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| PROJECT TITLE: Honest Abe Lincoln | |
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

Primary Investigative Question –

Abraham Lincoln was known as “Honest Abe” during his lifetime. How did he get that name, and was he deserving of it?

Contextual Essay –

Honest Abe Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln does deserve the name “Honest Abe.” He was known for his honesty as a youth, a young man, as a lawyer and as president. There is much evidence to testify that Lincoln truly was an honest man. Popular stories of his honesty as a youth may be partially fabricated, but they truly are part of American culture. Abraham Lincoln was known as “Honest Abe” as a young man – before he became a lawyer or a politician. The name stuck. In 1859 when he ran for president the nickname became his campaign slogan. His own writings show that he valued honesty. His contemporaries called him honest. Today’s history texts still call him “Honest Abe.” The integrity of our sixteenth president is still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Youth

Stories of Abraham Lincoln’s youth and childhood became a part of American culture while he was still alive. Friends, relatives and neighbors loved to relate stories of his honesty. After his death, biographers collected anecdotes documenting his stellar character and honesty. Lincoln’s friend and junior law partner, William Henry Herndon, collected memories and produced a biography in 1889. In it, he related many stories of Lincoln’s character that have become part of the body of American folklore that makes up “Honest Abe.” In the conclusion of his book, this man who knew Lincoln personally stated, “In the grand review of his peculiar characteristics, nothing creates such an impressive effect as his love of the truth. It looms up over everything else. His life is proof of the assertion that he never yielded in his fundamental conception of truth to any man for any end.” (Herndon 487-488.)

The story of a book, borrowed and ruined by rain seeping through the chinking of the log cabin, and of the boy who worked for three days foddering corn to pay for the book was popular in the nineteenth century. Did it really happen? The story was recorded in a popular biography written for children, The

Pioneer Boy, and How He Became President by William M. Thayer. Lincoln was consulted by the author before the publication of the book and he was given a copy of it when it was published in 1863. (Thayer 174-185) The story was corroborated in an 1889 interview with Mrs. Josiah Crawford who reported that her husband owned the book, and sold it to the boy for a few days work after it was ruined. Perhaps this is not absolute proof of this event, but it definitely assures it a place in America's collective memory.

New Salem Days

How did he earn the name "Honest Abe?" Most of the early biographers claim it was from honest dealings while storekeeper in New Salem, Illinois. Lincoln was remembered by a local as "attentive to his business — was kind and considerate to his customers & friends and always treated them with great tenderness — kindness & honesty." (Guelzo Page 48.) A biography first published in 1879 tells of Lincoln closing the store and walking several miles to return coins he inadvertently over charged a customer. The same source relates the story of a customer buying one half pound of tea and later realizing he had only the quarter pound weight on the scale. Again, he closed the store to deliver the remainder of the tea. (Lincoln and McClure 22-23). Sources relate that folks in New Salem relied on Honest Abe to judge local contests because of his fairness. "He was judge, arbitrator, referee, umpire, authority, in all disputes, games and matches of man-flesh, horse-flesh, a pacificator in all quarrels; everybody's friend." (Lincoln and McClure 31).

Perhaps some of the stories are romanticized fables. But his honest dealings as postmaster of New Salem are recorded in the official history of the United States Post Office. The tiny New Salem post office had closed and no one had appeared from the government to collect the seventeen or eighteen dollars belonging to the post office. Later, when a postal agent stepped forward to collect the money, Lincoln produced a knotted old blue sock containing the exact amount that was due. (*Postal History*. United States Post Office)

A well documented event that contributed to the "Honest Abe" image is the repayment of the debt left from the death of Lincoln's partner in the failed "Berry Lincoln Store." It was such a large amount that Lincoln referred to it as "the national debt." It took him fifteen years to repay the debt, but he remained faithful to make payments as he built his law practice. (Oates, *With Malice*, 25)

Lincoln as Lawyer and Politician

"Honest Abe" stuck with Lincoln's during his 25 year law career and intermittent political career. These examples range from the courtroom, to his law office, to law lectures. A relative told a story of Lincoln defending a client. When the key witness took the stand, Lincoln realized he was lying. Lincoln faced the court and said, "Gentlemen, I depended on this witness to clear my client. He has lied. I ask that no attention be paid to his testimony. Let his words be stricken out, if my case fails. I do not wish to win in this way." (Stevens 141-142) Another story reports that Lincoln told a prospective client, "You'll have to get some other fellow to win this case for you. I couldn't do it. All the time while standing talking to that jury, I'd be thinking, 'Lincoln, you're a liar'; and I believe I should forget myself and say it out loud." (Rothschild 57)

Lincoln's honesty was also evident in his words. In notes he wrote for a law lecture, Lincoln wrote, "There is a vague popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest." Yet, he went on to instruct, "Let no young man, choosing the law for a calling, for a moment yield to this popular belief. Resolve to be

honest at all events; and if, in your own judgment, you can not be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation.” (Lincoln, Notes for a Law Lecture)

“ In handling hundreds of cases in the circuit courts, Lincoln firmly reestablished his reputation as a lawyer. It was a reputation that rested, first, on the universal belief of his absolute honesty. He became known as "Honest Abe" — or, often, "Honest Old Abe" — the lawyer who was never known to lie. He held himself to the highest standards of truthfulness.” (Donald p. 149)

As President

The challenges facing Lincoln as president were complex. His primary goal was to preserve the union, and sometimes that conflicted with public opinion and even with the Constitution itself. However, Lincoln’s commitment to honesty remained a guiding principle. A prime example of this is in his first inaugural address. Lincoln said to those wishing to secede from the union, “YOU have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while / shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend’ it.” Promise keeping is part of honesty. Lincoln made a promise to save the union, and that promise was the basis of his decisions as President.

Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address began ““Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln was calling the nation to remember the promise made to Americans before there was a United States of America, that ALL men have an equal opportunity in this land. Bringing an end to slavery was a complicated endeavor. The choices were not always clear. But Lincoln had his inner convictions to guide him. The Emancipation Proclamation was a bold step, but one Lincoln had to make. “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free,” Lincoln said on an address to Congress one month before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued.

As the war was drawing to a close Lincoln reiterated the promises he had made in his first inaugural address that the Union must be preserved. In order to accomplish this, the peace must be formed "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds.”

In 1863 President Lincoln said, “It is my ambition and desire to so administer the affairs of the government while I remain president that if at the end I shall have lost every other friend on earth I shall at least have one friend remaining and that one shall be down inside me.” (Behn)

Conclusion

Modern historians eschew “hero history.” The current trend is a pendulum swing in response to the historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who were looking for lessons for America’s youth in the leaders of our country. But character education is still within the scope of elementary education. No man is perfect, and historians can certainly find flaws in Lincoln’s character. Still there are lessons to be learned about honesty from the president who has been known as “Honest Abe” for over one hundred and fifty years.

Stephen B. Oates is a modern historian who concluded in his book, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths*, "Lincoln was as honest in real life as in legend. Even his enemies conceded that he was incorruptible." (Oates, *Abraham Lincoln*, 52)

In *The Making of the American Self*, scholar Daniel Walker Howe explains that Lincoln saw the duty of individuals to dedicate themselves to "the purposeful construction of the self." (Howe 138-141) In Lincoln's day being "self made" referred to character, not bankroll. Lincoln felt that from the beginning, our nation was designed to enable citizens to "remake" themselves. Howe says that when Lincoln spoke of "a rebirth of freedom" in the Gettysburg Address he was saying that the nation needed to become a place where all people have the freedom to remake themselves. Howe holds Lincoln as an example of an American fulfilling the promises of the claim in the Declaration of Independence that all have an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. (Howe 108).

Americans love the man who made himself. He was a pioneer boy who was born without family status, money, or a chance for education. Yet he chose to make himself into an educated, successful lawyer and leader. He chose to be honest and he chose to have honesty be his identity. He chose to be a man of integrity. For Lincoln, honesty was a conscious choice. What better role model for Americans than "Honest Abe?"

"*Abraham Lincoln, 1894* . Pages 17 - 20." University of Iowa Digital Library, n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2011. <<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/u?/bollinger,1913>

"An Interview with Mrs. Josiah Crawford, in Autumn of 1881 ." *Indiana History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2011. <images.indianahistory.org/u?/dc006,3

Behn, Richard J.. "The Lehrman Institute: History." *The Lehrman Institute Public Policy Programs Lehrman Institute Research*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.lehrmaninstitute.org/history>

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Abraham Lincoln: redeemer President*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.

Herndon, William Henry, and Jesse William Weik. *Herndon's life of Lincoln, the history and personal recollections of Abraham Lincoln as originally written by William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik*;. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1949.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Lincoln, Abraham. "Annual Message to Congress -- Concluding Remarks." Washington, D.C., December 1, 1862. *Abraham Lincoln Online* N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2011. <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>

Lincoln, Abraham. "Notes for a Law Lecture." *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 2*. 1809-1865.. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2011. <quod.lib.umich.edu>.

Lincoln, Abraham, and J. B. McClure. *Anecdotes of Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln's stories: including early life stories, professional life stories, White House stories, war stories, miscellaneous stories*. Chicago: Rhodes & McClure, 1879. Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

Oates, Stephen B., *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Oates, Stephen B. *With malice toward none: the life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

"Postmasters Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman." *Postal History*. United States Post Office, n.d. Web. 14 Feb. 2011.

<www.usps.com/postalhistory/_pdf/PMsAbrahamLincolnandHarryTruman.pdf#search='abraham lincoln postmaster'>.

Rothschild, Alonzo, and John Rothschild. ""Honest Abe": a study in integrity based on the early life of Abraham Lincoln Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917 - Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<http://books.google.com>

Steiner, Mark E., *An Honest Calling. The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln*. Northern Illinois University Press. 2006

Stevens, Walter B., and Michael Burlingame. *A reporter's Lincoln*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Thayer, William Makepeace. "*The pioneer boy: and how he became president...* Walker, Wise and company, 1863- Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<http://books.google.com/pages/174-185>.

Annotated Bibliography –

Books for adults:

Oates, Stephen B. *With malice toward none: the life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977

Many biographies have been written about Lincoln. This one is very readable. It contains anecdotes of his life and thoughtful analysis of the complex nature of the challenges facing him as our sixteenth president.

Thayer, William Makepeace. "*The pioneer boy: and how he became president...* Walker, Wise and company, 1863- Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<http://books.google.com/>.

This author corresponded with Lincoln about some of the stories recorded in the biography, and Lincoln was given a copy of the book when it came out in 1863, so even though it is very anecdotal, it seems as if the source could be considered reliable. The author intended for the book to be an inspiration to young people to be honest like our president. It is very readable.

Herndon, William Henry, and Jesse William Weik. *Herndon's life of Lincoln, the history and personal recollections of Abraham Lincoln as originally written by William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik*; Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1949.

Herndon was a friend and junior law partner of Lincoln's. He began collecting anecdotes before Lincoln's death and interviewed many people in the compilation of this book. Historians have felt that the book is not entirely reliable, especially in the reports about Lincoln's relationship with Ann Rutledge. However, it is a valuable source of Lincoln stories.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Howe's thesis is that Lincoln was a "self-made man" not in the sense of making a fortune for himself, but in the sense that he began as a rough hewn pioneer man with nothing given to him except the opportunity America gives to every citizen

Lincoln, Abraham, and J. B. McClure. *Anecdotes of Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln's stories: including early life stories, professional life stories, White House stories, war stories, miscellaneous stories*. Chicago: Rhodes & McClure, 1879. Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

This very readable book has many interesting anecdotes. It was first published in 1879 listing Lincoln and McClure as authors, although all the stories are told in third person. It is available for free online.

Books for children

Adler, David A., and John C. Wallner. *Honest Abe Lincoln: easy-to-read stories about Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Holiday House, 2009.

This fine primary biography of Lincoln by a popular author contains the story about the incorrect change given in the New Salem store.

Rappaport, Doreen, and Kadir Nelson. *Abe's honest words: the life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2008.

Beautiful illustrations and free verse make this book stand out in the collection of Lincoln biographies for children. The book emphasizes Lincoln's honesty.

Thompson, Sarah L. , *What Lincoln Said*. HarperCollins, 2008 .

This book has colorful appealing illustrations by James Ransome and is a collection of readable Lincoln quotes that children can understand. It would be a great source for writing prompts and discussion topics.

Winnick, Karen B.. *Mr. Lincoln's whiskers* . Honesdale, PA.: Boyds Mills Press, 1996.

This delightful book contains a letter written by a letter written by a little girl who felt that candidate Lincoln might win more votes if he grew a beard. Lincoln responded that he did not want to be showing off! (That's honest!) However, he soon appeared with whiskers and wore a beard until the end of his life. The author has a website with activities at http://www.karenwinnick.com/lincoln_reviews.html

Winters, Kay, and Nancy Carpenter. *Abe Lincoln: the boy who loved books*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003.

This book has beautiful illustrations and portrays Lincoln's great desire to learn. It is inspiring to see how much it meant to young Lincoln to be able to learn to read.