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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

by

JOHN RICHARDS BOYLE, D.D.

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1911

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

MEMORIAL MEETING

FEBRUARY 15 1911

1911

Commandery of the State of Pennsylvania

FEBRUARY 15, 1911

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 4, 1861, TO APRIL 15, 1865


Born February 12, 1809, in Hardin (La Rue) Co., Kentucky
Assassinated April 14, 1865; died April 15, 1865, at Washington, D. C.

Enrolled by Special Resolution April 16, 1865

"The Making of Abraham Lincoln"

COMPANION CAPTAIN JOHN RICHARDS BOYLE D.D.

CHAPLAIN OF THE COMMANDERY



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“THE MAKING OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN”

By Companion CAPTAIN JOHN RICHARDS BOYLE, D.D.

The greatest surprise of the Civil War period—perhaps the greatest surprise of our National history—was ABRAHAM LINCOLN. Two years before his election to the Presidency, Jesse W. Fell, of Bloomington, said to certain public men of the East, “We have two giants in Illinois,—Douglas, the ‘little giant,’ whom you all know, and LINCOLN, the real giant, whom as yet you do not know.” And it was true. Mr. LINCOLN’s great debate with Douglas in 1858, his subsequent lecture tour through New England, and his Cooper Union speech, had attracted public attention, and astonished many thoughtful men, but it was a fact that when he took the oath of office as Chief Magistrate of the Republic, the Nation did not really know him, and because he was so widely unknown he was, naturally enough, somewhat distrusted. At first sight he seemed an unusual and in some sense a disconcerting figure. Six feet four inches in height, loose jointed, long limbed, with great hands and feet, a narrow neck, large features, a swarthy and deeply seamed countenance, heavy dark hair, and careless in dress, he appeared to the superficial observer as only a superior type of frontier manhood. And sober minded men asked nervously: “Is such a man as this equal to our emergency? Can he guide the ship of state through the angry waters of Civil War?” In fact it scarcely seemed possible. And yet when this comparatively untried man came in contact with the most powerful minds of the Nation, and when he was confronted with the most appalling problems that ever demanded solution from an American President, he met every crisis with phenomenal calmness, ability and courage, and impressed the country and the world with his supreme genius for leadership. In the Cabinet, the brilliant and experienced Seward, who had accepted the portfolio of State, that, as one historian has said, he might be a sort of guardian or Providence to the new administration, confessed within three months that the President was the greatest man among them. Senators like Sumner acknowledged his capacity. Generals like Grant, and Sherman, and Meade, were amazed at his practical military sagacity. Congress bowed its head before his intellectual and moral sovereignty. The people awoke to an assured confidence in him. The army in the field adored him. And the foreign world recognized in him a new and commanding figure on the stage of civic life. He proved himself a revelation of personal manhood and official sufficiency. As he towered physically above other men, so he stood vitally above them, until in that crucial period of the Nation’s

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Private 58th Penna. Infantry October 12, 1861; transferred to 111th Penna. Infantry January 17, 1862; discharged to accept promotion March 11, 1862.

Second Lieutenant 111th Penna. Infantry March 12, 1862; First Lieutenant May 1, 1863; First Lieutenant and Adjutant March 12, 1864; mustered out to accept promotion August 15, 1864.

Captain and Asst. Quartermaster U. S. Volunteers August 16, 1864; honorably mustered out March 20, 1866.

life, when extraordinary human power was developed on every hand, he outclassed all others, and held the centre of the stage, grandly, sublimely, and unrivaled in the majesty of his personality and influence. And so he has continued to stand through the nearly forty-six years that have succeeded his tragic death, and today his colossal and sacrificial figure transcends that of every other American statesman in the temple of our National fame.

Every effect has its adequate cause. And Mr. LINCOLN was the effect of an adequate cause, or a series of such causes. How can we account for him? How sprang this man from comparative obscurity to such sudden and unexampled eminence? Whence had he letters, never having learned? Where and how did he acquire his preparation for his brief but immortal public services? These are the questions that must be determined before we can at all understand ABRAHAM LINCOLN. And I shall therefore venture to speak to you briefly to-night of the fundamental forces and conditions that made him what he was, and trained him for his incomparable services to the country and the world.

I. HIS HEREDITARY INHERITANCE

First among these I mention his Hereditary Inheritance. Always primary in the forces that produce a man is transmitted quality. Heredity is a generic and potent factor in personality. Blood tells. Great and good men can no more be derived from base material than gold can be made from brass or clay. Ancestry counts positively in character, and therefore one of our witty essayists cautions us all to be very particular in our choice of parents. Mr. LINCOLN had no pride of ancestry himself, and because he was born of humble parents in a cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky, it has been popularly supposed that he had no lineage worth mentioning. But the precise reverse of this is the fact. ABRAHAM LINCOLN was the scion of a notable and worthy stock. His earliest American ancestor was Samuel Lincoln, who came from England with the Puritans, and settled at Hingham, Mass., about 1640. The four grandsons of this man all served with credit in the Colonial Army and Navy during the Revolutionary War. One of his great-great-grandsons, Levi Lincoln, was a Harvard graduate and filled the offices of Representative in the Massachusetts Legislature, Attorney-General of the United States, Secretary of State, and Justice of the United States Supreme Court. One of Levi Lincoln's sons was also a Harvard man, and another was a member of Congress, and a Governor of the State of Maine. The President's grandfather was a large land owner in Virginia, who removed in early life to Kentucky, where he was killed by the Indians. And this domestic tragedy alone accounted for the poverty of the President's father, who was a child of only ten years of age when his father was murdered. Had the second Abraham Lincoln lived, his son Thomas would have been a man of property and position, and the third and greatest ABRAHAM LINCOLN would not have been a squatter's child. The truth is that the pure blood of Old England and New England coursed in ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S veins. For five generations his paternal ancestors were religious, patriotic, educated, public spirited men, and the man-child that nestled in the arms of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, on February 12, 1809, was the God-appointed heir of their intellectual and moral characteristics. By the divinely ordained law of hereditary transmission there came to him from this ancestry the germinal forces of his personality. Once again a chosen liberator was born in poverty, and a king was cradled in obscurity. But the accidental conditions of his birth did not and could

not affect his person. His regnant nature was there in embryo, as the oak is in the acorn, and the divine ordination was upon it. His ancestral generations fruited in him, as the selected and cultured seed fruits in the consummate flower.

And this is the primary fact to be recognized in any logical inquiry into the personality of ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

II. HIS EARLY ENVIRONMENT

The second great fact to be considered in the making of this phenomenal man is that of his Early Environment. The crude and narrow sphere in which Mr. LINCOLN passed his youth and young manhood would seem at first glance to have been positively destructive of any advantages he might have derived from heredity. When he was seven years of age his people removed from Kentucky to Southern Indiana, where he lost his good mother, and thirteen years later they migrated further to Sangamon County, Illinois. In both localities the conditions were similar. The country was new, the people were hardy pioneers, and generally illiterate, and often godless and wicked. Schools were unknown, except when some peripatetic Roman Catholic pedagogue, or an itinerant Irish teacher with a shady past, appeared, and opened a so-called place of instruction for a few weeks or months, at which "the three R's" were beaten into the pupils' heads with hickory rods or hard knuckles. There were no churches, and only occasional religious services held by some stray evangelist. Profanity, drinking, gambling and fighting were the popular vices, and the grocery store or blacksmith shop was the village point of rendezvous. Hard, heart breaking toil, relieved by unrestrained excesses, constituted the rural Western life of that day. And LINCOLN was of necessity exposed to it all. He was inured to its severe labor from his earliest childhood, and was familiar with its prevalent vices from his tenderest years. Dressed in homespun jeans, his trousers tucked into his cowhide boots, a coon skin cap upon his head, his great height and nondescript garb rendered him a unique and striking figure. He was renowned for his remarkable physical strength, even among a race of exceptionally muscular men. No young man of the vicinity could sink an axe so deeply into a log, or strike a wedge so powerfully as he. He could outleap, outrun, or outswim any of his fellows, and at wrestling he was unequalled. It is said that when he appeared at New Salem as a clerk, a crowd of young toughs forced him into a wrestling match with the local champion, who was deemed invincible. Failing to bring LINCOLN to the ground, this athlete resorted to a cowardly and desperate foul. The good-natured LINCOLN was roused to sudden fury by this infamy, and raising the man bodily from the ground he hurled him from him with such force as to wound and stun him. What a tackler he would have made upon a modern foot-ball field. And yet he was the soul of good humor, and was a universal favorite with the more quarrelsome youth who soon learned to respect and fear his mighty arm.

He possessed great physical as well as moral courage. It is related that on one occasion two men were carried away by a flood in the Sangamon River. As they floated past New Salem, they managed to obtain a handhold on a half submerged tree that had lodged on a sand-bar in midstream. LINCOLN lashed a long rope to a log nearby, and directing some of the bystanders to pay it out, he leaped upon this unsteady life-boat, paddled it to the tree, and brought the frightened, half-drowned men safely to shore. His moral courage was equally marked. He never drank. He would not gamble. He did not become addicted to the use of

profane language. He treated women with the utmost respect and delicacy, and did not shrink from defending them against rude or vulgar speech. One day in his store at New Salem a young rowdy broke into a torrent of oaths in the presence of a woman. LINCOLN quietly but earnestly rebuked him, and when the offender turned upon him with other oaths, this backwoods Knight Errant said: "I see that my admonition has done you no good, and that you must be physically persuaded, and as there is no one else to chastise you but myself, I will do it,—and I will do it now." And he carried that struggling blasphemer from the store, threw him to the ground, and rubbed smartweed in his face and eyes until he howled for mercy.

He was a welcome visitor in the homes of these pioneer women, and was not above relieving them of the care of their little children at times while they themselves struggled with their heavy housework. He was the friend especially of the mothers of the wild young men of the community. One of these he knew as "Aunt Hannah," and after he had become a practicing attorney this woman's son—LINCOLN's former antagonist in the wrestling bout—was tried for murder. LINCOLN sought out the panic-stricken mother and promised to defend her boy. This he did successfully by impeaching the testimony of the chief witness for the prosecution, causing him to swear positively that he identified the defendant near the scene and on the night of the murder by the light of a cloudless full moon, and then producing an almanac, he proved that there was no moon visible on that night.

From a child he was thoughtful and introspective,—a close observer of nature and men,—and this habit not only developed his remarkable reasoning power, it stimulated also his native genius for humor and humorous anecdote. There was a large log lying half embedded on the river bank at New Salem that was known as "Lincoln's Log." There the men of the village would gather in the evening and listen with great glee to his quaint stories. He could mimic the typical frontiersman, the negro, the auctioneer, and the preacher, and illustrate the oddities of all with irresistible effect. He became known far and near for this gift, and in later years when he traveled the large judicial district in which he practiced law, the seat of the county courts was always enlivened by his never failing fun. At the hotel in the evening or as judge and lawyers journeyed together over the tedious roads, he was always the centre of attraction. Sometimes he carried his levity into the court room, greatly to the disturbance of its decorum. The presiding judge, David Davis, who afterwards became a United States Senator from Illinois, was a man of portly frame, and was highly punctilious for the dignity of his court, but he could not resist LINCOLN's merriment. On one occasion a knot of lawyers gathered about LINCOLN, who whispered a side splitting story in their ears, that caused them to shake with laughter and drew the attention of the jury, the witnesses and the spectators to their amusement, when Judge Davis smote his desk sharply and shouted: "MR. LINCOLN, MR. LINCOLN, we cannot hold two courts here. Either your court or mine must adjourn, and I think it will be yours. Silence." And then he beckoned to one of the smiling attorneys and whispered: "What was it that LINCOLN was saying?" At another time MR. LINCOLN in delivering an official paper made an irresistibly funny remark to the clerk of the court, and that official unable to control himself, burst into a loud peal of laughter. Judge Davis nearly split the desk with his gavel, and cried: "Mr. Clerk, fine yourself \$5 for contempt of court." As soon as the incident was

forgotten in the routine business of the court, his honor called the clerk to him and murmured: "What was that funny joke of LINCOLN's that made you laugh?" And when the clerk whispered it in his ear, the judge hid his face while his huge form quivered with amusement, and as soon as he could control his voice, he said in his most judicial tones, "Mr. Clerk, since you have made a full and satisfactory explanation of your recent unseemly levity to the court, I will remit your fine."

The thought I wish to impress is that this raw, crude environment of his early life did not harm ABRAHAM LINCOLN. He was a part of these conditions, but they did not dominate him. He was superior to them, and made them wholesome and helpful to himself. They aided in developing him. The severe physical exactions of his youth were as good, or better, for him than the college gymnasium or gridiron would have been. The school of human nature in which he spent his first twenty-one years unfolded and molded his mind and conscience and heart. He dominated it all in healthful self-mastery. These conditions were a soil in which he grew. He was cleaner, brighter and greater than his surroundings. And the few thoughtful men who then knew him appreciated this fact. They saw that he was a *sui generis* in this wild garden of life, and one of them who observed him closely said one day with emphasis, "Mark my words. ABRAHAM LINCOLN will some time be the President of the United States."

III. HIS SELF CULTURE

But the greatest and most wonderful fact in the making of ABRAHAM LINCOLN was his severe and masterful self-culture. His intellectual training of himself would be pathetic were it not so heroic. He had no instructors. He never attended school for one year in all his life. He came in contact with no educated men. He worked hard for his living from his earliest childhood. And yet he educated himself in the truest sense of that term. He made pens from the quills of buzzards, and ink from poke berry juice, and laboriously practiced writing until he became one of the neatest penmen in the county. He used the back of a wooden shovel or the barn door as a slate, and practiced arithmetic upon them, with a piece of charcoal for a pencil, until, as he said, he could cipher as far as "the rule of three," and then he toiled on until he mastered the mathematical principles of surveying. His entire stock of books, when he was twenty-one years of age, consisted of the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, A Brief History of the United States, Weems' Life of Washington, and the Revised Statutes of Indiana, and he had access to no others. But he read and absorbed these volumes, and they stimulated and affected his mental life. The Bible gave him his profound faith in God, and his classic style of literary expression. Aesop tickled his sense of humorous philosophy. Bunyan's great allegory inspired his imagination. The story of the Republic and its great Father aroused his patriotism, and the statutes of his state awoke in his heart an ambition for the law. He once walked twelve miles to borrow the only copy of Kirkham's Grammar in the county, and memorized its contents within six weeks, and then, turning it about in his hands he said "So that is a science, is it? Well, I think I will tackle another." While he kept store in New Salem he bought one day from a passing emigrant, for fifty cents, a barrel of old papers. In the bottom of it he discovered a dilapidated copy of Blackstone's Commentaries. That book was to him one of the most precious treasures of his life. It furnished his emergent mentality its precisely needed stimulus. He revelled in its magni-

ficient arguments, and wrestled with its profound principles in fascinated delight, and he determined then and there that he would be a lawyer. He studied as he followed the plow, as he rested in the noon-time shade of the trees, as he waited for customers in his store, and as he lay in his bed at night. And what was far more to the purpose, he *thought*. He developed knowing power. As he said, he could never surrender his hold on a proposition until he had mastered it. Thus, his naturally clear, penetrative, analytical mind was nourished and disciplined and strengthened, until he became a reasoning prodigy among his amazed associates.

He also practiced the art of public speech. By memorizing selections from the "Kentucky Preceptor;" by listening critically to itinerant preachers; by attending court and studying the oratory of the judges and attorneys; by visiting political assemblies and camp meetings, and analyzing the style and power of their practiced speakers, and by speaking himself, he gradually acquired the gift of public address, and became locally famous for his oratorical skill. Lucid, thoughtful, self-possessed, sincere and witty, he was soon regarded as the most popular young orator in Sangamon County. And he continued these severely studious habits throughout all his subsequent life. In after years when he met some of the most distinguished members of the American bar in court, and was astonished at their learning and power, he was not dismayed. He studied them, and felt that he could emulate them, and said to one of his friends that he was going back to Springfield "to study law." His friend said, "Why, MR. LINCOLN, you are one of the greatest lawyers in Illinois now?" "No matter," he replied, "I am going home to study law." He felt that he could learn what any other man knew, and that he could do what any other man did.

Thus he trained himself and grew. Steadily, with untiring industry, he filled and strengthened his mind, until he became full orbed,—clothed with intellectual power and baptized with mental light, and capable of grappling any problem of thought with mature and conquering energy. Self educated,—self made,—he was at forty-five years of age an intellectual giant, even among strong men.

His moral development was equally remarkable and thorough. From his youth he was known to his associates as "HONEST ABRAHAM LINCOLN." God's eternal ethical law was enthroned in his incorruptible conscience. He was honest commercially. When he was a young merchant he found one evening that he had mistakenly given a customer six and one-half cents too little in change, and he walked that night several miles to make it good. Through the fault of his partner at New Salem, he was cruelly burdened with a business debt of fifteen hundred dollars, and he labored and denied himself for years to pay the last penny of that debt.

But this is saying but very little of his honesty. He was intellectually honest and was as immovable as a granite head-land in fidelity to his convictions of right. While he was President, certain senators once plead with him to do a much desired public act and they went so far as to hint at his political ruin if he refused. His well known reply was, "Gentlemen, I cannot see this thing as you do. You may be right, I may be wrong. But I cannot do it. But," he added, "there is one thing I can do. I can resign my office, and perhaps Mr. Hamlin may be able to meet your views."

He was ethically honest. When the Trent affair took place, and Mason and

Slidell were taken from that British ship on the high seas, by Captain Wilkes of our navy, and England demanded their surrender under threat of war; and when the whole country,—congress, newspapers and public opinion—were clamoring for their retention at any cost, MR. LINCOLN said, "We cannot rightfully hold these men. The principle of their retention is precisely that which we went to war with England in 1812 to protest against. We must give them up." And he gave them up. It was one of the most ethically courageous things an American President ever did. And the conscience of the American people will forever endorse and defend his stand.

He was magnanimously honest. When the case of a soldier who had been severely wounded in battle, but who had subsequently deserted, was brought before him, he said, "The Scriptures teach us that by the shedding of blood there is remission of sin. This man shed his blood for his country, and his sin shall be forgiven." And he spared his life. And when he thought his re-election in 1864 was uncertain he carefully wrote out a memorandum of patriotic action regarding what he conceived to be his duty to his successor. His integrity, inspired and cultivated by the humble surroundings of his early life, grew with his growth, and was flawless at every point, and in every test.

IV. HIS POLITICAL TRAINING

I had intended to speak also of MR. LINCOLN's civic training for his great public life work, but time fails me. A single hurried word must suffice. He was no political novice, when he leaped into national fame. Politics had been one of his absorbing studies from his youth. He received his first convictions concerning slavery from his perusal of the Indiana Statutes which forever forbade it in that state, but he first saw the practical spirit of that institution when he visited New Orleans in his early days in command of a flat-boat. There he saw slaves whipped and otherwise maltreated, and one day he attended a slave auction. He beheld a young mulatto girl on the block; he witnessed the personal indignities to which she was subjected, he saw her tears and heard her sobs of fear and shame, and said to his companions, "Come away, I cannot stand this," and raising his right hand heavenward, he exclaimed, "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I shall hit it hard." And on January 1, 1863, that same right hand annihilated it forever on American soil.

His political training was aided by his service in the Illinois legislature and his single term in Congress. It was advanced by his constant study of our civic conditions and his active interest in the public affairs of his state. It was still further advanced by his leadership in the establishment of the Republican Party in his State in 1854, and in his remarkable campaign for that party in 1856, when he made his overwhelming "Lost Speech" and his equally powerful political oration on the "House Divided Against Itself,"—addresses which fairly swept his audiences into a delirium of excitement, and which have never been surpassed for effect on the American rostrum. And that training was perfected in his unexampled public debates with Senator Douglas in 1858, in which he spoke altogether for twenty-one hours against one of the greatest political debaters the country has ever produced, and gave the Nation what is without doubt one of the most masterful examples of comprehensive civic intelligence, wisdom, and argument that was ever pronounced on a political platform.

And thus it came to pass that when he was called to the Presidency in

1860, he was, of all living Americans, the one man who had been the best prepared by Providence, intellectually, morally, and civilly, to guide the Nation safely through its impending struggle for life.

He grew in the Presidential office as all true men grow under great responsibilities; but the Presidency did not make ABRAHAM LINCOLN. God had done that in the strange way that I have so rapidly and imperfectly traced. The Presidency and the War of the Rebellion simply gave him his opportunity. He was ready for it. **And when the hour struck, God's carefully prepared instrument was at hand.**

