



# Lincoln Lore

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## Sara Gabbard Interview with Robert Bray

**SG:** Your book *Reading with Lincoln* shows an incredible amount of research, especially in view of the fact that you took the time to read all of the books Lincoln read. As a professor of English, what first drew you to this project?

**RB:** To begin with, I only read or re-read those titles that 1) were indisputably part of Lincoln's reading; or 2) were plausibly claimed by others—Lincoln acquaintances and several generations of Lincoln scholars—as having been read by him, even though the reader himself never said so. This a little eased my task (for example, I did not need to re-read all of Shakespeare).

As a long-term teacher of literature, I have often wondered whether the true history of my field ought to be the history of reading. While such an undertaking would be beyond me—and the subject difficult to encompass, impossible to measure precisely—I nonetheless think that literary scholarship owes it to our culture to examine what people have actually read and see what patterns may emerge. Thus, while I delight in bringing Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) before a class in American literature of the 1850s, even as I wax enthusiastic about Melville's art, I know that this demanding short novel about slavery and racism had at best a negligible impact on the culture of the day—few readers to begin with, fewer still who got Melville's darkly tragic point. By contrast, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published a few years earlier in the

decade, had perhaps the greatest readership of any American novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with over 300,000 book-copies in print in its first year (1852) and a million more to come by the eve of the Civil War. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* genuinely influenced American public opinion. Detested, even banned, in the South, the novel's evangelical Christian attack on slavery moved many northern readers (particularly women) toward a determination that something must be done sooner rather than later to end the peculiar institution. And it was done: "So this is the little lady who started this great war," Abraham Lincoln is said to have remarked upon encountering Mrs. Stowe on a social occasion early in the conflict. The president was both amused and bemused by the author and her book. But his remark is not entirely implausible as history.

Ironically, Abraham Lincoln very probably never read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (he claimed he had never read any novel all the way through—see below). But he certainly understood that as a literary work it possessed an unprecedented socio-political power in the land. Letting the world know that he knew this was politically useful; and in any case he didn't *have* to read the book to understand its authority: the story and the characters and the pathos had saturated the oppressive American atmosphere of the 1850s. That brings me, long way round, to my second point on this question. Lincoln had an idiosyncratic genius. This came from nature (we would say from biology). Yet how did this genius become actualized? Through a habit of reading that began in boyhood with devouring every text

that came his way; then a process of culling and gleaning that led him to those books that were 1) to be the basis of his naturalistic worldview; 2) useful to his work, whether surveyor or lawyer or politician; and 3) able to move him deeply and immediately. I will speak further of this in response to some of the later questions.

**SG:** Please explain what you mean when you call Abraham Lincoln a 'political artist.'

**RB:** I have in mind the working partnership between his public and private politics. When he needed to talk to his constituents, whether the rural Whig voters of Sangamon County in 1832 or the millions of new Republicans in 1860, he did so through prose compositions that could be effectively spoken out loud at rallies and printed as essays in newspapers. He was listened to on the stump and 'listened to' in print. Not only were the points the same in both venues: they were *made in the same way*: a combination of homely idioms, biblical resonances and trumpeting rhetoric right out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century preceptors he read as a boy. As he grew in intellectual power, he likewise matured as a literary stylist—but one whose voice was always at the service of his ideas, and those ideas founded on principles that he believed were metaphysically solid. Before the presidency, the very best instances of the 'political artist' as writer and speaker are the debates with Douglas (1858) and the Cooper Union address (1860).

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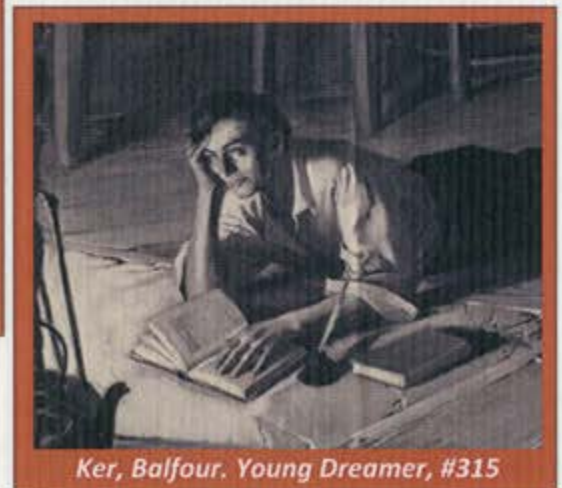
*Lincoln studying under a tree in New Salem, #315*



*Thomas Lincoln, #122*



*William H. Hemdon, #LN-0718*



*Ker, Balfour. Young Dreamer, #315*

## Lincoln Lore

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In private politics we see a very different kind of artistry. Though almost always forbearing, and scarcely ever holding a grudge, Lincoln carefully took the measure of his powerful political enemies and friends and did indeed keep score. Just as in the frontier games of wrestling and storytelling, staying one-up was everything. Because of the war, Lincoln had the power of a tyrant; he had to use it, and did, but whenever feasible he executed his political will through the benevolence of persuasion.

The great Lincoln scholar Douglas Wilson has aptly called the act of writing 'Lincoln's Sword.' Wielding that awesome blade, Lincoln did wonderful public political work. Behind the White House doors, however, Lincoln moved politicians around like pieces on a chessboard—sometimes seeming to play both red and black. When he combined public and private politics, as in asking William Henry Seward to help him revise the First Inaugural, a decision that turned out to be both politically and poetically adept, Lincoln was invincible.

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**SG: Why do you say that Lincoln read deeply rather than broadly?**

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RB: The list of books that Lincoln *certainly* read is comparatively short. Any college graduate of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century—and this was what we would call Lincoln's 'aspirational group'—would have read far more widely than he. After all, they followed a curriculum that began with classical language and literature, sometimes in Greek and Latin, sometimes in translation, and also read at their pleasure such modern works as taste and tutelage suggested. As is well known, Lincoln as a boy and a young man had to take what he could get. That meant the celebrated page-turner *The Revised Statutes of Indiana*, when nothing else was available, but in better days

Gibbon's mighty *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. By the time in his life when he *could* choose what to read, he had developed a stubborn resistance to novels and biographies, which 'Young America' was reading by the hundreds of titles, and a rather charming attachment to sentimental lyric poetry (a third-rate dirge, 'Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud,' his declared favorite poem). His law partner and biographer William H. Herndon, by contrast, was an omnivorous reader, always trying and failing to interest his law partner in the latest religio-philosophical titles from the east. But Herndon made a crucial point about Lincoln's reading: when he *did* take to a book he invariably 'assimilated it to his being.' From the date of reading onward, the book thus assimilated was available to his memory and emotion as if its very pages were spooling through his consciousness like those on the screen of an e-reader today.

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**SG: Have you found examples of Lincoln's comments about American authors who wrote during his lifetime? For instance, did he mention the transcendentalists? Did he read them?**

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RB: Lincoln rarely spoke as a literary critic. The literature he loved most (drama, dialect humor and poetry) he celebrated through performance. For example, he loved performing aloud the sketches of the 'literary comedians' such as Artemus Ward, Orpheus C. Kerr and Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby. Many were the meetings in which he bored, offended or amused a captive audience with the slang-ridden, raucous topical humor of these popular American writers (some of whose pieces were even about him!). He admired, too, the much more genteel poetry of the New England School, though the long reign of Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell was coming to an end by the time Lincoln took the presidential

office (Whitman had self-published the first edition of the poetically revolutionary *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, though I do not think Lincoln was aware of it). And though the greatest of American Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, would have provided in his essays a myriad of idealistic provocations to the naturalist/materialist mind of Lincoln, the two known suggestions that this encounter took place are unconvincing. Yet, through Herndon, Lincoln did come to know at least a small part of the writing of another Transcendentalist, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who provided Lincoln with food-for-thought and probably a memorable phrase or two on the subject of slavery, and just in time for a little speech Lincoln was preparing as his acceptance of the Republican nomination for senator in Illinois: without a national 'Unity of Idea in fundamentals,' Parker insisted, America was a "house divided against itself;" of course it cannot stand.'

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**SG: Please explain the term 'preceptors' and give examples.**

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RB: The art of the modern schoolroom textbook was just beginning in America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Demand for teaching aids was growing: after all, a democracy required literacy and more in its citizens if it were to function smoothly (or so northern progressives thought), and the kind of textbook that might work effectively both in and out of school would be prized above others. One variety was the 'preceptor.' Though literally referring to the teacher or leader who guided pupils according to *precepts*, that is, maxims and principles of conduct, the term attached itself to such books as could themselves guide an individual learner or a class. The one Lincoln probably knew best was *The Kentucky Preceptor* (1806,

1812). It was between the paper covers of this rudely printed volume that he found several literary extracts that he 'assimilated to his being' (see Herndon remark above), including Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and Thomas Jefferson's 'First Inaugural Address'—along with two pieces that may have formed his first anti-slavery reading. Preceptors had multiple intentions. First, usually through a preface, a hortative statement of what young American men ought to know and how to act upon that knowledge (the precepts themselves); then examples of these precepts in the readings; and finally the encouragement for the students to use the contents as models for their own writing (and in Lincoln's case recitation and performance).

#### **SG: Why didn't Lincoln read novels?**

RB: A great question! And one that lacks a satisfactory answer, though it was Lincoln himself who declared that he had never read a novel 'all the way through' (entailing, I suppose, that he had begun reading at least one in his life!). While I'm not sure I trust his rather categorical negative here, it is true that no one who had solidly reliable information about Lincoln's reading listed any novels. It wasn't a matter of length: he read long legal treatises like *Blackstone's Commentaries*, and he was more than content to read and sit through performances of full-length dramas (Shakespeare's *King Lear* is long). Nor was it a distaste for narrative itself, since, if one informant is to be believed, he praised *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* ['I am reading Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. . . . He has a grip and he knows how to tell a story.'] with acute apprehension. Short fiction in the form of humorous sketches remained among his favorites, but as we saw in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most popular long fiction of his time he neglected

to look at. My own speculation is that in his personal, literary reading he much preferred verse to prose and the poetic to the prosaic. Victorian triple-deckers would hardly have recommended themselves to Lincoln: too many pages from which to extract any vein of poetry. Yet, I suspect that had he come upon Dickens and given him a fair trial, Lincoln would have fallen in love.

#### **SG: Does Lincoln show evidence (in his reading, writing and speaking) of having been born on the cusp between Enlightenment and Romantic epochs?**

RB: If one understands by Romanticism the great philosophical and literary movement that began with German Transcendentalism and flowered in the English-speaking world with the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats—then, no: Lincoln was immune, made so perhaps by the Enlightenment training of his mind early in his adulthood (I'm thinking principally of Hume and Gibbon, Volney and Paine). For if one rejects the metaphysics of Transcendental Idealism, as Lincoln did, and accepts that of naturalism/materialism, which Lincoln did, Romanticism's promise of remaking one's soul (or more properly one's person) in Nature is delusive. This was also the promise of evangelical Protestantism in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, which was a theological version of Romanticism that offered rebirth through the Holy Spirit. And Lincoln also rejected this mode of Christianity.

That would be the end of the story of Lincoln the unromantic were it not for the wild card of Byron, who has so often been placed among the English Romantics but is only uneasily at home there. From Byron, Lincoln took the archetype of the lordly but deeply-flawed tragic hero (as he took from Burns that of the impoverished commoner speaking truth to power).

Both Byron's extravagant public persona and those of his many outlaw poetic protagonists shouted 'I'm a genius!' to a world incapable of accepting the anarchic Byronic hero yet fascinated by the spectacle of his outsized actions. Lincoln could not bring himself to anything like Byron's in-your-face extroversion, but we are within our critical rights to suppose that, especially in the late 1830s, he keenly felt and deeply brooded upon what we might call the Byronic heroism of difference.

#### **SG: Please explain the connection between Jefferson's 'creed of our political faith' and Lincoln's 'political religion.'**

RB: The connection is vital: without the one the other doesn't appear in Lincoln's 1838 'Lyceum Address' or time and time again in his later thought. But there is an important difference. Jefferson spoke of a *creed* and Lincoln of a *religion*. Lincoln believed that 'political religion' was more a mode of living than a statement of belief, and as an effective civic preacher he insisted that Americans do and do and keep on doing the things that would gradually perfect the Republic, the most crucial of which was always following the spirit of the law and its letter as often as possible, while democratically refining the latter so as to best embody the former.

#### **SG: Did you find any evidence that Thomas Lincoln may have been a more supportive father than is generally accepted? For instance, you mention that Thomas procured a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* for his son.**

RB: Let me offer a clarification on your second point. It was Louis A. Warren (*Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, 1959*) who *supposed* that Tom Lincoln obtained a copy of Bunyan for his son. Warren was himself relying on another printed source, and I rather casually accepted the

assertion as probable. But my analysis of *Pilgrim's Progress* holds that if the boy Lincoln read Bunyan as *Christian allegory*, rather than as an adventure story of fights with giants and treks through swamps, he would not have been impressed.

In giving his son the book, supposing he did, what may have been Thomas Lincoln's motives? Benevolent: he simply wanted to give boy Lincoln something he would treasure and knew (though he did not approve) that books were precious to his son. As a peace offering: having perhaps too sorely disciplined the boy, and having hired him out for wages that entirely came back to the father, Thomas 'procured' *Pilgrim's Progress* as if to say, 'there, boy, that should make you happy' (and more conformable to the father's demands!). As moral instruction: here was the very book, next to the Bible, that might bring young Abraham, who was already showing signs of religious skepticism and even scorn, to true Christianity. In the end, all this speculation is the stuff of which novels are made. . . . Has anyone read Richard Slotkin's *Abe*?

On the matter of the quality of Thomas Lincoln's fatherhood, I wasn't looking for evidence either way. But I do agree with Michael Burlingame's portrait of Lincoln's father as willfully ignorant, a failure in life and mean-spirited and sometimes cruel toward his son. [Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (1994, pp 38-41; *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2008, 1: 5-11)]

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**SG: How, in later life, did Lincoln use what he learned from Aesop's Fables?**

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RB: Though he had known many of the stories by heart from his youth, the recorded instances of the adult Lincoln's employing them are few. The most striking example occurred in mid-1862. Lincoln had

emancipation on his mind, and he wrote to the chaplain of the United States Senate, Byron Sunderland, concerning the fate of the slaves: 'As for the Negroes, Doctor, and what is to become of them. . . it made me think of a story I read in one of my first books, "Aesop's Fables." It was an old edition, and had curious, rough wood-cuts, one of which showed four white men scrubbing a negro in a potash kettle filled with cold water. The text explained that by scrubbing the negro they might make him white. Just about the time they thought they were succeeding, he took cold and died. Now, I am afraid that by the time we get through this war the negro will catch cold and die.'

I actually dug up a copy of the very edition Lincoln refers to, with its 'curious, rough wood-cuts,' including the one of the 'blackamoor' being scrubbed to death. This was one of the most memorable of the many book-hunts I did for *Reading with Lincoln*.

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**SG: How reliable is William Herndon as a source of information regarding his law partner?**

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RB: I agree with Rodney Davis and Douglas Wilson, the editors of the indispensable editions of *Herndon's Informants* (1998) and *Herndon's Lincoln* (2006), whose test of reliability goes like this: when Herndon says Lincoln *told him* something, that something is very probably true to what Lincoln said. When Herndon relies on informants, one has to compare what *Herndon's Lincoln* reports with the original information before judging veracity. And when Herndon offers positive opinions about Lincoln's character, etc.—as he so often does—then one must weigh his views in the scales of what other contemporaries thought Lincoln was like. I happen to believe that Herndon got Lincoln's character remarkably right: *Herndon's Lincoln* strikes me as one of the finest

biographies I've ever read, comparable in quality with Boswell's *Johnson*, the biographer's total engagement with his subject nonetheless not leading to hero-worship. Herndon, like so many others who have followed his emblazoned trail, sought the 'real Lincoln.' And darned near found him, at least for the pre-presidential period of Lincoln's life.

But there is another wrinkle with *Herndon's Lincoln* that went unnoticed until Wilson and Davis prepared their new edition: the silent pen of Jesse W. Weik (Herndon's collaborator). When I was putting together my annotated bibliography of Lincoln's reading, I noticed in the pages of the 1889 *Herndon's Lincoln* a most peculiar allusion to Honoré de Balzac and his 'droll stories' (pg 195 in the Wilson-Davis edition). It was in the context of Lincoln as a ribald story-teller, with Herndon, of course, the putative rememberer of sundry occasions on which the boys got together to see who could spin the the best off-color yarn. To make my point here understandable I need to quote a short passage:

Lincoln was enabled to draw from Balzac a 'droll story,' and locating it in 'Egypt' or in Indiana, pass it off for a purely original conception.'

Now this clearly implies that Lincoln had read (in translation) Balzac's *Droll Stories*. Yet I could find no indication that there had been an English version published in the United States until nearly a decade after Lincoln's death. Herndon was usually very careful in matters relating to events with his partner in which he had participated. So what was going on? I recall one morning walking down 7<sup>th</sup> street in Springfield with Rod and Doug while vigorously expressing to them my vexation with Herndon. Both men immediately laughed and said simultaneously, 'that's Weik!' For Weik had silently 'improved' Herndon's account of the

story-telling derby with what he must have thought was an allusion his readers would understand. But the suggestion that Lincoln knew Balzac's *Droll Stories* was false—Weik, perhaps unintentionally, misleading readers by a reference to something *he* knew but Lincoln couldn't have. Thus, careful readers of *Herndon's Lincoln* must be aware of its enfolded layers: the informants, the Herndon and the Weik. Still, without the biography and its sources we would have only the prairie ghost of Abraham Lincoln before he became famous in the late 1850s. I for one am deeply grateful that William H. Herndon gave his life to the book.

**SG: Since the King James Bible would have been so familiar to many, did other orators of Lincoln's era refer to it as frequently as he did? Given the multitude of translations available today, can the words still resonate as they once did?**

RB: I hesitate to toss out an assertion about earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century *secular* oratory, since I just don't know enough about the subject. But I can say with some confidence that Lincoln, when he used the Bible, was acting both like a preacher and a rhetorician. As the former, he was aiming at high moral seriousness; as the latter, he was embodying the cadences, imagery and by-then archaic diction to add emotive power to his speeches. I suspect that the King James, from its wide familiarity, was the *only* book in 250-year-old English that he could so employ publicly with oratorical success.

The King James's words don't 'resonate' today, but not perhaps because of their patina of quaint age. Among my students I find that few of those who identify themselves as Christians know anything about any translation of the Bible, which some of them assume was written in English to begin with and most have not in any case read.

**SG: Since Lincoln's reference to 'fourscore and seven years' referred back to the Declaration of Independence, rather than to the ratification of the Constitution, did he consider the Declaration to be the primary founding document?**

RB: I resoundingly agree with the many Lincolnists who have said *undoubtedly!* In the words of the Declaration Lincoln discovered a principle of politics and ethics that he might accept as transcendently true—for all people, everywhere, all the time. The United States was 'on record' as basing its entire 'political religion' on the assertion that all men had been created equal, and so on, no matter how the Constitution may have obscured the evil of slavery by silently continuing the institution under the new Union. As for Jefferson, the Declaration became for Lincoln the aspirational ideal of the American nation (to my mind, it still is).

It is fascinating to trace Lincoln's intellectual path toward making the Declaration philosophically 'self-evident.' As the near-atheist, proto-Jacobin radical of New Salem in the 1830s, Lincoln accepted the notion of *natural* rights, with no need for the hypothesis of God; then followed the Deistic 'creator' of the Declaration's 'endowed by their creator' clause; and finally what we now call *human* rights, political and civil. Would he have seen and approved of this contemporary secular move? Would he have realized the truth that putting the ideal of the Declaration in a transcendental place was an act not of God or Nature but of pure humanity and its best aspirations?

**SG: How do your students today relate to the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln?**

RB: As a professor, my first duty in teaching Lincoln is to recover a full-blooded human person from the leavings of myth, legend and accidental or purposeful distortion. To do so, my students and I begin with Lincoln's self-education in literacy as the basis for whatever greatness he achieved. I try not to emphasize the heroic Lincoln until we are in a position to know how he became so—genius is, after all, only a potential. Lincoln first actualized himself intellectually and then drove himself to use his genius in politics. Potential plus ambition *can* result in greatness, and the great ones *can* choose to act well instead of ill, even when terrifyingly empowered by nature and history. Students understand this when they finally finish disrobing the mythic statue and see, to their delight, that the emperor has even finer clothes on beneath. Abraham Lincoln has become their preceptor—I hope for life.



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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S VIRGINIA ROOTS

Phillip C. Stone

During the Civil War, like much of the nation, the Lincoln family was divided, represented on opposite sides of the conflict. At the very time President Lincoln struggled to save the Union, his Lincoln cousins in Virginia supported secession; Lincoln, the Union Commander-in-Chief, was opposed by Virginia kinsmen fighting for the Confederacy; Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, freed slaves; his Virginia cousins owned slaves.

It comes as quite a surprise to most people to learn that Abraham Lincoln had strong family roots in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, that his cousins were slave-owners who fought for the Confederacy and that there remain even today in that picturesque valley multiple homes and dozens of graves of Abe's Virginia relatives. While the story of his birth and early childhood in Kentucky is well known, the fact that his father, grandfather, grandmother, great-grandparents and dozens of other relatives lived in Virginia is not as well known.

Deeds and other documents reflect that Lincoln's great-grandparents moved from Pennsylvania to Virginia around 1768.<sup>1</sup> His great-grandfather, nicknamed "Virginia John" by Lincoln students to distinguish him from other family members with the same name, acquired 600 acres of fertile Shenandoah Valley land on Linville



*Lincoln Homestead front*

Creek in what is now Rockingham County, Virginia,<sup>2</sup> and lived there until his death 20 years later. He was laid to rest in a corner of the farm, joined almost 20 years later by his wife, Rebecca Flowers Morris Lincoln. Their log house burned before Rebecca died but was rebuilt by a grandson some 15 years after her death. The replacement structure was demolished by 1920.<sup>3</sup> After the interments of Virginia John and Rebecca, four generations of their descendents were buried in what is now known as the Lincoln Cemetery, the last in 1938.

The oldest of the nine children of Virginia John and Rebecca Lincoln, all of whom accompanied them to Virginia, was 24-year-old Abraham Lincoln, born in 1744. The president's grandfather, after whom Abe was named, was called "Captain Abraham" not only to distinguish him from others with the same name but in recognition of his service in the local militia during the American Revolution. After moving to Virginia, Captain Abraham married Bathsheba Herring, a native of Rockingham County. Although Bathsheba is spelled in various ways, probably depending on the literacy of the writer, it is clear that some variation

of "Bathsheba" was the first name of the President's grandmother.<sup>4</sup> There is no documentation confirming that she was a Herring, but it is a widely accepted tradition in both the Lincoln and Herring families.<sup>5</sup>

From his father's farm on Linville Creek, Captain Abraham acquired 200 acres. There he and Bathsheba had all five of their children, including their youngest child, Thomas, born in 1778. After thirteen years in Virginia, Captain Abraham, moved his family to Kentucky in late 1781.<sup>6</sup> A few years later, he was killed on his Kentucky farm by Indians. Young Tom Lincoln, only about four years of age when he left Virginia, grew up in Kentucky. The story of the Lincoln family from that point is well known.

Whatever the merits of the frequent claims that Tom Lincoln was unsuccessful, even shiftless, there was nothing shiftless, indolent or impoverished about the Virginia Lincolns. While Captain Abraham surely went to Kentucky to acquire even more land, his 200 acre farm in the Shenandoah Valley was—and still is—a beautiful, fertile tract. He also owned about 250 additional acres in the county.<sup>7</sup> His father seemed to have made a good living on his adjoining farm.



*VA Roadmarker at the Homestead*

Captain Abraham's brother, Captain Jacob, who also served in the Revolution, was in fact prosperous. Jacob was the progenitor of most of the Lincolns carrying the family name who remained in Virginia. He built a beautiful two-story house within a short distance of his parents' home around 1800. A substantial brick dwelling, known today as the Lincoln Homestead, it was impressive in its day and remains a very elegant house. According to Jacob's granddaughter, Captain Jacob had mahogany lumber brought from Pennsylvania and made into beautiful furniture, some of it in-laid.<sup>8</sup>

Porcelain locks and hand-crafted mantels added to the beauty of the home. An attractive portico graced the front. In stark contrast to President Lincoln's boyhood, his family in Virginia at the time was living in comfort. Jacob died in 1822 and was buried in the Lincoln Cemetery, just a few hundred yards from his residence. His widow, Dorcas Lincoln, survived until 1840. In her will, she provided for the disposition of Lincoln slaves.<sup>9</sup>

One of Jacob's sons, "Colonel" Abraham Lincoln moved into the Lincoln Homestead about 1840 after the death of his mother earlier that year. Soon afterwards he built an addition to the rear of Homestead.



*Home, built circa 1820  
by Abigail Lincoln Coffman,*

At his death in 1851, his will disposed of multiple slaves among his family members.<sup>10</sup> His wife, Mary Homan Lincoln, remained in the dwelling until her death in 1874. During the Civil War, even in the fall of 1864 when Sheridan's troops burned so much of the Shenandoah Valley, including crops and barns of the Lincolns, she was living in the Homestead, supported by her slaves. At her death, it passed from the Lincoln family.

Another of Tom Lincoln's Virginia uncles also did well in Virginia. John Lincoln Jr. was a surveyor, a significant landowner and for many years clerk in the Linville Creek Baptist Church, located just a few hundred yards from Tom Lincoln's birthplace.

Most of the minutes of the church for over 20 years are in Lincoln's handwriting. In old age, he moved from the area to be close to his children in Ohio, where he died in 1835.<sup>11</sup> The other sons of Virginia John, Isaac and Thomas, after marrying in Virginia, left the state while still young men.

Like their father, several children of Captain Jacob built substantial residences in the Shenandoah Valley, which are still in use. About half a mile southwest of the Lincoln Homestead, around 1825, Jacob Lincoln, Jr. built what is now known as the "Pennybacker Place."

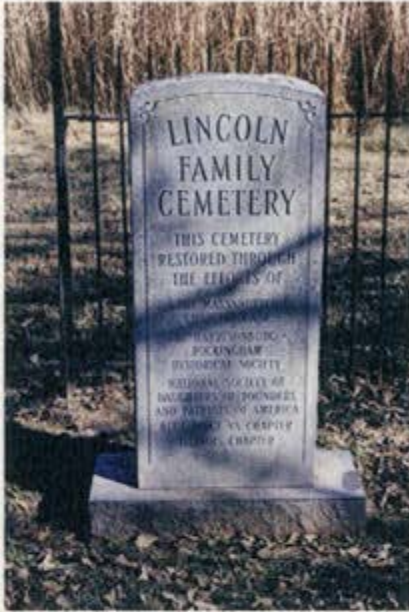


*Lincoln Homestead, built about 1800 by  
Captain Jacob Lincoln, brother to President's  
grandfather*

His descendants lived there until 1938. Jacob's daughter, Abigail, and her husband Jacob Coffman, built a brick residence about one mile southeast of Dayton, not far from the home of Bathsheba Herring Lincoln, the president's grandmother. Another house, built by a daughter, Dorcas, wife of John Strayer, is located in the town of New Market, a few miles from the Lincoln Homestead. It once served as the headquarters for Stonewall Jackson.

Another of Jacob's children, David, in 1829, moved to the small community of Lacey Springs, about five miles east of the Homestead, where he operated the Lincoln Inn. The Inn supposedly hosted such travelers as Presidents Van Buren and Polk, as well as Henry Clay and Jerome N. Bonaparte, all travelling to and from Washington.<sup>12</sup> David was literate, knowledgeable about business matters and had a good reputation.<sup>13</sup> A first-cousin to the president's father, David later corresponded with Abe Lincoln about family connections. He died in 1849. Neither the Inn, which burned in 1898, nor David's residence survives, but the graves of David and more than a dozen of his descendants can be seen in the Lacey Springs Cemetery.





Lincoln Cemetery Marker

President Lincoln was quite aware of his Virginia roots. While serving in Congress, in 1848, he wrote to David Lincoln in Rockingham County, acknowledging his connections with the local Lincolns. He recited that his father had been born in Rockingham County, and that his grandfather, for whom he was named, had lived there. He wanted to know more about his family: "I shall be much obliged, if you can write me, telling me, whether you, in any way, know anything of my grandfather, what relation you are to him, and so on. Also, if you know, where your family came from, when they settled in Virginia, tracing them back as far as your knowledge extends."<sup>14</sup> The day after hearing from David, he wrote again, reciting names of multiple relatives, places they lived, and referred to his father then living in Coles County. He posed questions and urged David to tell him more: "What was your grandfather's Christian name? Was he or not a Quaker? About what *time* did he emigrate from Berks Co., Pa. to Virginia? Do you know any thing of your family (or rather I may now say,

our family) farther back than your grandfather?"<sup>15</sup> Lincoln asked David to send more information if available. He also promised to call on David if he was ever in the area. David died just a year after these letters, but about the same time, Abe Lincoln was corresponding with a distant cousin in Massachusetts:

*My father's name is Thomas; my grandfather's was Abraham.... My grandfather went from Rockingham county in Virginia, to Kentucky, about the year 1782; and, two years afterwards, was killed by the indians. We have a vague tradition, that my great-grand father went from Pennsylvania to Virginia; and that he was a quaker. Further back than this, I have never heard any thing.... Owing to my father being left an orphan at the age of six years, in poverty, and in a new country, he became a wholly uneducated man; which I suppose is the reason why I know so little of our family history. I believe I can say nothing more that would at all interest you. If you shall be able to trace any connection between yourself and me, or, in fact, whether you shall or not, I should be pleased to have a line from you at any time.*<sup>16</sup>

As late as 1860, he corresponded with a cousin acknowledging his continuing interest in family history and referring to his earlier correspondence with David in Virginia.<sup>17</sup>

Lincoln biographer David Donald, acknowledging that Lincoln had exchanged letters with his cousin about Lincoln genealogy, yet introduces his book with the erroneous assertion: "Abraham Lincoln was not interested in his ancestry. In his mind he was a self-made man, who had no need to care about a family tree."<sup>18</sup> Donald acknowledges that the actual facts constituted a worthy ancestry: "In sum, Abraham Lincoln, instead of being the unique blossom on an otherwise barren family tree, belonged to the seventh American generation of a family with competent means, a reputation for integrity, and a modest record of public service."<sup>19</sup>

In a more recent biography, Ronald White clarifies that Lincoln had a "persistent curiosity about the family history,"<sup>20</sup> he simply never thought one's lineage or name was a basis for claiming success; one must earn success through his own efforts.



Lincoln Homestead, showing 1840 rear addition built by Colonel Abraham



*Pennybacker Place, built c. 1820 by Jacob Lincoln, Jr., first cousin to Tom Lincoln*

His Virginia relatives were likewise conscious of their ties to the President during the Civil War. A cousin, whose barn had just been burned by Lincoln's army, was asked if Abe was related to him; he replied affirmatively, saying he would like to shoot Cousin Abe.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, family connections did not trump the partisanship of war. Lincolns fought for the Confederacy, and they owned slaves. Markers placed in the Lincoln Cemetery by the Lincoln family honor Ned and Queen, "the last of the Lincoln slaves."

Although Lincoln was interested in his genealogy, nothing indicates that his connections to Virginia came up in conversations during the Civil War. Congressman John T. Harris, representing the district in which Lincoln's Virginia relatives lived, met with Lincoln at Willard's Hotel in Washington the day before Lincoln's inauguration. He introduced Dr. Coffman, one of the men with him, as the owner of Lincoln's grandfather's farm.<sup>22</sup> There is no reference to any reaction from Lincoln, nor do notes from meetings with Virginians during the War reflect any comments by Lincoln about his Virginia connections.

Virginia's Lincoln Country has attracted notable students of Lincoln as well as his son, Robert, hosted by his cousin, Mrs. Pennybacker. Other visitors included Waldo Lincoln (1914), Ida Tarbell (1922), William Barton (1924), Carl Sandburg (1925) and Louis Warren, long-time editor of *Lincoln Lore* (1926).<sup>23</sup>

Although the Lincolns and their neighbors were fervent Confederates, the community today honors its association with President Lincoln. For almost four decades, a simple ceremony has been conducted annually on his birthday in the local Lincoln Cemetery. Local efforts to honor the Lincoln family connections also include the founding of the Lincoln Society of Virginia. It started in 2004 in response to the unseemly reaction to the placement of a Lincoln statue in Richmond, Virginia. The Society, thought to be the only one of its kind in the Old Confederacy, attempts to preserve the local Lincoln family landmarks, to provide education about the Virginia Lincolns, and to interpret Lincoln and the Civil War in a mature way for those now living in the former Confederacy.

Lincoln's great-grandparents, grandparents, and father lived in Rockingham County; his father was born there; and his family has been in the community for over 200 years. It is the site of dozens of Lincoln graves and multiple Lincoln homes. Family members in the area still carry the Lincoln name. Clearly Abraham Lincoln had deep roots in Virginia.



*Virginia Johnson and Rebecca Lincoln graves: Lincoln Cemetery*



*Colonel Abraham Lincoln's grave: first cousin to Tom*

## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Deeds, wills and court documents are from the Augusta County Circuit Court (ACCC) until 1778, at which time Rockingham County was formed from Augusta County. Records after that date are located in the Rockingham County Circuit Court (RCCC). "Burnt Record" refers to court documents partially burned during the Civil War.
- <sup>2</sup> ACCC Deed Book 15, p. 52. The deed is dated June 22, 1768.
- <sup>3</sup> John W. Wayland, *The Lincolns of Virginia*, (1946, reprinted by C.J. Carrier Company, Harrisonburg, VA., 1987.) A debt of gratitude is owed to Wayland, a local historian, who gathered anecdotal material and oral history of the family, much of it from Mary Elizabeth Lincoln Pennybacker, born in 1827.
- <sup>4</sup> The 1780 deed conveying their Virginia farm has her name as "Bershaba,." then several times as "Bathsheba," once as "Basheba," and the signature appears to be "Batsab." RCCC Burnt Record Deed Book 0, pp. 92-95.
- <sup>5</sup> Waldo Lincoln, *History of the Lincoln Family*, (Worcester, MA, Commonwealth Press, 1923), Vol. I, pp.200-202
- <sup>6</sup> Captain Abraham acquired land in Kentucky in 1780 and executed a deed for his Virginia farm that same year, but the document confirming his wife's consent to the deed recites that she was still in the Abraham Lincoln home in Rockingham County on September 24, 1781 and was not able to travel to the local court house. RCCC Burnt Record Deed Book 0, pp. 138-139.
- <sup>7</sup> Wayland, p. 54
- <sup>8</sup> Wayland, p. 85
- <sup>9</sup> RCCC Burnt Record Will Book 1, p.154A.
- <sup>10</sup> RCCC Burnt Record Will Book A, pp.81-82.
- <sup>11</sup> Waldo Lincoln, Vol. I, p. 208.
- <sup>12</sup> Wayland, p. 164, citing the local newspaper, *Rockingham Register*, February 18, 1898.
- <sup>13</sup> Wayland, p. 151
- <sup>14</sup> *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (CW)*, ed. Roy P. Basler, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:459
- <sup>15</sup> CW 1: 462
- <sup>16</sup> CW 1: 456
- <sup>17</sup> CW 4: 37
- <sup>18</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, (New York; Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 19
- <sup>19</sup> Donald, p. 21
- <sup>20</sup> Ronald White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, (New York, Random House, 2009), p. 8
- <sup>21</sup> Wayland, p. 168.
- <sup>22</sup> *Of Men and Measures: The Memoirs of John T. Harris of Virginia*, ed. Dale F. Harter, (Master's Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1999), p. 87
- <sup>23</sup> Wayland pp. 223-242.

**PHILLIP C. STONE**

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*Stone is a frequent lecturer on Abraham Lincoln and for each of the last 36 years has conducted a ceremony at a local Lincoln family cemetery to commemorate Lincoln's birthday. In 2004 he founded the Lincoln Society of Virginia, which hosts an annual symposium on Lincoln. He is a member of the Lincoln Forum, the Advisory Board of the U.S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and the Virginia Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.*

*He and his wife Cherrill have four grown children, one of whom now owns and resides on Virginia John Lincoln's farm.*



*Crowd starting to gather for a special event*

## LINCOLN AND RACE: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

By Richard Striner

In my new book *Lincoln and Race*, which is forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press, I examine the debate about Lincoln's racial views that continues to fascinate Lincoln scholars and members of the general public. In the twentieth-century, that debate was often framed around a simple question: to what extent, if at all, did Lincoln harbor white supremacy attitudes? In the Civil War era, however, the question was often the reverse: to what extent was Lincoln a "negro lover?"

After a careful examination of the most reliable evidence—and even after looking at some items of admittedly unreliable evidence—I have come to a very strong conclusion. But before I intimate the nature of this conclusion, it would be an interesting exercise to examine what historians (and selected non-historians) have said about this matter through the years.

Some of the historiographical trends have related to the overall "temper of the times" in which the various historians were working, but others reflected certain differences in individual sensibilities. In 1948, Richard Hofstadter wrote about Lincoln in a manner that reflected both the lingering influence of Civil War revisionism (as well as the lingering and overlapping influence of Charles A. Beard) and the powerful ethos of civil rights advocacy in the Truman era. Lincoln, according to Hofstadter, was "one of the world's great

political propagandists."<sup>1</sup> Hofstadter emphasized Lincoln's ambition and portrayed him as an opportunist. He wrote about Lincoln's treatment of the racial issue in the course of the Lincoln-Douglas debates with thinly-veiled contempt, citing Lincoln's "strategy of appealing to abolitionists and Negrophobes at once."<sup>2</sup>

Comparing Lincoln's pleas for cessation of racial animosity with his disavowals of civil rights advocacy, Hofstadter had this to say: "Possibly the man devoutly believed each of the utterances at the time he delivered it; possibly his mind too was a house divided against itself. In any case it is easy to see in all this the behavior of a professional politician looking for votes."<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter came to the conclusion that Lincoln was "never much troubled about the Negro."<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-to-late 1950s, certain scholars came to different conclusions. In 1956, David Herbert Donald mused that racial thinking was fundamentally alien to Lincoln's personality; Lincoln, wrote Donald, "was color-blind . . . . He thought of the black man first of all as a man."<sup>5</sup> In 1959, political philosopher Harry V. Jaffa excoriated Hofstadter along with the Civil War revisionists for minimizing the significance of Lincoln's anti-slavery convictions. But while Jaffa concluded that Lincoln was a champion of human rights and a great moral teacher, he also came to the conclusion that Lincoln was sincere in his disavowal of civil rights advocacy—not because of bigotry, but rather because of "prudential" calculation

in the face of the electorate's bigotry.

"Lincoln was a pessimist on the subject of the possibility of an interracial, egalitarian society," Jaffa wrote. "The physical difference of color, he thought, preserved prejudices which would make political equality impossible. But he did not say that the inequality traceable to color was rooted in an inequality of intrinsic worth."<sup>6</sup> Jaffa cited Lincoln's advocacy of colonization as proof for the preceding assertion: "For Lincoln, as for Jefferson, Clay, and others, the only perfect solution of the American race question was complete separation by the emigration of the Negroes. [But] in advocating emigration and colonization of the Negroes, Lincoln was not depreciating the Negroes; on the contrary, he paid them a high tribute in supposing they had the same capacity for founding a free society that white men had."<sup>7</sup>

In 1962, historian Benjamin Quarles offered commentary on Lincoln's racial views in a positive manner but without any theory to account for Lincoln's seeming inconsistencies. Indeed, Quarles himself seemed inconsistent. "Lincoln did not believe that the Negro was on a par with the white man in mental endowment," Quarles averred. A few paragraphs later, he reiterated this point in stronger

terms: "Lincoln did regard the Negro as inferior." Quarles acknowledged that Lincoln "believed in equality of opportunity for all Americans, but he did not fully sense that a denial of any basic right was, in effect, a denial of equal opportunity for advancement." Nonetheless, Quarles also concluded (with tremendous inconsistency in light of the preceding statements) that "Lincoln was not anti-Negro;" indeed, he was "a man without bigotry of any kind."<sup>8</sup>

In the 1950s and '60s historians were increasingly torn between two points of view: Lincoln as a man of prejudice and Lincoln as a man who overcame prejudice. The latter view was expressed by historian Richard N. Current, who wrote of Lincoln in 1958 "as a symbol of man's ability to outgrow his prejudices."<sup>9</sup> But historian Leon F. Litwack wrote of Lincoln in 1961 as a man who "accurately and consistently reflected the thoughts and prejudices of most Americans."<sup>10</sup>

In 1966, constitutional historian Harold M. Hyman argued that Lincoln was not only "educable," but an increasingly bold leader in the struggle for racial equality: "Lincoln not only went along with each step of this rise in vision; sometimes he led in discerning the shores dimly seen of a greater American society." When Lincoln urged voting rights for educated blacks and black veterans in 1864 and 1865, he was recommending the enfranchisement of "precisely the Negroes who were most obnoxious by standpat or retrograde racial standards; colored veterans of the Union's armies, men

who had likely shot at rebel whites, served as their jailers, and ordered white civilians about, and bookish blacks whose outward characteristics offended folkways committed to less lofty stereotypes of Negro capacities and behavior."<sup>11</sup>

With the rise of the New Left and the "Black Power" movement, historians began to react to the views of Lerone Bennett, Jr., a black journalist who called Lincoln "a tragically flawed figure who shared the racial prejudices of most of his white contemporaries." Bennett argued that Lincoln's early environment warped his sensibilities in ways that never really changed: "One must see him first," Bennett wrote, "against the background of his times. Born into a poor white family in the slave state of Kentucky and raised in the anti-black environments of southern Indiana and Illinois, Lincoln was exposed from the very beginning to racism."<sup>12</sup>

In 1974, Lincoln scholar Don E. Fehrenbacher questioned the significance of Lincoln's early surroundings in regard to his feelings on race. "Any racial views he encountered during his youth were likely to be unfavorable," he admitted, "but more important is the question of how often he encountered such views and how thoroughly he absorbed them (original emphasis)." Moreover, wrote Fehrenbacher, "the assumption that his racial attitudes were shaped more or less permanently by his early social environment does not take into account the fact that youth may rebel against established opinion. Lincoln did in a sense reject his

father's world, leaving it behind him forever soon after reaching the age of twenty-one."<sup>13</sup>

In any case, Lincoln never encountered many blacks in his earliest years, claimed Fehrenbacher: "He had little contact with Negroes while growing up in backwoods Indiana or as a young man in New Salem, Illinois . . . There is scarcely any record of his thoughts on race until he was past forty years of age."<sup>14</sup>

Fehrenbacher suspected that Lincoln had little, if any, gut-level racial feeling; to the contrary, his anti-slavery argument, "carried to its logical conclusion, seemed to spell complete racial equality," for which reason he had to temporize when confronted by the demagogues like Stephen Douglas: "In the Democratic press, Republicans almost invariably became 'Black Republicans,' and political survival more often than not appeared to depend upon repudiation of the epithet."<sup>15</sup> And so his racist-sounding statements of the 1850s must be taken with a grain of salt:



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Nearly all of those statements were essentially disclaimers rather than affirmations. They indicated, for political reasons, the maximum that he was willing to deny the Negro and the minimum that he claimed for the Negro. They were concessions on points not at issue, designed to fortify him on the point that was at issue — namely, the extension of slavery . . . And words uttered in a context of such pressure may be less than reliable as indications of a man's lifetime attitude (original emphasis).<sup>16</sup>

Overall, wrote Fehrenbacher, "there is little evidence of racism as an attitude or racism as a mode of behavior in his relations with Negroes."<sup>17</sup>

Just a few months later, historian George Fredrickson came to different conclusions. Lincoln, wrote Fredrickson, was "neither a common Negrophobe nor a principled champion of racial equality."<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging "the political context" in which Lincoln worked, Fredrickson contended that "the position Lincoln was to take on the race question in the 1850s was not totally predetermined by political calculation." It was part of a "pattern of belief."<sup>19</sup>

Fredrickson suggested that Lincoln's formulation in the Lincoln-Douglas debates— "certainly the negro is not our equal in color—perhaps not in other respects"— provides a glimpse into gut-level feelings: though "tentative on the question of intellectual and moral distinctions," Lincoln's statement that blacks are "inferior in color" reveals a "strong

distaste for Negroid physical features and a powerful preference for white pigmentation as the human norm."<sup>20</sup> Fredrickson used the language of sociology—"somatic norm image"—to bolster this suggestion. He went on to suggest that Lincoln's friendly manner in his meetings with blacks such as Frederick Douglass resulted from "a depth of self-awareness that made it possible for him to control his prejudices precisely because he acknowledged their existence and recognized their irrational character."<sup>21</sup>

Above all, Fredrickson emphasized Lincoln's support for colonization as evidence that he "continued to his dying day to deny the possibility of racial harmony and equality in the United States and persisted in regarding colonization as the only real alternative to perpetual race conflict."<sup>22</sup> While acknowledging the evidence of Lincoln's growing support for black voting rights in 1864 and 1865, Fredrickson argued that the case of Louisiana, which figured most prominently in these developments, was special and atypical. He concluded by stating that "the deeply rooted attitudes and ideas of a lifetime do not change easily," while admitting that "all of this is frankly speculative."<sup>23</sup>

In 1981, historian LaWanda Cox examined Lincoln's presidential leadership vis-à-vis blacks. Her verdict on Lincoln's racial feelings was judicious and guardedly favorable: "Lincoln's much quoted statements of the 1850s," she observed, were "made under pressure of a political opposition seeking to exploit his basic equalitarianism as an affront to

white supremacy." But "in them can be seen a tentativeness in his acceptance of the prevailing concept of racial inferiority . . . an undercurrent of distaste for appeals to prejudice, and a precision in phrasing that more often than not delimited his concessions on the race issue."<sup>24</sup>

In 2000, Lerone Bennett, Jr. published his *magnum opus*: *Forced Into Glory*, one of the most emotional denunciations of Lincoln as a putative racist. In his 1968 magazine article, Bennett suggested that Lincoln had developed racist attitudes early in his childhood. In *Forced Into Glory*, Bennett shared a most revealing confidence: his own anti-Lincoln animus had developed in early childhood. "I was a child in whitest Mississippi," he wrote, "reading for my life, when I discovered that *everything* I had been told about Abraham Lincoln was a lie. Astounded, unable to believe White media or White textbooks, I embarked on a private study designed not to satisfy course requirements but to save my life (original emphasis)."<sup>25</sup>

Bennett concluded that "Lincoln must be seen as the embodiment, not the transcendence, of American Tradition of racism." He was a fraud: a reluctant emancipator who had to be forced into doing something noble, a bigot who wanted to deport the freed blacks *en masse*. "Lincoln still has something to say to us negatively," Bennett averred: he could stand for all time as the embodiment of racial oppression and lies, thus serving as an edifying and eternal target for exposure and de-bunking. "This, in fact, is the only power

the powerless have in history," wrote Bennett: "the power to say to the powerful and the comfortable that if you take a stand in history against us and against history, history will never forget or forgive you." And Lincoln's life by the standards of Bennett was unforgivable. "A choice for or against Lincoln today," he wrote, "is a choice for or against slavery," a choice "between humanity and White Supremacy, freedom and oppression, truth and lies."<sup>26</sup>

The unending dispute about Lincoln's racial attitudes has continued through the early twenty-first century. Here are some samples of recent opinion among Lincoln scholars.

In 2002, political philosopher William Lee Miller wrote that Lincoln

*opposed the extension of slavery, not primarily to protect the territories for white labor, as did many antislavery politicians, but primarily because of the monstrous injustice to the enslaved and the threat to the nation's moral foundations. That was a choice. He could have done otherwise, as did many Republicans. . . . Some treatments have said . . . that it was Lincoln's sharing in the pervasive racial prejudice of his environment that was "deep seated," but I do not see the evidence for that deep-seatedness. I would have said that his racial prejudices were conventional, opportunistic—and changeable. He did not give voice to the worst anti-Negro stereotypes, as not only Democrats but many Republicans did. And the*

*concessions to white prejudice he made regularly had a qualified, tentative cast; they were concessions made under polemical and political fire. And—this is a key disputed point—they did change in the changed conditions of the last years of his presidency.*<sup>27</sup>

In 2007, Allen C. Guelzo argued that the allegation that Lincoln was a racist was unconvincing: "Much as Lincoln doubted in the 1850s that there was much likelihood for civil or political equality for blacks, his doubts were expressed in terms of the historical circumstances of slavery and the structure of American law, not on some inherent black racial inferiority . . . Lincoln seems to have been noticeably free from any form of racial malevolence."<sup>28</sup>

Philip Shaw Paludan agreed: "It seems quite clear," he wrote, "that Lincoln thought free blacks were 'capable of thinking as white men.' His view of black abilities was environmental and not the frozen view of racial difference adopted by true racists."<sup>29</sup>

But historians Kenneth J. Winkle and James Oakes disagreed; they were convinced that Abraham Lincoln harbored deep bigotry. Winkle: "Lincoln imbibed his earliest attitudes toward slavery and race growing up in the slave state of Kentucky and the free states of Indiana and Illinois. He rose above the deepest prejudices he encountered there but never managed to overcome them all."<sup>30</sup> Oakes (on Lincoln's statement on race in his 1854 Peoria speech): "No doubt Lincoln was caving in to popular prejudices;

no doubt he shared many of the prejudices himself . . . It never seems to have occurred to Lincoln that the racial discrimination he endorsed might undermine the ability of blacks to pursue their happiness."<sup>31</sup>

Historian Michael Burlingame, in his acclaimed recent Lincoln biography, expressed a mildly ambiguous view of Lincoln's racial attitudes:

*Although neither Lincoln nor Douglas was a racial egalitarian, they differed sharply on race. Lincoln let slip the term nigger far less often than his opponent, and when he did use the word, it was usually in a context suggesting that he was paraphrasing Democrats. Unlike Douglas, he never claimed that his party was the white man's party; he seldom argued that slavery should be contained primarily to preserve the territories for whites; he did not raise the race issue except in response to Douglas's race-baiting; and Lincoln's statements regarding black inferiority were much more guarded, mild, and tentative than Douglas's blatant assertions of white superiority.*<sup>32</sup>



Stephen Douglas, #65

The debate about Lincoln's racial views will never end, for his feelings must guide us—and provoke us—in our never-ending quest to make American democracy as genuine as anyone can.

And my own conclusion? While I cannot prove the matter—nobody can—I believe that in all probability Lincoln had no racial bias. When the evidence (and this includes the most apparently damning sorts of evidence) is read within the fullest historical context, it makes no sense—at least to me—to conclude that Lincoln said what he said and did what he did if he felt any secret racial bigotry.

I have no doubt that my conclusions will result in much commentary.



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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), Vintage edition, 1973, 142.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 148-49.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>5</sup>David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 135.

<sup>6</sup>Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 384.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 385-86.

<sup>8</sup>Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 36-37.

<sup>9</sup>Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958), 236.

<sup>10</sup>Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 276.

<sup>11</sup>Harold M. Hyman, "Lincoln and Equal Rights for Negroes: The Irrelevancy of the 'Wadsworth Letter,'" *Civil War History* 12 (September 1966), 260, 262.

<sup>12</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony*, XXIII (February 1968), 36.

<sup>13</sup>Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Only His Stepchildren: Lincoln and the Negro," *Civil War History* 20 (December 1974), 300.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 300-301.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>18</sup>George M. Fredrickson, "A Man, But Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (February 1975), 39.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>24</sup>LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), 19-20.

<sup>25</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 2000), 1.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 625-626.

<sup>27</sup>William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 361, 364.

<sup>28</sup>Allen C. Guelzo, "Foreword: Was Lincoln a Racist?" in Brian R. Dirck, ed., *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), x, xii.

<sup>29</sup>Philip Shaw Paludan, "Greeley, Colonization, and a 'Deputation of Negroes,'" in *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>30</sup>Kenneth J. Winkle, "Paradox Though It May Seem: Lincoln on Antislavery, Race, and Union," in *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>31</sup>James Oakes, "Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, States' Rights, and Black Rights" in Eric Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 130.

<sup>32</sup>Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), I, 526.



## SOURCES OF LINCOLN'S GREATNESS: The Case for Books - The Case for Geometry

By Myron A. Marty

Abraham Lincoln's reputation as an orator and writer played a large part in his success in politics and as president. This widely accepted judgment has long inspired attempts to discover experiences in his past that explain his distinctive accomplishments.

Examining accounts of his formal education in what were called "blab" schools does not help much. In these schools the children read aloud from schoolbooks and passed them on to the next reader. An observation by Nathaniel Grigsby, a neighbor and in-law, however, hints at better things to come: "he was always at school and attentive to his studies he was always at the head of his class and progressed rapidly in all his studies". (sic) Still, the mature Lincoln described his education as "defective," attained "by littles."

Not helpful either is a look at Lincoln's early working life as a farmer and a flatboatman on the Mississippi River. But when he settled in New Salem, a village with a population fewer than one hundred, he climbed to higher rungs on an occupational ladder, working as a miller, store clerk, militia captain, merchant, and postmaster. On each rung he took advantage of opportunities to learn, and before long he was a surveyor, legislator, and at age twenty-eight a self-taught lawyer.

For more than a century, historians and biographers, looking beyond his meager schooling and early career, have had their say on the foundation of Lincoln's greatness. Now come a literature professor, a lawyer, and a retired electrical engineer to offer new, strikingly different perspectives on that foundation.

Robert Bray, a literature professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, explores what the contents and styles of books "assimilated into his being," (in William Herndon's apt phrase) contributed to Lincoln's "'liberal arts education' and thereby to his political artistry." Lincoln's habit of reading, Bray continues, "concentrated a naturally powerful mind, and . . . provided models of voice and diction to one who had inborn talent as a storyteller and a near-flawless memory and therefore needed only the stimulus of literary greatness, and emulative practice, to emerge as a great writer himself."

To support his thesis, Bray takes readers on a boyhood to maturity "reading with Lincoln" journey, identifying what Lincoln read and suggesting the effects on his thought and actions.<sup>1</sup>

David Hirsch and Dan Van Haften advance a much narrower thesis in *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason*. In the first paragraph of their introduction, they unabashedly assert: "Almost any literate person can become an Abraham Lincoln. We show how Lincoln's own literacy was hard-won; it is hard to imagine anyone more fully leveraging self-education than Abraham Lincoln."

They have discovered, they claim, precisely how Lincoln put together arguments and composed speeches. While "Lincoln possessed talent and intellect, his self-development was more of an engineering accomplishment than an exercise of innate talent." They lay out, chapter-by-chapter, "the elements of this accomplishment."

Bray makes no such bold claim in demonstrating that books concentrated Lincoln's naturally powerful mind and his lifelong habit of reading provided the stimulus of literary greatness and enabled him to become a great writer himself.

His extensive research into Lincoln's reading habits equips him to identify books he read at every stage of his life. In his boyhood and adolescence, Lincoln is known to have read the Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and perhaps a dozen other books available in his neighborhood, including *Aesop's Fables* and Parson Weems's *Life of George Washington*. He seems to have profited most from Lindley Murray's *English Reader*, a collection of eighty "middling works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with occasional bows to Milton and Pope."

Bray writes of other works Lincoln read, but he acknowledges that there are "no highways in the research odyssey into Lincoln's early life, only twisting game paths often overgrown with the brush of time and obscure in the long sundown of memory." Nonetheless, he is on solid ground in citing these and other books Lincoln read. At New Salem, for example, Lincoln mastered Samuel Kirkham's *English Grammar*, and beginning at "almost the zero point" he did the same, at age twenty-five, with Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. Being mathematically grounded, they were more difficult for him than grammar.

By then Lincoln was influenced by the writings of Thomas Paine, who alluded to the value of Euclid's work, "praising [his *Elements*] as a book of self-evident demonstration, entirely independent of its author and of everything relating to time, place and circumstance." This lends credibility to the thesis advanced by Hirsch and van Haften.

In *The Age of Reason*, Paine "took deadly aim at Christian credulity" through a direct factual and textual analysis of the *Bible*. That compels Bray to assess Lincoln's religious skepticism, and he does so with admirable sensitivity. There is little doubt that Lincoln, yet a young man, tempered his skepticism to prevent it from hindering his advancement in public life.



Thomas Paine

Showing the breadth of Lincoln's reading, Bray outlines Lincoln's encounters with other writers, including Edward Gibbon, author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and French philosophers Constantine de Volney and Voltaire. Reflecting his interest in poetry, he was moved by the work of the renowned poet William Cullen Bryant.



Edward Gibbon

Bray finds it ironic, even paradoxical, that Lincoln rarely referred to any poet, "no matter his mode of writing or his audience, "apparently believing that the use of the language that meant most to [him] was not useful to him in his own political life." 82

At this point, Robert Bray the professor of literature, continues with Lincoln-related critiques of the works

of writers Lincoln is known to have read: Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, (Lincoln memorized and recited substantial portions of his work), Alexander Pope, Lord Byron, Robert Browning, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He also discourses at some length on how Lincoln's immersion in *Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England* played a major role in his becoming a lawyer.

Bray's professional critiques continue on other writers, particularly those who wrote on slavery, such as Hinton Rowan Helper, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing. The book concludes with a treatise on the works of Shakespeare in Lincoln's thought and conversations.

These highly literary portions of the book are the most interesting to read and the most difficult to encapsulate in a review. So my advice is: "read the book."

*Abraham Lincoln and the Logic of Reason* casts Lincoln in a far different light. To David Hirsch and Dan Van Haften it does not seem to matter that he absorbed much from the books he read—from *Aesop's Fables* to Shakespeare and all the rest identified by Bray. It matters only that he applied what he learned from the first six books, of thirteen, in *Elements*<sup>ii</sup> by the Greek mathematician Euclid (ca. 300 B.C.E.)

Although Lincoln did not elaborate on the influence of Euclid's *Elements* on his thought and life, in an autobiographical sketch prepared for John L. Scripps, a journalist writing a campaign biography (c. June 1860), he wrote, "He studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid since he was a member of Congress [1847-49]. He regrets his want of education and does what he can to supply the want."<sup>iii</sup>

But to the authors of this book, it is not the mention of Euclid that matters, but Lincoln's application of Euclid's *Elements* to his speeches and writings. Lincoln's education, formal and informal, they assert, can be divided into five categories:

- logical reasoning
- oral communication
- conflict resolution
- general education
- legal education

If readers of this review, or of the book, are puzzled by these paragraphs, as I am, they may or may not be helped by the authors' attempt to relieve that puzzlement by presenting tables of Lincoln's speeches and writings that follow this outline, based on Euclid Book 1, Proposition 1:

Element 1. Enunciation

"The enunciation states what is **given** and what is **sought** from it."

Element 2. Exposition

"The exposition takes separately what is given and prepares it in advance for use in the investigation."

Element 3. Specification

"The specification takes separately the thing that is sought and makes clear precisely what it is."

Element 4. Construction

"The construction adds what is lacking in the given for finding what is sought."

Element 5. Proof

"The proof draws the proposed inference by reasoning scientifically from the propositions that have been admitted."

Element 6. Conclusion

"The conclusion reverts to the enunciation, confirming what has been proved."

A mathematical summary appears beneath each Element. Under "Conclusion," for example, it reads: "Therefore the triangle ABC is equilateral, and it has been constructed on the given finite straight line AB (Being) what it was supposed to do."

In the chapters that follow, Hirsch and Van Haften analyze some fifteen Lincoln letters and speeches, using what might be called the Euclidian formula. They also subject the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson's Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, as well as writings of Isaac Newton and Aristotle to the same analysis.

One can admire the passion and convictions of the authors, but that does not require accepting their thesis of the points they make in attempts to support it. Here are some reasons:

First, it is hard to imagine the creative mind of Abraham Lincoln conceiving his work according to the Euclidian formula, even though he might have been subconsciously influenced by it.

Moreover, writers who never heard of the Euclidian formula construct their work along similar lines by stating a thesis, constructing their case to support it, and judging its plausibility or defensibility.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that some scholars, such as Michael Burlingame in his recent two-volume work, include no reference to Euclid. He escapes mention also in first-rate biographies by Richard Carwardine, David Donald, Allen Guelzo, and William Lee Miller, as well as in Harold Holzer's book on Lincoln's address at Cooper Union. Mark Steiner, in *An Honest Calling: The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln*, a groundbreaking work, says nothing about Euclid (and this book does not even make it into Hirsch and Van Haften's bibliography). Although Douglas L. Wilson made a passing reference to Lincoln's interest in Euclid in *Honor's Voice*, he was not accorded even that much in Wilson's *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, the best recent analysis of Lincoln's writings.



Euclid



Aesop



John Bunyan

The influence of Euclidian principles on Lincoln's speaking and writing is included in several books where one would expect it. Ronald C. White, in his biography, notes that Lincoln "bought a copy of Euclid's *Elements* and set himself the task of memorizing the Greek mathematician's geometrical theorems." In *Our Eloquent President*, White notes that proposition was a favorite word, which he had used nearly three hundred times in addresses and letters before Gettysburg." Gabor Boritt, in *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* remarks that Lincoln's opening sentence at Gettysburg "led with the phrase 'dedicated to the proposition,' the word 'proposition' coming from his study of Euclid's geometry, something that had to be proven."

Garry Wills offers the most detailed analysis of Lincoln's best-known public address, and he puts the Euclid question into a larger context. "[Lincoln] not only read aloud, to think his way into sounds, but wrote as a way of ordering thought. . . . He was proud of the mastery he achieved over Euclid's *Elements*, which awed Herndon and others. He loved the study of grammar, which some think the most arid of subjects." Citing an observation by Herndon, Wills notes that Lincoln was "laboriously precise in his choice of words. He would have agreed with Mark Twain that the difference between the right word and the nearly right one is that between the lightning and the lightning bug."

*Abraham Lincoln and the Logic of Reasoning* is useful for gaining another perspective on Lincoln's rhetorical prowess, but it would be more so if the authors had restrained their enthusiasm for what they claim as their discovery and acknowledged that Abraham Lincoln's speeches and writing cannot be compressed into a formula. Had they shown the caution displayed by Robert Bray in making assertions about what Lincoln read, they could have produced a more plausible book. As it stands, its main value may be a byproduct of their efforts: their exposition on various strategies in Abraham Lincoln's law practice.

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#### Reading with Lincoln:

Robert Bray: Southern Illinois University Press: 2010: 261 pages.

#### Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason:

David Hirsch and Dan Van Haften: Foreword by Frank J. Williams: Savas Beatie: 2011: 439 pages

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#### Notes:

<sup>i</sup> In the appendix, Bray presents a list that draws upon his earlier work, "What Abraham Lincoln Read: An Annotated and Evaluative Bibliography." The appendix lists only those books ranked as "A" (very likely read) or "B" (somewhat likely read). The complete list ranks some also as C (somewhat unlikely) and D (very unlikely). For each entry Bray lists the author/title, original publication date, the genre, when it was reportedly read, its provenance, and its ranking. The heavily annotated list appeared in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 28, No.2, Summer 2007. It is available online at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/28.2/bray.html>. This journal article prompted me to purchase *Reading with Lincoln*.

<sup>ii</sup> In *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 10, the six books appear on first 126 pages of the 396 in the complete work. Look at them and see that mastering them was no small accomplishment.

<sup>iii</sup> Frank J. Williams, drawing on the biography of Lincoln by William Herndon and Jesse Weik, notes: "While on the [Illinois Eighth Judicial] circuit, Lincoln took up the study of the first six books of Euclid, proving theorems amid the chaos and revelry of the country taverns. Sometimes for amusement he would attempt to force a complicated political issue into a rigid formula of geometry, thus deriving from the cold logic of mathematics a more lucid oral style. Joseph R. Forniari and Sara Vaughn Gabbard eds. *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865*. (Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 126-27.



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