

Abraham Lincoln: America's New President

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Few Americans have been as widely and universally admired as Abraham Lincoln. This seems to be not only for his passionate crusade to preserve the United States as one nation, but also for his personal qualities. He was almost literally a self-made man who embodied many of the virtues humanity deems most important. Out of humble obscurity, he became one of democracy's most powerful spokesmen.

Born in a cabin in the Kentucky backwoods on February 12, 1809, Lincoln lived a difficult life as a boy. His father Tom Lincoln was an illiterate and stern disciplinarian and Lincoln spent most of his youth working alongside him. According to Lincoln, he spent a total of only about one year in formal schooling. Somehow, though, he had the drive to rise above his circumstances and learned how to read and write and perform simple mathematics. He appears to have had access to few books, but those he had he read thoroughly and critically.

Tom Lincoln moved the family to Indiana in 1816. It was there in 1818 that the nine-year-old Lincoln suffered a crushing blow when his mother Nancy passed away suddenly. A year later Tom Lincoln married again, this time to Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children. Sarah Lincoln was a godsend, treating her stepchildren as her own and showing special favor to young Abraham. Lincoln often referred to her as his "angel mother".

In 1830 Tom Lincoln moved again, this time to Illinois. Required by law to work for his father until he was 21, Lincoln left home at the earliest opportunity. He ended up in New Salem, Illinois where he took a job as a store clerk. Young Lincoln became a local favorite. The tall

and muscular young man was a great raconteur, spinning a wide variety of stories to the delight of the locals. Despite his sense of humor, Lincoln often suffered from what he termed “melancholy” but seems to have kept that mostly to himself.

In 1832, Lincoln had his first taste of leadership when he was elected captain of a local militia charged with defending the territory from Indian attacks. After briefly considering blacksmithing as his vocation, Lincoln decided to pursue law. He passed the bar examination in 1836 and moved to Springfield, Illinois the next year. There, he became an extremely successful lawyer, noted for not only his intelligence but also for his honesty and sense of fairness. During this time period he also was elected four times to the Illinois state legislature. He married Mary Todd in 1842 and the couple had four sons, only one of whom survived to adulthood. In 1847 he was elected to a single term representing Illinois in the United States House of Representatives where he experienced great frustration in having his ideas taken seriously. In 1849, he returned to Illinois and to his law practice.

Lincoln largely kept to his legal work until 1856. In that year, Lincoln joined the Republican Party in response to the Kansas-Nebraska act and two years later he challenged Stephen A. Douglas for his United States Senate seat. Lincoln and Douglas engaged in a memorable series of debates where Lincoln’s plainspoken eloquence attracted wide acclaim. On the question of slavery, Lincoln said “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe the government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free”.

Though Lincoln lost the election for Senate, he gained a powerful national reputation and positioned himself for what would be a successful run for the White House two years later.