

**LINCOLN'S**  
**GIFT**

**HOW HUMOR**  
**SHAPED**  
**LINCOLN'S**  
**LIFE & LEGACY**

**GORDON LEIDNER**  
with an afterword by Michael Burlingame

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# LINCOLN'S GIFT

## HOW HUMOR SHAPED LINCOLN'S LIFE & LEGACY

GORDON LEIDNER  
with an afterword by Michael Burlingame



CUMBERLAND HOUSE™

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Published by Cumberland House, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.  
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410  
(630) 961-3900  
Fax: (630) 961-2168  
[www.sourcebooks.com](http://www.sourcebooks.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leidner, Gordon

Lincoln's gift : how humor shaped Lincoln's life and legacy / Gordon Leidner.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

(hard cover : alk. paper) 1. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865—Humor. 2. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865—Anecdotes. 3. American wit and humor. I. Title.

E457.2.L45 2015

973.7092—dc23

2014041682

eBook version 1.0

In memory of my brother:

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*Jeffrey David Leidner*

Who walked on straight paths.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## LINCOLN THE STORYTELLER

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*They say I tell a great many stories; I reckon I do, but I have found in the course of a long experience that common people, take them as they run, are more easily informed through the medium of broad illustration than in any other way, and as to what the hypercritical few may think, I don't care.*

—Abraham Lincoln

Today we think of Abraham Lincoln as a great leader—perhaps our greatest. We recall his eloquent speeches, his fight for the preservation of the Union, and his emancipation of the slaves. We honor his devotion to duty, sacrifice, and honesty.

What we do not think of today in association with Abraham Lincoln is a good joke. In Lincoln's day, however, he was a well-known storyteller, and more than one Lincoln joke book was published during his presidency. Although most of the jokes in them did not originate with Lincoln, like everyone else, he enjoyed reading them. One of them had a story Lincoln was particularly fond of—the anecdote about two Quaker women discussing President Lincoln and Confederate president Jefferson Davis at the beginning of the Civil War. The first Quaker lady said, after some contemplation, that she believed the Confederacy would win the war because “Jefferson Davis is a praying man.” “But Abraham Lincoln is a praying man too,” the second Quaker lady protested. “Yes,” the first admitted, “but the Lord will think Abraham is joking.”

Mark Twain said that the secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow, and if this is true, we can understand why Lincoln told so many jokes. He endured many tragedies in his life, beginning with the loss of his mother when he was nine years old, his sister when he was nineteen, his first love when in his twenties, two young sons, and of course the terrible trials of an internecine war.

Lincoln always said that he cared little for the typical vices of the day—drinking, smoking, gambling—but that a good joke was like a tonic or medicine to him. It is well known that Lincoln had a melancholy personality and frequently suffered bouts of what may have been unipolar depression. He recognized this challenge and told many people that he used funny stories to help lift himself out of sessions of sadness.<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln acquired his penchant for jokes and storytelling from his father, Thomas Lincoln. When Abe was a child, he loved to listen to his father and other men swap yarns and funny stories. As he grew older, he himself became increasingly adept at telling and retelling humorous stories, frequently modifying them to accommodate each situation. When Lincoln became a lawyer, he used his jokes and stories to gain the good will of juries, and more than once, the opposing counsel complained to the judge that Lincoln's stories were irrelevant and distracting. The trouble for them, though, was that the portly Eighth Circuit judge, David Davis, loved Lincoln's jokes more than anyone else in the courtroom.

As a politician, Lincoln used his humorous stories to ridicule opponents, such as the competing political party whose platform he said was like “the pair of pantaloons” advertised to be “large enough for any man, small enough for any boy.” More than once, Lincoln's lifelong political opponent, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, saw his forceful arguments forgotten by the audience when Lincoln followed up his rival's speech with a joke or funny analogy. At the debate in Ottawa, Illinois, Lincoln compared one of Douglas's statements to trying to make a chestnut horse into a horse chestnut. At the

debate in Alton, Lincoln told a story that showed how he felt about a political feud that was currently raging between Douglas and the head of the Democratic Party, President James Buchanan. He said he felt like the old woman who, not knowing who was going to win a brawl between her husband and a bear, decided to cheer for both of them: “Go it husband, go it bear!”

When Lincoln became president, he used his jokes for various purposes. Sometimes his jokes put visitors at ease, such as the time he met a soldier who was three inches taller than him, and he asked the young man if he knew “when his feet get cold.” Sometimes his jokes were just for fun, like when he commented about the demise of a vain general, saying, “if he had known how big his funeral would be, he would have died long ago.” Often his jokes were simply familiar expressions, as with his comment to a sculptor who had been working on a bust of Lincoln, when he said “that looks very much like the critter,” or to a visitor that he would “pitch in” to his problem “like a dog at a root.”

Frequently Lincoln used jokes to illustrate political points he wanted to make, such as his comparison of General George B. McClellan’s continuous cry for reinforcements to the monkey named Jocko who wanted a longer tail. On another occasion, he compared the congressman who was taking both sides of a political issue to the farmer and son who had to search both sides of a branch at the same time for their old sow who they thought “was on both sides of the creek.” Sometimes he used jokes to get visitors who had taken up too much of his time to leave. While the listeners were laughing, he would ease them out the door.

Lincoln also used funny stories to break the ice in awkward moments. Frequently these jokes were simple ones that poked fun at his own appearance, like the story of meeting a stranger in a railroad car in Illinois. The stranger said, “Excuse me, Sir, but I have an article in my possession which belongs to you.”

“How is that?” Lincoln asked, considerably astonished.

The stranger took a jackknife from his pocket. “This knife,” he said, “was placed in my hands some years ago, with the injunction that I was to keep it until I found a man uglier than myself. I have carried it from that time to this. Allow me now to say, Sir, that I think you are fairly entitled to this property.”

More than anything else, however, Lincoln used humor to help him cope with his melancholia and the terrible strain he had during the war. He told one visitor that if he didn’t tell these stories, “I would die.”

It is not the intention of *Lincoln’s Gift* to be a joke book but instead a short biography that weaves many of his jokes and humorous stories into the narrative. The jokes and funny stories included here are placed, as accurately as possible, within the context that Lincoln actually used them, or when that is not known, when he would likely have used them.

A challenge for anyone who wants to recount a funny Lincoln story is to select the genuine article. Spurious Lincoln jokes abound, and even for Lincoln scholars, it can sometimes be difficult to discern which stories Lincoln actually told. To minimize this problem, I have taken the jokes and stories from the sources in the bibliography and cross-checked them, where possible, with the appropriate primary sources listed at the end of the book.

Another challenge is to place the jokes correctly in the timeline of Lincoln’s life. Although most can be accurately placed chronologically, some are more difficult. For some stories, there are varying or insufficient accounts of when Lincoln told them. Also, he often repeated stories throughout his life with slight variations to meet each circumstance.

The biggest challenge, however, in conveying Lincoln’s humor is that his skill as a storyteller and his manner of delivery were often funnier than the story itself. As the great Lincoln biographer Benjamin Thomas pointed out, Lincoln’s facial expressions, gestures, Hoosier accent, and his ability to mimic were essential to getting a laugh from his audience.<sup>2</sup> Although this cannot be adequately



conveyed in print, in an effort to remind the reader of Lincoln's manner of speech, Lincoln's Hoosier accent has been preserved, as much as possible, in quoted material. In a few instances, stories were abbreviated or altered slightly for clarity.

Abraham Lincoln the statesman definitely deserves the credit he's received for his great accomplishments—leading America through its most terrible war, preserving the Union, inspiring the nation to sacrifice, and freeing the slaves. But to fully appreciate Lincoln's accomplishments, one must understand how he coped with the war casualties, his personal tragedies, and his melancholia. To do this, we take a brief look at Abraham Lincoln, from his lighter side.

*Gordon Leidner*  
*September 1, 2013*

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1. A thorough analysis of Lincoln's melancholy can be found in Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy*.
  2. For an analysis of Lincoln's humor, see Thomas, "Lincoln's Humor: An Analysis," chap. 1 in *"Lincoln's Humor" and Other Essays*.



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# NEVER COME TO MUCH

## 1809–1830

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Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin near the village of Hodgenville, Kentucky. Most of the world didn't take notice of this event, but when Abraham's nine-year-old cousin Dennis Hanks heard of it, he followed a custom in Kentucky to "run over and greet the newborn babe." Abraham's mother, Nancy, was glad to see Dennis, and wanting to see the young man squirm, she shoved the baby into his arms.

Dennis held little Abraham dutifully and looked him over from head to toe. Before long, the future president of the United States began to cry, and nothing Dennis could do would stop the squawking. Finally Dennis had endured enough and handed his red-faced little cousin back to his mother, saying disgustedly, "Take him—he'll never come to much."

Dennis's assessment of young Abraham's prospects was not an unreasonable one, considering the circumstances of his birth. He was from a poor family, lived in an area of the country that offered little opportunity for education, and seemed destined for a life of hardscrabble farm work.

In spite of his challenges, Abraham had been given the advantages of a loving mother, a hardworking father, and good health. In addition to these, he had a pleasant disposition and even as a youth would become well liked by both children and adults. But most significantly, he possessed a tremendous hunger to learn, an extraordinary memory, and a lifelong desire to be "esteemed of my fellow men."

According to Cousin Dennis, Nancy Lincoln was an intelligent woman who was quite influential in her children's intellectual development. Abraham's father, Thomas Lincoln, cared little for education but was a likable character with a unique talent for composing and telling humorous stories.

Thomas was a carpenter and cabinetmaker by trade, and like nearly everyone else in that region, he was a farmer as well. When Abraham was two years old, Thomas moved Abraham, Nancy, and Abraham's four-year-old sister Sarah from Sinking Spring Farm to a more fertile farm along Knob Creek. The Lincolns lived at the Knob Creek farm for five years, and while there, Nancy gave birth to another boy, named Thomas after his father, who unfortunately died in infancy.

By most accounts, Thomas and Nancy Lincoln were honest people who were respected members of their community as well as of the Little Mount Separate Baptist Church. Nancy was deeply religious and took pleasure in reading the Bible to the children. Reading books would become a passion for Abraham Lincoln, and the Bible was the first book that, through the voice of his mother, would open his eyes to a larger world. According to Dennis, Nancy "learned him to read the Bible" and Abraham was "much moved by the stories."

Although Nancy could read and put great stock in her children's education, her husband could not and did not. Of above average height and powerful build, Thomas valued hard work, as evidenced by the fact he had saved enough money to buy the Knob Creek farm. Dennis recalled that Thomas was very popular in the community, because he was "a good, clean, social, truthful, & honest man, loving like his wife everything and everybody."

Although in the evenings Thomas liked to entertain his family with stories about Daniel Boone,

distant relative, and other pioneers of Kentucky, life at Knob Creek was primarily about survival. On the farm, the children had many chores to do, and so Abraham and Sarah had little opportunity for formal education. In Kentucky, they attended local ABC schools for at least two brief sessions, one taught by a hardy soul named Zachariah Riney, and the other by a large man who was related to Nancy by marriage, Caleb Hazel. These “masters” were employed as much for their ability to maintain discipline as their ability to instruct their pupils.

In December 1816, Abraham’s father uprooted the family again, this time moving north of the Ohio River into the recently developed state of Indiana. Unlike Kentucky, Indiana was a free state. Although he disliked slavery, Thomas’s primary reason for moving was probably to get away from Kentucky, where he frequently ran afoul of property title disputes resulting from poorly conducted state land surveys.

Thomas moved his family to a virtual wilderness, a heavily wooded area close to the Ohio River. Along Little Pigeon Creek, near Gentryville, he built a crude shelter of logs enclosed on only three sides, with the fourth side facing an open fire. Somehow, the family survived the winter of 1816–17 in this hovel.

In Indiana, Thomas owned eighty acres of land with undisputed title. When the spring of 1817 arrived, eight-year-old Abraham had an ax put in his hand for the purpose of helping his father clear their land and build a better cabin. That fall, Nancy’s uncle and aunt, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow, arrived and brought with them Dennis, who was now eighteen years old.

Although the family’s situation improved from the previous winter, the fall of 1818 brought heartache. Both Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow came down with a deadly ailment known as “milk sickness.” Contracted from the milk of cows that had eaten a poisonous plant known as snakeroot, the sickness almost always resulted in a quick death. Doctors were scarce in that part of the country, and within a week, both Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow were dead. The Lincolns had very little time to grieve, because soon Abraham’s mother Nancy contracted milk sickness too.

Nancy quickly grew weak and realized that she was going to die. She called Abraham and Sarah to her bedside, told them she was not going to live, and encouraged them to be “good and kind to the father, to one another, and to the world.” She also expressed hope that they would “reverence and worship God.” Within hours, she was gone. Her grieving husband and son built a simple wooden coffin from whipsawed pine logs, and they buried her near their cabin.

Dennis moved in with the Lincoln family and shared the loft with Abraham. Life became very difficult for the survivors, especially eleven-year-old Sarah, who tried to cook and keep up with household chores. Thomas and Dennis hunted, and Abe did other chores, but Thomas knew that his children needed a mother. In December 1819, he left the family and went to Kentucky to find a wife.

Thomas was a fast mover, for in a few weeks he returned with his new wife, widow Sarah Bush Johnston, her three children, and a wagon-full of much-needed furniture and household furnishings. One can only imagine what the new bride thought of the place she was to call home. The roof was half-finished, the door was broken, there were no windows, and there was no cabin floor. The children were not very impressive either. Abe and Sarah looked “wild—ragged and dirty.”

Thomas’s new wife, who he called Sally, took charge of the children and home. She immediately soaped and scrubbed Abe and Sarah and dressed them in clothes she’d brought along, making them look “more human.” She put Thomas and Dennis to work fixing up the cabin. They completed the roof, put in windows and a better door, and installed a wooden floor.<sup>1</sup>

Sally was a kindhearted, loving person who took an immediate interest in Abraham and Sarah. In later years, she would say, “Abe was the best boy I ever saw or ever expect to see.” Although he would come to dislike being called Abe, he evidently didn’t mind hearing this moniker come from his stepmother’s lips. Abe affectionately called her Mama.

Life became more pleasant for Abe. He not only had a sister, but now he had the three Johnstone children and Dennis to pal around with.

At the age of ten or eleven, Abe attended a term of “blab” school, where students recited lessons aloud at the same time so the master knew they were studying. The school building was a log cabin located about two miles from the Lincoln home. The schoolmaster was Andrew Crawford, who tried to teach “manners” but focused mostly on reading, writing, and arithmetic through simple proportions.

A term of school at that time was two or three months in length, usually during the winter months when the children were not involved in planting or harvesting crops. It was at Crawford’s school that, according to his classmate Nathaniel Grigsby, Abe wrote short essays against cruelty to animals. Crawford, as was typical of schoolteachers in the wilderness, was not especially qualified to teach but was presumably smarter than his students. Educated people were uncommon in that region, and as an adult, Lincoln would recall that “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.”

Schoolmaster Crawford held spelling contests regularly, and at one of them, Abe helped out fellow student Anna Roby when she was given the word “defied” to spell. She started off correctly with *d-e-* then paused, unsure if the next letter was *y* or *i*. She looked at Abe, who was pointing to his eye, and finished the word correctly.



**Abraham Lincoln's father, Thomas Lincoln**

One of the most humorous incidents of Lincoln’s school years was a story he would later use, as president, to refer to three cantankerous congressmen. In school, it was customary for students to take turns reading out loud from the Bible. On one occasion, the class read the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the Golden Image from the third chapter of Daniel. Verse 12, which contains the names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the Israelites who were thrown into the fiery furnace, fell to an undersized boy called Bud, whose reading skills had not progressed very far. These names are repeated

throughout the chapter. In recounting his recollections of Bud's ordeal, Lincoln said:

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Little Bud stumbled on Shadrach, floundered on Meshach, and went all to pieces on Abednego. Instantly the hand of the master dealt him a cuff on the side of the head and left him wailing and blubbering as the next boy in line took up the reading. But before the girl at the end of the line had done reading he had subsided into sniffles and finally became quiet. His blunder and disgrace were forgotten by the others of the class until his turn was approaching to read again. Then, like a thunderclap out of a clear sky, he sent up a wail which even alarmed the master, who with rather unusual gentleness inquired, "What's the matter now?"

Pointing with a shaking finger at the verse that a few moments later would fall to him to read, Bud managed to quaver out an answer:

"Look there, marster," he cried, "there comes them same damn three fellers again!"

At Crawford's blab school, Abe and his sister used a textbook they had brought with them from Kentucky, an edition of *Dilworth's Spelling Book*. Through this book, they learned about Roman and Arabic numerals and letters. Many of the lessons were taken from the Psalms and Proverbs of the Bible, and it included the familiar children's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep..."

Abe's stepmother recalled that Abe "read all the books he could get his hands on." These include *The Arabian Nights*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Mason Weems's Life of Washington*, and schoolbooks such as *The Kentucky Preceptor*, and, of course, the Bible.

As a farmer's son, Abe couldn't spend a lot of time reading. One of Abe's routine chores as youth was to go to the local grain mill to grind corn. On one occasion, after arriving at the mill, he hooked up their old mare to the arm of the corn grinder and began urging her along. Having previously complained that "his dog could eat the meal as fast as the horse could grind it," he decided that to speed the mare up, he would occasionally prod her with "Get up, you old hussy!" and apply a switch. The mare evidently grew tired of this routine. In the midst of Abe's admonishment, after he said "Get up," she gave him a swift kick to the forehead. The owner of the mill hurried in, picked up the senseless boy, and sent for Abe's father. Abe lay unconscious all night, and he was "apparently killed for a time." The next day, he started to regain consciousness, his frame jerked for an instant, and he awoke, blurting out the words "you old hussy!"

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Being people of faith, Thomas and Sarah Lincoln became members of the Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church. This was a "Hard Shell" or "Primitive" Baptist Church, whose beliefs were very conservative and Calvinistic. Abe attended church with his parents and held the position of sexton, responsible for maintenance of the church building.

Abe loved sitting in the room when adults were talking and would listen attentively to everything they said. His stepmother recalled that after everyone left, he would pepper his parents with questions wanting to understand everything they had talked about. Abe would one day say that the only thing that ever made him angry was when an adult talked to him in such a way that he couldn't understand what they meant.

Abe had an opportunity to attend school again when he was about twelve years old and then again at fifteen. His sense of humor started showing up at this age, as a few surviving pages from one of his copy books demonstrate:

*Abraham Lincoln*  
*his hand and pen*

he will be good  
but god knows When

---

and

*Abraham Lincoln is my nam[e]  
And with my pen I wrote the same  
I wrote in both hast[e] and speed  
and left it here for fools to read.*

His stepsister Matilda said that in addition to “ciphering” in copy books, Abe ciphered on ju about everything else—including boards and walls when he didn’t have paper.

Once, when Abe was reading aloud to Dennis and his stepmother from *The Arabian Nights* and *Aesop’s Fables*, Dennis observed, “Abe, them yarns is all lies.” Abe responded, “Mighty darn good lies, Denny,” and continued with his reading. According to his cousin John Hanks, Abe “kept the Bible and *Aesop’s Fables* always within reach, and read them over and over again.” He would eventually commit many Psalms, Proverbs, and chapters of Isaiah to memory and state that the Bible was “the richest source of pertinent quotations.”

Many would attest to Abe’s ability to memorize. An acquaintance from Kentucky said that he was the “gawkiest, dullest looking boy you ever saw, unremarkable except for an exceptionally powerful memory.” Rowan Herndon, who knew Abe when he was a young man, would say he “had the Best memory of any man I Ever Knew,” for he “Never forgot anything he Read.” Lincoln himself would later say that his mind was like a “piece of steel, very hard to scratch anything on it and almost impossible after you get it there to rub it out.”

As he got older, Abe would walk miles to borrow books and obtained *Robinson Crusoe*, William Grimshaw’s *History of the United States*, and William Scott’s *Lessons in Elocution*. It was Scott’s book that introduced Abe to Shakespeare—an author who would become a lifelong favorite.

Abe would become a gifted storyteller, but according to Cousin Dennis, his skill was nothing compared to that of his father. Thomas Lincoln could “beat his son telling a story—cracking a joke.” One of the few surviving jokes attributed to Thomas was his response to his second wife Sarah, who asked which of his two wives he liked better, Nancy or her. Thomas replied, “Oh, now, Sally, that reminds me of old John Hardin down in Kentucky who had a fine looking pair of horses, and a neighbor coming in one day and looking at them said, ‘John, which horse do you like the best?’ John said, ‘I can’t tell; one of them kicks and the other bites and I don’t know which is wust.’”

With his father as a role model, Abe’s humor surfaced early in his life. One of the earliest recorded jokes that Abe told was when one of his neighbors, James Larkin, started bragging about his horse. He stepped up to Abe and commenced talking to him, boasting all the while of his animal.

“I have got the best horse in the country,” he proclaimed to his young listener. “I ran him three miles in exactly nine minutes, and he never fetched a long breath.”

“I presume,” Abe responded dryly, “he fetched a good many short ones though.”

In addition to showing him how to tell funny stories, Abe said that his father “learned him to work but never to like it.” Abe would frequently bring a book with him when going out to plant or harvest and during breaks would pull out his book and start to read. Dennis said that Abraham’s father sometimes had to “slash him for neglecting his work by reading.”

Abe’s physical strength and stature made him very capable of all types of manual labor. Abe worked hard for his father, and as he got older, he grew to resent the way Thomas would hire him out to work for other farmers and then keep all of his wages. In referring to his youth, Lincoln would later

say, with emotional hyperbole, that he “used to be a slave.”

Hoping to get away from farm work, Abe developed many pastimes, including an increasing interest in public speaking. When he was a young teen, he liked to imitate the only good orators he had ever heard—preachers and traveling evangelists. Abe would pick up the family Bible and take his place behind an old tree stump while the children sat on the ground in front of him. He would begin by calling out a greeting and then reading some familiar scripture. He would next call for the first hymn and the “congregation” would respond with some old John Newton or Isaac Watts hymn such as “Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb...”

After finishing the hymn, Abe would repeat the sermon he had heard that morning, virtually word for word. Abe, who would one day say that when he saw a man preach, he liked to see him act as though he were “fighting bees,” would walk back and forth in front of his congregation, imitating the mannerisms of the evangelist. As he preached, the children would cry out responses to his queries and shout a hearty “Amen!” when appropriate. Finally Abe would call for the last hymn and close with prayer.

While in his late teens, Abe would give political speeches, using what he had learned from a book on elocution as his guide. During breaks from farm work, he would stand on a stump and address his fellow workers until it was time to go back to work. Friends would later recall that he was a skilled public speaker even at that age and that he effectively used stories to make a point.

By the time Abe was seventeen, he was two inches shy of what would eventually be his full-grown height of six foot, four inches. Because of his size and strength, local farmers eagerly sought his help. But Abe wanted to do other work and began clerking in stores and chopping firewood for steamboats along the banks of the Ohio River.

In his late teens, Abe built a rowboat and began a business of ferrying passengers out to steamboats in the Ohio River. Once, two businessmen asked him to row them out to an approaching riverboat, and after he dropped them off, they each tossed a silver half-dollar into his boat. Abe would later recall that this was up till then “the most important incident of his life.” He “could scarcely credit that [he], a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. The world seemed wider and fairer before [him].”

His ferrying business was probably the cause of Abe’s first exposure to the courtroom. A businessman from the Kentucky side of the river sued him, claiming that Abe was not properly licensed. Abe went to court to defend himself, and the justice of the peace decided in his favor. This event may have been what stirred young Abe’s interest in the law, for he started to read Constable Thomas Turnham’s copy of *The Statutes of Indiana* shortly thereafter.

His interest in politics was also emerging, and after reading a biography of the politician Henry Clay of Kentucky, Abe became an admirer of Clay and later joined the Whig Party. Abe’s stepmother noted that during this time, Abe also started avidly reading newspapers.

Abe had an interest in girls too but was incapable of relating to them on a romantic level. One evening, he was sitting with his friend Anna Roby, looking at the moon and stars. Abe had recently developed an interest in astronomy, and when Anna remarked that the moon was sinking, she recalled years later how Abe corrected her. “‘That’s not so,’ he replied. ‘It don’t really go down; it seems so. The Earth turns from west to east and the revolution of the Earth carries us under, as it were; we do the sinking as you call it. The moon as to us is comparatively still. The moon’s sinking is only an appearance.’”

Befuddled, Anna retorted, “Abe—what a fool you are.”

Abe and his stepmother enjoyed a very close relationship, and she appreciated his sense of humor. Once, when she was not home, Abe spotted some children playing in the mud and got an idea for a joke. Abe took one of the toddlers into the cabin and helped him “walk” up the recently whitewashed

wall and across the ceiling. When his stepmother saw the muddy footprints on her ceiling she laughed and threatened to spank him.

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Abe had been blessed with a tragedy-free life for more than ten years, but when he was nineteen his twenty-one-year-old sister Sarah died during childbirth. She had married neighbor Aaron Grigsby a year and a half earlier. The loss of his sister was a tremendous blow to Abe, and he always believed that her life, as well as the life of her son, might have been saved if the Grigsbys had sent for a doctor sooner.

Several months after the tragic loss of Sarah, Abe was given the opportunity to go on the biggest adventure of his life. A neighbor by the name of James Gentry hired him to accompany his son Allen on a flatboat Gentry intended to send to New Orleans to sell livestock and produce. Around the first of the year, 1829, the young men pushed out into the Ohio River with their cargo. The trip took three months and was of immense educational benefit to Abe, who turned twenty while traveling to New Orleans. In that city, he got his first up-close look at slavery, and when he saw how human beings were bought and sold, he called it “a disgrace.” He returned home via steamboat, having earned the sum of twenty-four dollars, which his father, of course, kept.

Although Abe resented his father’s tightfisted habits and disdain for education, he remained faithful to his family. Even though he had turned the legal age of twenty-one and could leave his family, he stayed with them when Thomas decided to sell his Indiana farm and move to Illinois in early 1830. Abe dutifully helped pack the family belongings into an oxcart and move to the Prairie State. He helped them establish a new homestead near Decatur, Illinois, by erecting a cabin and barn, splitting enough rails to fence fifteen acres, and planting a crop.

In the spring of 1831, at the age of twenty-two, Abe prepared to make another trip to New Orleans via flatboat. This time, he, his stepbrother John D. Johnston, and cousin John Hanks made the trip under the employment of a businessman named Denton Offutt. After constructing the flatboat, they began their journey at Springfield, Illinois, and in April started down the Sangamon River with Offutt’s goods. They had not gotten far, however, when their flatboat got hung up on a milldam at New Salem, Illinois. Unable to dislodge the boat, it quickly began to fill up with water. Abe drilled a hole in the front of the boat, which was hanging over the dam, in order to drain the water. He then helped his companions redistribute their cargo, and the boat successfully slipped over the dam. The quick thinking impressed not only Offutt but the residents of New Salem as well, who had gathered along the banks of the Sangamon to witness the excitement.

Offutt had plans to open a store in New Salem and told Abe he could have a job as a clerk when he returned from the trip to New Orleans. Upon his return, Abe made a brief visit to say good-bye to his parents and then set out for New Salem. It was the summer of 1831.

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1. For Sarah Johnston’s impact on the Lincoln household, see Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 1:27.



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## A PIECE OF FLOATING DRIFTWOOD

### 1831–1842

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The village of New Salem was situated along the banks of the Sangamon River in the central part of the state and had about a hundred hearty souls residing in its fifteen or twenty cabins. Lincoln, who arrived by way of the Sangamon River, would later say that he came to New Salem “like a piece of floating driftwood.” He joked that the river was so meandering and serpentine that while traveling on it, “he had camped at the same place three nights in a row.”

True to his promise, Denton Offutt hired Lincoln to help build and manage a general store. After helping Offutt cut the logs, construct the store, and stock it with general merchandise, Lincoln settled in his job of selling goods.

Lincoln was happy to finally be out on his own, and as a store clerk, he quickly made a lot of friends. He loved to swap stories, tell jokes, and do small favors for people. One local, Clark E. Carr, said that Lincoln was “the most comical and jocose of human beings, laughing with the same zest at his own jokes as at those of others.” Carr added that he had never seen “another who provoked so much mirth, and who entered into rollicking fun with such glee. He could make a cat laugh.”

Lincoln also gained the trust of the townspeople. The local schoolmaster, Mentor Graham, recalled that Lincoln “was among the best clerks [he] ever saw. [Lincoln] was attentive to his business—was kind and considerate to his customers and friends and always treated them with great tenderness, kindness, and honesty.” Another resident, Robert B. Rutledge, attested to Lincoln’s character, saying, “People relied implicitly upon his honesty, integrity, and impartiality.”

Lincoln possessed a great deal of self-confidence and was quite comfortable telling jokes that ridiculed his own appearance. Typical of these, Lincoln said that he was surprised one day by a scowling man who drew a revolver and thrust the weapon into Lincoln’s face. He swallowed hard and quickly decided that any attempt at argument might be the last thing he ever did.

“What seems to be the matter?” inquired Lincoln with all the calmness and self-possession he could muster.

“‘Well,’ replied the stranger, who did not appear at all excited, ‘some years ago I swore an oath that if I ever came across a man uglier than myself I’d shoot him on the spot.’”

“A feeling of relief evidently took possession of Lincoln at this rejoinder, as the expression upon his countenance lost all suggestion of anxiety. ‘Shoot me,’ he said to the stranger, ‘for if I am uglier than you, I don’t want to live!’”

Lincoln’s stature, strength, and athletic ability were other traits that made him popular with the people of the region. Soon after arriving in New Salem, he demonstrated his physical prowess by wrestling a local bully, Jack Armstrong. Doing well in this contest, he won the respect of Armstrong and his friends, who were known as the Clary’s Grove Boys. In them and those watching the contest, Lincoln developed an army of allies. Lincoln’s future law partner John Todd Stuart said that the contest was a “turning point in Lincoln’s life.”

Lincoln was a keen student of human nature and formed deep friendships with many people. Once while Lincoln was talking with a few friends about human faults, the subject of greed came up. The

reminded Lincoln of a story about a hog:

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A man in Cortlandt county raised a porker of such unusual size that strangers went out of their way to see it. One of them the other day met the old gentleman and inquired about the animal.

“Waal, yes,” the old fellow said; “I’ve got such a critter, mi’ty big un; but I guess I’ll have to charge you about a shilling for lookin’ at him.”

The surprised stranger stared at the old man for a minute, pulled out the desired coin, handed it to him and started to go off. “Hold on,” said the other; “don’t you want to see the hog?”

“No,” said the stranger; “I’ve already seen as big a hog as I ever want to see!”

But Lincoln was interested in much more than human nature—he was an avid student of many subjects. When he wasn’t laughing and swapping yarns, clerking the store, or running errands for people, he was studying. Lincoln’s ravenous appetite for reading never waned, and in New Salem, he studied subjects such as arithmetic, philosophy, astronomy, history, poetry, and Shakespeare. His favorite poet was Robert Burns, and he especially loved Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

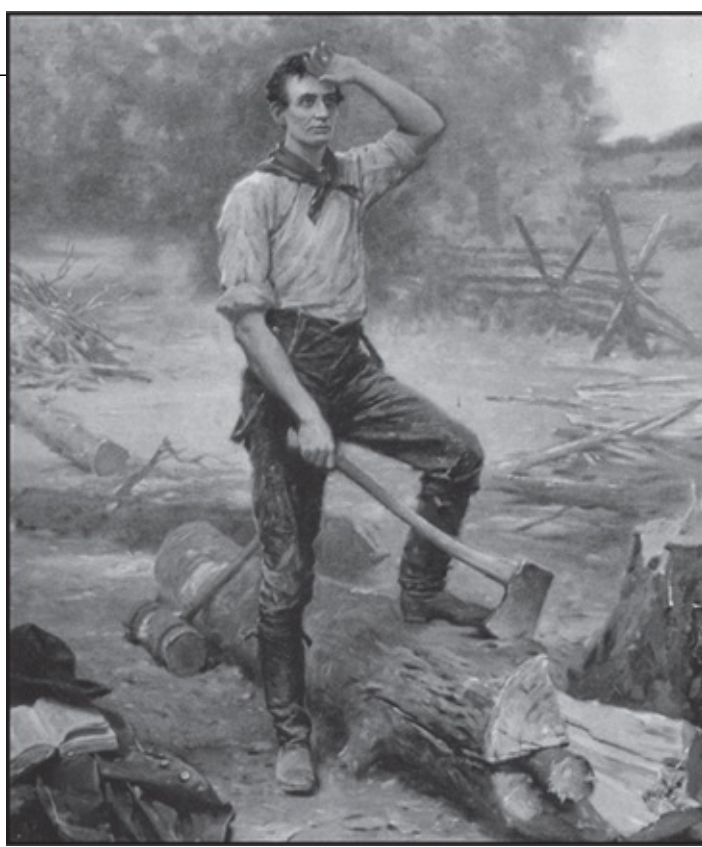
With the help of his schoolmaster friend Mentor Graham and a copy of Samuel Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures*, he tackled subjects he had received little instruction in, like grammar and speech. Interested in improving his skill at public speaking, Lincoln joined the New Salem debating society, which helped him prepare for future courtroom presentations and political speeches.

Lincoln also continued his interest in law. He attended sessions of the local court, which was presided over by Justice of the Peace Bowling Green. Appreciating Lincoln’s sense of humor, Green would occasionally ask Lincoln to make informal comments on cases before the court, which inevitably resulted in a “spasmodic shaking of the fat sides of the old law functionary.” In addition to amusing the judge, however, Lincoln proved he had serious intentions in the courtroom as well. Some of the locals began to rely on Lincoln, the nascent student of law, for legal advice. He acquired a book of legal forms and began drafting simple deeds and receipts for people.

Once, in Green’s court, Lincoln was called on by plaintiff Pete Lukins’s lawyer to attest to the validity of his client’s oath. The attorney said to Lincoln, “Please state what you know as to the character of Mr. Lukins as for truth and veracity.”

“Well,” said Lincoln, “he’s called *lying* Pete Lukins.”

Somewhat taken aback, the lawyer responded, “But, would you believe him on oath?”



***The Railsplitter* by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris**

Lincoln turned around and said, “Ask Esquire Green. He’s taken his testimony under oath many times.”

Green was asked the same question by the lawyer and the justice of the peace answered, “I never believe anything he says unless somebody else swears the same thing.”

Although Lincoln had been raised by religious parents and would one day be a man of deep faith himself, he had become more of a religious skeptic and had no reservations about telling funny stories involving preachers and church life. One was about the preacher who proclaimed, during his sermon that “although the Lord was the only perfect man, the Bible never mentioned a perfect woman.”

A woman in the rear of the congregation called out, “I know a perfect woman, and I’ve heard of her every day for the last six years.”

“Who was she?” asked the surprised minister.

“My husband’s first wife,” came the reply.

At the encouragement of friends, Lincoln decided to run for the state legislature in March 1832. This was a timely decision, because the store where Lincoln clerked had recently failed. So at the age of twenty-three, Lincoln became a candidate for the lower house of the state legislature.

Lincoln announced his candidacy and political platform in the *Sangamo Journal* on March 9, 1832. In this announcement, Lincoln wisely avoided controversial national issues and stuck to popular subjects. He announced he was in favor of various public works such as improvements to the Sangamon River and the construction of roads, canals, and railroads. Conscious of his own lack of schooling, he said that he believed everyone should be provided at least a moderate level of education so that they could “read the Scriptures and other works.”

He concluded his announcement of candidacy by proclaiming:

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed. I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. My case is thrown

exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.

Shortly after announcing his decision to run, Lincoln's campaign was interrupted by his state call for volunteers to serve in the militia. Sauk Indian chief Black Hawk, along with about five hundred Sauk, Meskwaki, and Kickapoo Indian warriors, had crossed the Mississippi River from Iowa into Illinois. They hoped to resettle on land they believed they had been swindled out of.

Lincoln postponed his political campaign and joined a militia unit to help repulse Black Hawk. Much to his surprise, he was elected captain by his men—something he would say, more than twenty years later, was “a success that gave me more pleasure than I have had since.” With the assistance of Jack Armstrong, his first sergeant, Lincoln did his best to instill some discipline in his men, including the rowdy Clary's Grove Boys. When he gave his first order to one of the men, he responded with “go to the Devil, sir!”

One of his responsibilities as captain was to lead his men in close order drill. But Lincoln's military parading skills were rather slim. While leading his men, he marched them toward a fence that had a narrow gate in it. Lincoln suddenly realized he couldn't remember the command that would successfully pass them single file through the gate. At the last minute, he ordered them to halt and then shouted, “This company is dismissed for two minutes, when it will fall in again' on the other side of the gate!”

Captain Lincoln had some difficulty keeping his raw troops in order. On one occasion, some of Lincoln's men got drunk and disorderly, incurring the wrath of Lincoln's superiors. As punishment, the young captain was forced to carry a large wooden sword for two days.

Lincoln and his men joined a force that had been ordered to find Black Hawk. They spent weeks trying to track him down, and never even got a glimpse of someone vaguely resembling an enemy until an old drunken Potawatomi Indian stumbled into their camp. Several of Lincoln's men wanted to kill him, claiming that he was a spy. Lincoln stood in front of the old man and said that anyone who wanted to harm him would have to fight him first. When they told him they didn't believe he would fight, he said, “Try me.” The old Indian left camp, unharmed.

After a few weeks, Lincoln's initial enlistment expired. Having no other employment, he decided to enlist for another term as a private and was sworn in by Lieutenant Robert Anderson, whom Lincoln would meet again during the Civil War. After his second term was over, he reenlisted for a third term before the war ended. Three months after his original enlistment, Lincoln returned to his political campaign, having never seen the enemy.

In July 1832, Lincoln held his first campaign rally in the village of Pappsville, Illinois. A fight broke out in the audience just as he was about to begin his speech. Noticing that his friend J. Rowan Herndon was getting whipped by a gang of men, Lincoln cut his way through the crowd and pitched in with Herndon. He threw several of Herndon's assailants about as if they were mere boys, tossing the one that had Herndon down ten or twelve feet. This ended the fight, and Lincoln returned to the platform to give his speech to the admiring audience. One onlooker recalled that his speech was something like this:

Fellow citizens, I suppose you all know who I am. I am humble Abraham Lincoln. I have been solicited by many friends to become a candidate for the Legislature. My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal-improvement system and a high protective tariff. These are my sentiments and political principles. If elected I shall be thankful; if not it will be all the same.

Although Lincoln won overwhelmingly in his own precinct, collecting 277 out of 300 votes, he lost the election because he was unknown in other precincts. He would later say that this was the only

time he was ever defeated in a political contest by the direct vote of the people. The political contests he lost in the future, for the U.S. Senate, were a result of tallies in the Illinois legislature rather than the voters.

After losing the election, Lincoln went into partnership with village resident William Berry and opened another general store in New Salem. Again Lincoln worked dutifully behind the counter selling goods, telling stories, and swapping jokes, but Berry drank up all the profits. This store failed too, and when Berry died a couple of years after the start of the partnership, Lincoln was left with a debt of \$1,100. This sum, which he referred to as his “national debt,” would take him fifteen years to pay off.

After the Berry store “winked out,” Lincoln’s friends helped him secure an appointment as postmaster of New Salem in May 1833. Lincoln was delighted to have this job, despite the low pay because it gave him access to all of the newspapers. The modest income of postmaster proved insufficient to cover his bills, so Lincoln obtained a copy of Robert Gibson’s *Theory and Practice of Surveying* and taught himself a new trade. He soon became deputy surveyor and worked part time in New Salem and surrounding communities. Surveying allowed him to travel to various parts of the county, make more friends, and learn the art of settling disputes between neighbors.

While working as postmaster and surveyor, Lincoln diligently studied law. He read Blackstone’s *Commentaries* and the *Revised Laws of Illinois* and continued to plead minor cases before Bowling Green. Through experience in the justice of the peace’s court and the New Salem debating society, Lincoln improved both his knowledge of the law and his speaking skills.

Undeterred by his previous defeat, Lincoln decided to run for the state legislature again in 1834. More widely known now, he secured the support of both the Democratic and the recently formed Whig parties. This time he was successful, and on August 4, he was elected representative from Sangamon County. With this rise in stature, Lincoln became more conscious of his physical appearance. Since he would be making the phenomenal salary of four dollars per day, he bought his first suit for six dollars, and on December 1, he traveled to the state capital of Vandalia to take his seat in the Illinois General Assembly.

The purchase of a new suit was a major event for Lincoln, as he had never been concerned about his clothes. He once saw a show where the magician asked for a volunteer from the audience to loan him a hat. Although he was reluctant to do so, Lincoln finally handed over his old hat, which the showman used to fry eggs in. When given the hat back, Lincoln said, “Mister, the reason I didn’t give you my hat before was out of respect for your eggs—not care for my hat.”

Lincoln was, however, an expert at finding the usefulness in clothes, beyond just being for warmth and comfort. Once, while walking to Springfield, he pretended to show concern for his coat. When a gentleman in a buggy drove up, Lincoln asked him, “Will you have the goodness to take my overcoat to town for me?”

“With pleasure,” replied the stranger, “but how will you get it again?”

“Oh, very readily,” said Lincoln. “I intend to remain in it.”

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During his first term in the state legislature, Lincoln was fortunate enough to share a room with fellow Whig and minority leader John Todd Stuart. Stuart liked Lincoln very much and took time to teach his protégé as much as he could about the practical functioning of the state legislature. Stuart taught Lincoln how to write bills, introduce them, and maneuver them through the assembly.

Even though Lincoln did not deliver any speeches in his first term, he was appointed to about

dozen special committees. He developed a love for politics, in spite of the fact that he was a member of the minority party.

In Illinois, the Whigs were significantly outnumbered by the Democrats, but Lincoln refused to give in to the temptation to switch parties, as many less-principled men did. To Lincoln, Whigs stood for economic progress and upward mobility for the underprivileged, whereas the Democrats were focused on maintaining a backward, agriculture-based economy.

Back in New Salem, Lincoln developed his first love interest, a pretty and quick-witted girl named Ann Rutledge. She was pursued by all the community's eligible bachelors, but it soon became known that she was to marry John McNeil, a boarder at the Rutledge Tavern. After this understanding had been reached, however, McNeil told Ann that his real name was John McNamar, and he had to leave New Salem to go back east and clear up some family business before they could marry. In McNamar's absence, Lincoln and Ann became close, and it is believed that they decided to marry sometime after. Ann sent word to McNamar that she was no longer interested in him.

Tragically, on August 25, 1835, Ann died of typhoid. Lincoln plunged into such deep depression that friends feared he would take his own life. Lincoln called these bouts of depression "the hypochondria," which was short for hypochondriasis. He moved in with his surrogate father Bowling Green for a while, but the passage of time and his return to books, jokes, and stories finally got him through.

In August 1836, Lincoln was again elected to the state legislature, which assembled in December. In this second term, he met the man who would become his lifelong political nemesis, Stephen A. Douglas. A Democrat from Jacksonville, Illinois, Douglas was a skilled lawyer and speaker who would one day develop a national reputation in politics. In the coming years, Lincoln would oppose Douglas in the legislature, compete with him for the hand of a young lady, work both with and against him in the courtroom, and run against him for the U.S. Senate and the presidency.

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Lincoln's oratorical skills improved during his second term as a legislator, and he became a confident floor speaker for the Whig Party. He used storytelling to overcome his nervousness, and it was not long before both Democrats and Whigs realized that when Lincoln rose to speak, there would be a good chuckle. During a debate with another legislator from Wabash County, who was known for his large, bushy eyebrows and his tendency to make "big bugaboos" about small problems, Lincoln couldn't resist poking fun at these peculiar characteristics of his opponent:

Mister Speaker, the attack of the member from Wabash on the constitutionality of this measure reminds me of an old friend-a-mine. He's a peculiar looking old fellow, with shaggy, overhanging eye-brows, and a pair of spectacles under them.

One morning just after the old man got up, he imagined, on lookin' out his door, that he saw a rather lively squirrel on a tree near his house. So he took down his rifle and fired at the squirrel, but the critter paid no attention to the shot. He loaded and fired ag'in and ag'in. After the thirteenth shot, he set down his gun impatiently, and said to his boy, who was looking on, "Boy there's something wrong 'bout this rifle."

"Rifle's all right, I know, 'tis," replied the boy, "but whar's your squirrel?"

"Don't you see him, humped up 'bout half way up the tree?" inquired the old man, peeping over his spectacles, and getting mystified.

"No, I don't," responded the boy; and then turning and looking into his father's face he exclaimed, "I see your squirrel! You've been firing at a louse on your eyebrow!"

Lincoln then claimed that his opponent had been doing the same thing in attacking his bill.

Lincoln and the eight other Whig legislators from Sangamon County were a tall bunch, with an average height between them of more than six feet. One Democratic newspaper derisively referred to them as "the Long Nine," and the nickname stuck. One of the most noteworthy accomplishments

the Long Nine was to get the state capital of Illinois moved from Vandalia to Springfield, a bill that successfully secured the passage of in late February 1837.

When he was twenty-eight years old, Lincoln first spoke out against the institution of slavery. A bill had been introduced that condemned the formation of abolition societies, and Lincoln, along with one other member of the legislature, voted against it. The two representatives boldly stated that “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy,” but they also demonstrated that they were not completely satisfied with abolitionists either when they added “but the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its [slavery’s] evils.”

In the spring of 1837, Lincoln was admitted to the Illinois bar, and his mentor, John Todd Stuart, accepted Lincoln as junior partner in his law practice. Becoming junior partner was a big break for Lincoln, because Stuart ran one of the most successful law practices in Springfield.

Now that he was a practicing attorney, Lincoln decided to leave New Salem and take up residence in Springfield. After his second term in the legislature ended, he moved in with a Springfield merchant by the name of Joshua Speed. Having brought all of his worldly possessions in two saddlebags, he took them upstairs to Speed’s room, set them on the floor, and quickly came back. “Well, Speed, I’m moved,” he announced.

Lincoln wasn’t interested in just law and politics. Throughout his twenties, he continued his bumbling pursuit of the opposite sex. He said that women were “the only things that cannot hurt me that I am afraid of.” One young woman, Martinette Hardin, said that he was “so awkward that [she] was always sorry for him.” He “did not seem to know what to say in the company of women.”

In 1838, Lincoln wrote a letter to his friend Mrs. Orville H. Browning about his second romance (after Ann Rutledge). Her name was Mary Owens, and at the time of Lincoln’s writing, Mary lived in Kentucky. Lincoln had met her three years earlier when she visited her sister in New Salem. Somehow the subject of matrimony came up when he was talking to Mary’s sister and Lincoln said that he had “no good objection to plodding life through, hand-in-hand with her,” if Mary was interested. In the meantime, Lincoln was informed that Mary Owens was returning to New Salem. In his letter to Browning, Lincoln described his reacquaintance with Mary when she came back to Illinois, marriage minded:

In a few days we had an interview, and although I had seen her before, she did not look as my imagination had pictured her. I knew she was over-size, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff; I knew she was called an “old maid,” and I felt no doubt of the truth of at least half of the appellation; but now, when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat to permit its contracting in to wrinkles; but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years; and, in short, I was not all pleased with her.

Feeling obligated to marry her, Lincoln began a reluctant courtship of Mary. It did not take long, however, for her to realize that he was not the man for her. Later saying that Lincoln lacked “those little links which make up the great chain of woman’s happiness,” she broke off their relationship and returned home to Kentucky. Lincoln told Browning “others have been made fools of by the girls, but this can never with truth be said of me. I most emphatically, in this instance, made a fool of myself.”

Lincoln grew rather despondent over his inability to find a wife and wrote, “I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying, and for this reason; I can never be satisfied with anyone who would be blockhead enough to have me.”

In the fall of 1838, Lincoln was reelected to the Illinois General Assembly and returned to Vandalia for his third term in early December. In this term, he became a more prominent leader because his partner John Todd Stuart had left the state legislature for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, DC. Although Lincoln lost a bid for Speaker of the House, he became the de facto floor leader for the Whigs and was appointed to the legislature’s finance committee.

A great deal of his efforts in the finance committee involved the defense of the Illinois state bank against attacks by the Democrats, who wanted to close it. Lincoln, while arguing against a Democrat party effort to defeat the state bank, attacked his opponents' credibility in the following manner: "Mister Cheerman, this work is exclusively the work of politicians; a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people, and who, to say the most of them, are, taken as a mass, at least one long step removed from honest men. I say this with the greater freedom because, bein' a politician myself, none can regard it as personal."

In 1839, Lincoln met his future wife, Mary Todd. Mary was a well-educated young lady from a wealthy, slave-holding Kentucky family and the cousin of John Todd Stuart. She had recently moved to Springfield to live with her sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Ninian Edwards. The Edwards home had become a sort of social center of town and was frequented by most of the town's young bachelors, including Lincoln.

Mary Todd was very interested in politics and made no secret of her desire to marry the man who would one day be president. Although she had the attention of many of the town's bachelors, including Stephen A. Douglas, she soon fell in love with the tallest and homeliest of the lot, Abraham Lincoln. Douglas had proposed marriage to Mary, but they did not see eye to eye, in spite of being of similar height. She was a devoted Whig and he a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. Douglas, after being rejected, told her that she had "thrown away" her best chance to "rule in the White House."

According to Elizabeth Edwards, who considered Lincoln unworthy of her sister's attention, it was comical to watch the young couple when they were together. They would sit on the sofa in the Edwards's parlor, and while Mary breathlessly chattered on, rapidly switching from subject to subject, Lincoln would sit in silence with a dumbfounded look on his face. Lincoln, the quick-witted storyteller who was so comfortable in the company of men, was absolutely tongue tied in the presence of this spirited, sophisticated young lady. Mary Todd once recounted that at one of her parties, Lincoln approached her and told her he wanted to dance with her "in the worst way." She later said that was exactly what he did—he danced "in the worst way." The awkward Lincoln, over a foot taller than Mary, cutting a rug with the petite young lady who had graduated from Madame Mantelle's Finishing School must have presented a ludicrous sight. But love is blind, and in 1840, Lincoln and Mary became engaged.

Shortly after their engagement, Lincoln was elected to his fourth term in the legislature and took his seat in December 1840. Thanks to the effort of the Long Nine, the state capital was now in Springfield, and the legislature met in temporary quarters at the Methodist Episcopal Church. On December 5, Lincoln and the Whigs wanted to prevent a quorum so that the lower house would not be able to vote on an issue regarding the state bank. Accordingly, Lincoln directed that, with the exception of himself and a few others, all Whigs absent themselves. The Democrats discovered the ruse and sent the sergeant at arms to bring in the missing members. He returned without the necessary number, so the Democrats locked the doors to prevent the escape of the Whigs already present. Suddenly a number of Democrats who, due to illness, had not been present appeared and a quorum was unexpectedly announced. Caught by surprise, Lincoln and his fellows attempted to escape. Finding the doors locked, they went into a panic, opened a window, and jumped out.

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Lincoln and Mary's relationship became a stormy one in the latter months of the year, and on the first of January, 1841, Lincoln broke off their engagement. Disappointing Mary threw Lincoln into a long bout of depression, which adversely impacted his performance as a floor leader for the Whigs. The



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