HISTORY SHAPERS

# THE STORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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# The Story of Abraham Lincoln

*by*

Mary A. Hamilton

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## PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

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# Boyhood

In this little book I am going to try to tell you something about Abraham Lincoln. There is far more to say about him than can be fitted into so small a space; and perhaps when you are older you will read about him for yourselves, and read his wonderful speeches.

The greatest names in American history are those of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. These two men are great in the true sense of the word; they are great because they loved their country, purely and passionately, better than themselves, and gave their lives to its service. They thought nothing of their own honour and glory: to the last they were simple and true. Americans may well be proud of two such patriots; and from them every one may be glad to learn what real greatness means. Their work has made America what it is.

Less than forty years before Abraham Lincoln was born, America belonged to England. In the time of Charles I., numbers of people who loved freedom and hated the wrongful government of the king left their country and sailed to the New World. Samuel Lincoln was one of these men.

For a long time they were few in number. The greatest

part of the country was unknown forest, inhabited by wild beasts, or vast plains which belonged to fierce tribes of Red Indians. Life for the early settlers was very hard and rough. They had to cut down trees to build their houses, and to kill wild animals to get their food. Nevertheless they soon grew to love the country where they lived, where they married and brought up their children; and their wild open life made freedom more precious to them than anything else. They began to resent the action of the English Government, which wanted to tax them to pay for wars which were agreed upon in the Parliament in London, where America had no voice to speak for her. On July 4, 1776, in the reign of George III., the chief citizens met together and declared that America was a free united country, with a right to govern itself. The 4th of July—"Independence Day"—is the greatest day of all in America.

For seven years there was war. In this war Abraham's great-grandfather, John Lincoln, served as a soldier. The Americans were led by George Washington.

England was defeated, and America—the United States of America— was a free country. From this time on, America belonged to the Americans. But a great many years had to pass before they made of the country the America that we know. Now there are towns everywhere: you can get from one end to the other of the great country, far bigger than the whole of Europe, by trains that travel day and night from north to south and east to west. Then there

were very few towns, most of them along the coast, and no railways. All the west was unknown.

After the war was over, bands of explorers set out to fight the Indians and to find new homes for themselves. And Abraham Lincoln's grandfather, after whom he was named, was one of the first of these explorers. He sold his little piece of land in Virginia, and tramped through the forests till he found a place to build a new home, carrying his youngest son Thomas on one shoulder, and with his loaded rifle in his other hand ready to shoot any Indian who should attack him. In Kentucky some white men had already settled and built a small fort; near it Lincoln cut down trees and built a hut for himself and his wife and his three sons to live in.

When Abraham was a small boy he used to listen to the stories which his father Thomas told of their life there in the constant fear of Indian attack. There was one story which Thomas told very often, the story of his father's death.

He was at work cutting down the trees, so as to clear an open space near the house which he could plough and then sow with seed.

One morning he set out as usual with his three boys. They were talking together as they walked, and none of them saw that behind one of the trees an Indian was hiding, his dark skin strangely painted with arrows and circles in white and scarlet, and on his head a tuft of black feathers standing upright and waving as he moved. In his

hand he had a gun. As soon as the father had passed, the Indian came out from behind the tree, moving without making any sound. He shot at Abraham from behind, and the bullet passed right through his heart. The father fell down dead before the eyes of his sons. They were terrified. The two eldest ran off, one to the house and the other to the fort, to bring help.

Thomas, the youngest, was only six. He could not run so fast as his brothers, and he was too much frightened to try. He stood still beside his father's body, not understanding what had happened. His eldest brother, Mordecai, made all speed to the house. As soon as he reached it he took down a gun, loaded it, and jumped up to the window so that he might shoot at the Indian out of it. As he looked out he saw the Indian walk up to the place where the dead body lay, look at it for a moment, then pick up little Thomas, put him under his arm, and turn to walk away with him. Mordecai felt his heart stand still with fear; but he was a brave boy, and his father had taught him how to shoot at a long distance. He aimed straight at the white star painted on the Indian's naked chest. There was an awful moment. Then the Indian fell back dead upon the ground, dropping the child from his arms. Thomas ran to the house as fast as his legs would carry him, screaming with fear, for now several other Indians began to appear from the wood. Mordecai fired again and again at them from the house; and poeple came from the fort, brought by his brother, and drove the Indians away.

Mordecai, when he grew up, spent his life in waging war upon the Indians, killing them wherever he met them. Thomas was neither so strong nor so clever as his brother. He became a carpenter, but he was never a very good carpenter. He was not very good at anything but sitting by the fire telling stories. He did that very well indeed, and people generally were fond of him; but he was not a successful person. He had none of his son's wonderful power of work; he always wanted to do something else, not the thing before him, and live somewhere else, not settle down to work where he was.

He built himself a log-cabin at Elizabethtown, on the edge of the forest, and when he was twenty-eight he got married and took his wife to live there.

It is said that all great men have had great mothers. Nancy Hanks had much more character than her husband, and her son was much more like her. She had a very sweet, unselfish nature, and every one loved her. She had had more education than her husband, and could read and write: she taught him to sign his name.

After their first child came—a daughter called Sarah—Thomas Lincoln, who always thought he could make a fortune somewhere else, moved farther west to a place called Nolin's Creek. The place was not at all attractive, but it was cheap. The soil was hard; it was rocky and barren, and nothing but weeds seemed to grow in it. Only a very energetic man could have made much out of it, and Thomas was not very energetic. They were very poor.

THE BULLET PASSED RIGHT THROUGH HIS HEART.

It was here, in an uncomfortable log-cabin, that his son Abraham was born, on the 12th of February 1809; and here he lived until he was seven.

The hut had only one room. It was very roughly built. Stout logs had been laid on top of one another, then bound together with twigs, and the holes filled up with clay and grass and handfuls of dead leaves. There was no ceiling, only the log roof.

The two children climbed up a shaky ladder to a loft in the roof, where they slept on a bed of dry leaves, covered with an old deer-skin, lying close together to keep themselves warm. As they lay there, they could count the stars that looked in through the spaces between the logs that made the roof. The windows had no glass; the door was only an opening over which a deerskin was hung as a curtain. In winter it was terrible. The wind blew in, icy cold; there was nothing to keep it out, except when sometimes the entrance was blocked up with snow, and no one could go out or come in until a pathway had been dug.

In the autumn the house used to be full of dead leaves that whirled about in the middle of the floor. The only comfort in the hut was the huge fire; it filled up nearly the whole of one side, and in front of it was a great bearskin rug. On this the two children spent the days in winter, playing together, or leaning against their mother's knee while she told them stories—fairy tales, or true stories about Indians and old American history, or parables from the Bible. In the winter you could not keep warm anywhere

else; and in the autumn there were damp fogs that made it unwholesome outside, or heavy rains that came through the roof; the only thing to do was to get as near the fire as possible. Above it were ranged all the household pots and pans; the meat, a haunch of venison, or a couple of rabbits, hung from the roof. Cooking was very simple, for there was no choice of food: it consisted of game shot in the forest, or fish caught in the streams, roots and berries from the wood; bread was made of flour ground from Indian corn, which was the only thing that grew in the rough fields. Until he was a grown man Abraham had never tasted any other sort of bread.

The life was uncomfortable, often dangerous—for an Indian attack was possible at any time—and always the same. No visitors came to see the Lincolns; there were few friends for them to go and see, only the scattered settlers living in huts like their own.

Abraham very soon learnt to make himself useful. He would cut and bring home wood for the fire; help his mother in the house, or his father out-of-doors. In summer he spent long hours roaming about the woods. He soon learned to use a rifle, for it was not safe to go far unarmed, and he became a good shot. He remembered very little about this time when he grew older. One day he had been out fishing, and at the end of it he caught a single fish. With this he was walking home to supper, when he met a soldier. His mother had taught him he must

always be good to soldiers, who fought for their country, and therefore the little boy gave the soldier his fish.

His father always thought that he should be better off somewhere else. He heard that across the Ohio River there was rich land which any one could have who chose to go and take it: so when Abraham was seven, and his sister nine, they moved. The father built a raft, and put his family and all the goods he had, after selling his house, on to it, and they sailed down the river, getting food on the way by shooting and fishing, till they came to a place they liked called Little Pigeon Creek. It was simply an opening in the forest.

Here they disembarked, and for a year they lived in a roughly built shelter, without a floor or doors or windows, while the father and his son built a better cabin, and cut down trees and shrubs to clear a place for planting corn. When it was finished, Abraham's aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow, and two cousins, John and Denis Hanks, came to live with them. The three boys were great friends, and they worked together on the farm until they all grew up.

Abe, as they called him, was a very tall boy for his age: his long legs were always in his way, and they seemed to get longer every day. He never wore stockings until he was a young man, but moccasins, such as the Indians wear—shoes of leather, with a fringe round the top—and long deerskin leggings; a deerskin shirt which his mother had made him, and a cap which was seldom on

his head, it being covered enough by his thick black hair. His hair was never tidy; always in his eyes, and having to be pushed back. Abe was clever with his axe, and a good workman; his mother had taught him to spell, but there was little chance of learning in Pigeon's Creek.

For a year the little family lived there very happily; then a mysterious sickness broke out in the place, no one knew why or how to cure it. They called it the milk sickness; many people fell ill of it, and hardly any one recovered. Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow both died of it in the autumn, and a few days afterwards Mrs. Lincoln sickened and died too. To her children this was a terrible grief. Abraham, though a boy when she died, never forgot his mother: she had taught him his first lessons, and from her came that sweetness of nature, that power of thinking first of others, that made every one who knew him love him. It was at the time of his mother's death that the sadness which never left him came upon him. In later life, people who really knew him said that, in spite of his fun and power of making other people laugh, he was the saddest man they ever knew.

A dreary winter followed. At the end of it Thomas Lincoln brought home a new wife to his little cabin. Sally Bush was a widow, with three children; she was a good and kind woman, and Abe really loved her and she him. She said afterwards that he had never all his life given her a cross word or look, or refused to do anything she asked him; that he was the best boy she had ever seen. He was

indeed the sunshine of the house; but in many ways he was very lonely. He was hungry for knowledge, for books and teaching. All the schooling he ever had was a month now and then with a travelling teacher who passed through Pigeon's Creek on his way to somewhere else; but none of these teachers knew much beyond the three R's: one who knew Latin was regarded as a sort of magician. In all, he had not so much as one year at school, taught by five different teachers.

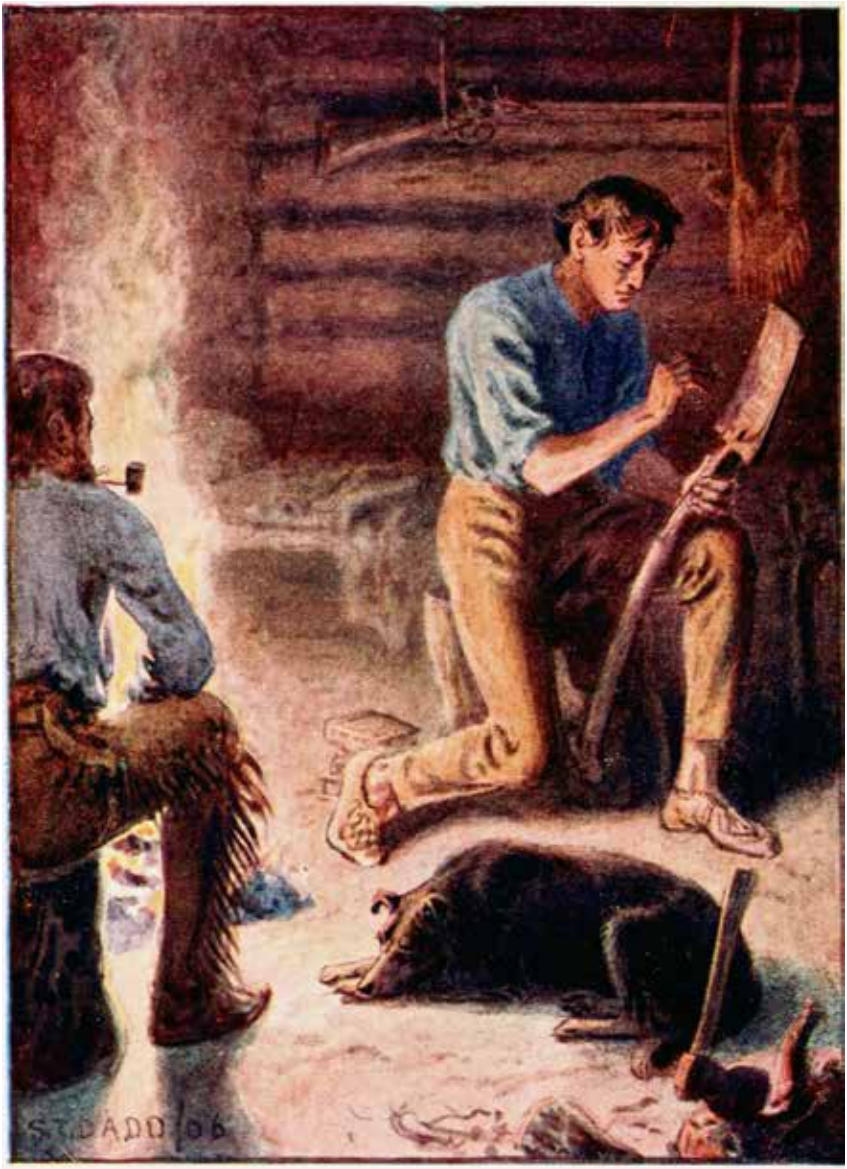
But Abe was not the sort of boy to learn nothing because there was nobody to teach him. He had a few books that had been his mother's, and he read them again and again until he knew everything that was in them. John Hanks, his cousin, says of him: "When Abe and I returned to the house from work, he would go to the cupboard, snatch a piece of corn-bread, take down a book, sit down, cock his legs as high as his head, and read." The Bible and "Pilgrim's Progress," "Aesop's Fables," and "Robinson Crusoe," these were his books; he knew them by heart. In the intervals of work he used to tell them to his companions. He thought over every word until he understood it. In this way he learned more from a few books than many people do from whole libraries, because he learned to think. He questioned everything, and asked himself if he thought so too, and why he thought so.

One day he borrowed the life of George Washington from a farmer who lived near; as he lay in the loft he read it with eagerness. In the middle he was called away to

work, and in the meantime the rain came in and ruined the book. Abraham went in despair to the farmer and told him what had happened. "Never mind," said the farmer. "You do three days' work for me for nothing and you may keep the book; I don't want it." To his joy he thus became possessed of a new treasure to be studied again and again. This book more than any other made him a patriot: he longed to get out into the great big world where he could serve his country. In the evenings he used to sit silent for hours, thinking. Sometimes he did sums of all sorts on the wooden shovel; making figures on it with a piece of charcoal. When it was quite full he shaved off the top with his knife so as to have a clean slate in the morning.

All his companions liked Abe and admired him. He worked very hard, but farm work did not interest him; he liked dinner and play better; and sometimes he used to stop work and climb on to a gate or a dead tree-stump, and make absurd speeches or comic sermons to his companions, or recite passages from his favourite books.

They thought him a quaint fellow, with some strange ideas. One of these strange ideas was his tenderness to animals. He never cared much for sport, because it seemed to him cruel. He showed his tenderness to animals when quite a small boy. One day he was playing in the woods with a boy called John Davis. In their game they ran a hedgehog into a crevice between two rocks, and it got caught fast. For two hours they tried every sort of plan to get it out, but without any success. They were not able




SOMETIMES HE DID SUMS ON THE WOODEN SHOVEL.

to pull it out, and it could not move itself. Abraham could not bear to leave the poor thing to die in pain. He ran off to the blacksmith's shop, quite a quarter of a mile away, and borrowed a pole with an iron hook fastened to the end; with this they were able to set the animal free

This care for animals was only one sign of Abraham's tenderness of heart. All little children and old people trusted him and his word. He was very soon known as "Honest Abe."

# The Young Backwoodsman

For Abraham life was dull and very monotonous: the round of work was much the same, summer and winter. He longed to escape from the dull work of a farm labourer; to go out and see the world. Until he was twenty-one, however, he was bound to serve his father; and his father seems to have had no idea that his son was fit for anything better than ordinary farm work. Other people nevertheless were struck by Abraham.

Until he was nineteen he had not left home at all; but then one day a rich land-owner who lived near came to him. He wanted some one to help his son to take a raft loaded with different kinds of goods down the Ohio River, selling the goods at the different places they passed. Abraham had struck this Mr. Gentry as being an honest and capable lad; he therefore asked him to undertake the voyage, and Abraham consented at once, glad of any chance of seeing something of life outside the settlement.

He took charge of the raft and steered it successfully down the river; the voyage took them past the great southern sugar plantations, right down to New Orleans. They had no adventures of any sort until they had almost come to New Orleans.

One night they encamped at Baton Rouge, a place on the bank of the river. Here they fastened their raft, and lay down to sleep on it for the night, wrapped up in thick blankets. They were both sound asleep. Suddenly Abraham started up. He heard the sound of many soft footsteps all round him. In the darkness, at first, he could see nothing; then he became aware that a band of negroes was attacking the raft, ready to steal their goods and to murder them. Abraham's cry woke up his companion, young Allan Gentry, and they threw themselves upon the negroes. If Abraham had not been uncommonly strong and active they must both have lost their lives, for the negroes far outnumbered them. He seized a huge log of wood, which served him as a club, and brandished it in his hand. His great height and the unknown weapon which he whirled round his head, terrified the negroes. He hit first one and then another on the head and threw them overboard, Allan Gentry helping. The fight was very fierce for a few moments, and then the negroes turned and fled. Abraham and Allan pursued them a long way into the darkness, but the thieves did not dare to return, though two men could not have held their own for long against such numbers.

The voyage ended successfully, and Abraham returned home for two more years. At the end of that time his father again moved. John Hanks had gone west to Illinois; he wrote to his uncle, praising the new country, and urging him to come there too. Thomas Lincoln was always ready

to try something new: he sold his farm and his land to a neighbour. All the goods of the household were packed in a waggon drawn by oxen; the family walked beside it. They tramped for more than a week until they came to the new State; the journey was not easy. It was February. The forest roads were ankle-deep in mud; the prairie a mere swamp, very difficult for walking. They had to cross streams that were swollen into rivers by the rains.

At last they arrived. John Hanks had chosen a plantation for them, and got logs ready for building the house. Abraham worked very hard, and helped his father and John Hanks to make a cabin; then, with his own hands, he ploughed fifteen acres of ground. When that was done he cut down walnut trees, split them, and built a high and solid fence which went right round his father's property.

Abraham lived in Illinois until he was made President of the United States. Once he was addressing a meeting there, years after this, and Denis Hanks marched in amid the shouts and applause of the crowd, carrying on his shoulder a piece of the railing that Abraham had made for his father. It is now in the Museum at Washington, kept as a national treasure. How little could Abraham himself or any one who knew him at this time, have dreamed that this rail-splitter was to be the greatest man in America.

The winter that followed was one of the most severe ever known in Illinois; it is always referred to as the winter of deep snow. When spring came at last, Abraham said good-bye to his father and mother, and went out into

the world to make a livelihood for himself. His boyish days were over. He was now twenty-one, and very tall and strong for his age. More than six feet four inches in height, he seldom met a man taller than himself. He is a great exception to the saying that all great men have been small—for example, Napoleon, Caesar, Hannibal, Shakespeare. Abraham was very well built; it was not till he stood up among other men that you realised that he was head and shoulders taller than most of them.

In the ordinary sense of the word, he had had no education. He knew no language but his own, and that not very well at this time. When asked could he write, he replied, "Well, I guess I could make a few rabbit-tracks." He had taught himself all the arithmetic he knew. But he knew two things that are the most important that can be got from any training: how to think, and how to work. When he made clear to himself what it was right to do, he did it without talking about it, all his life.

His experience in taking Mr. Gentry's cargo down to New Orleans induced a merchant called Offutt to offer him another job of the same kind. Offutt was an adventurous sort of dealer, who did all kinds of business. He wanted some one to help him who had a head on his shoulders, and he soon saw that Lincoln had plenty of sense. He therefore engaged him, and Lincoln took his cousin, John Hanks, to help him. They did not make much money by the voyage, but Lincoln showed great skill in managing the raft.

On this trip Lincoln came for the first time really face to

face with slavery. New Orleans was a great slave market, and they spent some time there. For the first time he saw negroes being sold in the open streets, chained together in gangs. For the first time, too, he saw negroes being beaten; fastened to a block and scourged till the blood ran from their backs. Every one took it all as a matter of course, but Lincoln was deeply struck. His heart bled. At the time he said nothing, but he was silent for a long while afterwards, thinking over what he had seen. There and then, as his cousin used to tell afterwards, slavery ran its iron into him: to see these men chained was a torment to him, and he never forgot it: the picture was printed on his memory never to be forgotten, only to be wiped out when there were no more slaves in America. He was often in the slave states after this; but slavery always seemed to him horrible.

Offutt was quite satisfied with the way in which the young backwoodsman had managed the trip. After his return he offered him a post in his grocery store at New Salem. He had a kind of half shop, half office, with a mill behind it; here he sold everything that any one could want to buy—grocery, drapery, stationery, miscellaneous goods of all kinds. Lincoln was clerk, superintendent of the mill, and general assistant.

Offutt soon began to admire his assistant immensely. He declared that Lincoln was the cleverest fellow he knew—he could read, and talk like a book; he was so strong and active that he could beat any one at running,