

## **Lincoln's Mentors: The Education of a Statesman OLLI Course Outline**

**Mick Chantler, Instructor**

**mickchantler@gmail.com**

**Introduction:** Abraham Lincoln is generally accepted by historians as our most inspiring leader (although some would argue that he should be placed second in this regard, next to Washington), our most eloquent writer, and our most philosophically minded president. But *how* he acquired these attributes remains something of a mystery. Lincoln had practically no formal education, was raised in poverty and squalor, and had no insider connections that could set the table for his ascension to power. This course will attempt to explain that seemingly inexplicable rise from humble obscurity to our greatest and most beloved statesman. The guiding theme for our analysis of Lincoln's life will be that he was obsessively determined to remedy the deficiencies in his formal schooling, and relentlessly sought out teachers wherever he could find them to help him on his journey to greatness. Some of these teachers were living men and women in his immediate surroundings, and others were the great thinkers of history long since departed, but still alive for Lincoln through the written word (he was an indefatigable reader.) Taken collectively, these people were "Lincoln's Mentors."

### **Week One: Lincoln Begins his Journey**

Young Abe's first mentors were, as one would expect, family members, neighbors and friends. We will see how his two mothers, Nancy and Sarah, fostered a love of learning in the boy's soul, and that his cousin Dennis Hanks helped him to learn to write. Additionally, numerous colorful locals encouraged him on his path. One even had the unlikely name of *Mentor* Graham—no joke! Another was a fellow named Bowling Green. We will also look at the contributions made by fellow lawyers like John Todd Stuart, Orville Browning, and William Herndon to his growing political awareness.

### **Week Two: Lincoln and The Enlightenment**

Technically the Enlightenment came to a close around the time Lincoln was born in 1809. But of course, a movement with such force as "The Age of Reason" would never really end. Lincoln drank deeply of that remarkable period's

intellectual legacy, and absorbed most of the era's key tenets. He was a philosophical materialist, a believer in the scientific method, a thoroughgoing rationalist, and a social egalitarian. He fully embraced most of the Enlightenment's economic and political doctrines as well—including a radical rejection of slavery. In this talk we will see how Lincoln's Enlightenment heroes—Thomas Paine, Constantine de Volney, Benjamin Franklin, and above all Thomas Jefferson—shaped his thinking and provided his intellectual scaffolding as he developed his vision for a “New Birth of Freedom” in America.

### **Week Three: Lincoln's Political Mentors**

Lincoln was a thoroughly political animal. From his early twenties, he longed to enter the world of public affairs. Extraordinarily ambitious and self-confident, he saw great triumphs in his future. To prepare himself for the political arena, he looked to men much like himself—self-made men who had extricated themselves from humble backgrounds—and studied their pathways to success. “If Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Zachary Taylor can do it, why so can I” was young Abe's guiding principle. We will see how Lincoln borrowed from both Whig and Democratic figures to forge his own strategies for winning high office, and also winning the public esteem he craved.

### **Week Four: Lincoln's Literary Mentors**

One of Lincoln's early teachers in New Salem—the colorfully named Bowling Green—urged young Abe to read deeply, polish his grammar, and develop his writing skills. Lincoln took his advice, and over time became our nation's greatest literary president. The rising young lawyer read poetry, history, scientific texts, and philosophy. He devoured the daily newspapers and when he could afford them, subscribed to magazines. Rarely was Lincoln seen without a book in his hand. In this lecture we will look at his “go-to” models: Shakespeare, Scottish poet Robert Burns, Edgar Allan Poe, Alexander Pope, Byron, and others. Lincoln learned from all of them—though, of course—he never met any of them. By the end of his life, he was able to compose such moving poetry as The Gettysburg Address and his immortal Second Inaugural Address. Not bad for a boy from the backwoods.

## **Week Five: Lincoln's Biblical Mentors**

While Lincoln never accepted the literal truth of the Holy Scriptures, he was as thoroughly versed in them as any minister—and probably better than most of the half-literate frontier preachers Lincoln experienced. As much as he longed to, Lincoln could never give himself over to the theological tenets of Christianity. But that doesn't imply that Biblical teachings were irrelevant to Lincoln. On the contrary, he looked to both the New and Old Testaments for ethical guidelines and for a deeper *philosophical* understanding of the meaning of life. He was more inclined to see in the Old Testament stories a paradigm for how to endure his own sufferings and the vicissitudes of fate. Job was his favorite Biblical figure—fittingly, since by 1862 it seemed to Lincoln that he was similarly afflicted with all the plagues heaven could rain down upon mortals. Today we will look at Lincoln's conflicted relationship with Scripture.

## **Week Six: Lincoln's Education in Military Affairs**

Lincoln had little experience in military matters—only a brief period of service in the Black Hawk War of 1832. That would hardly prepare him for the massive conflict of 1861-65, the nation's first truly modern war. Hence, Lincoln did what he always did when confronted with a problem that he didn't know how to tackle on his own—he sought out mentors who would help him master the material. U.S. Army generals were almost useless as teachers, since they either went over to the Rebel cause, or were as out of their depth as Lincoln. Consequently, he hit the books, reading volumes of military history and theory from works borrowed from the Library of Congress. We will see how in short order Lincoln went from military novice to one of the great strategic minds of modern times.