



# Lincoln Lore

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## The Influence of Riley's Narrative upon Abraham Lincoln

Editor's Note: This article with notes was first published in the Indiana Magazine of History, June, 1934, XXX, No. 2, pages 133-138. Later that year 100 attractive reprints in green cover stock were issued for further distribution. Due to a number of inquiries received within the last few months relative to Riley's Narrative, it is thought appropriate to republish the article without notes and with certain changes in the text, in this issue of Lincoln Lore. The article is republished with the permission of the Editor of the Indiana Magazine of History.  
R. G. M.

Of all the books that Lincoln read during his youth there is none more interesting and entertaining than Captain James Riley's *Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce*. This book, although extensively read during Lincoln's time, is today out of print and not available to the modern reader. Lincoln received from this book many ideas regarding slavery. He also found the book instructive and educational.

Much has been written concerning some of the books which Abraham Lincoln read, and their influence upon his subsequent career. The classics, text books, and patriotic works listed as having been read by him have received considerable attention. Little, however, has been written about the books which do not fall under the above classifications, despite the fact that some of these forgotten volumes exerted a tremendous influence upon his mental development. There were at best few books in southern Indiana during Lincoln's residence in that state, but there is a tradition that he read most of the books within a fifty mile radius of his home. Due to the fact that Lincoln spent less than a year in school, under five different schoolmasters, it is an interesting endeavor to determine the influence of certain books in his struggle for an education.

In recent years a great deal of interest has been shown in the compilation of books which Lincoln read. Historians and students have been able to make up a list of approximately two hundred titles, mentioned either by Lincoln in his letters and speeches, or by authors in numerous Lincoln biographies. A list of books that Lincoln read constitutes the principal background of his formal education.

In Lincoln's day Riley's *Narrative* was a standard work, and is said to have been so popular in southwestern Indiana during the period of his residence there, that it constituted an entire library in many pioneer homes. The first edition of the book was published in 1817, and with the sale of many other editions, over a million copies were distributed in a short period of years. Probably no other book published in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century attained so extensive a circulation in so short a time as did the *Narrative*.

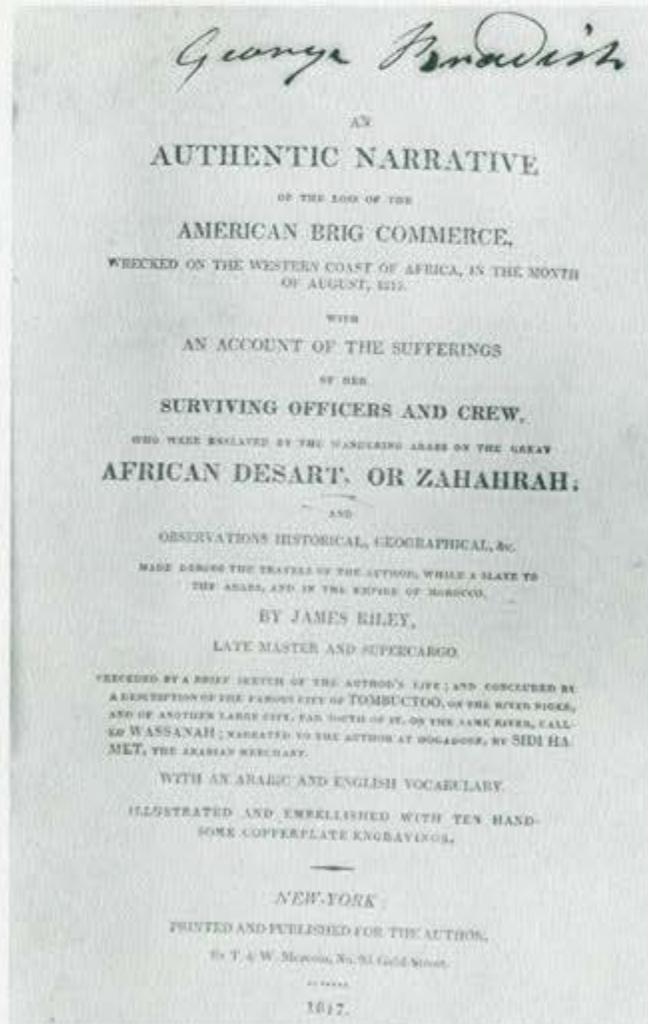
John Locke Scripps, in his campaign biography entitled *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, gave the following information concerning the books which Lincoln read as a youth:

"Abraham's first book, after Dilworth's Spelling-Book, was, as has been stated, the Bible. Next to that came Aesop's Fables, which he read with great zest, and so often as to commit the whole to memory. After that he obtained a copy of Pilgrim's Progress — a book which, perhaps, has quickened as many dormant intellects and started into vigorous growth the religious element of as many natures, as any other in the English language. Then came the *Life of Franklin*, *Weems' Washington*, and *Riley's Narrative*."

The identical copy that Lincoln read is not extant, and the imprint of the book is not known. It is assumed, however, that Lincoln read the *Narrative* while a youth in Indiana. Due to the proximity of southern Indiana to Kentucky, it is thought that the majority of the books in this newly settled territory were brought from Kentucky. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kentucky was the cultural background of the territory west of the

Alleghenies, with Lexington as its center. There is a slight probability that Lincoln's copy of the *Narrative* may have borne a Lexington, Kentucky, imprint of the 1823 edition.

This book is said to have made a striking and permanent impression on the minds of the early American



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation  
Title page of Riley's Narrative (1817 Edition)

youths who read it, and it is easy to believe that the youthful Lincoln found it both interesting and entertaining. The modern reader would likely find the book interesting, due to its quaint style, should he have the patience to peruse its very fine print. The *Narrative* undoubtedly left an indelible impression on Lincoln's mind in regard to the moral wrongs of slavery.

The unusually interesting title page of Riley's *Narrative* (1823 edition) in short gives a brief synopsis of the book:

"An Authentic Narrative Of The Loss Of The American Brig Commerce Wrecked On The Western Coast of Africa In The Month Of August 1815 With An Account Of The Sufferings Of Her Surviving Officers And Crew Who Were Enslaved By The Wandering Arabs Of The Great African Desert Or Zahahrah And Observations, Historical, Geographical, Made During The Travels Of The Author, While A Slave To The Arabs, And In The Empire Of Morocco By James Riley Late Master And Supercargo Illustrated and Embellished With Eight Engravings Lexington, Kentucky Published For The Author William Gibbes Hunt Printer 1823."

From this outline, it is easy to see that such a narrative would appeal to the American pioneer. Africa was a continent of which little was known, and the Arabs, no doubt, proved to be a topic of never-ending conversation among those who read the book.

In his book, Captain James Riley gives a true account of his adventures, enslavement and travels in Africa. The *Narrative* begins with the wrecking of the brig *Commerce* in August 1815 on the western coast of Africa. The crew with all the officers was seized by a company of nomadic Moroccan Arabs, who stripped them of their clothing and carried them into the interior of the "Desert of Zahahrah." From this same continent, American and English ships were bringing black slaves to America. This reversal of the process of enslaving men must have brought to the minds of many white men the ignominy of being a slave.

The misery suffered by the victims while on the desert is described in sordid detail, and Captain Riley very vividly relates how he and his unfortunate companions were sold as slaves to Arab merchants. The book is filled with anti-slavery sentiment, not from the political aspect, but from the moral side of the question. It is likely that Lincoln was especially impressed with the paragraph which depicts the slave market as follows:

"They next found fault with my shins, which had been very sore and they examined every bone to see if all was right in its place, with the same circumspection that a jockey would use who was about buying a horse."

During Lincoln's residence in Indiana, at age nineteen, he made a trip to New Orleans, and while there, he saw the slave markets. It is not known whether he read Riley's *Narrative* before or after his first New Orleans trip, but it is likely that the wrongs of Aryan slavery contrasted with Negro slavery were brought sharply to his mind after reading the book.

This true anti-slavery sentiment set forth by Riley was not propaganda, because his book was written before slavery had reached its critical aspect in American politics. This story undoubtedly convinced Lincoln of the unmistakable wrong inherent in the enslavement of one man by another. The environment of Lincoln's life had always been anti-slavery. The community in which he was born in Kentucky staged one of the most bitter and consistent controversies over slavery in American history. When the Lincolns moved to Indiana the anti-slavery atmosphere continued to be ever present in Lincoln's life. No doubt on many occasions Lincoln listened to slavery arguments, but it is likely that the deciding force which caused him to form definite conclusions regarding the subject, came from newspapers, periodicals, and books. Riley's *Narrative* was without a doubt one of the greatest forces in developing Lincoln's unfavorable reaction to slavery.

Captain Riley continued his narrative regarding his enslavement after being sold to a cruel slave master:

"After some time bartering about me, I was given to an old man whose features showed every sign of



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

#### Captain James Riley

A copy of an engraving which appears as a frontispiece in Riley's *Narrative* (1817 Edition).

the deepest rooted malignity in his disposition. And this is my master? Thought I; Great God; defend me from his cruelty."

The slave master proved to be as cruel as Riley anticipated, and there must have been few cases in American slavery where the institution existed in a more severe form than in the "Empire of Morocco."

Many thrilling and exciting events occurred as the *Narrative* continues. In time a few members of the crew were able to reach civilization. After the release of Captain Riley he traveled extensively in Africa, recording geographical observations and describing the customs, manners and dress of the inhabitants. It is a reasonable conclusion that his *Narrative* proved especially instructive to Lincoln because of the advice given seamen regarding the technicalities of navigation, a phase of study which always interested him.

In one of the last chapters of the *Narrative*, Captain Riley describes a primitive Arabian plow and the crude methods of cultivation. No doubt this fact fascinated Lincoln, who was mechanically minded. Probably, Lincoln had an Arabian plow in mind, as contrasted with the little-improved pioneer American plow, when he spoke before the Wisconsin State Fair on September 30, 1859:

"Our thanks, and something more substantial than thanks are due every man engaged in the efforts to produce a successful steam plow."

When Captain Riley arrived in America, he was naturally an opponent of slavery. In concluding his book he devoted the last few pages to a discussion of the American slave and the ill-effects of slavery. At this early date considerable attention was being given to this subject in some sections of the United States.

He had the following to say concerning American slavery:

"Strange as it must appear to the philanthropist, my proud-spirited and free countrymen still hold a million and a half, nearly, of the human species, in the most cruel bonds of slavery, many of whom are kept at hard labor and smarting under the savage lash of inhuman mercenary drivers, and in many instances enduring besides the miseries of hunger, thirst, imprisonment, cold, nakedness, and even tortures."

Riley was one of the first American abolitionists, and his anti-slavery sentiment reached more than a million readers. The author's appeal for help in abolishing slavery follows:

"I will exert all my remaining faculties in endeavors to redeem the enslaved and to shiver in pieces the rod of oppression; and I trust I shall be aided in that holy work by every good and every pious, free, and high-minded citizen in the community, and by the friends of mankind throughout the civilized world."

Much has been written concerning slavery. During the period of American history when it was the paramount issue, thousands of tracts, books, and magazines were published either for or against the institution. The fact that Abraham Lincoln, the emancipator, read Riley's *Narrative* places this early book among the most important ever published on the subject.

### Edward Duffield Neill Lincoln's Secretary

The average student of Abraham Lincoln's administration knows that the President had two private secretaries named John G. Nicolay and John Hay. Perhaps some readers were a little startled in 1955 by the book titled *Lincoln's Third Secretary*. This work contains "The Memoirs of William O. Stoddard," who was certainly a bona fide secretary to the President. In reality, Lincoln had a total of five secretaries, the other two being Edward Duffield Neill and Gustave E. Matile. (This fifth secretary was mentioned and discussed at some length in *Lincoln Lore*, Number 1457, July, 1959.) This might also be the appropriate time and place to state that Lincoln did not have a secretary named Kennedy.

Few Lincoln students know that a 131 page biography of Neill was published by the Macalester College Press of Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1949. The biography by Huntley Dupre is titled *Edward Duffield Neill: Pioneer Educator*. Undoubtedly, Neill's greatest claim to fame is that of a pioneer educator and as the founder of Macalester College. Scholar that he was, he also made many contributions to the study of Minnesota and United States history.

During the early months of the Civil War, Neill was appointed chaplain of the First Minnesota Infantry. On June 21, 1860 the regiment embarked from Fort Snelling for the East, and Neill served with the Minnesota soldiers at the Battles of Bull Run, Fair Oaks and Malvern Hill. He terminated his services as chaplain of the First Minnesota on July 7, 1862, and received the appointment of chaplain of the army hospitals in Philadelphia on July 26, 1862.

While Neill was serving his country as a Presbyterian army chaplain, Lincoln had an occasion to borrow from the Library of Congress one of his books titled *The History Of Minnesota: from the Earliest French Explorers to the Present Time*, published in Philadelphia in 1858. Whether Lincoln read this book or just used it for reference is not known.

During the period that Neill served as a chaplain, he became well acquainted with the President, and on several occasions conferred directly with him about matters pertaining to the war. Apparently, Neill moved in influential circles in Washington and was a confidant of Lincoln and other high officials in the government.

In February, 1864, Neill became one of Lincoln's secretaries, to assist in answering the mail, under the direction of Nicolay and Hay. His official appointment was dated August 23, 1864. Before securing his new position he was rated as a second clerk in the Department of the Interior.

Helen Nicolay, in her book *Lincoln's Secretary A Biography of John G. Nicolay*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1949, gave some additional information as to Lincoln's secretaries in general and as to why Neill was employed: "When, after some months, Mr. Stoddard was incapacitated by illness, my father asked that Edward D. Neale (*sic*) of Minnesota be appointed in his place, and that Charles H. Philbrick of Illinois, an old-time friend, be made a second class clerk in the Department of the Interior and assigned to duty at the White House. This accounts for the number of individuals whose



Photograph from the Minnesota Historical Society

Edward Duffield Neill  
1823-1893

From a Daguerreotype taken in 1861

families claim, quite innocently, that they were 'private secretary to President Lincoln.' Legally and officially my father was the only one. John Hay was known as his assistant."

As Neill worked in the offices of the White House, he came to have a very favorable impression of the President. He wrote: "Every month my impression of the greatness of President Lincoln increased. He was above a life of mere routine. In his bearing there was nothing artificial or mechanical . . . In conversation I never knew him to speak of himself as President . . . He was independent of all cliques. Willing to be convinced, with a wonderful patience he listened to the opinions and criticisms of others . . . When once opinion was deliberately formed, he was as firm as a rock. The President's capacity for work was wonderful."

On June 16, 1864 President Lincoln and his party attended the Great Central Fair in Philadelphia in aid of the U. S. Sanitary Commission. After his return to Washington, Neill had an occasion to pay Lincoln another visit:

"I found him stretched out, his head on the back of one chair, his legs resting on another, his collar and cravat on the table, a mulatto barber lathering his face, while his Attorney General, Edward Bates, was quietly seated by his side, talking to him upon some matter of state . . . To the question whether his visit was pleasant, he replied that it was, and the ladies, he believed, had made several thousand dollars by placing him on exhibition."

Neill made other comments about Lincoln, namely: "His memory was very retentive . . . As a writer he was fluent and forcible . . . He composed letters amid distractions which would have appalled other men . . . President Lincoln's accessibility won the hearts of the people."

Lincoln was re-elected to the Presidency on November 8, 1864, and on the following morning Neill recorded this episode: "As I passed the door of his office, which was ajar, I saw that he was at his table and engaged in

official work. Entering the room, I took a seat by his side, extending my hand and congratulated him upon the vote, for my country's sake, and for his own sake. Turning away from the papers which had been occupying his attention he spoke kindly of his competitor."

Neill's last interview with Lincoln "was between three and four o'clock of the last day of his life." After Lincoln's assassination and death, Neill continued his services at the White House under President Andrew Johnson. His work was largely the signing of land patents and he resigned on April 25, 1867 to become the chief clerk in the Department of Education, which had just recently been created.

Evidence of Neill's Work as a presidential secretary is to be found in volumes VII and VIII of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. There are a total of ten references to Neill where messages and telegrams, signed by Lincoln, appear in his handwriting. On February 9, 1865 Lincoln suspended the execution of Private James L. Hycks (Hicks), 67 Pa Vols. The telegram was sent to Brigadier General George W. Getty. In order that the telegram might be sent promptly, Edw. D. Neill wrote Major Eckert that "The President requests that you will send the above. The man was to have been executed on 10th inst." Neill signed his name as "Sec: to Pres: U.S. etc."

Today at Macalester College a number of Lincoln's letters, a lock of the President's hair and other memorabilia are exhibited, emphasizing the close connection between the founder of that educational institution and the Sixteenth President.

## Hurrah for Lincoln

R. Bunyan of Batavia (Kane County), Illinois wrote a letter to Samuel P. Williams\*, a prominent Indiana merchant, politician and banker, on November 9, 1860. This was just three days after the presidential election, and Bunyan was exuberant over the results of the balloting. A portion of this letter, a gift to the Foundation by Mrs. Fred Deal, 203 West Central Avenue, La Grange, Indiana, follows:

"Hurrah for Lincoln! This is the salutation of every one you meet. Hurrah for Lincoln is the joyful greeting at every step you take through the village. Hurrah for Lincoln is vorciferated by every urchin in the streets. Hurrah for Lincoln forms the loud chorus of a band of 150 Wide Awakes, and half the Republicans are hoarse with shouting Hurrah for Lincoln

"When the cars came in on Wednesday forenoon, more than 50 republicans were at the Depot, and about as many papers snatched from the newsboys, were eagerly glanced over when with one accord, such cheers burst forth, as would have made Old Abe's heart glad if he could have heard them, for some minutes, nothing was to be seen but waving of papers and hats, and dozens of hats in the air as high as they could be thrown, and nothing could be heard but 'Hurrah for Lincoln' In the evening thy burnt up all the fire balls, powder etc. they could get, and next morning sent in to Chicago for fireworks, but in the evening it rained, and is raining still but some of them are out rejoicing. They appear almost wild with excitement, leaping and yelling, like madmen. Perhaps I feel as happy as any of them, but don't make quite as much noise, but when I meet a friend, pass the usual salutation. 'Hurrah for Lincoln.' This little town gave Lincoln 94 majority out of 411 votes, 7 for Breck, and 2 for Bell. There — in spite of the rain I hear the cannon, Well — let us all rejoice that the reign of the slaveholders is at an end, and we are once more free and independent. I much fear Abe will have a hard row to hoe, or a tough log to split, with both houses of congress against him."

\*Samuel P. Williams was a native of Lebanon, Connecticut, a son of Solomon and Martha (Baker) Williams, both of English descent. He was born in 1815, and received a fair education. At the age of seventeen, he was in White Pigeon, Michigan, where for four years he engaged in mercantile pursuits. He then came to Lima (Howe) where he conducted the largest general store in the area. He soon purchased 160 acres of land and owned a branch store at McDonough, Illinois. He possessed great business ability and owned large banking interests in several towns in Indiana and Michigan. Williams was at the treaty of Fort Dearborn (Chicago) in 1833, a delegate to the River and Harbor Convention at Chicago in 1847, served in the lower House of the Indiana State Legislature in 1857, and served

as a delegate to two Republican National Conventions. He contributed largely toward building the Grand Rapids Railroad, assisting in organizing the first bank in the county, and conducted a female seminary at Lima, and dealt largely in real estate. He was a trustee or contributor to Wabash College.

## Tad's Kid Goat and the Joke on Old Abe

Editor's Note: Mr. Terry L. Frohriep, 117 South Johnson Street, Garrett, Indiana, has a collection of Civil War letters written by his distant relative, Frank M. Potter, 122 New York Regiment, Army of the Potomac. Potter had been wounded in the hand in the Battle of the Wilderness, and he was placed in Ward 5 of the Columbian Hospital in Washington, D.C.

On July 22, 1864, Potter wrote to his father and among other things, he related the story about Tad and the kid goat, and thinking the story was interesting, he suggested that it be published in one of the Marshall, Michigan newspapers. It is not known whether or not this was done.

Mr. Frohriep has granted permission for the story to appear in Lincoln Lore. The letter has been copied as it was written, with no effort being made to improve the grammar, spelling and punctuation.

R. G. M.

"... it seems little Tad had a kid and he had ran away. well who ever got it sold it to a widow woman just below this hospt. for five dollars. One evening as Abe and Mrs. Lincoln and Tad were going up to the soldiers home Tad see his kid and had the team stoped and the driver was requested to get out and pick up the kid but when Cuffee went to pick up the kid he had a woman to deal with so the President said he was shure it was his kid well says the woman give me 6 dollars and you can have it he was not disposed to pay for his own goat so he drove on but it seemed Tad was bound to have his kid. for the next morn they stoped to banter the woman again but no go. she had paid 5 dollars for it and she must make a dollar on it if she let it go. Cuff got down again advanced up to the kid. the woman came out says she you dam . . . dont touch that kid. yes says he but it is the Presidents kid and he told me to get it. well says she I dont care for you or the President. if the President sees fit to give me 6 dollars for the kid he can have it. if not you keep your hands off from the kid. at night when Abe and Tad came back they stoped and the President gave the woman 6 dollars for his lost kid and Tad rode by with the kid in his arms and Tad in his fathers lap I think the joke was rather against old Abe that time to have to pay 6 dollars for his own kid

"Now as the above has made some fun here I thought it worth publishing as Abe is quite noted for his jokes you see here he got the joke on him and I propose to you to go and have it published in one of the Marshall papers if you think it worth while what I have related I know to be true part by personal observation and the rest from the woman herself. She keeps a fruit stand near here . . ."

## Just A Reminder!!

Still available, from the Lincoln National Life Foundation, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801, are copies of *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration: "A New Birth of Freedom"* by Dr. Louis A. Warren.

This book may be had in both the trade and *de luxe* editions, at \$5.95 or \$7.50 respectively. (10% discount for libraries and schools).

Following are a few excerpts from the many favorable reviews on this book:

"Masterly thorough analysis."

"Fascinating account of a significant address."

"In the top rank of all the Lincoln literature."

"Superb work, thrilling in its simplicity and clarity."

"Most complete discussion of the address that has thus far been made."

"Adds a great deal to our knowledge, and puts it all in a perspective, and all in one place."

"Captures the spirit of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg with a clear and forceful vitality."

"It certainly must be considered the definitive volume on Lincoln's address at Gettysburg."