Abraham Lincoln

The Man,
The Myth,
The Making of a President

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Lithograph version of a photograph of Abraham Lincoln made circa 1909 from an original negative created in 1864 by Matthew Brady and then owned by Frederick Hill Meserve;
Bunker, “Great and Astonishing Trick of Old Abe, The Western Juggler,” published in Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun, April 1861;
At the beginning of the year 2009, we mark two anniversaries of note. The first is the 146th anniversary of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1). The second is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln (February 12), the man who authored that document and signed it into law, thus signaling the end of slavery. Between these two dates, Americans will pause to celebrate the remarkable consequence of these two significant events: the inauguration of the first president of the United States to be born of African heritage.

This historic moment seems a fitting time to reflect upon the long cultural journey Americans have taken over the course of the past two centuries, since the cold winter night when Abraham Lincoln came into the world in a ramshackle cabin deep in the woods near Hodgenville, Kentucky. Born to an impoverished farm family in an America that accepted slavery as a viable system of labor and social differentiation, Lincoln could little have guessed at the turns his life would take, let alone that it would be he who would preside over the demise of the slave system in the United States and the preservation of its government under the banner of emancipation.

Dissected endlessly by scholars, Lincoln at 200 remains an enigma, his every action open to multiple, even opposing interpretations. Lincoln’s complexities and his reticence in speaking about personal matters have led successive generations of authors to impute to him a wide range of qualities, beliefs and behaviors with which he had no particular association in life. This propensity to employ Lincoln’s persona to promote a variety of often conflicting social, political and cultural agendas exploded after his assassination and the long period of public mourning that followed. The first crescendo of interpretation, re-interpretation and misrepresentation came in the decades just before and after the celebration of the Lincoln Centennial in 1909, and a second in our own times, with the approach of 2009.

This Bicentennial exhibition, in attempting to capture these threads of the American experience, essentially tells three stories. First and foremost, it provides a set of intimate glimpses from the life of Abraham Lincoln as he lived it, documenting his rise from humble origins in the woodlands and prairies of the West to the presidency of the United States.

Second, the exhibition retells the story of Lincoln from the public perspective, gathering together some of the key themes of American mythology with which Lincoln’s name and memory became entangled along with issues for which Lincoln has been used as a principal icon since his assassination in April 1865.

Finally, by exploring both Lincoln myths and Lincoln’s reality in parallel display, the exhibition aims to provoke questions about the varied intersections of life, politics and race in American life, both in Lincoln’s day and in our own.
Abraham Lincoln was unschooled, ill-mannered, inexperienced, and subject to bouts of dour melancholy. He was also well-read, witty, honest, honorable, a good speaker, a good listener and a quick study. Lincoln’s many seeming contradictions inspired both praise and condemnation from Americans during his lifetime as well as from subsequent generations. These competing views of Lincoln have forced scholars to delve into deep and detailed examination of the surviving record. Yet despite these efforts, the true character of the man who served as 16th president of the United States remains as elusive as ever.

Little documentation survives from Lincoln’s early years, a period about which he himself remained largely silent in later life. Lincoln’s studiousness and his reading habits have been widely documented, and his evolution from farm work to storekeeper to lawyer has been traced by every biographer. Still, his personal relationships with family and friends remain mysterious and speculative. Materials displayed in this section of the exhibition document Lincoln’s development, from his early childhood in Kentucky and Indiana to his work as a flatboatman, militia leader, surveyor, lawyer, and politician, showing his development as a man, as an advocate for individual rights and liberties, as a maker of public policy and as a national leader.

One thing that we can say with authority about the times in which Lincoln came of age is that it was an era when slavery permeated every aspect of American life. Race was an issue that Lincoln could not fail to confront, either in politics or in everyday life. During the past half-century, Lincoln’s seemingly inconsistent approaches to the core issue of American race relations have elicited heated debate from a variety of perspectives. Was Lincoln a weak opponent or a strong advocate of emancipation as a governmental policy? Was the Emancipation Proclamation a happy accident of circumstance, or the result of a deliberate course of action grounded in moral principle?
Recent historical interpretation points to nuances in Lincoln’s perspective on slavery and abolition. At the most fundamental level of individual rights, Lincoln firmly believed that people of color had God-given, or natural, rights that were guaranteed to them under the Constitution of the United States—rights that included, as he put it, the right to enjoy the bread earned by their own labor. This, of course, made slavery a moral wrong. Beyond that, as President, Lincoln acted on the belief that African Americans were entitled to the same basic privileges and immunities of citizenship in the United States that were accorded to white citizens. However, when it came to the question of social and political equality among black and white Americans, Lincoln equivocated. Recognizing that local sentiment was strongly opposed to racial equality, he thus deferred to the states and localities to regulate such areas as voting privileges, eligibility for elective office and jury service, access to public education, and marriage laws.

Lincoln’s thinking on race was heavily influenced by the writings of Thomas Jefferson and the speeches of his fellow Kentuckian, Henry Clay, both of whom believed that blacks and whites could not live together in an America where slavery had been abolished because the very fact of slavery had created too much bitterness between the races. To both men, and—at least initially—to Lincoln himself, colonizing freed people in other locations—possibly Africa, where colonies of ex-slaves had been established in Liberia and Sierra Leone, or perhaps in the Caribbean where Haiti had become an independent republic under Black leadership—seemed the best option for resolving racial frictions. Lincoln, however, abandoned colonization as a post-emancipation option once persuaded that African American soldiers had demonstrated their viability for full citizenship through personal sacrifice on the battlefield.
Although Lincoln famously claimed emancipation was not his central purpose for going to war with the South, in a letter to newspaper editor Horace Greeley, in the end emancipation both helped him achieve the goal of winning the war to preserve the Union and sealed his own fate, as a group of disgruntled Southerners conspired to end his life. Indeed, emancipation looms as the largest and most significant element of Lincoln’s legacy in our own times.

**LINCOLN THE MYTH**

The same ambiguous qualities that have provoked so much speculation by scholars have also prompted the exploitation of Lincoln’s life story in a wide variety of genres. Self-improvement groups have embraced Lincoln as the iconic figurehead for the self-made man. Lincoln’s sole speech before an Illinois temperance group in 1842 continues to animate the advocates of anti-addiction programs. The story of Lincoln’s early years in a rude cabin inspired several generations of poor school children, both white and Black, to pull themselves up from humble origins.

From the moment it became news, Lincoln’s tragic death sparked a massive outpouring of sentiment that forged a wholesale re-imagining of Lincoln’s actions as President. He quickly became the martyr who died to preserve the nation, the saint who ended an immoral and inhumane institution and abolished oppression, the prophet who envisioned an America greater than Americans had yet known. Public hunger to learn more about Lincoln was fed by a range of writers who researched and penned biographies of the late president. Admiration for Lincoln’s rise to greatness grew widely with the dissemination of each new tome, and sparked emulation by many. The details of Lincoln’s early life on the Western frontier became the iconography of America itself, while Lincoln’s actions as president to free the slaves made him the voice of moral authority in the Northern states and for African Americans.

By the turn of the twentieth century, no politician could hope to position himself in public life without taking a position on Lincoln and many attempted to sport Lincoln’s mantle.

As new generations of Americans have succeeded Lincoln and his generation, the sense of Lincoln’s importance in American life has diminished. Today Lincoln’s image is as often as not employed to market goods and services, rather than to suggest moral character. This portion of the exhibition explores a number of the ways in which Lincoln’s image has been used to promote particular agendas for the popular audience since 1865, from defining national identity to marketing consumer wares.
Lincoln’s greatness rests on his astute vision of the nation and its future. His foresight, articulated in 1858 during the Illinois Senate campaign in the famous “House Divided” speech, animated his presidency. As commander-in-chief, Lincoln thus successfully used both military and political strategies to advance national goals, including emancipation, often without the support of his military commanders and other leaders.

At the time of his death, on April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was 56 years old. He had written only a brief memoir about his early life, and shared little of a personal nature with even his closest friends. We do not have from Lincoln the benefit of an extended late-in-life presidential autobiography, such as that written by his successor, Ulysses S. Grant. Lincoln’s early biographers, particularly his law partner William Herndon, made assiduous efforts to collect memoirs about him from those who had known or encountered him before they too passed on. Yet, the record they have left us sheds no definitive light on the man many regard as our greatest president.

We cannot know what Lincoln himself would have written about his presidency had he lived to a ripe old age and chosen to reflect back on his time in office and his achievements as president. Nor can we project with any authority what he would have thought of the nation’s peregrinations on the question of race since 1865.

After 200 years, is Lincoln still relevant to American life in the 21st century? No exhibition can answer that question. But through this display of documents, images and artifacts, we hope to stimulate viewers to think deeply about the life of Abraham Lincoln, the nature of the presidency, and the ongoing significance of racial questions in shaping American history and culture.
In the case of this ungainly boy there was no necessity of any external incentive. A thirst for knowledge as a means of rising in the world was innate in him. . . . All the little learning he ever acquired he seized as a tool to better his condition. He learned his letters that he might read books and see how men in the great world outside of his woods had borne themselves in the fight for which he longed. . . . In all the intervals of his work — in which he never took delight, knowing well enough that he was born for something better than that — he read, wrote and ciphered incessantly. His reading was naturally limited by his opportunities, for books were among the rarest luxuries in that region and time. But he read everything he could lay his hands upon, and he was certainly fortunate in the few books of which he became the possessor.

“Lincoln’s Address at Gettysburg”
(lithograph; Philadelphia: Wm. Finley and Co., 1894)