

Project Title: Education in the time of Lincoln

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Scholarship & Research

1. **Primary Investigation Question** – What was it like when Abraham Lincoln went to school?
2. **Contextual Essay** –

Education was considered important when Lincoln was a child but it was often a luxury. Schools were available to most white children in the North, less so in the south (Marty, 2008). There were private schools, parochial schools, trade schools, and professional schools but they did not serve the needs of the masses only of a select few (Sutherland, 1989). Boarding schools were available in a lot of cities and were used because it was often unrealistic for a family to transport a student to and from school each day due to transportation issues. Schooling options differed in the city from rural areas. Learning occurred through daily life in workplaces, whether on farms or through apprenticeship in the shops of the towns and cities, and in churches. In rural areas school terms varied from a few weeks to a few months.

Traveling school teachers would go from place to place and their income was dependent on the families supporting the local schools (Marty, 2008). One of the responsibilities a teacher had was to whittle goose quills, and make ink for the inkwell. Teachers were often unmarried women. They often lived with local families (pbs.org). Students were sometimes older than the teacher. Wooden canes were often used to punish students. Teachers would ring a hand bell to call students in and tardiness was punished (pbs.org).

Children were expected to “acquire the rudiments of reading, writing, and calculating (Larkin, 1989). Most children learned to work; they learned the skills their parents used in their professions. In rural communities such as the ones that Abraham Lincoln grew up in children were required to work and often the only time they had for schooling was in the winter in between harvesting and planting. Girls often couldn’t attend school because they had to help their mothers with housework and the care of younger siblings (Sutherland, 1989).

Church and school were very closely intertwined. “Parents expected the children to develop a strong moral sense, be exposed to polite behavior, and develop their character at school (Sutherland, 1989)”. The bible was the first book in the classroom. Schools were seen as an instrument of social control. Schools were typically church-sponsored (Marty, 2008). There was generally no homework due to the chores that awaited them when they returned home (pbs.org).

What was life in a one-room school house like? Typically a “one room schoolhouse was a rectangle with two or three windows on each side and a single door at one end. The door opened in a vestibule partitioned off from the main room. Rows of pegs or hooks on either side of the door provided places for students to hang their coats. A cast-iron stove in the middle provided heat, and the sun provided light. The teacher’s desk stood on a raised platform at the end of the room nearest the door (Sutherland, 1989)”. In most cases students sat on benches

and they had to write their lessons on wood-frame hand slates. These schools were frequently overcrowded and short on learning materials.

A rural school day would begin at 8:45 with a prayer, a Scripture reading, and a patriotic song. It lasted until 4p.m. Included in the day were an hour for recess, and an hour for dinner at noon. Most learning was through memorization and recitation. The age range in a classroom varied but could be anywhere from the age of six to twenty. The curriculum primarily consisted of the multiplication tables, states of the Union and their capitals, and spelling (Sutherland, 1989). Students often had quizzes at the end of the day (pbs.org).

Abraham Lincoln attended a one-room school house like the one previously mentioned. When Lincoln was five years old his mother taught him his letters (Marty, 2008). Abraham Lincoln attended a number of schools but only went to school for about one year. He attended an A, B, C school in Kentucky where he learned the alphabet. He had to walk two miles to school with his sister Sarah. In Indiana, he attended a school called a "blab school"; a school where all of the students read their lessons aloud (Pascal, 2008). His stepmother encouraged him to attend school whenever possible. In the early 1820's, he attended school in several brief periods. Another type of school he attended was a "subscription school"; where the teachers were paid by their pupils' parents in skins or farm produce (Marty, 2008).

Abraham Lincoln loved to read. One of his cousins said "whenever Abe had a chance in the field, while at work, or at the house, he would stop and read (Herbert, 2007)". Reading the bible contributed to Lincoln's learning. Some of the text that Lincoln was known to read were: *The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington*, Noah Webster's *America's Spelling Book*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; *Aesop's Fables*. "That Lincoln was a voracious reader with a remarkable capacity for absorption that in these years he laid the groundwork for his later self-education are beyond questions (Marty, 2008).

"If Lincoln had been asked to name his best teacher, his response might well have been the same as Frank Loyd Wright's when someone posed the question for him: "I will have to give that honor to myself (Marty, 2008)". Lincoln's education in large part is a reflection of the person that he was.

School during the time that he lived is very different from schooling today. Abraham Lincoln attended a one-room school house. He would have recited most of his lessons aloud. He attended school with children who varied in age. Abraham Lincoln's school experience was similar to today in that he learned how to read, write, and do arithmetic's.

3. Annotated Bibliography –

Herbert, Janice (2007). *Abraham Lincoln for Kids, His life and Times*. Chicago, Review Press.

Summary: In this book are many activities that may be done to teach children about Abraham Lincoln. The book also contains information about Abraham Lincoln at the different phases of his life. The book has many illustrations and is written in a manner that makes it easy to understand and share with students.

Larkin, Jack (1988). *The Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790 – 1840*. Harper & Row, Publishers.

Summary: This book contains pages throughout that address education during this time period. It is useful in giving the reader more in-depth information on how education was viewed. It talks about the importance of formal schooling in chapter 1, school reform in chapter 2, and school discipline in chapter 7.

Pascal, Janet B. (2008). Chap 1, *Who was Abraham Lincoln?* Grosset & Dunlap.

Summary: In this chapter; *Life in a Log Cabin*; the reader is told the story of Abraham Lincoln's early years. It is useful in that it could be read aloud to smaller children and has many illustrations to share. Students will be able to make connections between past and present using the illustrations in this book.

Marty, Myron (2008). Chap 3, *Lincoln's America 1809-1865*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Summary: In this chapter of the book, *Schooling in Lincoln's America and Lincoln's Extraordinary Self-Schooling* the author goes into detail about what schools were like when Lincoln went to school. This chapter also addresses the way in which Lincoln continued to educate himself when his formal schooling was over. The value of this chapter is to give the readers an in-depth look into Abraham Lincoln's schooling.

Sutherland, Daniel (1989). Chap 4, *The Expansion of Everyday Life 1860 – 1876*. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Summary: In this chapter of the book, *Churches, Charities, and schools*; the author takes a look at churches and schools. It gives the reader an in-depth look and descriptions of what schools were like. It is useful in explain to children how schools were different in the past. Goes into detail about the changes that took place as education grew in importance.

http://www.pbs.org/kcet/publicschool/evolving_classroom/index.html

Summary: This web site is an excellent way to learn about school in the past and how it has changed into what it is today. The site has pictures available to help young children make the connection between what their school is like what school was like long ago.

