

The Life of Abraham Lincoln

“The Short and Simple Annals of the Poor”

“He was Born in Kentucky, Raised in Indiana and Lived in Illinois”

Abraham Lincoln’s early years were marked by hardship on the American frontier. He was born in 1809 into a world of subsistence farming. His father, Tom Lincoln, struggled to carve out a living for his family in the dense forests of Kentucky. Confused land titles and Kentucky’s status as a slave state drove the Lincolns to seek a new home in Indiana territory across the Ohio River just prior to the territory becoming a state in 1816. There, on Pigeon Creek, near the community of Gentryville, Tom Lincoln constructed a crude three-sided shelter until a small one-room cabin could be completed. Young Abraham had an axe placed in his hands at an early age to help his father clear fields for planting.

In 1818, tragedy struck the household when Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, became ill with “milk-sick” fever and died. Also called “the trembles,” the disease was transmitted from the milk of cows that had eaten snake root. It produced agonizing gastrointestinal distress before the victims usually lapsed into a coma.

Tom Lincoln remarried in 1819. Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three small children, brought order and harmony to the dirty unkempt cabin in the wilderness. Sarah Lincoln encouraged young Abe’s interest in reading and learning. The illiterate Tom, however, criticized young Lincoln for wasting time with such activity. It was not unusual for Tom Lincoln to strike Abe a blow when he felt the boy’s preoccupation with books or joke telling distracted him from the hard work of farm life. Lincoln did attend so-called “blab schools” during this time and received, all told, about a year of formal education.

In 1828, Lincoln’s sister, Sarah, died in childbirth. A year later an outbreak of milk-sick fever again ravaged southern Indiana. Lincoln’s cousin, John Hanks, who had lived with the family for a time, sent reports from Illinois of the abundance of available land untainted by the fever. Tom Lincoln disposed of his holdings in Indiana and, in early 1830, the clan of Lincoln-Hanks-Hall families packed their meager belongings on ox carts and journeyed to Macon County, Illinois near the farm of John Hanks’ father. There, John and Abe worked splitting fence rails, clearing the land and doing odd jobs for nearby neighbors. The hard winter of 1830-1831 made Tom Lincoln question his decision to come to Illinois, but friends and family convinced him to settle in nearby Coles County. Tom and Sarah Lincoln lived out the remainder of their lives.

Lincoln left his father’s home in the spring of 1831. He, John Hanks and stepbrother John D. Johnston were hired by Denton Offutt to take a flatboat of goods down-river to New Orleans. He saw New Salem, Illinois for the first time when their craft became wedged on a milldam on the Sangamon River near the village. He returned to the town that July to work in Offutt’s store. In New Salem, Lincoln began his study of law and became active in the Whig Party, created in opposition to the policies of Andrew Jackson, and he represented New Salem for four terms in the Illinois legislature. He also met, and some believe wooed, attractive Ann Rutledge. Friends remembered a tortured and heartbroken Lincoln when the young woman died in August 1835.

He remained in New Salem until 1837, when he moved to Springfield as an attorney. In Springfield, he continued his support of Whigs running for national office. In 1840, 1844, 1848, and 1852, Lincoln ran as an elector for Whig presidential candidates. In 1847, he was elected to the United States Congress on the Whig ticket. He served one term. Retiring from active politics, Lincoln concentrated on his legal practice where one of his biggest clients was the Illinois Central Railroad. In 1854, he re-entered the political arena after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted slavery in new territories by popular vote. The controversy over slavery led to the birth of the new Republican Party. Lincoln lost his bid for the U.S. Senate in 1854 and again in 1858 - this time as a Republican. The great debates of 1858 against Democrat Stephen Douglas helped establish Lincoln as a national political figure and set the stage for his emergence in 1860 as a presidential candidate.

Lincoln's personal journey from 1830 to 1860 was one of radical change. He was raised on a frontier largely populated by Jacksonian Democrats and Separate Baptists but came to reject the ideologies of his youth. He became a religious maverick and adhered to the political ideals of those whose background often differed from his own. In this age of the "common man," Lincoln grew into a figure who was most uncommon.

And The War Came

Regional differences that had been growing since the founding of the American republic reached the boiling point as a result of the presidential election of 1860. Divided over the issue of expanding slavery, the Democrats split into two factions led by Vice President John C. Breckinridge and Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas. A third candidate, former Whig John C. Bell of Tennessee, formed a new party - the Constitutional Unionists - in an attempt to appeal to border state moderates.

Against this background, the Republicans held their nominating convention in Chicago to select their candidate. In order to improve upon John C. Fremont's showing in the 1856 election, the Republicans decided to broaden their appeal by reducing their strident rhetoric on slavery and advocating proposals such as protective tariffs, a homestead act, and a transcontinental railroad that would appeal to voters in the crucial Midwest swing states. To the surprise of many, Abraham Lincoln secured the nomination on the convention's third ballot.

When the votes were tabulated in November, Lincoln was an overwhelming winner in the Electoral College, despite having received only 39% of the popular vote. To Southerners, the thought of a Lincoln presidency was anathema. His party, derided as the "black Republicans," was on the ballot in only one southern state.

Concerned that Abraham Lincoln's firm opposition to the extension of slavery would ultimately doom their "peculiar institution," seven southern states seceded in the months following his election. Opinion in the North was divided during this crisis. Many felt the South should be allowed to depart in peace. The Confederate firing on Ft. Sumter in April 1861 ended the debate. Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the rebellion. A conflict ensued that would become the most sanguinary war in American history.

In the days following the bloodless bombardment and surrender of Ft. Sumter, Lincoln grew increasingly concerned about the vulnerability of Washington, D.C. to rebel attack. The nation's capital needed troops, as the city's garrison consisted of only 1,000 U.S. Army regulars and 1,500 militiamen, many of whom were suspected to be Confederate sympathizers. Worse still, the slave holding state of Maryland, whose citizens were also sympathetic to the South, surrounded Washington. Lincoln appealed to Northern governors for the immediate dispatch of troops to defend the capital.

Among the first to respond were the 800 men of the 6th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, which had been raised in January on the assumption that the secession crisis would lead inevitably to war. One of the regiment's company commanders was Captain Benjamin Franklin Watson, a young lawyer who owned a Democratic newspaper in Lawrence, Massachusetts. A loyal Democrat, Watson had also been appointed postmaster for Lawrence by Presidents Pierce and Buchanan.

Watson and the 6th Massachusetts would be sent by rail from Boston to D.C. Unfortunately, it was impossible to transit through Baltimore by rail. Passengers had to disembark the trains and travel through the city on foot or in horse drawn cars to another train station, which connected to Washington.

On the morning of April 19th, the 800 men of the 6th Massachusetts arrived in Baltimore. A rock-throwing mob of 7,000 secessionists and street thugs known as plug-uglies attempted to block their path through the city. After a pistol-shot rang out, Captain Watson and other officers ordered their men to open fire on the crowd. When the smoke cleared, three soldiers and fourteen civilians were dead. Scores more had been injured. The survivors reached the White House that night where a relieved President greeted them and said, "Thank God you have come."

Additional troops were forced to avoid Baltimore by traveling by ship to Annapolis and then railing to D.C. In early May, Capt. Watson and the 6th Massachusetts returned to Maryland to take control of the railroads. A massive Union show of force in Baltimore cowed the secessionists and plug-uglies into submission.

In August, Watson's 90-day term of enlistment expired. Upon returning to Lawrence, he discovered that local Republicans had taken advantage of his absence by getting one of their own men installed as postmaster. Watson contacted Lincoln, who responded that he might have signed the appointment of Watson's replacement unknowingly. He promised to take up the matter with the Postmaster General. Eventually, Watson would be summoned to the White House for a personal meeting with Lincoln. According to Watson, Lincoln was mortified by his role in causing Watson to lose the postmaster position, especially since Watson had been willing to risk his life to come to Lincoln's personal defense. Lincoln insisted that Watson accept a more lucrative and responsible position as Army Paymaster for Gen. Benjamin Butler's Department of the Gulf. Watson would serve honorably until ill-health forced his resignation in October 1864. As Watson editorialized in his newspaper, "Place and patronage are sweet but the dear country and the flag have far superior claims."

The Fiery Trial

With little military background, Abraham Lincoln was charged with directing a nation at war. Among the most important tasks he faced was raising troops and selecting leaders for the military. Thousands of men answered Lincoln's call for volunteers. Many desired special appointments and were not shy about dropping names to advance their case. For political reasons, Lincoln was forced to select Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania for the important position of Secretary of War. Cameron's corruption and inefficiency would hamper the Union war effort until he was replaced in December 1861.

The Union defeat at Bull Run signaled that the war was going to be a long one. Lincoln selected 35 year-old General George B. McClellan to command the Union armies. It proved to be an unfortunate choice. Although an organizational genius, he was an inept battlefield commander. The war was now deep into its second year, with no end in sight. Lincoln became convinced that radical measures, such as emancipation and conscription, would be necessary to secure final victory.

Well Poised Bayonet

When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln faced a firestorm of criticism for transforming the Civil War from a fight for union into a crusade to end American slavery. Dissension over Lincoln's decision even pervaded his home state of Illinois, where the Democratic-controlled legislature openly challenged the president. Citing a special clause in the state constitution, Illinois Governor Richard Yates, for the first time in state history, suspended the legislature and governed the state alone. Democrats held rallies denouncing Lincoln and the Proclamation. To show their support for the administration, state Republicans planned their own rally in September 1863. Former Springfield, Illinois mayor and Lincoln ally, James Conkling, wrote Lincoln of their intent to "make the most imposing demonstration" ever held in that part of the country. He urged Lincoln to attend if he could "break away from the pressure of public duties." Although unable to comply, Lincoln answered with a public letter addressing slavery, emancipation and the critics of his policies. He wrote Conkling that he had only one suggestion—"read it very slowly." This letter stands as one of Lincoln's most eloquent statements on emancipation and is a forceful and ardent defense of the use of black soldiers in the struggle to save the Union.

On the same day that Lincoln penned the letter to Conkling, he received a telegram from Ben Field, a New York state Republican organizer, requesting a copy of the Springfield letter to be read at a mass convention in Syracuse, New York on the same day as Springfield's rally. Both letters were presented to the assembled Union faithful on September 3, 1863 in the two respective cities.

The original letter sent to Field, including the requested copy of the Conkling letter, was donated to the Lincoln Memorial Shrine by Ben Field's nephew, Kirke Hart Field. A lawyer and a leading figure in the development of Redlands, Kirke Hart Field was also a key member of the Board of Trustees of A.K. Smiley Public Library at the time of his death in 1936.

“To Bind Up the Nation’s Wounds”

Union victories at Atlanta, Mobile Bay and the Shenandoah Valley dealt severe blows to the Confederate cause in the second half of 1864. These triumphs, in turn, helped assure Lincoln’s re-election in November.

At least 626,000 American soldiers had died. Another half-million had been wounded. Large portions of the rebelling Southern states had been devastated by the fighting and the nation’s economic infrastructure had been severely damaged. With Union victory in sight, Lincoln took stock of the horrendous cost of four years of civil war. His message to the nation was one of reconciliation and compassion. The words of Lincoln’s second inaugural address have become part of his legacy and reveal his hope for the healing of America:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Loss was not just relegated to the battlefield. Lincoln’s own home was touched by tragedy with the death of his beloved 11 year old son, Willie, and the subsequent emotional decline of his wife, Mary.

“We Cannot Escape History”

The surrender of Robert E. Lee’s main Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865 set off a great rejoicing throughout the North. The end of the war was at hand when, on April 14th, the nation’s victorious commander-in-chief was cut down by racist Southern sympathizer, John Wilkes Booth. The mood of national euphoria was quickly replaced with deep despair. Following his death, Lincoln was eulogized as America’s secular saint. Underappreciated in life, he was elevated almost beyond human recognition in death.

Nearly a century and a half later, Abraham Lincoln’s iconic status as, perhaps, the most revered of all Americans has the potential to overwhelm the importance of his actual words and deeds. In December 1862, during one of the darkest moments of an increasingly unpopular war, Lincoln presented Congress and the nation with a bold new course which he hoped would end the bloody conflict. In his summation, Lincoln posed a challenge: *“Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.”* For Lincoln and his generation, the trial was preserving the Union and ending slavery. Lincoln, in particular, bore a tremendous burden in order to ensure the survival of not only the nation, but also the ideals that created it. Other difficult challenges have been faced by succeeding generations. What country will we bequeath to future Americans? Abraham Lincoln’s message from that dark December still resonates. *“We — even here — hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free — honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of the earth.”*

Timeline of Important Dates / Family Members

IMPORTANT DATES

February 12, 1809	Born, Hardin (now Larue) County, Kentucky
1816	Moved from Kentucky to Indiana
March 1, 1830	Moved from Indiana to central Illinois
April – July, 1832	Served in Illinois Militia
August 1832	Unsuccessful candidate for Illinois House of Representatives
March 1, 1837	Admitted to the Bar
1834 – 1841	Served in the Illinois Legislature
November 4, 1842	Married Mary Todd in Springfield, Illinois
1847 – 1849	Sat in Congress as only Whig elected from Illinois
Early 1855	Unsuccessful candidate for Whig nomination for Illinois Senate seat
June 1856	Unsuccessful aspirant for the Republican Vice Presidential nomination
May 18, 1860	Nominated on the third ballot as the Republican Presidential candidate, Chicago, Illinois
November 6, 1860 (Constitutional of 303 electoral votes.	Elected President with 1,866,452 popular votes; Steven A. Douglas (Northern Democratic Party) had 1,376,957; John C. Breckenridge (Independent Democratic Party) had 849,781; John Bell (Union Party) had 588,879. Lincoln won 180
February 1861	Plot to assassinate President-elect Lincoln in Baltimore, MD
March 4, 1861	Inaugurated
April 12, 1861	Confederates fired on Ft. Sumter, South Carolina
September 22, 1862	Slaves proclaimed emancipated as of January 1, 1863
November 19, 1863	Delivered Gettysburg Address
June 7, 1864	Nominated on first ballot as Republican Presidential Candidate, Baltimore, MD
November 8, 1864	Re-elected President over General George B. McClellan.

Lincoln won 212 of 233 electoral votes.

April 14, 1865 Assassinated at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.
 April 15, 1865 Died at 7:22 AM
 May 4, 1865 Buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois

FAMILY MEMBERS

Father Thomas Lincoln (1778 – 1851) Born, Rockingham County, Virginia

Mother Nancy Hanks (1784- 1818) Born, Campbell County, Kentucky;
 Married Tom Lincoln, 1806

Step-mother Sara Bush Johnston (1788 – 1869) Born, Hardin County, Kentucky;
 Married Tom Lincoln, 1819

Wife Mary Todd (1818 – 1882) Born, Lexington, Kentucky

Son Robert Todd Lincoln (1843 – 1926) Born, Springfield, Illinois
 Served as Secretary of War under Presidents James Garfield and Chester
 of A Arthur; was minister to Great Britain in 1889; served as president
 the Pullman Company from 1897 to 1911.

Son Edward (Eddie) Baker Lincoln (1846 – 1850) Born, Springfield, Illinois

Son William (Willie) Wallace Lincoln (1850 – 1862) Born, Springfield,
 Illinois

Son Thomas (Tad) Lincoln (1853 – 1871) Born, Springfield, Illinois