

Biography of Abraham Lincoln

Maddy
(<https://www.wisuru.com>)

“My Best Friend is a person who will give me a book I have not read¹.” – Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was an American lawyer who served as the 16th president of the United States of America. He is best known for strengthening the U.S. economy and abolishing slavery while leading the nation through a political turmoil. Find out how Abraham Lincoln rose from nothing to become one of the most cherished presidents. Get a glimpse into the heartbreaking yet inspiring story of a man who lived a hero and died a martyr.



Abraham Lincoln was born on 12th February 1809, to Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln. His mother gave birth to him in a one-room log cabin where the Lincoln family had settled after years of migration through parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Abraham had two siblings - an elder sister and a younger brother. His younger brother passed away when Abraham was three or four years old.

When Abraham was seven years old, his family moved to Indiana, where his father had purchased 40 acres of land. Abraham's first year in Indiana was lonely because there weren't any children of his age in the neighborhood. His loneliness was only broken when the family of his mother's aunt came to stay with them. Abraham developed an instant liking to his mother's cousin and considered him his older friend.

A year later, a disease called milk sickness started to spread rampantly. It was caused by drinking the milk of a cow that had eaten a dangerous plant. The uncle and aunt of Abraham's mother died because of it. Within a few months, Abraham's mother died because of the same sickness too. This left the 9-year-old Abraham and his family completely broken.

After one year, to fill in the gap left by his mother and to rebuild the broken family, his father married a widow. Abraham soon developed a special bond with his stepmother. In his later life, when talking about her, he would refer to her as his mother.

Ten years after his biological mother's death, Abraham would again be devastated by another tragic incident. His elder sister would pass away while giving birth, leaving Abraham and his family in utter grief.

The deaths of his brother, mother, and sister made his childhood unbearably miserable and continued to haunt him throughout his life.

Abraham Lincoln suffered from clinical depression almost all his life². He might have inherited the vulnerability for depression from his parents, who themselves suffered from it. Moreover, losing his family members could have worsened his depression. At times, he suffered from major depressive episodes, feeling worthless and even wanting to commit suicide. He once told his law partner, *"I am now the most miserable man living... Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not."*

During Lincoln's time, depression was considered a weakness³. So, many people hid it from their friends and family. But Abraham Lincoln did not hide it from his friends. He even told his friends that the world was a hard and grim place to live. His depression and melancholy were noticeable not just to his friends, but also to complete strangers who met him only once. An observer, who saw Lincoln being selected as the Republican presidential candidate⁴, described Lincoln as one of the most diffident and worst plagued men he ever saw⁵. However, his depression made him more empathetic to others, and his openness about it made him more approachable. This could have been one of the reasons for people choosing him as the president. Moreover, as he was always depressed, he was never egoistic. He was open to learning from others, even if they were his enemies. So, he even appointed his former political opponents in his cabinet.

Since Lincoln often felt worthless due to his depression, he was always searching for a purpose for his existence. In his later years, he found this purpose, which was to hold his country together and abolish slavery. This gave him a reason to live, even when he wanted to die. Moreover

whenever he was overcome by overwhelming depression, his sense of humor helped him forget his problems momentarily.

Abraham Lincoln came from a family of adventurers⁶. His ancestor Samuel Lincoln is one of the thousands of people who moved from England to the unexplored USA in the 1600s in hopes of higher wages. In the USA, he started his life as a farmer. With time, he tried different business ventures, made enough money, and built a big house. His subsequent generations carried his sense of love for adventure. They moved to unexplored areas within the USA and gathered a significant amount of wealth there. However, among all the Lincolns, Abraham Lincoln was different. If the previous generations of Lincolns were driven by their love for the land, Abraham Lincoln was driven by his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. It helped him overcome the overwhelming sense of sorrow engulfing him. Thus, Abraham Lincoln became an avid reader since childhood and hated the laborious farm life. Even though he started working on the farm early to help his father, he used his spare time to read.

When Abraham Lincoln came to Indiana at the age of seven, there were little educational opportunities for children. Indeed, the first school was established only three years later. So, most children were taught informally. Lincoln, too, was taught to read and write by his mother's cousin. Additionally, he took intermittent lessons from teachers in blab schools. In these schools, students learned to read by repeating what the teachers taught them. So, Abraham Lincoln learned by reading and reciting his lessons aloud and repeating them over and over. This habit stayed with Abraham Lincoln for the rest of his life. So, he always read aloud. Young Abraham read everything he could get his hands on. He read storybooks, newspapers, spelling books, songbooks, etc. Some of the first books he read were Robinson Crusoe, the Bible, Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington, and Aesop's fables. Sometimes, he would walk for several miles to borrow a single book. Such was his passion for learning.

During those days, the paper was a scarce resource. So, the students did calculations on boards, which they cleaned and reused. However, the little Abraham somehow managed to get some sheets of paper, sewed them together and created a sum book⁷, two pages of which are preserved in the Library of Congress.

In 1831, when Lincoln has grown up to be a tall, young man, he and his few friends transported goods from New Salem to New Orleans and sold them. It was here that Lincoln saw the ground picture of slavery. Then, one of these friends started a general store, and Lincoln started working for him.

In 1832, Lincoln entered politics⁸. He contested in the Illinois state assembly. But he lost in it. The same year, the general store closed down, and Lincoln lost his job. After losing his job, Lincoln volunteered to fight in the Black Hawk War, which started soon after. In this war, hundreds of Native Americans fought against the USA. Even though Abraham Lincoln never saw actual combat during that war, he was selected as the captain of his unit. Lincoln later remarked that being chosen as the captain by his peers gave him more pleasure than anything else. After the war, he returned and served as a postmaster of New Salem and later its county surveyor.

In 1834, Abraham Lincoln contested in the Illinois state assembly elections once again. However, this time, he won the election. Indeed, he won the next three elections as well. He served a total of four terms in the Illinois House of Representatives from 1834 to 1842.

After his successful election into the Illinois state assembly in 1834, Lincoln decided to pursue law and become a lawyer. After all, courtrooms were not new to Abraham Lincoln. His father often visited courtrooms when they were still in Kentucky. He might have taken young Abraham with him. Moreover, after they moved to Indiana, Lincoln went to courtrooms to observe lawyers with good oratory skills argue with each other. There he noticed that lawyers often referred to books like the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. So, he read all these books thoroughly. In 1835, Abraham Lincoln started to study law on his own. He read law using books borrowed from a law firm and a judge. In September of the following year, after passing an oral examination, he got the license to practice law. He began his practice soon after.

He met his first love interest in the following years, but she passed away due to typhoid fever. He then met another woman, but the relationship died after they both agreed that it was not working. In 1839, Lincoln met Mary Todd, a woman who later became his wife and mother of his children. They got married in 1842. The couple settled in Springfield near Lincoln's law office. The couple had four sons, two of whom died aged 4 and 12 due to tuberculosis and typhoid fever, respectively⁹.

In 1843, Lincoln decided to contest the election for the United States House of Representatives from the seventh Congressional district. However, the Whig party, in which Lincoln was a member, nominated John J. Hardin. So, he couldn't get a nomination for that election.

However, in 1846, his party nominated him. He won his opponent by securing 56% of the votes and became an active member of the House of Representatives. He even introduced the house to a bill to abolish slavery. But he dropped it when it got no support from his own party. In 1848, he extended his support to nominate General Zachary Taylor in the presidential elections. Taylor won and became the president of the USA. After Taylor won, Lincoln was not given a post he anticipated. So, he decided to continue his law practice as the given post would have ended his political career in Illinois. He then won many cases as a lawyer. Due to his clean reputation, he came to be known as 'Honest Abe.'

For several decades, the abolition of slavery has been a heated topic in the USA. It divided the USA into two factions demographically- the northern and the southern states. The southern states wanted to expand slavery, whereas the northern states wanted to abolish it. In the 1850s, when the USA was expanding, deciding whether the newly acquired states should abolish slavery or not, became a big problem. So, a Democratic senator called Stephen Douglas proposed a solution. This solution, passed in 1854 as the Kansas-Nebraska act¹⁰, aimed to let the people of the states decide if they wanted slavery or not. This upset the delicate balance between the northern states and the southern states, which were equal in number. As a result, a civil war in the country between the northern and southern states became inevitable. This act also annoyed the northern Democrats who opposed slavery. So, they quit the party and joined the relatively new Republican party.

The Kansas-Nebraska act made Lincoln enter politics once again. He opposed this act strongly as he opposed slavery in all forms in all his speeches. So, he joined the republicans in the year 1856 and became a leader of the republicans in Illinois soon after. In the 1856 U.S. Senate elections, Abraham Lincoln contested against Stephen Douglas. Even though he lost that election after a series of moving debates, Lincoln's presence in the political scene made him a favorite among the masses. People called him the next republican presidential candidate.



Figure 2: A Clip of a newspaper from 1860

For the 1860 presidential elections, Abraham Lincoln was chosen as the presidential candidate by his party. Ironically, Lincoln never gave any speeches during his campaign. He let his life story play its part. However, other Republicans supported him with their speeches. They developed such elaborate campaigns portraying Abraham Lincoln as a hero. Other candidates looked so small and weak in front of Lincoln and his story. The heroic story of a poor farm boy who becomes the president of the USA appealed to the vast majority of the people. So, Abraham Lincoln won the election and became the president of the USA on 6th November 1860¹¹. He was the first Republican leader to do so.

He had gathered votes majorly from the northern states as none of the slaveholding southern states supported him due to his stand against slavery. In the run-up to his inauguration, he tried to convince the southern states for a political compromise. But none of his efforts made any difference. The seven slaveholding southern states left the USA, which was also called the Union back then. They formed their own sovereign nation called the Confederate States of America¹² or the Confederates.

In the following four years, Lincoln braved the civil war and painstakingly rallied to bring the

states into the Union. He had many health issues during the time, including depression, for which he took mercury pills that affected his health. The trauma of losing a son during his presidential term also added to his depressed mental state. In 1862, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, giving freedom to slaves of ten states that didn't fall under the Union. This proclamation freed 3.9 million slaves. This convinced Lincoln that they can put an end to slavery if they fought strongly.

"Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves" – Abraham Lincoln

In 1864, Lincoln successfully managed his second presidential campaign and was re-elected in November. He delivered his 2nd inaugural address in 1865. He diverted all his efforts to re-establish the southern states that had withstood the worst of the war. Lincoln rallied to pass a constitutional amendment that aimed to abolish slavery. In his 2nd attempt, he gathered the majority and passed the amendment. This came to be known as the 13th amendment to the U.S. constitution.

On the evening of 14th April 1865, Lincoln had gone to enjoy a play with his wife and general Grant. John Wilkes Booth, a confederate spy and actor, had attended Lincoln's speech on 11th April 1865. In this speech, Lincoln had spoken about bringing voting rights for black people. Hearing that, Booth decided to assassinate Lincoln and his allies. While the murder attempts on Lincoln's allies failed, Booth successfully entered Lincoln's theatre box and shot him in the head. Lincoln remained in a coma for the next nine hours and succumbed to his injuries on the morning of 15th April 1865. Vice president Andrew Johnson was sworn in as the president the next morning. Booth, Lincoln's murderer, was spotted in a farm in Virginia after two weeks. He had to be killed as he refused to surrender to the police.

Lincoln was laid to rest after his body was taken in a funeral train all throughout the country, so that mourning citizens could take a last look at their president. An estimated 25 million people attended his memorial service¹³. He was buried in the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield. His wife and sons are also buried in the same cemetery. There were some attempts to steal Lincoln's remains in the following years, but they were all prevented. Lincoln's tomb has been opened 5 times, and his remains have been moved 17 times to date.

Lincoln was one of the greatest presidents America has ever seen. His portrait can be seen on the \$5 bill and penny. His image was also carved on the Mount Rushmore memorial that features the four U.S presidents who personify America's story. Many stamps feature him, and many other memorials are dedicated to him in different parts of the country.

The Lincoln Memorial in Washington is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. It houses many memorabilia from Lincoln's personal life and office tenure. He has been a subject of many Hollywood films and has been portrayed as one of America's greatest heroes. President Barack Obama named Abraham Lincoln as his favorite president. He used Lincoln's Bible for his oath ceremony as a tribute to the president.

Abraham Lincoln was constantly depressed almost all his life. Yet, he found a reason to live, remained true to his country and people, and carved his name in history. So, whenever you are in a dire situation and doing something illegal looks like the easy way out, remember what Abraham Lincoln said: *"Whatever you are, be a good one"*



Figure 3: A \$5 Bill portraying Abraham Lincoln

Facts you probably didn't know

1. Lincoln is the one who declared the final Thursday of November to be celebrated as the national Thanksgiving holiday¹⁴.
2. Lincoln's bodyguard was missing when Lincoln was assassinated.
3. He took part in wrestling matches before he became actively involved in politics.
4. Lincoln was an animal lover and would have opened an animal shelter after his retirement if he was not assassinated.
5. He survived an assassination attempt in the year 1864 as the bullet fired at him hit his hat.
6. It was claimed that Lincoln's health started to deteriorate even before his assassination. He had developed a rare genetic disease that led to muscle wastage¹⁵.

References

1. Goodreads. *Abraham Lincoln Quotes* https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/229.Abraham_Lincoln. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
2. Learning Lift Off. *Overcoming Obstacles: How Abraham Lincoln Defeated Depression* <https://www.learningliftoff.com/overcoming-obstacles-how-abraham-lincoln-defeated-depression/>. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
3. Verywell Mind. *The History of Depression* <https://www.verywellmind.com/who-discovered-depression-1066770/>. Accessed on 2020-07-05. 2020.
4. Wikipedia. *1860 Republican National Convention* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1860_Republican_National_Convention. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
5. Dickinson Education. *Railsplitter* http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/essay/print/Essay_Railsplitter_Print.pdf. Accessed on 2020-07-05. 2010.

6. White Jr., R. C. A. *Lincoln: A Biography* ISBN: B001NLKSCU (Random House, 2009).
7. Library of Congress. *Image 1 of Page of Abraham Lincoln's student sum book, ca. 1824-26.* <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mcc.022/?sp=1&r=-0.568,0.588,1.991,1.027,0>. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
8. Wikipedia. *Early life and career of Abraham Lincoln* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_life_and_career_of_Abraham_Lincoln. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
9. Abraham Lincoln History Society. *Children* <http://www.abraham-lincoln-history.org/children/>. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
10. History. *Sound Smart: The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 | History* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYP854GAPAU>. Accessed on 2020-07-05. 2016.
11. Abraham Lincoln Online. *Lincoln's Failures* <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/education/failures.htm>. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
12. Wikipedia. *Confederate States of America* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate_States_of_America. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
13. National Museum of American History. *A Funeral Procession 1,700 Miles Long (page 1 of 2)* <https://americanhistory.si.edu/lincoln/funeral-procession>. Accessed on 2020-07-05.
14. Wikipedia. *Thanksgiving (United States)* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_(United_States)). Accessed on 2020-07-05.
15. The Atlantic. *Was Lincoln Dying Before He Was Shot?* <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2009/05/was-lincoln-dying-before-he-was-shot/17955/>. Accessed on 2020-07-05. 2009.