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The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln

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Introduction: The Self-Made Man in His Own Words

When we think of monumental figures in American history, few stand as tall as Abraham Lincoln. Most of us have studied the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the tumultuous years of the Civil War. But what about the man himself? How did Lincoln view his own life? This brings us to a fascinating and often overlooked treasure of American letters: **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**. While Lincoln never penned a lengthy, book-length memoir in the style of Benjamin Franklin or Ulysses S. Grant, he did produce several distinct autobiographical sketches. These writings, composed primarily for political campaigns and biographical dictionaries, offer an intimate, direct, and remarkably humble look at his path from a log cabin in Kentucky to the White House.

For readers and history enthusiasts, studying **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**is not just about learning dates and places. It is about hearing the voice of Lincoln himself—unfiltered by biographers, unvarnished by legend. It is a masterclass in narrative economy, revealing how Lincoln intentionally shaped his public persona. This article explores the context, content, and enduring significance of these rare, personal documents, showing why they remain essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the 16th President.

The Genesis of the Autobiography: Necessity and Circumstance

Lincoln was not a man given to vanity or self-promotion. His autobiographical writings were born out of practical necessity rather than personal ambition. The primary impetus came in 1859 and 1860, as his national profile grew following the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. Newspaper editors, publishers of biographical encyclopedias, and political supporters were eager for accurate information about the man from Illinois.

The 1859 Request from Jesse W. Fell

The most famous and complete of these autobiographical sketches was written in December 1859. Jesse W. Fell, a friend and an early supporter of Lincoln for the presidency, requested a brief account of Lincoln's life. Fell needed the information to help promote Lincoln for the Republican nomination. Lincoln reluctantly complied, producing a concise narrative of roughly 600 words. This document, often referred to as the **Autobiography (1859)**, is the core of what scholars now compile as **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**. In it, Lincoln writes in the third person, a stylistic choice that allows him to maintain a sense of objectivity and distance from his own story.

The 1860 Campaign Biographies

As the 1860 election approached, the demand for Lincoln's life story increased exponentially. At the request of campaign biographers, including William Dean Howells, Lincoln provided additional notes and details. He sent short, bullet-point-like lists of facts about his early life, his education (or lack thereof), and his legal career. These fragments, while disjointed, contain the raw material that Howells and others used to craft campaign

The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln is the composite work known today as

Key Themes in Lincoln's Own Life Narrative

Reading Lincoln's autobiographical writings is striking for what he includes and, perhaps more importantly, what he omits. He focuses relentlessly on the fundamentals: birth, poverty, education, and work.

Humble Origins and the "Short and Simple Annals of the Poor"

Lincoln opens his 1859 sketch with a stark admission: "I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky." He immediately sets the tone of hardship. He describes his early life in terms of labor and lack. He mentions that his father, Thomas Lincoln, was unable to provide "luxuries" such as education. This emphasis on humble origins was politically astute in the growing democracy of the 19th century, but it was also deeply true. Lincoln didn't romanticize his poverty; he presented it as a fact that shaped his character. He succinctly states that his "education was defective" and that he went to school "by littles," totaling less than one year of formal instruction.

The Hunger for Knowledge

One of the most compelling subtexts of **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**is the author's insatiable desire for learning. In describing his youth in Indiana, Lincoln mentions that he read every book he could procure for "many miles around." He mentions by name "Aesop's Fables," "Robinson Crusoe," "The Pilgrim's Progress," and a "Life of Washington." This reading was not casual. Lincoln explicitly states that this self-directed education was the only one he ever had. This narrative arc—from a boy with a borrowed book to a man who would write the Gettysburg Address—is central to the American Dream, and Lincoln knew its power.

From Surveyor to Legislator to Lawyer

The autobiographical sketches document a career path marked by versatility and perseverance. Lincoln mentions his time as a flatboatman on the Mississippi River, his service as a captain in the Black Hawk War (a formative, if militarily uneventful, experience), and his various jobs as a postmaster, surveyor, and storekeeper. He then pivots to his entry into politics and law. He notes that he was "elected to the Legislature in 1834" and began studying law "in earnest" after that. He narrates his move to Springfield, Illinois, and his partnership with John T. Stuart. The tone is matter-of-fact: he worked hard, he learned the law, and he built a practice. There is little self-congratulation, only a steady drumbeat of labor and ambition.

The Structure and Style of the Autobiography

Lincoln was a master of prose, and his autobiographical writings are no exception. Even when writing in the third person, his distinctive voice shines through.

Third-Person Narration and Objective Detachment

Perhaps the most defining structural feature of **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**is the use of the third person. Lincoln writes "He was born," "He was raised," "He married." This is not a common choice for personal narrative. It creates a sense of distance, as if Lincoln is reviewing a case file or writing a deposition. This stylistic choice reflects his legal training and his personal reticence. He is presenting the facts of his life as evidence, not as a story to be embellished. This detachment makes the narrative feel incredibly honest and reliable.

Economy of Language and Understatement

Lincoln was a master of brevity. He wastes no words. Describing his early education, he could have lamented his lack of schooling, but he simply states, "There were some schools, so called, but no qualification was ever required of a teacher." This single sentence conveys volumes about the frontier conditions. When describing his marriage to Mary Todd, he writes, in the 1859 sketch, very little. He mentions it as a fact, not a romance. This

economy of language draws the reader in, forcing them to read between the lines.

Honest Assessment of Failure

Unlike many political autobiographies, Lincoln's does not shy away from setbacks. He discusses his one term in the U.S. House of Representatives (1847-1849) and notes that he was "not a candidate for reelection," implicitly acknowledging that his anti-Mexican War stance was unpopular in his district. He also writes about his time as a young lawyer, implying that the work was hard and the success was gradual. This honesty is disarming and adds immense credibility to his narrative.

The Significance of the Autobiography as a Historical Document

Why does **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln** matter to us today, nearly 160 years after his death?

A Blueprint for the "Self-Made Man"

In the context of the 19th century, Lincoln's autobiography became a foundational text for the "self-made man" mythos. It provided real, powerful evidence that a person from the most humble circumstances, with no money, no connections, and almost no formal education, could reach the highest office in the land. This narrative fueled the aspirations of generations of immigrants and working-class Americans.

Correcting Myths with Facts

Even during Lincoln's lifetime, myths were beginning to accumulate around him. The autobiography served as a factual anchor. By writing his own story, Lincoln could correct errors and set the record straight. He was not a saint born in a perfect log cabin; he was a complex, ambitious, and hardworking man born into poverty. His own words provide a crucial check against later hagiography.

Insight into Lincoln's Psychology

For scholars and readers, the autobiography offers rare psychological insight. We see Lincoln's analytical mind at work, even when describing his own life. We see his strategic thinking about image and reputation. We see a man who is acutely aware of his rough edges but also confident in his capabilities. The document is a window into how Lincoln managed his own identity.

A Closer Look at the 1859 Autobiography (The Fell Manuscript)

The most complete version of **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**is the one written for Jesse W. Fell. Let's delve into some of its specific contents.

Lincoln begins by stating that his "parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families—second families, perhaps I should say." This dry wit is typical. He then traces the family's migrations.

He covers his early life in Indiana in detail, noting the "incredible darkness and ignorance" of the frontier environment. He mentions his stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston, who encouraged his reading. He states that he worked on a farm until he was 22.

Then comes the famous passage about his reading: "The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity." He does not boast about his knowledge; he credits "necessity."

He succinctly covers his political career, including his election to the state legislature in 1834, 1836, 1838, and 1840. He mentions his "eight years in the Legislature" and his "one term in Congress."

The 1859 sketch ends with a statement of his political principles. This is crucial. Lincoln uses the autobiography as a platform to state his positions on slavery, the economy, and the Constitution. He writes, "I am naturally anti-

slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel." This is a powerful and personal declaration.

Comparing the Autobiography to Other Biographical Sources

It is important to distinguish **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**from the many biographies written about him.

Biographers like Carl Sandburg, David Herbert Donald, and Doris Kearns Goodwin have written comprehensive works that draw on thousands of sources. They have the benefit of hindsight and can analyze Lincoln's motives, decisions, and impact in a way that Lincoln himself could not.

However, Lincoln's autobiography has a unique authority. It is the primary source. It is Lincoln's own self-assessment at a specific moment in time. While biographers interpret, Lincoln simply states. The autobiography is the raw data from which all subsequent biographies are built. It is the foundation.

Furthermore, the autobiography reveals gaps in the historical record. Lincoln says very little about his feelings, his family life, or his personal struggles. He does not discuss his wife Mary in any emotional depth. He does not mention the tragic death of his mother, Nancy Hanks, when he was nine years old. These omissions are themselves telling. They show a man who compartmentalized his pain and focused on the public narrative.

The Enduring Legacy of Lincoln's Self-Portrait

Today, **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln**is available in various collections of Lincoln's writings. It is studied in history classes, political science seminars, and literature courses. It is a model of concise, honest, and strategic self-presentation.

For writers and communicators, the autobiography is a lesson in the power of understatement. Lincoln did not need to hype his achievements. He let the facts speak for themselves. He trusted his readers to understand the magnitude of his journey from a log cabin to the presidency.

For students of leadership, the autobiography shows a man who was deeply self-aware. Lincoln understood his strengths (ambition, work ethic, intelligence) and his weaknesses (lack of formal education, political inexperience). He did not pretend to be something he was not. This authenticity was one of his greatest political assets.

For anyone seeking inspiration, the story told in **The Autobiography Of Abraham Lincoln** is a powerful

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