



# Lincoln Lore

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## RATTLING LINCOLN'S BONES

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

Around the time of Lincoln's birthday anniversary each year, I tremble when I pick up my morning newspaper. The popular press, hungry for anniversary copy, sometimes runs strange stories, and 1991 proved as strange as any. The National Museum of Health and Medicine announced that it was considering a proposal to perform DNA analysis on fragments of Abraham Lincoln. In its curious collection of bones, diseased organs, and surgical kits lie some pieces of Lincoln's skull and strands of his hair — more than enough to allow science to investigate the sixteenth president's genetic make-up.

The proposal came not from idle curiosity but from a closely focused argument over Lincoln's health. This unfortunate controversy centers on the possibility that Lincoln may have suffered from a rare genetically transmitted disease called Marfan's Syndrome. If so, then John Wilkes Booth's bullet most likely cheated the Grim Reaper by only a few months.

The controversy is unfortunate because it leaves the public with the wrong impression about Lincoln and causes historical students to ask the wrong questions. Lincoln was not a sufferer from much of anything, and students should be thinking what



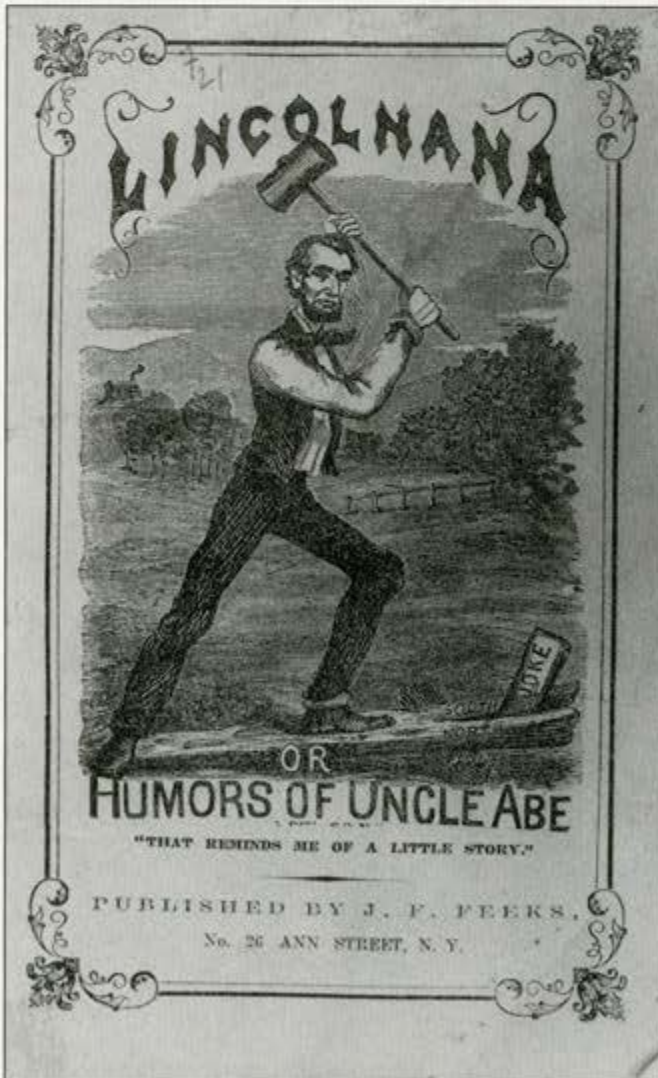
*From the Lincoln Museum*

FIGURE 1. Magazine illustrator Pruett Carter painted this sentimentalized version of Lincoln's hospital visit in 1937.

an edge his fabulous health gave him in the quest for success as politician and president.

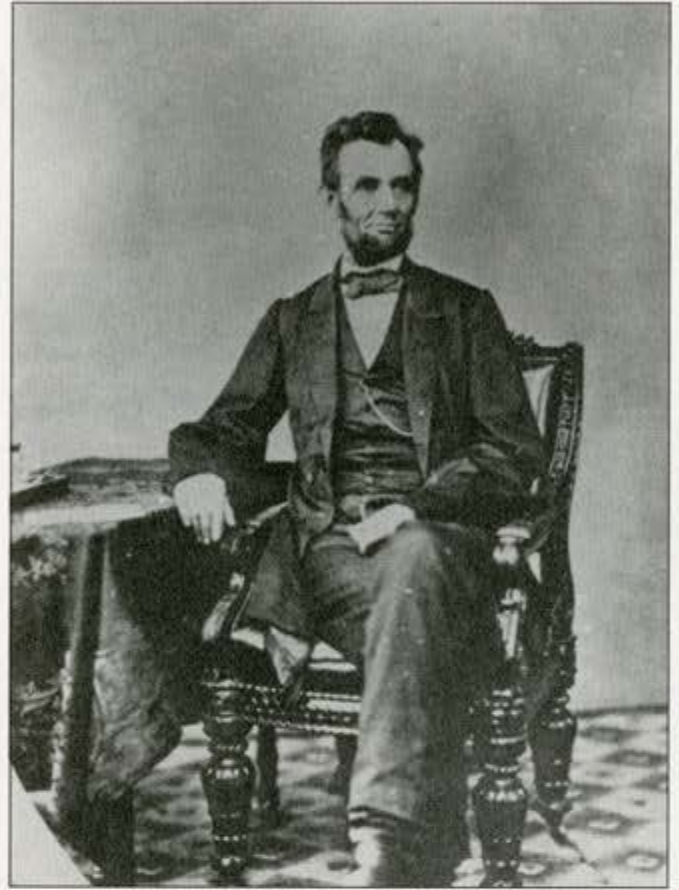
Of course the National Museum of Health and Medicine has trouble seeing Lincoln in such a way. Medical professionals tend to look at people as patients or potential corpses: they think in terms of what might be wrong with an organism. Merely working in the surroundings of that museum would predispose one to think in terms of the manifold hazards to life. Bones shattered by war injuries, photographs of monstrously restored limbs, artists' renderings of raw and painful wounds, and jars of disease-blackened internal organs hardly promote comfortable thoughts about the health environment of nineteenth-century soldiers and statesmen.

Visiting the museum (which I heartily recommend) will provide a healthy antidote to more conventional historical exhibits that glorify war. When I toured the place in January, the vivid reminders of the Civil War wounded brought to mind a story about one of President Lincoln's frequent visits to Washington military hospitals to cheer up the wounded U.S. soldiers. On this occasion, he was accompanied by a young woman. They went up to the cot of a wounded soldier, and she asked solicitously, "Where were you hit?" "At Antietam," the soldier replied. "But where did the bullet strike you?" she said. "At Antietam," he answered. "But where did it hit you?" she asked, "At Antietam," he replied yet again. At this point President Lincoln decided to intervene and he talked to the taciturn soldier while the young woman occupied herself elsewhere. After a few minutes Lincoln rejoined her and, taking both the woman's hands in his, said, "My



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 2. The source of the bawdy hospital-visit story.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 3. The president greeted all office-visitors in a business-like but pleasant manner.

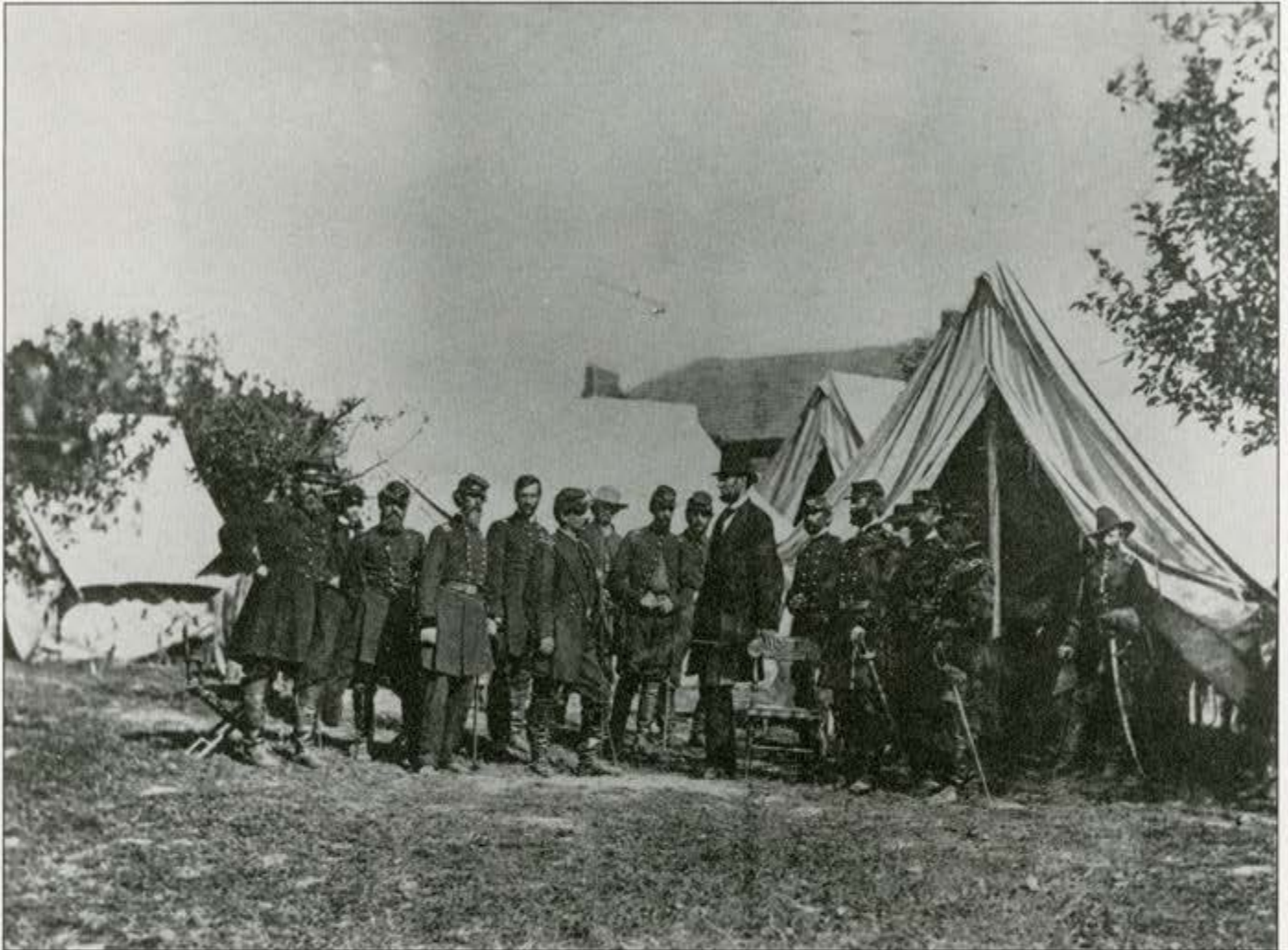
dear girl, the ball that hit *him*, would not have injured *you*."

The story is surely apocryphal, though it was attributed to Lincoln, in print, already in 1864. Its very existence suggests something of real interest today: Lincoln was the sort of man who could tell jokes in a charnel house. And this is a common-sense sign that, while he was president, Abraham Lincoln's mental health was sound. For the Civil War was a great charnel house indeed, causing the deaths of more Americans than World War I, World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam all put together. If that did not unstrung him, probably nothing would.

Lincoln perfectly understood the nature of war fought before the germ theory of disease. (Two Civil War soldiers died of disease for every one killed in combat.) As his private secretary William O. Stoddard described it, the atmosphere in Washington in general and the White House in particular was very gloomy after General Burnside's defeat at Fredericksburg in December 1862.

We lost fifty percent more men than did the enemy, and yet there is sense in the awful arithmetic propounded by Mr. Lincoln. He says that if the same battle were to be fought over again, every day, through a week of days, with the same relative results, the army under Lee would be wiped out to its last man, the Army of the Potomac would still be a mighty host, the war would be over, the Confederacy gone, and peace would be won at a smaller cost of life than it will be if the week of lost battles must be dragged out through yet another year of camps and marches, and of deaths in hospitals rather than upon the field. No general yet found can face the arithmetic, but the end of war will be at hand when he shall be discovered.... Mr. Lincoln is searching for him.

To such assets as stable mental health and a firm grasp of the realities of nineteenth-century medicine, President Lincoln could also add a robust physical constitution. He was a man of muscular strength fully commensurate with his legendary frontier rail-splitting past, he retained his marvellous physique to his death, and he enjoyed, from all appearances, excellent health that



*From the Lincoln Museum*

**FIGURE 4.** Lincoln towered over most other men of his era, and a gangly appearance is a common symptom of Marfan's Syndrome.

allowed him to have proper endurance for the grueling duties of a wartime head of state. Francis B. Carpenter, a portrait painter who lived in the White House for six months while he worked on a giant canvas celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation, recalled that Lincoln once went down to the Navy Yard to see some new inventions tried out. He spotted some axes hanging outside a shed and said, "Gentlemen, you may talk about your 'Raphael repeaters' and 'eleven-inch Dahlgrens', but *here* is an institution which I guess I understand better than either of you." He held the axe out at arm's length by the end of the handle — a feat no one else in the group could perform, though all tried.

Good health and a robust constitution allowed Lincoln to bear up under a grinding daily schedule, described with unparalleled vividness in Benjamin Thomas' biography of Lincoln. This description of Lincoln's office routine does little more than summarize Thomas'. Lincoln was not a good sleeper, so he rose early and was at work in his office by seven. At eight he ate an egg and drank a cup of coffee; he was, throughout his life, notoriously indifferent to food. He worked another hour and then had office hours from 10 to 1 on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays and 10 to noon on Tuesdays and Fridays, cutting the office hours short those two days to hold noontime cabinet meetings.

In these office hours Lincoln endured an endless parade of office seekers, women pleading for mercy for their sons and husbands, groups of religious fanatics come to pray with him, and politicians offering advice or making threats. Lincoln's White House staff consisted of four people, two private secretaries, who read every piece of incoming mail and screened every visitor, and a doorman on the first floor (a humorous Irishman named

Edward Moran) and another White House old-timer, Louis Bargdorf, on the second floor where Lincoln's office was. There was no one to whom to delegate work. Though wearing, the schedule rarely wore out Lincoln's patience, and through it all he kept up his legendary sense of good humor. When, for example, an officer in the Union Army, got into trouble for watching through a transom while a young woman undressed, Lincoln told his private secretary that the man should be elevated to the "peerage." When an office-seeker boasted in a letter of application that he was a direct descendant of John Randolph of Roanoke, Lincoln knew from Washington scuttlebutt that the squeaky-voiced Randolph was notoriously impotent. The president wrote in the letter, "A direct descendant of one who was never a father," and filed it.

At one on most days, Lincoln walked to the private apartments of the White House, *through* the corridor where all the people were waiting to see him in his office. On Mondays Lincoln skipped lunch and held a reception from one to two. Even when he ate lunch, all he had was a biscuit, fruit, and a glass of milk. He was a teetotaler and did not use tobacco. He went back to work in the afternoon. He coped with mountains of routine. For example, Lincoln reviewed 30,000 court martial sentences every year, sometimes in sessions of six straight hours of work. He answered letters by hand and drafted his own state papers. He wrote almost everything himself: he had no ghost writers and no spin doctors.

At four p.m. he usually took a carriage ride with his wife, but this often turned into a visit to local hospitals, hardly a relaxation for the commander in chief who ordered these young men

into battle. He ate at six and went back to his office to work — late. Mrs. Lincoln, who was not given to exaggerating her husband's long periods of separation from her, wrote, "I consider myself fortunate if at eleven o'clock, I once more find myself, in my pleasant room & very especially, if my tired & weary husband, is *there*, resting in the lounge to receive me — to chat over the occurrences of the day."

There were essentially no vacations — no Camp David, no Rancho Mirage, no Kennebunkport; there were no holidays to speak of — effectively or actually no Christmas, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Memorial Day, or Easter. On Christmas Day 1861 Lincoln held a four-hour cabinet meeting to solve the worst diplomatic crisis of the Civil War, the "Trent Affair." On Christmas Day 1862 he and Mrs. Lincoln visited hospitals all afternoon. On Christmas Day 1863 he worked on a long paper on the constitutionality of military conscription. On each New Year's day the Lincolns held an official open house at which the president shook so many hands he could not sign a bill afterward.

Through four years of this Lincoln was really sick only once; he fell ill with "varioid" on the train ride home after giving the Gettysburg Address and was mostly in bed for almost two weeks. The White House was half quarantined for three weeks.

Except for that, there were four straight years of work from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day.

Lincoln's good health is a little-known key to his success as a president, and it was a great advantage he held over Jefferson Davis, who suffered from pneumonia as a young man and complained of eye problems caused, he said, by snow blindness when stationed by the army in Wisconsin. In Louisiana he contracted malaria as a newlywed, and his first wife died from it. After her death, Davis recovered his physical health but lived in mysterious seclusion for ten lost years. He emerged, married a teenager half his age, and entered politics. He suffered amaurosis which greatly impaired the sight in one eye. He suffered from ear aches, inflamed red eyes (he stayed up writing until two or three many mornings), recurrent pneumonia, recurrent malarial fever, facial neuralgia, bad nerves, and virtually constant ill health. Despite all that, Davis outlived all his children but one and did not die until almost a quarter century after the Civil War.

In the index to the standard biography of Davis, 275 pages long, there are 13 page references to health. In one standard Lincoln biography, 522 pages long, "health" is not even an index entry.

Before the presidency, good health also gave Lincoln an advantage over his greatest political rival, Stephen A. Douglas. The Little Giant ended the famous 1858 campaign for Illinois' senate seat exhausted and voiceless and suffered painful symptoms of throat disease and rheumatism through the rest of his life (which ended prematurely in 1861). Douglas exacerbated his problems, no doubt, through heavy drinking and smoking.

Lincoln remained free of such habits, and he never went in for eccentric health fads. One thinks of other famous men from his era who had different views: John C. Calhoun with his astringently cold baths and Stonewall Jackson with his bizarre lemon-sucking and alimentary canal straightening. Lincoln admitted to being superstitious — about dreams, for example — but his views on health appear to have been quietly sane.

Lincoln's health, by contrast with his rivals or by any other historical standard, was excellent — so good that it is rarely mentioned in documents. If one wants to know about it, in fact, one has to join the ranks of the historical paparazzi who sift through the waste baskets and sneak into the medicine cabinets of the great men and women of the past. These people have found that Lincoln suffered mightily from corns and bunions and wrote a grateful endorsement of a chiroprapist named Isachar Zacharie, who brought Lincoln some relief. Other historians, who found Lincoln's account with his druggist in Springfield, have learned that Lincoln or members of his family needed or fancied they needed: castor oil, calomel, Woods Restorative, Lubins extract, cough candy, lineament, carminatives (for expelling gas from the alimentary canal), ipecac (an emetic and expectorant), camphor, magnesia, Allen's Restorative, and brandy. According to his law

partner William Herndon, who took an extraordinary interest in Lincoln's private areas, Lincoln also took blue mass pills for constipation.

These strategies of indirection have not really come up with anything startling, so in recent years we have seen the use of medical evidence of a non-documentary kind to find out things about Lincoln's health of which he did not know himself — in particular, the theory that he was a victim of Marfan's Syndrome. There has also, especially since the early 1960s, been considerable interest in Lincoln's mental health. Psychobiography is another strategy of indirection, a way of ascertaining whether Lincoln suffered from diseases he could not have known about.

In the case of mental disease, however, Lincoln did at one time in his life complain and confess to symptoms — of what he called "hypochondriasm" or "the hypo." We might call it depression. There is the kind of documentary evidence for it that no historian can ignore: Lincoln's own letters, especially from 1841. On January 20, 1841, Lincoln wrote to John T. Stuart, "I have, within the last few days, been making a most discreditable exhibition of myself in the way of hypochondriasm." On the 23rd he told him, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth." His friends commented on it: "We have been very much distressed, on Mr. Lincoln's account; hearing that he had two Cat fits and a Duck fit since we left," Martin McKee gossiped. Lincoln was serving in the Illinois state legislature at the time. Normally, he had an excellent attendance record. In his 1841 session he voted 397 times and failed to vote 92 times — higher than the average for his colleagues (who averaged 54 non-voting absences) and nearly quadruple Lincoln's absenteeism in the previous two sessions. That is the kind of behavioral evidence in which a historian should put much stock; this emotional problem was interfering with Lincoln's work. Though other incidents are not as directly documented, many of the old settlers in New Salem who were interviewed years later, recalled that Lincoln suffered similarly at the death of Ann Rutledge about a decade before his engagement to Mary Todd. He complained of loneliness and the thanklessness of public life when serving alone in the Illinois legislature in 1836 and in Congress in 1848.

"Cat fit" and "duck fit" are not clinical terms, and it is difficult to say what Lincoln's problem was, but we can and should tell what it was not. It was not related to public events — only to intensely private ones. The "hypo" occurred after Lincoln's engagement to Mary Todd was mysteriously broken off on January 1, 1841. The earlier bout came from the death of one of the few marriageable young women in New Salem, Ann Rutledge. Similarly, the complaints from legislative service came when he was away from women friends or family. After 1849, he somehow got this problem worked out — in part by throwing himself enthusiastically into legal and political work.

By the time of the presidency emotional distress is *not* a factor. Thus when Lincoln's eleven-year-old son Willie died at 5 p.m., on February 20, 1862, in the midst of Lincoln's presidency, Lincoln said to his secretary, "Well, Nicolay, my boy is gone — he is actually gone." He burst into tears and went into his *office*. He did not seek consolation in the private apartments of the White House first. Lincoln missed the next day's cabinet meeting at noon, but conferred with the Secretary of State and with General Benjamin F. Butler. The next Friday Lincoln attended the cabinet meeting as usual. He went four days without writing official letters or state papers. Then it was back to work as normal — he allowed himself no prolonged absenteeism from the presidential job. President Lincoln certainly had his emotional life fully under control, and his physical life, as far as historians can tell from the methods they use, continued robust and helped give him an edge on Jefferson Davis.

If the decision were left to me, I think I would leave Lincoln's bones alone. But the scientific tests, if conducted, will have at least one merit: they will put an end to the unfruitful and misleading speculation over Lincoln's ill-health.