



Image from: [Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist preacher... in The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations](#)

Summary Article: **Lincoln, Abraham**
From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

Abraham Lincoln (the “Great Emancipator”) was the sixteenth president of the United States. Born in a log cabin on the Kentucky frontier, near Hodgenville, on February 12, 1809, Lincoln has been a prominent icon since his assassination in 1865. Thousands of books and articles have been published about Lincoln, exploring all aspects of his life from his religious beliefs to his legal career. Biographical sketches of his life often seem legendary. Modern American schoolchildren learn lessons about the wisdom, humanitarianism, and virtues of “Honest Abe,” and his silhouette decorates classrooms every February in honor of his birthday. Cast as a martyr, Lincoln is often depicted as a flawless hero in books and movies. His contemporaries, however, viewed him differently and sometimes quite critically and hostilely.

Lincoln's rustic, backwoods origins reinforced his cultural image as a moral and dutiful man. When describing his childhood in the Indiana wilderness, Lincoln emphasized that his parents were poor, ordinary, hardworking people. Lincoln helped on the family's farm and humbly remarked about his lack of education. Accounts glorifying him reiterate tales about Lincoln walking miles to borrow books and sometimes using coal to write on a shovel when he did not have a pen and paper.

Moving to New Salem, Illinois, he labored at a variety of jobs before he began his political career. Lincoln split rails for fences (hence, one of his popular nicknames, the Railsplitter) and worked as a flatboat operator, a store clerk, a surveyor, and a postmaster. He was not always successful at his work, and folklore emphasizes Lincoln's integrity by explaining that he always repaid his debts and would locate customers to give them change if he discovered they had been billed incorrectly. The source of most information about Lincoln's early years is based on reminiscences recorded decades after the narrators knew Lincoln and are biased by sentimentality and faulty memories, which exaggerated his actions, qualities, and personality traits.

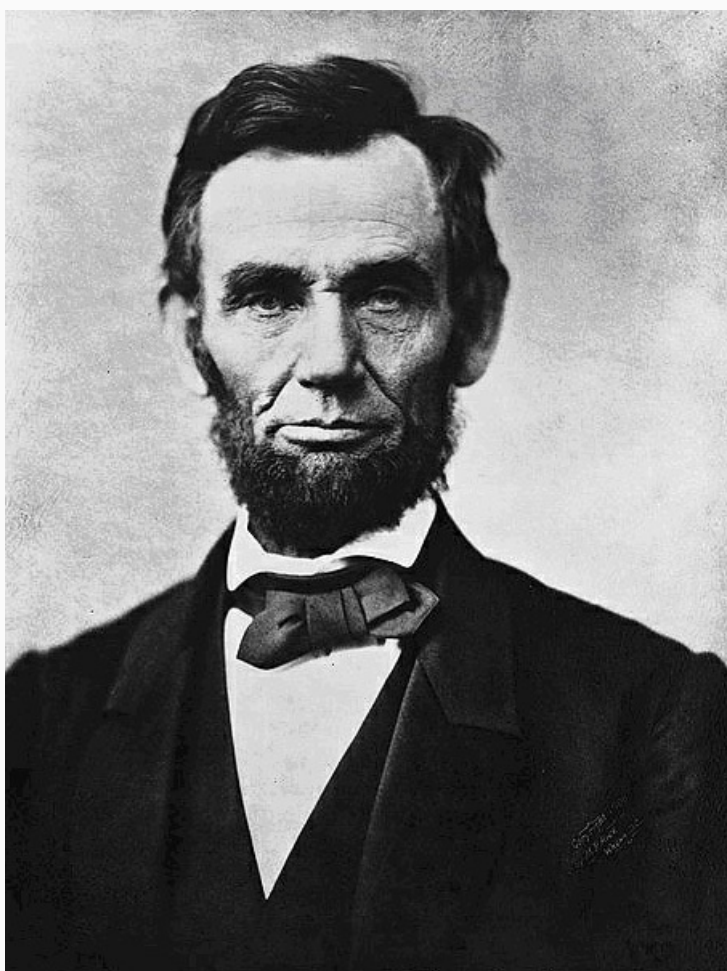
After losing his first political contest, Lincoln was elected as a Whig and began serving in the Illinois state legislature in 1835. He was admitted to the bar in 1837 and represented clients at courts throughout the state. Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1847, Lincoln debated opponent Stephen Douglas in a fierce Senate contest in 1858, and despite his loss the debates resulted in securing Lincoln the Republican nomination for president two years later. A dazzling orator, Lincoln's brief but intense speeches stunned and inspired listeners. His “Lost Speech” was so dubbed because when he criticized slavery after the May 1856 Lawrence, Kansas, riots, reporters focused so intently on his message that they forgot to take notes.

Lincoln's presidency was antagonistic. As commander-in-chief he experienced difficulties with his generals. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, and his suggestion about extending suffrage to some freemen upset conservative Republicans, who tried to block his renomination in 1864. Military successes and Lincoln's reverent words in the Gettysburg Address secured soldiers' votes, which assured his win in the election. In both his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction and his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln sought a peaceful and

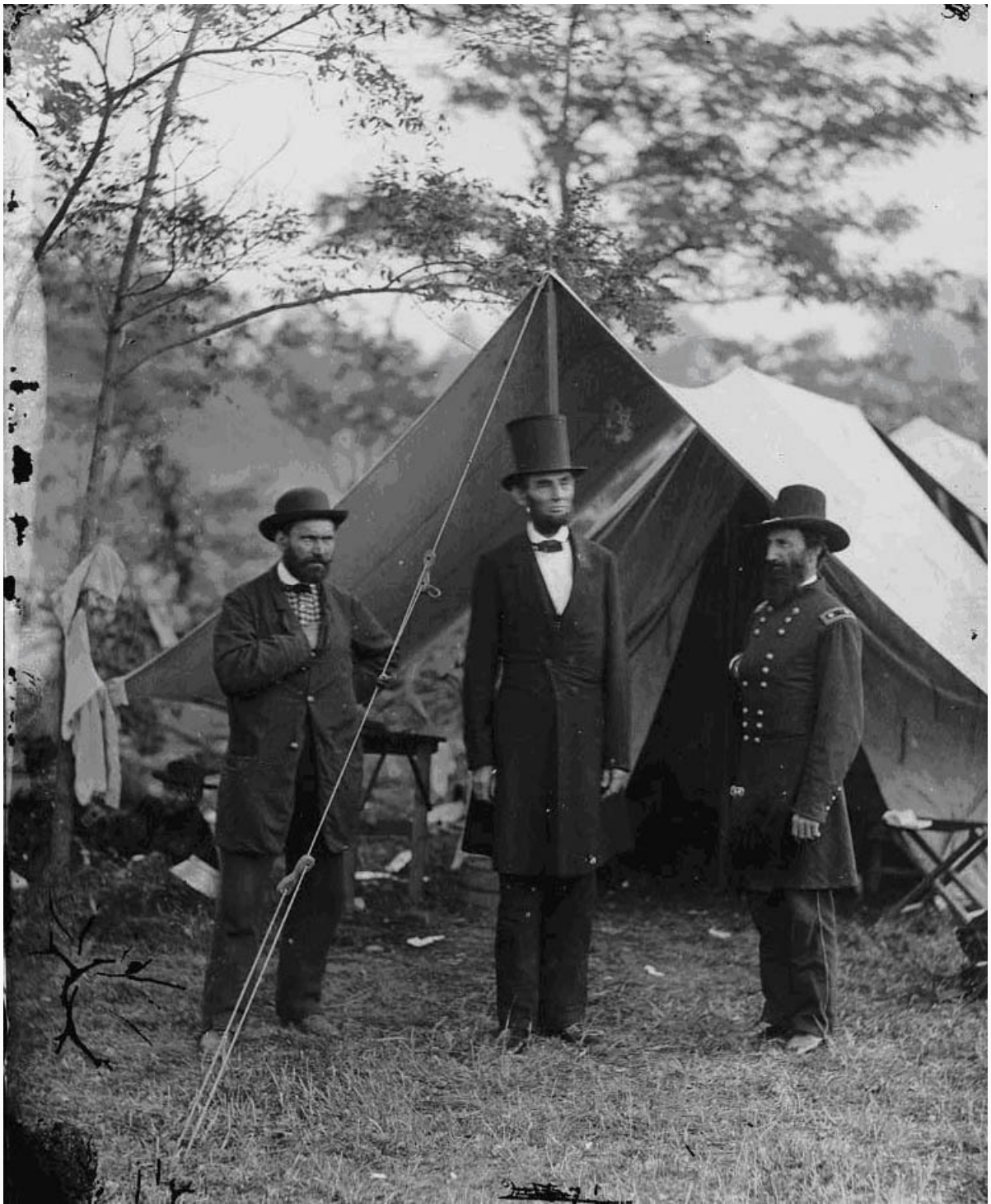
nonpunitive reconciliation with Southern states “to bind up the nation's wounds.” His assassination on April 14, 1865, in Washington, D.C., by Southern sympathizer John Wilkes Booth prevented the implementation of his plans. He was the first president to lie in state in the Capitol rotunda.

Public fascination with Lincoln insures the preservation of lore about Grace Bedell, the girl who suggested he grow whiskers, and Mrs. Lydia Bixby, whose five sons died during the Civil War. Both of these stories have been disputed. The myth that Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on an envelope is often retold to visitors who travel to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and other Lincoln shrines. The nose on Lincoln's bust at his Springfield, Illinois, tomb shines from where people superstitiously rub their hands for good luck. Lincoln is memorialized on Mount Rushmore. Generations of children have been named Lincoln. Amateur and professional Lincoln historians collect books and memorabilia, consult Internet sources, and join Lincoln associations.

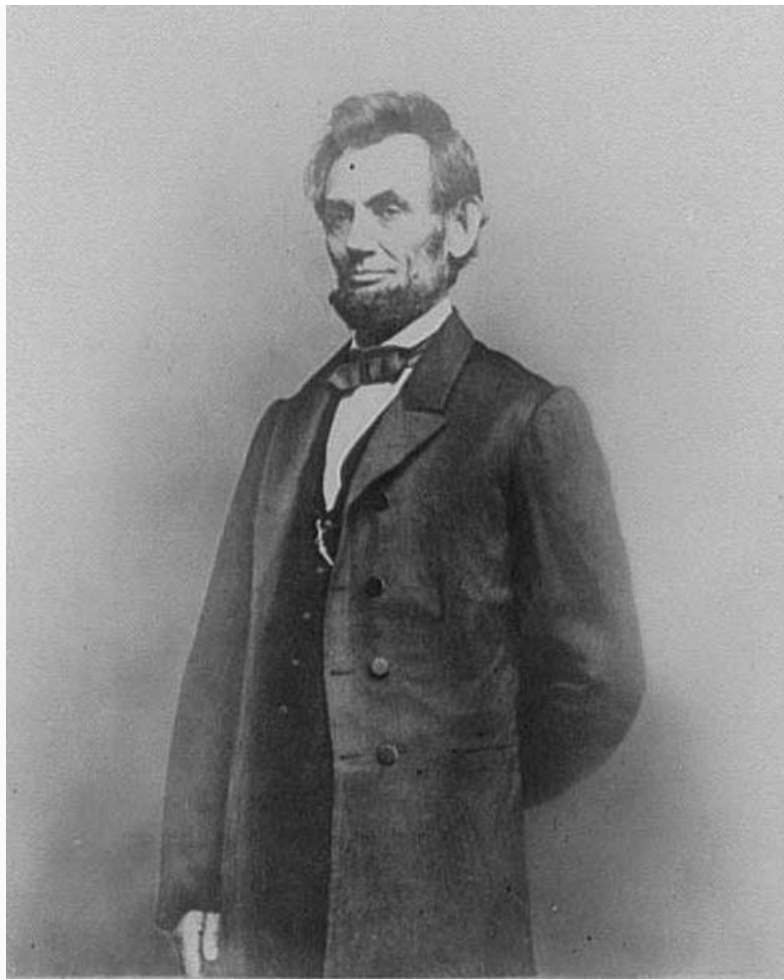
Lincoln's legacy has resulted in his being ranked high by historians gauging presidential accomplishments. Modern generations respect Lincoln, while the majority of his contemporaries were contemptuous toward him, manipulating national grief after his death for political gain. Lincoln's image was printed on tickets in Southern elections in order to win the votes of illiterate freemen. Even today Republican candidates running for office will often state that Lincoln would have approved of their platforms. Since Lincoln's death diverse groups have appropriated his words to gain public support of their programs.



Abraham Lincoln. 1863. Alexander Gardner, photographer. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Allan Pinkerton, President Lincoln, and Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand at Antietam, Maryland. 1862. Alexander Gardner, photographer. Selected Civil War photographs, Library of Congress.



Abraham Lincoln, three-quarter length portrait, standing, facing left. 1864. Brady National Photographic Art Gallery, photographer. Selected Civil War photographs, Library of Congress.

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