



## **Lincoln's Boyhood in Indiana**

*My childhood-home I see again,  
And gladden with the view:  
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,  
There's sadness in it too.*  
--Abraham Lincoln, 1845

Abraham Lincoln, revered among the greatest Americans, was shaped in large measure by his years in Indiana. The people he knew here and the things he experienced stayed with him throughout his life. His sense of honesty, his pursuit of education and learning, his respect for hard work, his compassion, and his notions of right and wrong were born of this place and time.

In the fall of 1816 Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln packed their belongings and two children--Sarah, age nine, and Abraham, age seven--and left their Kentucky home bound for the new frontier of southern Indiana. Arriving at his 160-acre claim near the Little Pigeon Creek in December, Thomas quickly set about building a cabin and carving a new life from the "wild region," as Abraham once described the largely unsettled Indiana woodlands.

In much of the work Thomas was assisted by his son. As he grew older, Abraham increased in his skill with the plow and, especially, the axe. He later recalled how he "was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument."

For the first two years in Indiana, life was good for the Lincolns. In the fall of 1818, when Abraham was nine, Nancy Hanks Lincoln went to tend to some neighbors ill with milk sickness and herself became a victim. It was a tragic event for the family, and the first of many losses Abraham would endure over his lifetime. Thomas and Abraham made a rough wooden coffin for her burial, and the family said their last farewells to their beloved wife and mother.

Within a year Thomas made a visit to Kentucky, where he married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow he had known for many years. Sarah brought into the household her three children, aged 12, 8, and 5, a wagonload of furniture, and many books. Sarah proved to be a kind stepmother. Under her love and guidance, the two families became one.

In frontier Indiana, opportunities for formal education were few-and there was endless farm work to be done. Lincoln described his education by saying:

"There were some schools, so called, but no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond '*readin, writin, and cipherin,*' to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course, when I came of age, I did not know much. Still, somehow I could read, write, and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all."

Abraham's time spent in classrooms totaled about one year. Books and paper were hard to come by, and he made his own math textbook. He would walk a long way to borrow books. Some of the ones he read

included *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Aesop's Fables*. He also knew the Bible thoroughly, and many years later told the New Jersey Senate about another book that greatly impacted him:

“May I be pardoned if, on this occasion, I mention that away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got a hold of a small book, such a one as few of the younger members have seen, Weems’ *Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country. . . and you all know, for you have all been boys, how these early impressions last longer than any others. I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for.”

By all accounts, he loved to read and could often be seen carrying a book as well as his axe. By age 16 Abraham was tall and muscular with a keen intellect. Joining in informal political discussions at Gentry's store, Abraham honed his debating skills. In 1828 Abraham got a job piloting a flatboat loaded with produce down the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to New Orleans. There he witnessed a slave auction on the docks, an experience that greatly disturbed him-and that he would never forget.

Two years later, the Lincoln family left for Illinois, where Abraham spent his next 30 years.

#### **Resources:**

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/ebooks/records/eep7832.html> (Most of the above information is directly from this site.)

[http://www.nps.gov/libo/forteachers/upload/teacher\\_packet.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/libo/forteachers/upload/teacher_packet.pdf)

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2009/02/young-abraham-lincoln-child-of-the-american-frontier/>

<http://www.finebooksmagazine.com/issue/200902/lincoln-1.phtml>

<http://www.apples4theteacher.com/holidays/presidents-day/abraham-lincoln/biography/lincolns-childhood.html>

World Book 2005