. The question is on the passage of the bill, to which the yeas and nays have been ordered.

The Secretary proceeded to call the roll.


ddd


The VICE PRESIDENT announced that the joint resolution, having received the concurrence of two-thirds of the Senate present, is ready to be read: A joint resolution submitting to the Legislatures of the several States a proposition to amend the Constitution of the United States.

Mr. SAULSBURY. I rise simply to say that I now beg leave to any hope of the reconstruction of the American Union.

Mr. McDOUGALL. I desire to ask a question for the purpose of understanding a matter of the Chair. The ruling, I understand, is that the vote as it stands now has no relation to the States not represented on the floor, and I think our policy should have relation to all the States as recognized under the Constitution.

The VICE PRESIDENT. The chair ruling that a majority of all the Senators are present, and two thirds of the number voting, provided a quorum votes, is sufficient to pass any resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution.

Mr. McDOUGALL. I only desire the privilege of saying that we now have the opportunity to entertain.

ADJOURNMENT TO MONDAY.

A message from the House of Representatives, by Mr. LANE, of Indiana, was read as follows:

A joint resolution to incorporate the "Home for the Aged and Orphaned," in the State of Indiana. To which the Senate adjourned to-morrow by 10, 10, etc.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

FRIDAY; April 8, 1864.

The House met at twelve o'clock, Mr. Prayer, of Georgia, in the Chair. The Journal of yesterday was read and approved.

MISSOURI CONTESTED ELECTION.

Mr. GANSON. I rise to a question of privilege. I submit a motion in the case of the contested election of Mr. Brooks and Benjamin F. Loan, from the seventh congressional district of Missouri, and ask that the resolution be read, and that the report be printed.

The Clerk read as follows:

Resolved, That Benjamin F. Loan is not entitled to a seat in this House as a Representative from the seventh congressional district of Missouri?

Resolved, That John P. Brooks is not entitled to a seat in this House as a Representative from the seventh congressional district of Missouri?

Mr. UPSON. I submit the views of the minority as follows:

Resolved, That Mr. Brooks is entitled to retain his seat in this House as a Representative from the seventh congressional district of Missouri.

Mr. GANSON. I ask that this case be set down for the consideration of the Committee of the Whole.

THE SPEAKER. It is a question of privilege, and the gentleman can call it up at any time.

TAXATION OF STORES, WAGS, ETC.

Mr. ODELL. The following resolution, which was read, concurred in, and agreed to:

Resolved, That the Committee of Ways and Means be instructed to inquire into the expediency of reporting a bill
THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE:

CONTAINING

THE DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

SECOND SESSION OF THE THIRTY-EIGHTH CONGRESS:

ALSO, OF THE

SPECIAL SESSION OF THE SENATE.

BY F. & J. RIVES.

CITY OF WASHINGTON:
PRINTED AT THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE OFFICE.
1863.
Mr. BROWN, of Wisconsin. I ask the gentleman from Ohio to yield to me to offer a substitute for the amendment that has been proposed. 

Mr. ASHLEY. I cannot yield for that purpose. I have a substitute myself, which I should much prefer to offer a substitute in this joint resolution. 

Mr. ASHLEY. It seems to me that the time which the House has devoted to this subject now before the House was disposed of in June last requires two thirds of this body. That two-thirds vote has not been obtained.

The SPEAKER. The Chair overrules the point. The rules of the House authorize every bill and joint resolution to pass by a majority vote. The Constitution of the United States, however, declares that no constitutional amendment shall pass except by a two-thirds vote. On the question of the passage of the joint resolution the constitutional provision will operate, and not till that time. All other questions are governed by the rules of the House.

Mr. ASHLEY. My action upon this question of order will depend upon the uniform usage of the House in regard to bills voted on by the President. In such cases all votes up to the time when the President casts his vote on the bill over the President's veto are decided by a majority vote, but on the final vote a two-thirds vote is necessary.

Mr. ASHLEY. It has been the universal understanding that we were to have a vote today. Gentlemen upon the other side of the House will bear me witness that I have longed to make to the gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. ASHLEY,) that there are a number of us here, who believe the House can be here to-morrow, but who are not here to-day, who are anxious to vote upon this question. As this bill has passed by a majority vote, the vote will be taken at a fixed hour to-morrow, all action upon this side of the House for delay withdrawn.

Mr. ASHLEY. It was not their understandings that we were to have a vote to-day. Gentlemen upon the other side of the House have longed to have a vote to-day. It was postponed till to-morrow. It seems to me, that they have no right to put themselves from the House their action not to operate either to keep us in session here or to justify themselves to the usual parliamentary rules to procrastinate, and put off the vote. 

Mr. MALLORY. I was not aware that any understanding had been arrived at as to a vote to-day. During the last session, the gentleman from Pennsylvania, (Mr. STILES,) gave notice last week that the vote would be taken to-day; and at the beginning of the discussion this morning I observed it was four o'clock as the time when the vote would be taken, instead of which we have procrastinated it almost an hour to accommodate gentlemen upon the other side of the House.

Mr. MALLORY. Did that understanding exist upon this side of the House? If it did and if gentlemen will say so, I shall take no action in that direction.

Several Members. It was so understood.

Mr. ASHLEY. I cannot yield any further. I am not disposed to go on with this question, and came into the House intending to close the debate, as under the rules I had a right to do. This is in accordance with the understanding, and I hope gentlemen will make it desirable; but I yielded the time to gentlemen on the other side, until it is now nearly four o'clock, and members on all sides of the House demand a vote. I therefore decline to take up the time of the House, and demand that the main question shall now be put.
Mr. Steven Spielberg
DreamWorks Studios
100 Universal Plaza
Building 5121
University City, CA 91608

Dear Mr. Spielberg,

After finally sitting down to watch your Academy Award-nominated film, *Lincoln*, I can say unequivocally that the rave reviews are justified: Daniel Day-Lewis is tremendous, the story is compelling and consuming, and the cinematography is beautiful.

The historical accuracy of the film’s moving conclusion, however? Well, that is a different story.

As a Member of Congress from Connecticut, I was on the edge of my seat during the roll call vote on the ratification of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery. But when two of three members of the Nutmeg State’s House delegation voted to *uphold* slavery, I could not believe my own eyes and ears. How could Congressmen from Connecticut—a state that supported President Lincoln and lost thousands of her sons fighting against slavery on the Union side of the Civil War—have been on the wrong side of history?

After some digging and a check of the Congressional Record from January 31, 1865, I learned that in fact, Connecticut’s entire Congressional delegation, including four members of the House of Representatives—Augustus Brandegee of New London, James English of New Haven, Henry Deming of Colchester and John Henry Hubbard of Salisbury—all voted to abolish slavery. Even in a delegation that included both Democrats and Republicans, Connecticut provided a unified front against slavery.

In many movies, including your own *E.T.* and *Gremlins*, for example, suspending disbelief is part of the cinematic experience and is critical to enjoying the film. But in a movie based on significant real-life events—particularly a movie about a seminal moment in American history so closely associated with Doris Kearns Goodwin and her book, *Team of Rivals*—accuracy is paramount.

I understand that artistic license will be taken and that some facts may be blurred to make a story more compelling on the big screen, but placing the State of Connecticut on the wrong side of the historic and divisive fight over slavery is a distortion of easily verifiable facts and an inaccuracy that should be acknowledged, and if possible, corrected before *Lincoln* is released on DVD.

Sincerely,

Joe Courtney
Member of Congress
Congressman misrepresented in “Lincoln” was a New London judge who freed a slave

By David Collins
Publication: The Day
Published February 13, 2013

I was impressed when U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney took director Steven Spielberg to task for misrepresenting the votes by Connecticut’s congressmen on whether to abolish slavery.

"Placing Connecticut on the wrong side of the historic and divisive fight over slavery is a distortion of easily verifiable facts and an inaccuracy that should be acknowledged," the Second District congressman wrote this month to the famous director.

I was sorry to see the woeful response from "Lincoln" screenwriter Tony Kushner, who did indeed acknowledge the mistake but then directed a snide comment to our congressman, who is anything but a grandstander in matters like this.

"I hope no one is shocked to learn that I also made up dialogue," Kushner said in his testy reply to Courtney.

People do expect dialogue to be made up in historical dramas. But they also expect the general facts to be correct.

Indeed, I learned, after browsing a bit through The Day’s archives, that the man whose vote to abolish slavery Kushner got wrong, was, in fact, a respected abolitionist from New London.

Augustus Brandegee, who was serving his second term in Congress when the historic vote depicted in Spielberg’s move took place, was a Yale-educated lawyer and a former speaker of the House in the Connecticut General Assembly.

He was said to be a close friend of Lincoln’s and spent a lot of time with the president during his time in Washington.

After returning to Connecticut, Brandegee served for a short term as mayor of New London, his native city, and then practiced law.

He was hailed as a great civic leader at his large funeral in 1904 and remembered in newspaper editorials around the state as "a star of the first magnitude" and "one of the great leaders of the Republican party."

Brandegee is still remembered today on a plaque in New London that recalls his role in freeing a slave who was a stowaway on the 103-foot schooner Eliza S. Potter, on an 1858 voyage from Wilmington, N.C., to Noank.
Discovered on the ship en route, the slave was turned over to customs authorities in New London and, given the federal Fugitive Slave Act, which required slaves be returned to their owners, was expected to be sent back South.

Instead, Brandegee, then a police judge, interceded in the case and cited Connecticut's "Personal Liberty Law," a state law he helped enact, and one at odds with the federal slave act. Judge Brandegee freed the stowaway. "Do you want to be a slave or free?" Brandegee was said to ask the man in some accounts from the time.

"Free" the man was said to reply, before fleeing down New London's Bank Street.

It is believed the freed slave eventually made his way to Canada via the underground railroad.

So screenwriter Kushner not only got the abolition vote of the Connecticut delegation wrong in "Lincoln," he maligned one of the heroes of Connecticut's abolition movement.

One can imagine Brandegee spinning under the big stone monument in New London's Cedar Grove Cemetery, where he is buried.

As long as Kushner was going to change important facts, one wonders why he didn't just go big and write, for instance, that the South won or that Lincoln lived to a ripe old age.

This is the opinion of David Collins
The Oscar for Best Fabrication

By Maureen Dowd
February 16, 2013

I SAW “Argo” with Jerry Rafshoon, who was a top aide to President Carter during the Iranian hostage crisis, when six Americans escaped and were given sanctuary for three months by courageous Canadian diplomats.

We were watching a scene where a C.I.A. guy can’t get through to Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s chief of staff, to sign off on plane tickets for the escaping hostages, so he pretends to be calling from the school where Jordan’s kids go.

“How Hamilton wasn’t married then and didn’t have any kids,” Jerry whispered, inflaming my pet peeve about filmmakers who make up facts in stories about real people to add “drama,” rather than just writing the real facts better. It makes viewers think that realism is just another style in art, so that no movie, no matter how realistic it looks, is believable.

The affable and talented Ben Affleck has admitted that his film’s climax, with Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers jumping in a jeep, chasing the plane down the runway and shooting at it, was fabricated for excitement.

Hollywood always wants it both ways, of course, but this Oscar season is rife with contenders who bank on the authenticity of their films until it’s challenged, and then fall back on the “Hey, it’s just a movie” defense.

“Zero Dark Thirty,” “based on firsthand accounts of actual events,” has been faulted for leaving the impression that torture was instrumental in the capture of Osama. It celebrates Jessica Chastain’s loner character, “Maya,” when it could have more accurately and theatrically highlighted “The Sisterhood,” a team of female C.I.A. analysts who were part of the long effort.

And then there’s the kerfuffle over “Lincoln,” which had three historical advisers but still managed to make some historical bloopers. Joe Courtney, a Democratic congressman from Connecticut, recently wrote to Steven Spielberg to complain that “Lincoln” falsely showed two of Connecticut’s House members voting “Nay” against the 13th Amendment for the abolition of slavery.

“They were trying to be meticulously accurate even down to recording the ticking of Abraham Lincoln’s actual pocket watch,” Courtney told me. “So why get a climactic scene so off base?”

Courtney is pushing for Spielberg to acknowledge the falsity in the DVD, a quest that takes on more urgency now that Spielberg has agreed to provide a DVD to every middle and high school that requests it.

Tony Kushner, the acclaimed playwright who wrote the screenplay, told me he was outraged that Courtney was getting his 15 minutes by complaining about a 15-second bit of film on a project that Kushner worked on for seven years.

The writer completely rejects the idea that he has defamed Connecticut, or the real lawmakers who voted “Aye.” He said that in historical movies, as opposed to history books where you go
for “a blow-by-blow account,” it is completely acceptable to “manipulate a small detail in the service of a greater historical truth. History doesn’t always organize itself according to the rules of drama. It’s ridiculous. It’s like saying that Lincoln didn’t have green socks, he had blue socks.”

He feels that if he had changed the margin of the vote, or made someone a villain who was not in real life, that would have been inappropriate. (He’s one-up on Shakespeare there.) But he wants “wiggle room” on some things.

Spielberg’s production people called the National Archives in 2011 to get a copy of the original voting roll and to plumb deeply into the details of the vote on one of America’s most searing moral battles, even asking whether the vote was recorded in a bound volume or on loose ledger forms. That roll shows that the first two votes cast were “Nays” by Democratic congressmen from Illinois, Lincoln’s own state. Wasn’t that enough to show the tension?

Kushner explained that in his original script he thought, as in the musical “1776” or the Continental Congress or conventions, the lawmakers voted by state, so Connecticut would have been one of the first Union states to vote.

Harold Holzer, a Lincoln historian attached to the film, pointed out the mistake to Spielberg and Kushner, telling them that voting in those days was done alphabetically by lawmaker. But Kushner said the director left the scene unchanged because it gave the audience “place holders,” and it was “a rhythmic device” that was easier to follow than “a sea of names.” They gave fake names to the Connecticut legislators, who were, he said, “not significant players.”

Yet The Wall Street Journal noted, “The actual Connecticut representatives at the time braved political attacks and personal hardships to support the 13th Amendment.” One, the New London Republican Augustus Brandegee, was a respected abolitionist and a friend of Lincoln. The other, the New Haven Democrat James English, considered slavery “a monstrous injustice” and left his ill wife to vote. When he said “Aye,” applause began and the tide turned.

I’m a princess-and-the-pea on this issue, but I think Spielberg should refilm the scene or dub in “Illinois” for “Connecticut” before he sends out his DVDs and leaves students everywhere thinking the Nutmeg State is nutty.

Kushner says that won’t happen, because this is a “made-up issue” and a matter of “principle.” But as Congressman Courtney notes: “It was Lincoln who said. ‘Truth is generally the best vindication against slander.”
Congressman Says ‘Lincoln’ Got Connecticut’s Slavery Vote Wrong

By Lyneka Little
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Rep. Joe Courtney of Connecticut says a key part of “Lincoln” is wrong and he wants the film fixed. The film shows two of three lawmakers from his state voting against the 13th Amendment, the landmark measure that prohibited slavery in the U.S.; but Courtney says that according to the Congressional Record, all four representatives from his state actually voted in favor of the 13th amendment (This is confirmed by historical records from the time).

“I could not believe my own eyes and ears,” Courtney wrote in a letter to “Lincoln” director Steven Spielberg. “How could Congressmen from Connecticut—a state that supported President Lincoln and lost thousands of her sons fighting against slavery on the Union side of the civil war—have been on the wrong side of history?”

The congressman goes on to call accuracy “paramount,” and asks that Spielberg acknowledge and correct the inaccuracies before “Lincoln” is released on DVD. A representative for “Lincoln” didn’t return a request for comment.

Speakeasy found in a check of the historical record that one of Connecticut’s representatives at the time, Augustus Brandegee of New London, was a fierce abolitionist, and according to an obituary in the Connecticut State Library database “He zealously supported the anti-slavery movement when its supporters met contumely and contempt.”

Another, James English of New Haven, considered slavery “a monstrous injustice” and left his sick wife to vote for the 13th amendment. “I suppose I am politically ruined, but that day was the happiest day of my life,” English said afterwards.

A third Connecticut representative, Henry Deming of Colchester, once railed against “the infamy of buying, selling and owning human beings.”

And the fourth, John Henry Hubbard of Salisbury, not only voted for the 13th amendment, he also supported funds to help freed slaves after the war saying “from the beginning to the present time they have been robbed of their wages, to say nothing of the scourgings they have received.”