

## **For back to school, lessons of a self-educated president**

Stamford Advocate 09/03/2009

By Lewis E. Lehrman

Abraham Lincoln seldom got the chance to go to school. He received fewer than 12 months of schooling. Congressman Lincoln, it was reported, once said that a Georgia colleague was "an eloquent man, and a man of learning; so far as he could judge of learning, not being learned himself." Such self-deprecation came naturally. Lincoln's friend Joshua Speed noted that Lincoln "was never ashamed, so far as I know, to admit his ignorance upon any subject, or of the meaning of any word, no matter how ridiculous it might make him appear."

In the campaign biography that journalist John L. Scripps prepared for Lincoln's 1860 campaign for president, Scripps wrote that among the books that Lincoln had "read in early life, I took the liberty of adding 'Plutarch's Lives.' I take it for granted that you had read that book. If you have not, then you must read it at once to make my statement good." Lincoln was amused by Scripps' presumption, but he followed Scripps' instruction and "read it through."

Scripps had accurately enumerated many of the books that Lincoln had read as part of his self-education. Reading supplemented the little formal schooling he received. Of his education, Lincoln recalled that "no qualification [was] ever required of a teacher, beyond readin, writin, and cipherin, to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard."

Lacking a classical education in the classroom, Lincoln nevertheless read the classics of English literature. He became a lifelong student of the Bible, Shakespeare and the poetry of Robert Burns. In the autobiography he prepared in 1859, Lincoln described his rudimentary schooling and added: "The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity."

As a young politician, Lincoln honed his understanding of political philosophy and public policy by participating in debating societies and political speech-making. His preference for reading aloud whatever came into his hands annoyed law partner William H. Herndon, who thought that Lincoln "read less and thought more than any man in his sphere in America."

The nation's 16th president was less self-conscious about his lack of education than was the first, George Washington, whose own education was cut short when his father died when Washington was 11 - depriving him of the opportunity to be schooled in England like his older half-brothers. America's first president described his own education as "defective." Washington pushed to have his step-son attend what became Columbia College in New York City; unfortunately, education was far less important to "Jack" than

to George. Jack dropped out. Lincoln had better luck getting his son into Harvard, then law school.

With little professional guidance or previous education, President Lincoln had made himself into a lawyer with two years of self-study.

Both the first and 16th presidents mastered and appreciated Euclid, whom Lincoln studied as a middle-aged lawyer. After the Revolution, Washington saw the expansion of national power "as plain as any problem in Euclid" (Letter from George Washington to Benjamin Harrison, January 18 1784; PWCF, Volume I, pp. 56-57). Both Lincoln and Washington had learned practical mathematics by mastering surveying as young men.

The two presidents' intellectual curiosity lasted a lifetime. Union Army officer James Grant Wilson told of dining with President Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward at the White House when Seward showed Lincoln a new gold medal. Wilson asked, "What is the obverse of the medal, Mr. President." Lincoln turned to Seward and commented: "I suppose by his obverse the Colonel means t'other side" (Rufus Rockwell Wilson, editor, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln*, p. 423; James Grant Wilson, *Putnam's Magazine*, February and March, 1909).

Three decades earlier, at age 23, Lincoln had begun his political career by declaring: "That every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance."

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