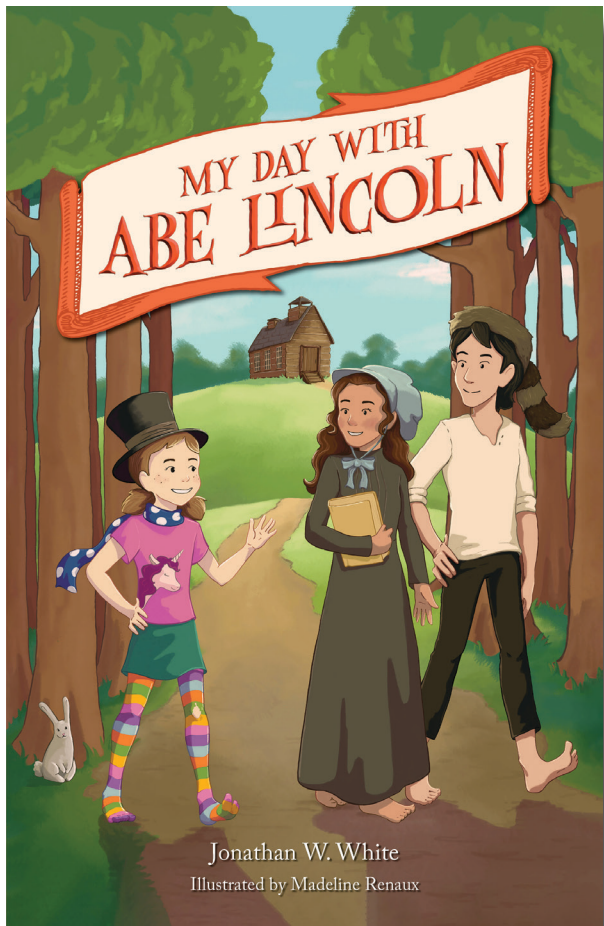


Jonathan W. White

Illustrated by Madeline Renaux

Teacher's Guide for *My Day with Abe Lincoln*

By Jonathan W. White



My Day with Abe Lincoln is a historical fantasy-fiction chapter books for kids, ages 6 to 10, that tells the story of a third grader named Lucy who travels back in time when she puts on a magic top hat. While she does not yet know it, her mission is to give the hat to a young Abe Lincoln.

The story is rooted in years of historical research. It opens on a Monday morning when Lucy does not want to go to school. During a tantrum she dresses in a silly outfit, and when she puts on her brother's top hat from his new magic set, she is transported to a dirt path in Spencer County, Indiana, in the 1820s, where she meets two children, Abe and Sarah Lincoln, as they are on their way to school. Lucy goes with them and experiences what a one-room schoolhouse would have been like in frontier Indiana.

Many of the details in the narrative are true to the historical record. The events that Lucy witnesses or hears about are also based on actual historical events, and much of the dialogue consists of words that were spoken by Lincoln or his family. For the sake of the narrative—and being able to bring many aspects of Lincoln's life together in a short space—*My Day with Abe Lincoln* blends moments that took place at different times into one day. Many of the aspects of Lincoln's life and character that come out in the story also point forward to his time as president.

This guide will teach parents and teachers the history behind the story and provides questions that teachers can use in classroom discussion. In several places, the guide reproduces primary source documents that can be shared and discussed with students in conjunction with the story.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE BOOK

1. HARD WORK AND EDUCATION

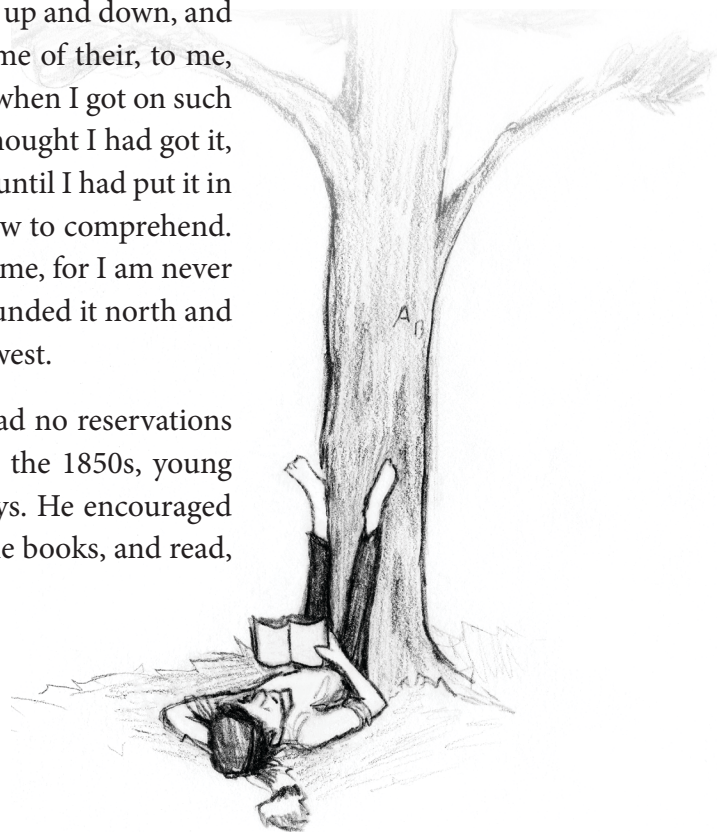
Abraham Lincoln saw reading and education as pathways out of poverty and manual labor. As a boy and young man, Abe did a lot of farm chores for neighbors. For one neighbor he cut corn for ten cents per day. For another local farmer he split rails and built fences, dug wells, and cleared land for a quarter a day. For another farmer he earned 31 cents per day butchering hogs. Sometimes he worked for corn instead of cash. Abe later said that butchering pigs was “the roughest work a young man could be made to do.” He hated doing farm chores and he worked hard in school so that he would be able to use his mind rather than his hands when he grew up. When Lincoln first ran for public office in 1832, he told the people of his community that education is “the most important subject we as a people can be engaged in.”

Lincoln read any chance he got. He enjoyed reading history, poetry, the Bible, Shakespeare, and newspapers. He was not much of a fan of fiction, though, telling one friend “that he had never read a novel clear through.” When he was about fourteen, he borrowed a copy of David Ramsay’s *The Life of George Washington* (1807) from a neighbor named Josiah Crawford. The book got wet from rain while it was in the Lincoln cabin, and Crawford required the young Lincoln to cut corn for three days to pay for the book.

For his entire life Lincoln strove to understand difficult concepts. In 1860, he told a reporter:

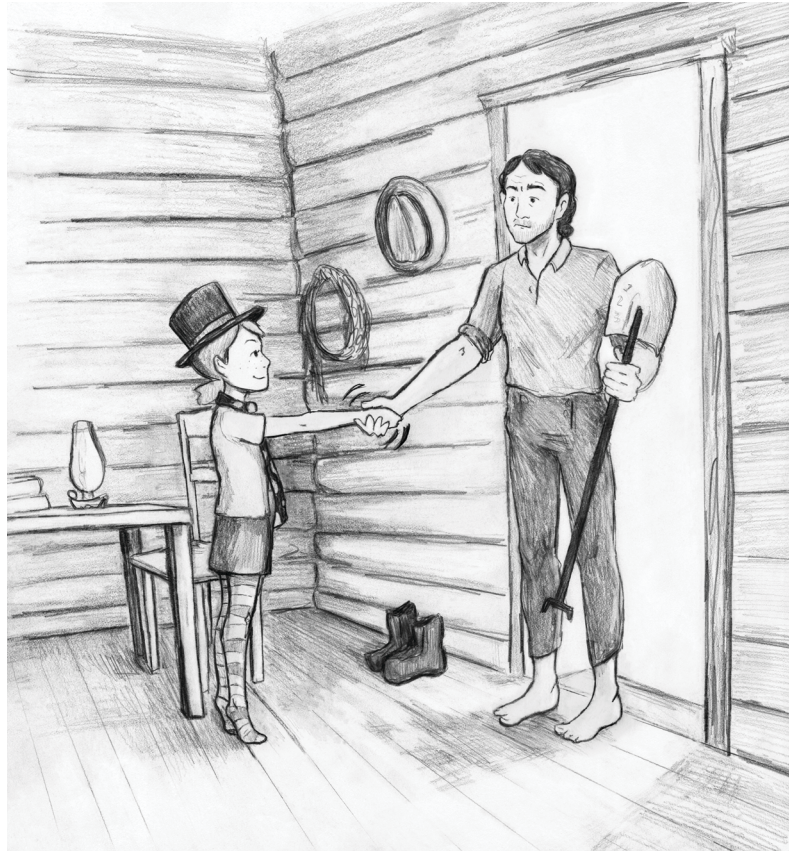
I can say this, that among my earliest recollections, I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don’t think I ever got angry at anything else in my life. But that always disturbed my temper, and has ever since. I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk of an evening with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck by me, for I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it north and bounded it south and bounded it east and bounded it west.

While Lincoln did not enjoy working with his hands, he had no reservations about hard work with his mind. As a lawyer in Illinois in the 1850s, young men would often ask him how they could become attorneys. He encouraged them to teach themselves, just as he was self-taught. “Get the books, and read, and study them carefully,” he told one young man. “Work, work, work, is the main thing.” To another, he said, “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed, is more important than any other one thing.”



2. SHAKING HANDS

Handshaking was an important part of Lincoln's adult life. He shook tens of thousands of hands during his presidency, including of men and women of all races and classes. (On one occasion he shook 2000 hands and bowed 2600 times in two hours.) As I show in my book, *A House Built By Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House* (2022), many of Lincoln's black visitors were touched by how he treated them with dignity and respect, and how he shook their hands without making any acknowledgement of their race or skin color. Lincoln shook the hand of nearly every African American he met—something that few white Americans of the era would have done. In *A House Built By Slaves*, I conclude, "In almost every instance he appears to have initiated the human contact. Shaking hands, for Lincoln, could be an understandably



tiresome chore. When he shook hands, one observer noted, 'he does it with a hearty will, in which his entire body joins' so that 'he is more weary after receiving a hundred people than some public men we could all name after being shaken by a thousand.' And yet he warmly, kindly, eagerly, and repeatedly grasped the hands of his black guests." This gesture had great symbolic meaning—and it is something he may have learned as a child, perhaps even in Mr. Crawford's school.

By some accounts, Lincoln was so fully invested when he shook people's hands that he may have looked a little funny when he did it. On March 22, 1861, the famous author Herman Melville attended a public reception at the White House where, he said, Lincoln "shook hands like a good fellow—working hard at it like a man sawing wood at so much per cord."

CHAPTER 1. FREDDIE'S MAGIC HAT

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you ever had a day when you didn't want to go to school? What did you do?
2. Do you have any siblings? Have you ever taken something from them without asking? What happened?



CHAPTER 2. ABE AND SARAH

Historical Background:

The Lincoln family moved from the slave state of Kentucky to the new free state of Indiana in 1817, as Lincoln later explained, "partly on account of slavery, but chiefly on account of the difficulty of land titles in Kentucky." Abe's father, Thomas, had been on the losing end of several lawsuits involving land claims in Kentucky, and he wanted to move to Indiana, where the land had been surveyed by the Federal government. Thomas purchased 160 acres and built a cabin about a mile from a water source. (The story that appears later in the book about the cat going with Lincoln to get water was recalled by Lincoln's youngest stepsister, Matilda Johnston Moore, in 1865.)

According to Lincoln's father, Thomas, Abe really did wear a sunbonnet on his first day of school, and he really did cry when he got home that afternoon.

Questions for Discussion:

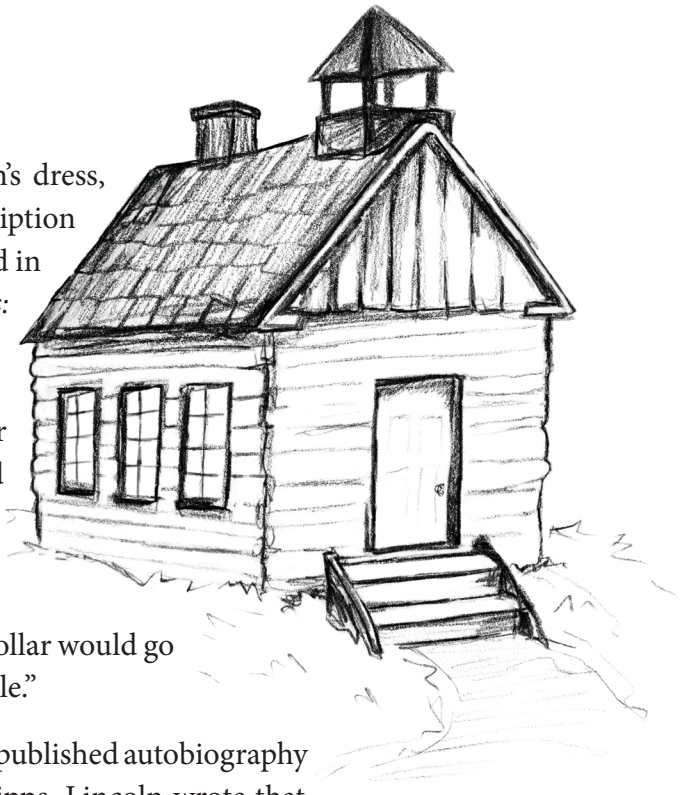
1. What would you think if you magically traveled to another time and place?
2. What do you like to know when you meet someone new?
3. Have you ever been embarrassed at school, like Abe was in his sunbonnet? How did you respond?



CHAPTER 3. MR. CRAWFORD

Historical Background:

The description of the schoolroom—including the children’s dress, learning, and play—is based on Michael Burlingame’s description in *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2009) and the recollections found in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis’s *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (1997). Lincoln’s teacher, Andrew Crawford, really did want his students to learn manners. Nathaniel Grigsby later remembered: “We only wrote—spelled & ciphered—. We had Spelling Matches frequently—Abe always ahead of all the classes he Ever was in—When we went to Crawford he tried to learn us manners. &c. He would ask one of the schollars to retire from the School room—Come in and then some schollar would go around and introduce him to all the Schollars—male & female.”



Lincoln always regretted his lack of formal education. In an unpublished autobiography he wrote about June 1860 for the journalist John Locke Scripps, Lincoln wrote that while he was in Indiana he “went to A.B.C. schools by littles,” where he studied under three teachers: Andrew Crawford, James Swaney, and Azel W. Dorsey. Writing in the third person, Lincoln said that he

now thinks that the agregate of all his schooling did not amount to one year. He was never in a college or Academy as a student; and never inside of a college or academy building till since he had a law-license. What he has in the way of education, he has picked up. After he was twentythree, and had separated from his father, he studied English grammar, imperfectly of course, but so as to speak and write as well as he now does. He studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid, since he was a member of Congress. He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.

In the lead up to his debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Galesburg, Illinois, on October 7, 1858, Lincoln had to pass through a window in Old Main, the largest building on Knox College’s campus, in order to get onto the platform. He joked, “At last I have gone through . . . college.” In 1861, Lincoln told a college graduate that he “always regretted the want of a college education. Those who have it should thank God for it.”

We don’t know for certain whether Lincoln read *The Columbian Orator*, a popular textbook that reproduced excerpts from speeches, poems, plays, and other famous writings. First published in 1797, and in wide use in American schools into the 1820s, at least one acquaintance claimed that Lincoln read it. *The Columbian Orator* was highly influential in Frederick Douglass’s life and thinking for its powerful abolitionist arguments. When Douglass was about 12 years old, he obtained a copy and “read [it] over and over again with unabated interest.” Douglass was moved by its “bold denunciation of slavery, and . . . powerful vindication of human rights,” saying, “The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. . . . The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery.”

As a boy and young man, Lincoln was a strong and skilled wrestler. One wrestling match in New Salem, Illinois, with a rowdy gang led by a man named Jack Armstrong, may have been instrumental in jumpstarting Lincoln's political career. During a brief period as a militia officer in 1832, one friend said, "he had the reputation of being the best wrestler in the army—he could generally throw down anybody he came across" (although he did lose one big wrestling match during the Black Hawk War). During the Civil War, when someone told Lincoln that George Washington had been a wrestler, he replied good naturedly: "If George was loafing around here now, I should be glad to have a tussle with him, and I rather believe that one of the plain people of Illinois would be able to manage the aristocrat of old Virginia."

Questions for Discussion:

1. How are your school and classrooms different from schools during Abe Lincoln's childhood? Can you think of similarities?
2. Do you think it would have been easier or harder to learn in a one-room schoolhouse?
3. Would you have liked learning in a one-room schoolhouse?

CHAPTER 4. THE SPELLING BEE

Historical Background:

As will become clear in chapter 9, Abraham Lincoln was a bad speller his whole life. As the Republican candidate for president in 1860, he didn't know how to spell "wizard." On December 20, 1859, shortly before becoming the Republican nominee for president, Lincoln wrote a brief autobiography for journalist Jesse W. Fell, in which he wrote of his education in Indiana:

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 so-journ in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard. 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. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.



(The “rule of three” is a method of solving mathematical problems in which the numbers have a proportional relationship.)

Anna Roby told the spelling bee story to Lincoln’s law partner, William H. Herndon, in September 1865:

I knew Mr L well—he and I went to school together—I was 15 ys old—Lincoln about the same age—we went to school to Crawford in 1822 or 3 I think—I used Websters Spelling book—Lincoln the same—One day Crawford put a word to us to Spell: the word to Spell was *defied*. Crawford said if we did not spell it he would keep us in school all day & night—we all missed the word—Couldn’t Spell it. We spelled the word Every way but the right way—. I saw Lincoln at the window: he had his finger On his Eye and a smile on his face. I instantly took the hint that I must change the letter y into an I. Hence I Spelled the word—the class let out. I felt grateful to Lincoln for this Simple thing. Abe was a good—an Excellent boy.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is your hardest subject in school? What can you do to improve at it?
2. Do you think it was cheating for Abe to help Anna get the answer?

CHAPTER 5. BACK TO THE WOODS

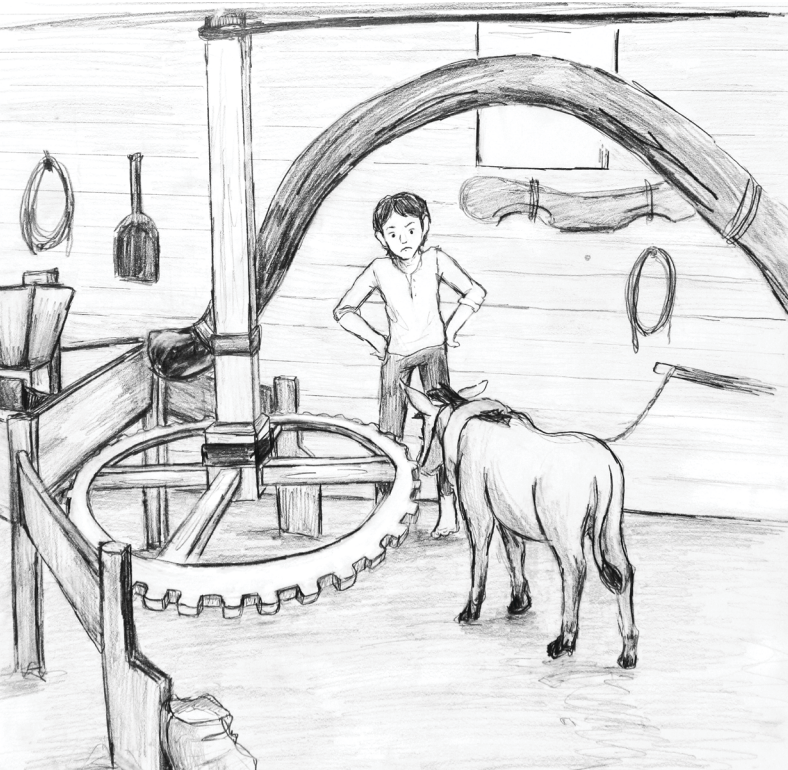
Historical Background:

In his autobiography for Jesse W. Fell, Lincoln described Spencer County as “a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up.” Lincoln’s stepmother, Sally Lincoln, also said, “when I landed in Indiana—The country was wild—and desolate.”

The story of Noah Gordon’s gristmill appeared in a brief autobiography Lincoln wrote for journalist John Locke Scripps about June 1860. In third person, Lincoln wrote: “In his tenth year he was kicked by a

horse, and apparently killed for a time.” According to William H. Herndon, Lincoln “considered this one of the remarkable incidents of his life. He often referred to it, and we had many discussions in our law office over the psychological phenomena involved in the operation.”

The stories about the turtles and the essay on animal cruelty come from Lincoln’s schoolmate Nathaniel Grigsby, who remembered in September 1865: “Lincoln while going to School to Crawford would write short sentences against cruelty to animals. We were in the habit of catching Turrapins—a Kind of turtle and put fire on their back and Lincoln would Chide us—tell us it was wrong—would write against



it . . . Essays & Poetry were not taught in the school—Abe took it up of his own accord. He wrote a good Composition against Cruelty to animals whilst going to Dorsy and Swany.” According to an article published in 1873, Lincoln’s stepbrother John D. Johnston once “threw a terrapin against a tree, and crushed its shell. Abe saw its sufferings, and preached upon the spot a sermon against cruelty, ‘contending that the life of an ant is as sweet to it as ours is to us.’”



Austin Gollaher later told the story of Lincoln falling into Knob Creek.

While we were wandering up and down the little stream called Knob Creek Abe said: “Right up there”—pointing to the east—“we saw a covey of partridges yesterday. Let’s go over and get some of them.” The stream was swollen and was too wide for us to jump across. Finally, we saw a narrow foot-log, and we concluded to try it. It was narrow, but Abe said, “Let’s coon it” [meaning, crawl like a racoon].

I went first and reached the other side all right. Abe went about half-way across, when he got scared and began trembling. I hollered to him, “Don’t look down nor up nor sideways, but look right at me and hold on tight!” But he fell off into the creek, and, as the water was about seven or eight feet deep, and I could not swim, and neither could Abe, I knew it would do no good for me to go in after him.

So I got a stick—a long water sprout—and held it out to him. He came up, grabbed with both hands, and I put the stick into his hands. He clung to it, and I pulled him out on the bank, almost dead. I got him by the arms and shook him well, and then rolled him on the ground, when the water poured out of his mouth.

He was all right very soon. We promised each other that we would never tell anybody about it, and never did for years. I never told any one of it until after Lincoln was killed.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you ever moved to a new place? What was it like? What do you think it was like for Abe and Sarah to move to the wilderness in Indiana in 1817?
2. How do you think our country would be different if Abe had died when he fell in the creek, or when he was kicked in the head by the horse?
3. What do the stories in this chapter tell us about Abe’s childhood, and life on the frontier in the United States about 200 years ago?



CHAPTER 6. SQUIRREL

Historical Background:

A recreation of the Lincolns' cabin is now managed by the National Park Service at the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Lincoln City, Indiana. Lincoln's poetry, including the misspellings, appeared in the copybook Lincoln kept when he was about fifteen years old (shortly after this story would have taken place).

Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died in October 1818 of a disease called "milk sickness." (Several other members of the community died about that time as well.) In 1819, Thomas left the children in Indiana and returned to Kentucky, where he proposed to an old acquaintance, Sarah Bush Johnston—the widow of the jailor in Elizabethtown. They were married in December 1819. Thomas was gone for so long that, according to one source, the "children had given him up as having been killed by some wild animal."



When Sally came to Indiana, she brought her three children with her. For the sake of simplicity, her children—John, Elizabeth, and Matilda—have been excluded from this story. (I've also omitted Abe's cousin, Dennis Hanks, who lived with the Lincolns during this time.) In historical scholarship, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln is most often known as "Sarah," but to avoid confusion with Abe's sister, she goes by "Sally" in the story. In at least two written sources, Lincoln called her "Sally," and several people quoted in *Herndon's Informants* also called her that.

When Sally arrived in Indiana, she found Abe, Sarah, and their cousin Dennis Hanks living in squalor. One source said, "They had become almost nude for the want of clothes and their stomachs became leathery from the want of food." Sally later remembered washing and cleaning them. She told William H. Herndon, "I dressed Abe & his sister up—looked more human." In order to make the place more civilized, she had Thomas and the boys install a wood floor and front door in the cabin.

According to historian Michael Burlingame, Sally "was a good cook, though her culinary skill was wasted on Abe, whom she described as 'a moderate Eater' who obediently 'ate what was set before him, making no complaint: he seemed Careless about this.' . . . She probably served him the customary pioneer diet in Indiana, which consisted of cornbread, mush and milk, pork, chickens, quail, squirrels and wild turkeys." On rare occasions Sally made gingerbread, which Lincoln later called "our biggest treat."

Lincoln grew to love his stepmother, telling one friend that she "had been his best Friend in this world & that no Son could love a Mother more than he loved her." Despite the pain of having lost his own mother when he was nine, Lincoln came to call Sally, "Mama." For her part, Sally, too, loved Abe. In September 1865, she told William H. Herndon, "I had a son John [D. Johnston] who was raised with Abe[.] Both were

good boys, but I must Say—both now being dead that Abe was the best boy I Ever Saw or Ever Expect to see.” She added, “He was the best boy I ever saw. He read all the books he could lay his hands on.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. How was Abe’s home similar or different from where you live?
2. What was Abe’s relationship like with his stepmom, Sally?
3. What would you do if you were offered a food you did not like at a friend’s house—like squirrel?

CHAPTER 7. MEETING THOMAS LINCOLN

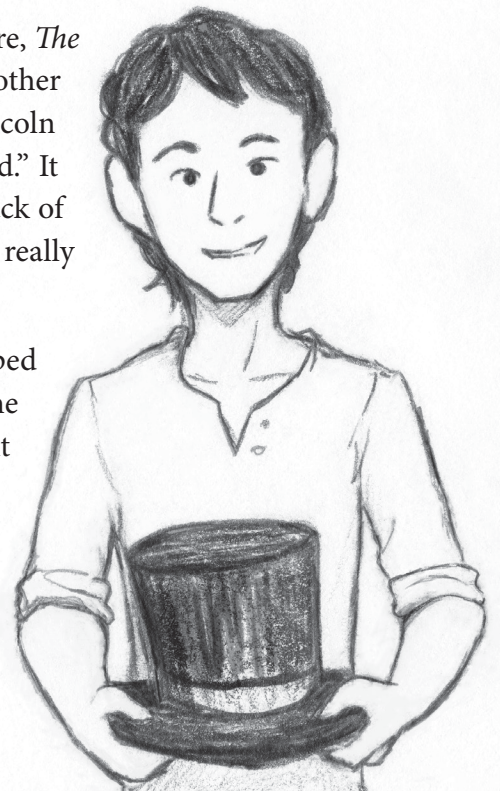
Historical Background:

Lincoln and his father did not have a good relationship. As Thomas was dying in 1851, Lincoln chose not to visit him, telling his stepbrother, John D. Johnston, “My business is such that I could hardly leave home now.” Lincoln “sincerely hope[d] Father may yet recover his health; but at all events tell him to remember to call upon, and confide in, our great, and good, and merciful Maker; who will not turn away from him in any extremity.” After a few more lines, Lincoln got to the heart of the matter—that their relationship was not a good one. “Say to him that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant; but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before; and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere-long to join them.”

Lincoln’s disdain for his father is evident in how he described Thomas’s lack of education. In his 1859 autobiography for Jesse W. Fell, Lincoln wrote that his father “grew up, literally without education.” In his 1860 autobiography for John Locke Scripps, Lincoln added: “Thomas, the youngest son, . . . by the early death of his father, and very narrow circumstances of his mother, even in childhood was a wandering laboring boy, and grew up literally without education. He never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name.”

Unlike his father, Lincoln read the Bible, the plays of William Shakespeare, *The Arabian Tales*, and Parson Weems’s *Life of Washington*, among many other books. Several of the quotations used in this chapter are things that Lincoln really said—including the quote about “two senses” and the “best friend.” It was Lincoln’s cousin, Dennis Hanks, who called *The Arabian Tales* a “pack of lies”—to which Lincoln responded, “mighty fine lies.” Some neighbors really did believe he was lazy when they saw him reading so much.

Lincoln’s memory was extraordinary. Reading by “two senses” really helped him retain the information he encountered in books. In fact, the reading he did as a child continued to influence his thinking as a politician. This point is illustrated in two speeches he gave as president-elect. On February 21, 1861, Lincoln told the New Jersey senate:



May I be pardoned if, upon this occasion, I mention that away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, such a one as few of the younger members have ever seen, "Weem's Life of Washington." I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New-Jersey. The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single revolutionary event; 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. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

The next day, February 22, 1861 (which happened to be George Washington's birthday), Lincoln spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence (1776) and U.S. Constitution (1787) had been debated and adopted. Speaking without a script, he said:

I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live. You have kindly suggested to me that in my hands is the task of restoring peace to our distracted country. I can say in return, sir, that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. (Great cheering.) I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence—I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. (Applause.) I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. (Great applause.) It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance. (Cheers.) This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

At the close of this short, extemporaneous speech, Lincoln added that he "would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender" that great principle.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was Abe's relationship like with his dad? How can you tell?
2. Why did Abe like to read? Do you like to read? If so, what are your favorite kinds of books? Why? If you don't like to read, why not?
3. Why was the history of the American Revolution so important to Abe? (Teachers may wish to share the two excerpts from Lincoln's 1861 speeches with their students when discussing this question.)
4. Why do you think the gift of Freddie's hat was so meaningful to Abe?



CHAPTER 8. GRANDPA LINCOLN

Historical Background:

In his autobiography for Jesse W. Fell, Lincoln described the death of his grandfather in 1786 by saying "he was killed by indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest." Lincoln had apparently heard this story many times during his childhood. In 1854, he wrote to a distant relative that "the story of his death by the Indians, and of Uncle Mordecai, then fourteen years old, killing one of the Indians, is the legend more strongly than [most prominent of] all others imprinted upon my mind and memory." Lincoln's cousin Dennis Hanks later described the story with this detail: "Mordaci said the Indian had a silver half moon trinket on his breast at the time he drew his 'beed' on the Indian, that silver being the mark he shot at. He said it was the prettiest mark he held a rifle on."



Lincoln's relationship with Native Americans is complicated, and aspects of it might be too difficult to discuss with younger readers. For those who do wish to discuss it with their children or students, the following paragraphs will provide information about this controversial aspect of Lincoln's biography.

As a young man, Lincoln served as a captain (and later as a private) in the Black Hawk War in 1832. While he never was personally engaged in combat, he did witness the horrors of the aftermath of battle (seeing scalped and mutilated corpses of U.S. soldiers). In a speech in Congress in 1848, he joked, "I had a good many bloody struggles with the musquitoes; and, although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry."

In 1865, one of Lincoln's old friends remembered a particularly notable incident from the Black Hawk War that he said spoke to Lincoln's discretion, valor, and mercy.

An old Indian Came to Camp & delivered himself up, showing us an old paper written by Lewis Cass, Stating that the Indian was a good & true man[.] Many of the men of the Army said "we have come out to fight the Indians and by God we intend to do so". Mr Lincoln in the goodness & kindness and humanity & justice of his nature stood—got between the Indian and the outraged men—saying— "Men this must not be done—he must not be shot and killed by us". Some of the men remarked— "The Indian is a damned Spy[.]" Still Lincoln stood between the Indian & the vengeance of the outraged soldiers—brave, good & true. Some of the men said to Mr Lincoln— "This is cowardly on your part Lincoln". Lincoln remarked ["if any man thinks I am a coward let him test it," rising to an unusual height. One of the Regiment made this reply to Mr Lincoln's last remarks— "Lincoln—you are larger & heavier than we are". "This you can guard against—Choose your weapons", replied Mr Lincoln somewhat sourly.

After this, no one accused Lincoln of cowardice. Greene concluded: "This is the first time or amongst the first times I ever saw Mr Lincoln aroused."

During the Civil War, Lincoln oversaw the largest mass execution in American history—38 Dakota warriors who had been convicted by a military tribunal for their participation in the Dakota War in August and September 1862. Lincoln has been criticized for this action; however, it must be understood within its historical context.

By the summer of 1862, the Dakota Sioux Indians were starving. Treaties with the U.S. government had hemmed them into small reservations in Minnesota, and the government was always slow in paying them the annuities they were owed. To make matters worse, merchants and federal agents were horribly corrupt, stealing from the Native Americans, and defrauding them year after year.

On August 17, 1862, four starving, drunk Dakota warriors stumbled upon the home of a white family in Acton, Minnesota. There they found a hen's nest with some eggs in it. After fighting with each other over whether or not to eat the eggs, the men killed three unarmed white men, a white woman, and a 15-year-old white girl. All-out-war followed for the next six weeks as the Dakota killed between 400 and 600 white settlers, including many women and children. Eventually the U.S. Army suppressed the uprising, and in September 1862 the army set up a military tribunal to try the Dakota for war crimes. Most of the trials were quick, in some cases taking only a few moments. In many cases, the Dakota did not speak English and did not fully understand what was taking place. Over the course of 30 days, 392 Dakota were tried in the military court; 303 were found guilty and sentenced to be executed.

The pressure on Lincoln to approve the executions was immense. The white population of Minnesota demanded swift hanging of all 303 condemned. Lincoln responded, however, by deliberately slowing things down. He ordered military leaders in Minnesota to carry out no executions until they heard from him. He then had three trusted lawyers review all 303 case files. He wanted to know which convicts had committed war crimes—like rape or the murder of unarmed civilians—and which had simply been captured on the battlefield during the war.

After a careful review, Lincoln commuted the sentences of 265 Dakota warriors, and he approved the executions of 38 whom he believed had committed atrocities against unarmed civilians. He took the time to carefully write out a phonetic spelling of each Dakota name to make sure that only the correct men were executed.

This moment is controversial today because it was the largest mass execution in American history. But it is also the largest commutation. From Lincoln's perspective, the Dakota who waged war should not be treated as war criminals simply for fighting on a battlefield. Only those who had attacked or killed noncombatants should be.

The execution of the 38 was held on December 26, 1862. Afterwards, some politicians chastised Lincoln for not hanging all 303. They said that he could have done better in elections if he had executed them all. Lincoln replied, "I could not afford to hang men for votes."

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why were family stories important to Abe? Are they important in your family?
2. How did Lucy's attitude change when she got home? Why did this happen?

CHAPTER 9. BACK TO SCHOOL

Historical Background:

The Lincoln quotations that Lucy reads in this chapter are all directly out of the historical record. While the caption for the hat is made up, the story is true. In 1850, Lincoln confessed to another lawyer: "I am ashamed of not sooner answering your letter, herewith returned; and, my only appologies are, first, that I have been very busy in the U.S. court; and second, that when I received the letter I put it in my old hat, and buying a new one the next day, the old one was set aside, and so, the letter [was] lost sight of for a time."

Questions for Discussion:

1. How did meeting Abe change Lucy's life? Has someone ever changed your views or attitudes about life like this?
2. Why does Mr. Wilson make Lucy find the books on her own? Would you be able to find a book you wanted in your local library?
3. What else do we learn about Abe in this chapter? What does it mean that he was humble?



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