

**ABRAHAM  
LINCOLN**

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Abraham Lincoln by Joseph H. Choate

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BY

JOSEPH H. CHOATE

EIGHTH THOUSAND

NEW YORK  
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & COMPANY  
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**AN ADDRESS**

**DELIVERED BEFORE THE**

**EDINBURGH PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION**

**NOVEMBER THE THIRTEENTH**

**NINETEEN HUNDRED**

## ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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WHEN you asked me to deliver the Inaugural Address on this occasion, I recognized that I owed this compliment to the fact that I was the official representative of America—and in selecting a subject I ventured to think that I might interest you for an hour in a brief study in popular government, as illustrated by the life of the most American of all Americans. I therefore offer no apology for asking your attention to Abraham Lincoln — to his unique character and the part he bore in two important achievements of modern history: the preservation of the integrity of the American Union and the emancipation of the colored race.

During his brief term of power he was probably the object of more abuse, vilification, and ridicule than any other man in the world; but when he fell by the hand of an assassin, at the very moment of his stupendous victory, all the nations of the earth vied with one another in paying homage to his character; and the thirty-five years that have since elapsed have established his place in history as one of the great benefactors not of his own country alone, but of the human race.

One of many noble utterances upon the occasion of his death was that in which "Punch" made its magnanimous recantation of the spirit with which it had pursued him: —

“Beside this corpse that bears for winding sheet  
 The stars and stripes he lived to rear anew,  
 Between the mourners at his head and feet,  
 Say, scurrile jester, is there room for you?”

“Yes, he had lived to shame me from my sneer,  
 To lame my pencil, and confute my pen —  
 To make me own this hind — of princes peer,  
 This rail-splitter — a true born king of men.”

Fiction can furnish no match for the romance of his life, and biography will be searched in vain for such startling vicissitudes of fortune, so great power and glory won out of such humble beginnings and adverse circumstances.

Doubtless you are all familiar with the salient points of his extraordinary career. In the zenith of his fame he was the wise, patient, courageous, successful ruler of men; exercising more power than any monarch of his time, not for himself, but for the good of the people who had placed it in his hands; commander-in-chief of a vast military power, which waged with ultimate success the greatest war of the century; the triumphant champion of popular government, the deliverer of four millions of his fellow men from bondage; honored by mankind as Statesman, President, and Liberator.

Let us glance now at the first half of the brief life, of which this was the glorious and happy consummation. Nothing could be more squalid and miserable than the home in which Abraham Lincoln was born — a one-roomed cabin without floor or window in what was then the wilderness of Kentucky, in the heart of that frontier life which swiftly moved westward from the Alleghanies to the Mississippi, always in advance of schools and churches, of books and money, of railroads and newspapers, of all things which are generally regarded as the comforts and even necessities of life. His father, igno-



rant, needy, and thriftless, content if he could keep soul and body together for himself and his family, was ever seeking, without success, to better his unhappy condition by moving on from one such scene of dreary desolation to another. The rude society which surrounded them was not much better. The struggle for existence was hard, and absorbed all their energies. They were fighting the forest, the wild beast, and the retreating savage. From the time when he could barely handle tools until he attained his majority, Lincoln's life was that of a simple farm laborer, poorly clad, housed, and fed, at work either on his father's wretched farm or hired out to neighboring farmers. But in spite, or perhaps by means, of this rude environment, he grew to be a stalwart giant, reaching six feet four at nineteen, and fabulous stories are told of his feats of strength. With the growth of this mighty frame began that strange education which in his ripening years was to qualify him for the great destiny that awaited him, and the development of those mental faculties and moral endowments which, by the time he reached middle life, were to make him the sagacious, patient, and triumphant leader of a great nation in the crisis of its fate. His whole schooling, obtained during such odd times as could be spared from grinding labor, did not amount in all to as much as one year, and the quality of the teaching was of the lowest possible grade, including only the elements of reading, writing, and ciphering. But out of these simple elements, when rightly used by the right man, education is achieved; and Lincoln knew how to use them. As so often happens, he seemed to take warning from his father's unfortunate example. Untiring industry, an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and an evergrowing desire to rise above his surroundings, were early manifestations of his character.

Books were almost unknown in that community, but the Bible was in every house, and somehow or other "Pilgrim's Progress," "Æsop's Fables," a "History of the United States," and a "Life of Washington" fell into his hands. He trudged on foot many miles through the wilderness to borrow an English Grammar, and is said to have devoured greedily the contents of the Statutes of Indiana that fell in his way. These few volumes he read and re-read — and his power of assimilation was great. To be shut in with a few books and to master them thoroughly sometimes does more for the development of character than freedom to range at large, in a cursory and indiscriminate way, through wide domains of literature. This youth's mind, at any rate, was thoroughly saturated with Biblical knowledge and Biblical language, which, in after life, he used with great readiness and effect. But it was the constant use of the little knowledge which he had that developed and exercised his mental powers. After the hard day's work was done, while others slept, he toiled on, always reading or writing. From an early age he did his own thinking and made up his own mind — invaluable traits in the future President. Paper was such a scarce commodity that, by the evening firelight, he would write and cipher on the back of a wooden shovel, and then shave it off to make room for more. By and by, as he approached manhood, he began speaking in the rude gatherings of the neighborhood, and so laid the foundation of that art of persuading his fellow men which was one rich result of his education, and one great secret of his subsequent success.

Accustomed as we are in these days of steam and telegraphs to have every intelligent boy survey the whole world each morning before breakfast, and inform

himself as to what is going on in every nation, it is hardly possible to conceive how benighted and isolated was the condition of the community at Pigeon Creek in Indiana, of which the family of Lincoln's father formed a part, or how eagerly an ambitious and high-spirited boy, such as he, must have yearned to escape. The first glimpse that he ever got of any world beyond the narrow confines of his home was in 1828, at the age of nineteen, when a neighbor employed him to accompany his son down the river to New Orleans to dispose of a flat-boat of produce — a commission which he discharged with great success.

Shortly after his return from this his first excursion into the outer world, his father, tired of failure in Indiana, packed his family and all his worldly goods into a single wagon drawn by two yoke of oxen, and after a fourteen days' tramp through the wilderness, pitched his camp once more in Illinois. Here Abraham, having come of age and being now his own master, rendered the last service of his minority by ploughing the fifteen-acre lot and splitting from the tall walnut trees of the primeval forest enough rails to surround the little clearing with a fence. Such was the meagre outfit of this coming leader of men, at the age when the future British Prime Minister or statesman emerges from the university as a double first or senior wrangler, with every advantage that high training and broad culture and association with the wisest and the best of men and women can give, and enters upon some form of public service on the road to usefulness and honor, the University course being only the first stage of the public training. So Lincoln, at twenty-one, had just begun his preparation for the public life to which he soon began to aspire. For some years yet he must continue to earn his daily