



Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Plaza Lesson Plan

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“There I grew up.” Abraham Lincoln in 1859

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) was one of America’s greatest presidents. The character and strengths he demonstrated throughout his presidency found their roots in what is now Spencer County in southern Indiana. From 1816 to 1830, from ages seven to twenty-one, Lincoln roamed these woods, cut down trees, and worked the fields of the family farm near Little Pigeon Creek. Here grew his love of learning, his skillful use of language and storytelling, his sense of fairness, his opposition to slavery, and his ability to lead. As a lawyer and politician and ultimately as president of the United States during the Civil War, these values, strengths, and abilities served Lincoln well.

“A(braham) though very young, was large of his age, and had an axe put into his hands at once.” Abraham Lincoln in 1860

In 1816, Abraham Lincoln, at the age of seven, moved from Kentucky to Indiana with his father, Thomas Lincoln, his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and his sister, Sarah. He later described their Indiana home as “a wild region with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods.” Though only seven, he worked beside his father on the family farm near here clearing underbrush, carrying water, and trimming branches from the tress his father had cut down. He learned the value of hard work, something he kept with him all his life.

“All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.” Attributed to Abraham Lincoln by biographer J.G. Holland in 1866

Lincoln was fortunate to be raised by two strong, loving women. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, was thought by her neighbors to be an intelligent woman. She was **kind** and caring and encouraged Abe’s abilities and his desire for knowledge. She died, though, after living less than two years in Indiana. His father married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow, in 1819. She brought order to the motherless household and became the ten-year-old Lincoln’s strong supporter. Lincoln wrote later in life, “She proved a good and kind mother.”

“I view [education] as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” Abraham Lincoln in 1832

Most of Lincoln’s education came not from the schoolroom but from his own interest in learning. He was primarily self-taught. Though he attended several small schools for short periods of time, he said, “The aggregate of all [my] schooling did not amount to one year.” His mother and neighbors encouraged him to read and to spell, and he said that somehow “he learned to read and to write and to cipher to the Rule of Three.” He read everything he could get his hands on, including newspapers and such works as the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and *Aesop’s Fables*.

“His mind & the Ambition of the man soared above us.” Nathaniel Grigsby in 1865

Lincoln’s self-confidence, leadership skills, and sense of fairness to all people were nurtured in Indiana. His childhood friend, Nathaniel Grigsby, said that other boys looked up to Abraham. “He naturally assumed the leadership of the boys. He read & thoroughly read his books whilst we played. Hence he was above us and became our guide and leader.” He was well liked and trusted. The characteristics that he began to develop in those years were critical to his ability to lead the country through the struggles of the Civil War.

**“ . . . while nature and opportunity gave him talent and great success at story-telling and extemporaneous talking, he learned to write—learned to appreciate the value of the pen.”
John G. Nicolay, Private Secretary to Lincoln, in 1894**

In Indiana, Lincoln came to understand the power of the spoken word. He had a quick wit and became a great storyteller. He listened to the stories of his father and other adults in the community, he memorized whole sermons from church, and he repeated these stories and sermons to the great delight of his friends. He also attended political debates and practiced writing in a copybook. As president of the United States, he used wit and humor to ease a tense moment in debate or to help make a point. Lincoln’s ability to inspire people with both spoken and written words was a key to his success as president.

“In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with the bitterest agony I have had experience enough to know what I say.” Abraham Lincoln in a letter to Fanny McCullough in 1862

The pain of loss came early to Lincoln, and through it he learned compassion for others. When he was nine years old, his mother became sick and died within a week from the frontier illness called “milk sickness”. When he was eighteen, his sister, Sarah, died shortly after childbirth along with her infant. The understanding that grew out of experiences such as these would help him later as president to provide comfort to so many people who lost family members during the Civil War.

**“When (Lincoln) was nineteen. . . he made his first trip upon a flat-boat to New-Orleans.”
Abraham Lincoln in 1860**

While working away from the family farm, he became aware of how people lived and worked beyond Indiana. He worked as a ferryman on the Ohio River. In 1828, he and the son of the owner of a flat-boat took the boat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans and also sold cargo along the way. On the trip he encountered new people, new places, and varied ideas. While Lincoln had seen slavery as a young boy in Kentucky, the brutal picture of slavery that he saw on this trip to New Orleans at the age of nineteen was something that he never forgot.

“ . . . I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.” Abraham Lincoln in 1832

Lincoln’s experiences in Indiana inspired service to his country and a willingness to stand up for his beliefs in the face of conflict. In 1830, the Lincolns moved to Illinois, where Abraham helped them settle on their land. Soon he left the farm for New Salem to pursue a new life. Settling in Springfield in 1837, he became a successful lawyer. He served four terms in the Illinois Legislature

and one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. As president of the United States, he led the country through the Civil War and kept the Union together. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the areas of the Confederacy that were in rebellion, and said, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." His proposals for the South in the post war period, although unfulfilled after his death, focused on healing the wounds of the war and treating all the people of the South with justice and fairness.