

Lincoln and Tennessee

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Today we celebrate Presidents' Day, which honors Abraham Lincoln who was born 200 years ago on February 12, 1809. As a boy, one of the earliest books Lincoln read was Mason Locke Weem's "Life of George Washington," the President who became one of Lincoln's first heroes and who is also given special honor on this holiday.

Most people associate Abraham Lincoln with his Kentucky birthplace, Indiana boyhood, Illinois maturity, or Washington, DC, presidency. However, Lincoln has some very intriguing ties to Tennessee.

In 1828, at nineteen years of age, Lincoln made a flatboat trip down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from Indiana to New Orleans, Louisiana. It is likely that Lincoln and his partner Allen Gentry, the son of the flatboat owner, tied up in Tennessee on this trip.

Somewhere along the way, young Lincoln and Gentry were, as Lincoln later put it, "attacked by seven Negroes with intent to kill and rob them" of their cargo. The boys sustained some injuries, but fought off the attackers and "weighed anchor." Downriver in Louisiana, according to Historian David Herbert Donald, "Lincoln for the first time encountered large numbers of slaves."

A few years later, in the spring of 1831, Lincoln made another flatboat trip, this time from Illinois to New Orleans. One account of their journey explicitly states that the traders stopped for a day at Memphis, Tennessee. Again, upon reaching New Orleans, William Herndon says that Lincoln was struck by the "true horrors of human slavery." He even saw a slave auction so revolting that Lincoln developed a "deep feeling of 'unconquerable hate.'" According to Herndon and relative John Hanks, Lincoln declared, "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing [slavery], I'll hit it hard."

Lincoln tells the story of his paternal grandfather, also named Abraham, who was murdered in front of his sons about 1784 "by indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest." One of Grandfather Abraham's brothers, Isaac Lincoln, was a relative--by marriage--to Daniel Boone, and came as a young man to East Tennessee. As a Presidential nominee, Abraham Lincoln wrote that his father Thomas, "passed one year [1798] as a hired hand with his uncle Isaac on Watauga, a branch of the Holston River."

A relative of Isaac, Daniel Stover, married Mary Johnson, the youngest daughter of Greeneville, Tennessee's Andrew Johnson, who became President following Abraham Lincoln's assassination. The seventeenth President--Johnson--visited his daughter on

the farm once owned by Issac Lincoln and, following a stroke, died there on July 31, 1875.

Another of Abraham Lincoln's relatives, most likely another great-uncle by the name of Mordecai, lived in Greeneville, Tennessee, for a time. As justice of the peace, he officiated at the wedding of Andrew Johnson and Eliza McCardle on May 17, 1827. According to reporter John Thompson, Andrew Johnson served as a Greeneville alderman with Mordecai Lincoln and, twenty years later, sat with Mordecai's great-nephew in Congress.

The history of Abraham Lincoln's interaction with Tennessee during the Civil War is long and deep. Just after his inauguration, relates historian Thomas Alexander, Lincoln met privately with two loyal congressmen from the Knoxville district telling them that he still hoped for peace. However, Tennessee generally fell firmly into Confederate hands until February 1862, when General Ulysses S. Grant captured two key forts on the Cumberland River.

During the next two years, the state was the prime battlefield of the western theater in the Civil War. In March 1862, Lincoln appointed Andrew Johnson as the Union military governor of Tennessee replacing Isham Harris, the Confederate governor.

Knoxville was still in Confederate hands and Francis Carpenter wrote that when a telegram from Cumberland Gap reached Lincoln "that firing was heard in the direction of Knoxville,' he remarked that he was 'glad of it.'" The individuals around questioned why he should be *glad* and he replied: "Why, it reminds me of Mistress Sallie Ward, a neighbor of mine, who had a very large family. Occasionally one of her numerous progeny would be heard crying in some out-of-the-way place, upon which Mrs. Ward would exclaim, 'There's one of my children that isn't dead yet.'" Knoxville was finally reclaimed by the Federals in September 1863.

Because Tennessee now had a Union government, Lincoln exempted the State from the Emancipation Proclamation issued January 1, 1863, but urged Governor Andrew Johnson toward emancipation, which did indeed take place in the state. Lincoln also encouraged Johnson to recruit black soldiers from among former slaves, writing on March 26, 1863: "I am told you have at least *thought* of raising a negro military force. In my opinion the country now needs no specific thing so much as some man of your ability, and position, to go to this work. . . . The colored population is the great *available* and yet *unavailed* of, force for restoring the Union."

Two ladies from Tennessee visited Lincoln in Washington, D.C., seeking the release of their husbands held as prisoners of war. Lincoln was known for his clemency, and the women assured the President that their husbands were religious men.

The release was ordered, but Lincoln told one of the women, "Tell your husband, when you meet him, that I am not much of a judge of religion, but in my opinion the religion which sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because as they think, that

government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread in the sweat of *other* men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven."

In this, his bicentennial year, Lincoln is honored in Tennessee, across the still united nation, and around the world for his commitment to a unified country and to *freedom* promised by--as he said--the "proposition" in the Declaration of Independence "that *all* men are created equal."

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