

Lincoln's Early Teachers

Our greatest and wisest president emerged from a most unlikely background. Most of our early presidents were either college graduates—John Adams and his son John Quincy, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Polk and others—or were aristocrats like George Washington who, while not attending college, at least had training at home in the social arts required for assuming a prominent place in society. Not so with young Abe Lincoln. He was born to one of the poorest families in one of the poorest counties in Kentucky—probably the most impoverished states in the country. During his twenties he and his family moved to frontier Illinois—home to many southern emigrants who harbored shockingly bigoted racial views. His new state legally banned free Blacks from settling in the state, and even slavery was tolerated in some Illinois counties although the state was nominally a “free” state. Yet in time he emerges as the “Socrates of the West,” as one historian put it, and manages to finally destroy the national curse of slavery. Biographer Michael Burlingame perhaps said it best: “Lincoln’s leadership proved to be the North’s secret weapon in winning the Civil War; Lincoln was an effective leader because ***he achieved a level of psychological maturity unmatched in the history of American public life***. His high level of consciousness was acquired slowly and painfully as he overcame the economic and emotional poverty of his childhood.”

This course will focus on the question of how Lincoln achieved these depths of philosophical insight. We will see that perhaps it was the very rudeness of his background that enabled him to become the sophisticated statesman of the 1850s and 1860s. Because he had no college professors to turn to for advice or coaching as he mounted his career ladder, he had to seek out teachers wherever he could find them in the little farming communities of the west. These homespun mentors imparted a simple but effective folk wisdom to young Abe which stayed with him for the rest of his life. As a consequence he developed an uncanny understanding of the emotional needs, moods and wishes of the American people which enabled him to steer the ship of state through the

treacherous currents of 1861-65. By contrast, if Lincoln had had the resources to attend Harvard he might have learned that “Negroes” were biologically inferior to whites and quite unfit for citizenship in a democratic society. (That was the prevailing view of the Natural Sciences Department at Harvard, and most other universities in Lincoln’s day. Sometimes a college education can actually be a handicap!) Fortunately for all of us, Lincoln learned more about racial matters from the people he actually met and engaged, including one Frederick Douglass.

Today we will discuss people who had a critical influence on the young Lincoln. We will see that he owed a great debt of gratitude to both of his mothers—Nancy Hanks and Sarah Bush Johnston. Both women encouraged the boy’s interest in learning, and offered much needed emotional support for his ambitions (Lincoln’s father Thomas scoffed at his son’s hunger for “edication.”) We will also describe the young man’s first career mentors, John Todd Stuart, Bowling Greene and the aptly named Mentor Graham. (No kidding, that was Graham’s first name!) We will also see how Lincoln learned from figures from the past, and from fiction to forge his character. The youngster eagerly devoured Parson Weems’ *Life of Washington*, helping to cultivate a lifelong admiration of the great Virginian. One could also say that Aesop became one of his mentors, teaching him in the story of the Tortoise and the Hare that the race doesn’t necessarily go to the swiftest, but rather to the steadfast.

Lincoln gathered nuggets of wisdom wherever he could find them. Education doesn’t always occur only in formal institutions.