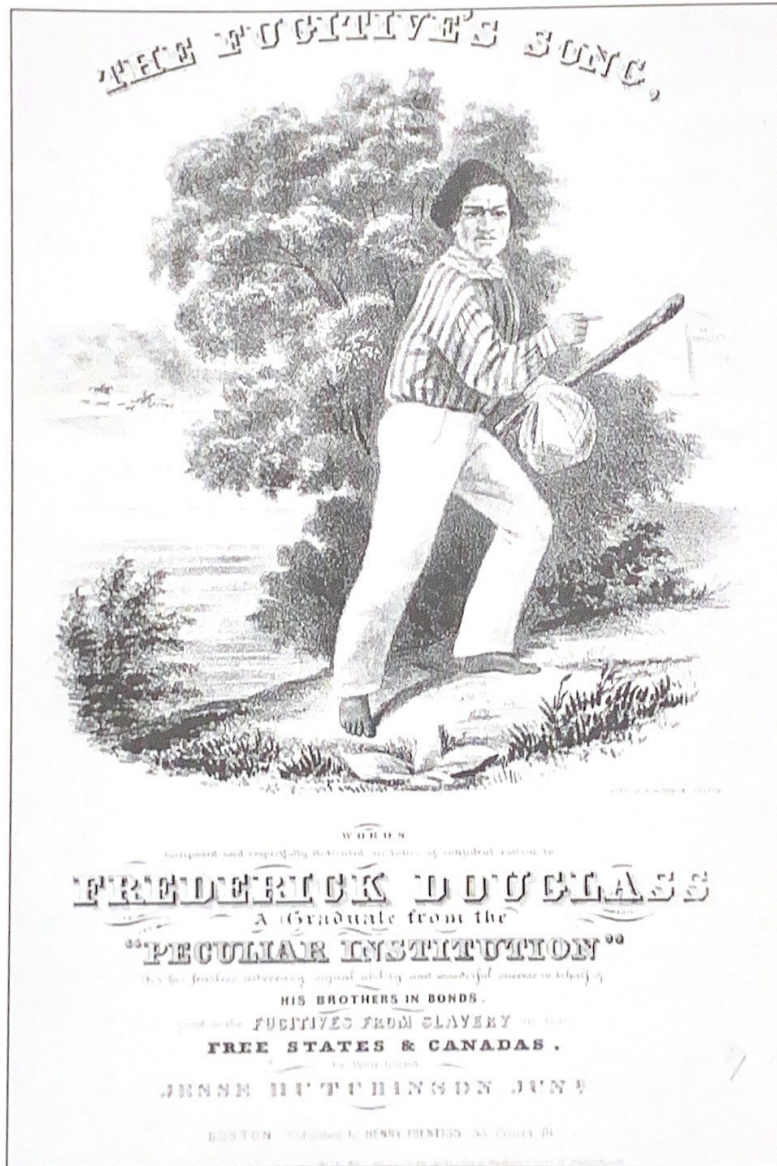




"The Fugitive's Song" was composed in 1845 as a tribute to Frederick Douglass and his "graduation" from the "peculiar institution," as slavery was sometimes called. Douglass is pictured on the sheet music cover as a runaway slave, fleeing barefoot from two mounted pursuers and a pack of dogs chasing him across the river.

## THREE

### *Soul on Fire*

On the morning of Monday, September 3, 1838, Frederick Bailey was delivered to the Baltimore train station in a horse-drawn cab driven by a friend. Dressed as a sailor, he wore a red shirt, a black kerchief tied loosely around his neck, and a sailor's flat-topped, broad-brimmed hat. In his pocket he carried the seaman's papers he had obtained, which described a man very different in appearance.

At the ticket window, he knew, his papers would be checked carefully. To avoid this scrutiny, he waited outside the station until the train to Wilmington, Delaware, was ready to pull out. When the conductor shouted, "*All aboard!*" Frederick's cab raced to the train and pulled up beside the coach set aside for black passengers. Bag in hand, Frederick jumped aboard just as the train got under way. He would buy his ticket on board.

As the train gained speed, he waited anxiously for the conductor to

enter the coach to collect tickets and examine the papers of black passengers. "This was a critical moment. . . . My whole future depended on the decision of this conductor."

The conductor appeared. Frederick had to rely now "on the jostle of the train, and the natural haste of the conductor," who moved gruffly through the crowded black passenger car. When he reached Frederick, "to my surprise and relief, his whole manner changed." His expression brightened. Baltimore was a seafaring city, and sailors were popular.

"I suppose you have your free papers?"

"No, sir. I never carry my free papers to sea with me."

"But you have something to show that you are a free man, have you not?"

"Yes, sir. I have a paper with the American eagle on it, that will carry me round the world." Frederick pulled out his seaman's papers and handed them over. The large emblem of the American eagle at the top of the papers caught the conductor's eye, and he did not bother to read the description of the bearer below. Handing the papers back, he took Frederick's cash fare, punched a ticket, and moved on to the next passenger.

Frederick's journey was just beginning. While still in Maryland, subject to arrest as a fugitive at any moment, he had to board a ferry to cross the Susquehanna River, then continue north on another train. At Wilmington, still in slave country, he would change to a steamboat up the Delaware River to Philadelphia. Along the way he had two close calls.

Once he spotted a sea captain who patronized the shipyard where Frederick worked and would immediately recognize him as a slave. As they passed each other, the captain seemed preoccupied. He did not notice Frederick.

"But this was not [my] only hairbreadth escape. A German

blacksmith, whom I knew well, was on the train [to Wilmington] with me, and looked at me very intently, as if he thought he had seen me somewhere before in his travels. I really believed he knew me, but had no heart to betray me. At any rate he saw me escaping, and held his peace."

Arriving in Philadelphia, a free city, Frederick went immediately onto another ferry, then boarded a night train, and then a final ferry that carried him to New York City. When he stepped off the boat early in the morning of September 4, he recalled, "it was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. . . . I felt like one who had escaped from a den of hungry lions."

He was twenty years old. In less than twenty-four hours and not quite two hundred miles, he had transformed himself from a slave to a free man.

Yet the "hurrying throng" and the "dazzling wonders of Broadway" harbored risks and dangers that could bring this glorious moment to an abrupt and ugly end. New York was a profitable hunting ground for professional slave catchers, legalized kidnappers constantly on the lookout for runaways, ready to capture fugitive slaves and return them to their owners in exchange for ample rewards. "I was yet liable to be taken back and subjected to all the tortures of slavery," Frederick remembered. "I was afraid to talk to anyone for fear of talking to the wrong one."

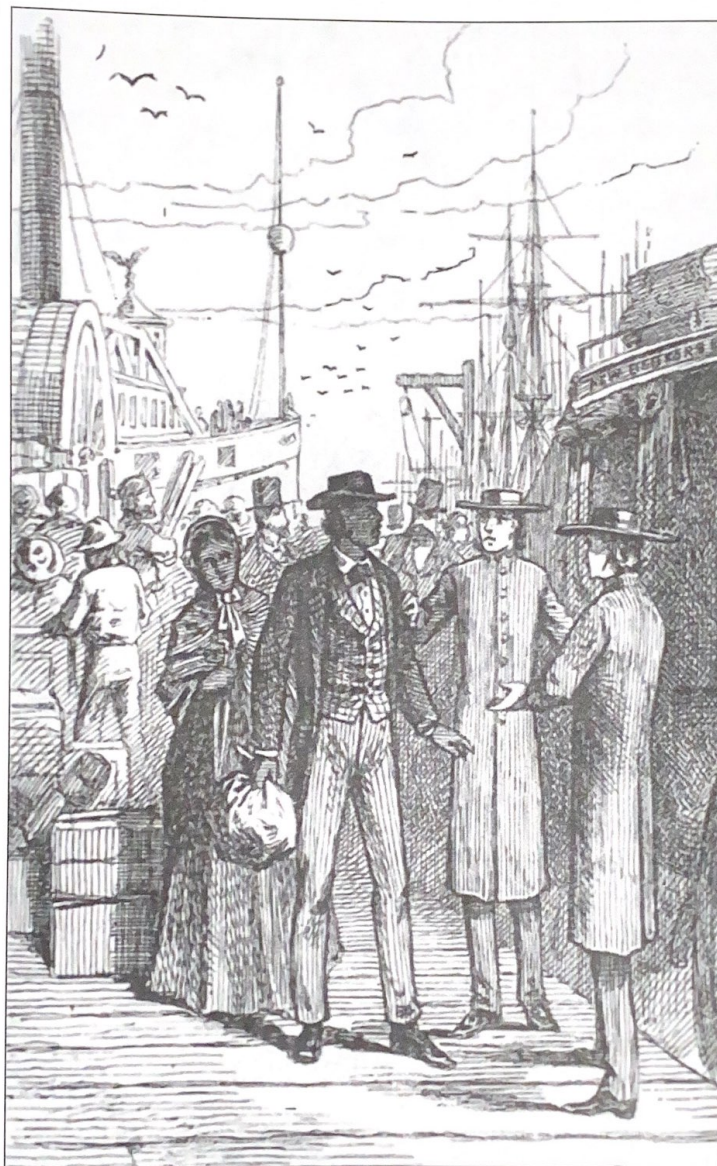
He found his way to the safe haven of David Ruggles's house, a few blocks from the ferry pier. Ruggles was a free black journalist who headed the New York branch of the Underground Railroad, which protected fugitive slaves and helped them make their way farther north. He advised Frederick to pick a new name to help avoid detection. He chose "Frederick Johnson."

Then he wrote to Anna to join him in New York. On September 15, eleven days after Frederick's escape, they were married

in David Ruggles's parlor by the Reverend James W. C. Pennington, another runaway slave from Maryland and a newly ordained Presbyterian minister. Anna wore a "new plum-colored silk dress." Frederick put on the wrinkled suit he had carried in his seaman's bag especially for the wedding. With their marriage certificate in hand and five dollars from David Ruggles to help pay their train and ferry fares, "I shouldered one part of our baggage and Anna took up the other." They set off for New Bedford, Massachusetts, where, Ruggles had promised, Frederick could find work at his ship caulker's trade.

New Bedford, a prospering seaport and the nation's whaling capital, had a sizable community of free blacks. Frederick and Anna moved into a small apartment near the wharves. A neighbor, Nathan Johnson, suggested that Frederick again change his name, since there were already too many Johnsons in town. Frederick finally settled on "Douglas," after James Douglas, a character in Sir Walter Scott's poem *Lady of the Lake*. Frederick was familiar with Douglass Street in Baltimore, so when he adopted the new name he spelled it with an extra s. Frederick Douglass now, he left Frederick Bailey behind for good.

When he applied for work at a local shipyard, he found that New Bedford, despite its diverse population, had its share of racism. The white workers threatened to quit if Frederick was hired as a skilled caulker. They agreed to let him work as a day laborer instead, at half their pay. For the next three years he labored at any kind of job he could find—sawing wood, shoveling coal, sweeping chimneys, rolling oil casks, working at a brass foundry. The work was hard and often dirty, but "I was now my own master. . . . It was the first work, the reward of which was to be entirely my own. There was no master Hugh, standing ready, the moment I earned the money, to rob me of it," he wrote.



*At the wharf in Newport, Rhode Island, Frederick and his bride, Anna, changed from a steamboat to a stagecoach headed for New Bedford, Massachusetts. Illustration from Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, published in 1881.*



*Frederick Douglass's New Bedford waterfront.*

Frederick and Anna moved to a small house and started a family, raising two daughters and three sons. They joined New Bedford's Zion Chapel, a congregation of black Methodists. Frederick subscribed to the *Liberator*, a weekly paper published in Boston by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

The *Liberator* called for an immediate end to slavery and demanded equal rights for all people. The paper was banned throughout the South. In Georgia the legislature had offered a \$5,000 reward for the arrest of its editor, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Frederick "mastered" every issue, as he put it. "The paper became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire."

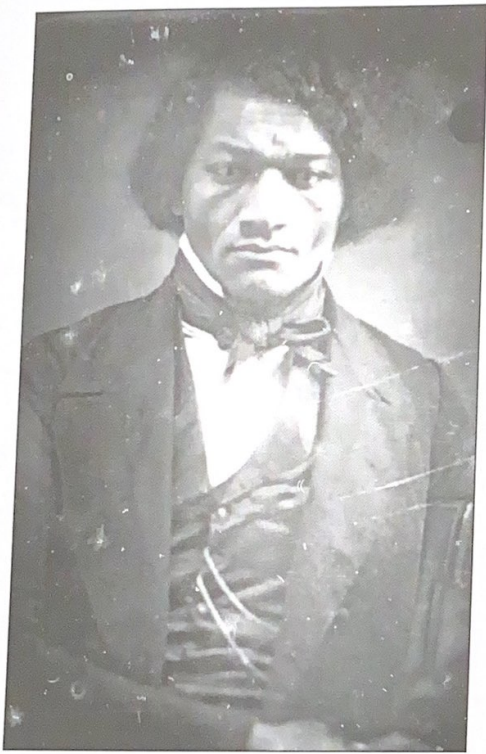
Inspired by the *Liberator*, he began to attend abolitionist meetings. "I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting. I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others."

In 1841, three years after arriving in New Bedford, Frederick traveled to Nantucket to attend a two-day convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Urged to "say a few words," he summoned his courage and rose to address the biggest audience he had ever faced—more than five hundred abolitionists, most of them white. "The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people, weighed me down."

"It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect," Frederick recalled. Hesitating and stammering, "I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called. At any rate, this is about the only part of my performance that I distinctly remember."

Speaking haltingly at first, he overcame his nervousness, and then the words poured forth. His audience would never forget that evening. They sat in rapt attention as they watched this earnest young black man and heard his passionate words. It was clear to everyone that a powerful new voice had been raised, and before the convention adjourned, Frederick was invited to become a paid speaker of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, to go out on the lecture circuit and tell the world about his life as a slave.

Twenty-three-year-old Frederick Douglass had found his calling. After he returned home to New Bedford, he set out on tour. During the next few years, he traveled constantly by train and stagecoach, lecturing at antislavery meetings in cities and



*Frederick Douglass around 1847. This is believed to be the earliest photograph taken of him.*

towns throughout the Eastern and Midwestern United States.

Making more than a hundred appearances a year, Douglass became a magnetic speaker, adding humor, sarcasm, and mimicry to his graphic accounts of the horrors of human bondage. He dressed formally, and his chiseled features and impassioned eloquence cast a spell on audiences "that laughed and wept by turns, completely carried away by the wondrous gifts of his pathos and humor."

Usually, Frederick traveled with John Collins, a white lecturer. While slavery was outlawed in the North, racial discrimination was common. Trains in Massachusetts were segregated, with black passengers assigned to separate cars, sometimes the freight car. Once, when Douglass and Collins were traveling together, the conductor ordered Douglass to move to the "colored car." Douglass refused. The conductor rounded up several toughs who wrestled Douglass from his seat and threw him off the train at the next stop.

Moving from town to town, Douglass and Collins spoke in churches, schools, and barns, or out-of-doors in parks and on town greens when every door "stood locked and bolted against us." When Frederick arrived in a town by himself, he often had trouble finding a place to speak. In Grafton, Massachusetts, he borrowed a dinner bell from a hotel and walked through town ringing the bell and crying out, "Notice! Frederick Douglass, recently a slave, will lecture on American slavery on Grafton Common this evening at 7 o'clock." A large crowd turned out to hear him, and the next day a local church opened its doors to him.

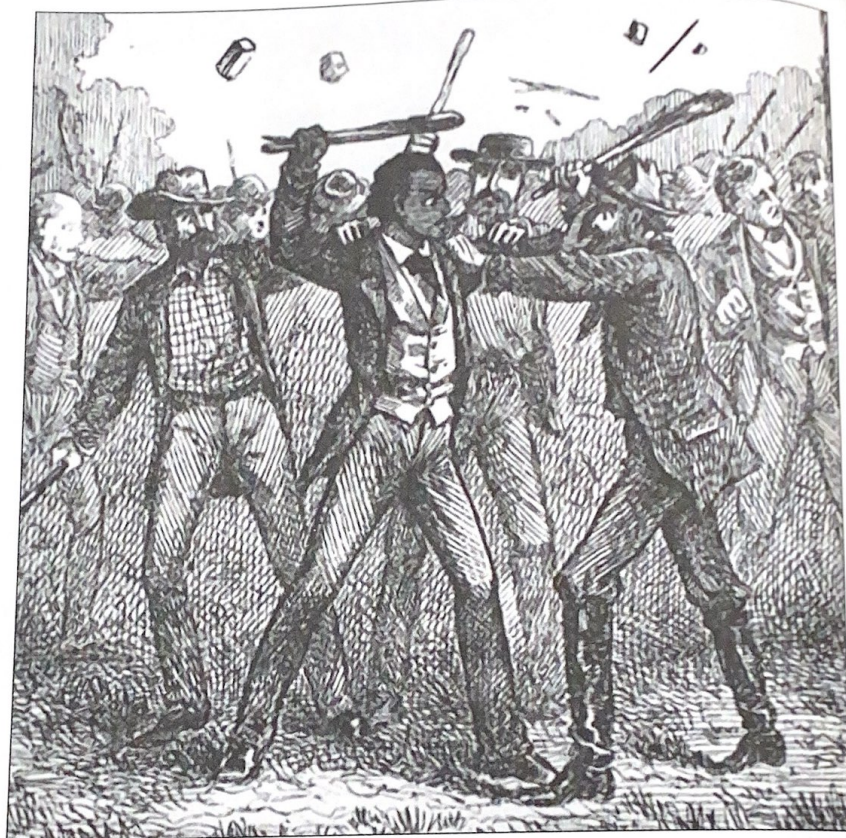
Antislavery speakers were often heckled. People threw rotten eggs at them, and at times their message incited violence. In Pendleton, Indiana, Douglass and two white lecturers were attacked by an angry mob. Douglass was hit with a club and his



right hand broken before the attackers got on their horses and rode off. Despite his injuries, he lectured the next day. His hand was not properly set and bothered him for the rest of his life.

As he toured the country, people questioned whether he really, in truth, had been a slave. He didn't seem to look, act, or speak like a slave. "Many persons in the audience . . . could not believe that he was actually a slave," wrote a Philadelphia reporter. "How

*In this rare daguerreotype, Douglass is seen seated (center right) on the speakers' platform at an antislavery gathering in Cazenovia, New York, August 1850. Standing just behind him is the prominent abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who would later run for president.*



*Fighting off the mob. Illustration  
from Life and Times of  
Frederick Douglass, 1881.*

a man, only six years out of bondage, and who had never gone to school a day in his life, could speak with such eloquence—with such precision of language and power of thought—they were utterly at a loss to devise.”

To answer such doubts, Douglass wrote the book that would make him famous. In 1845, when he was twenty-seven, he published his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*—the first of three

autobiographies he would write in his lifetime. So eloquent was the book, so graphic its accounts of slavery, skeptics argued that it could not possibly have been written by a black man, certainly not by a runaway slave. Published in Europe as well as the United States, the book became an international bestseller. An American reviewer called it "the most thrilling work which the American press ever issued—and the most important!"

In his lectures, Douglass had been careful not to reveal details about where he came from and who had owned him. He was still a fugitive, subject to capture and return to his owner. But his book named dates, places, and people; it was clear that the author was the runaway slave named Frederick Bailey.

His friends worried that if Thomas or Hugh Auld saw the book, they would attempt to hunt Frederick down and get their "property" back. Under the law, Massachusetts could do nothing to protect him. Hugh did, in fact, manage to read the *Narrative*, even though it was banned everywhere in the South. He vowed to "spare no pains or expense in order to regain possession of him [Frederick]" and "place him in the cotton fields of the South."

Frederick's friends urged him to sail to Great Britain, as other fugitive slaves had done. There he would be safe from arrest and could support himself by lecturing.

Three months after his *Narrative* was published, Douglass fled to the British Isles, which had abolished slavery. Greeted as a celebrity, he spent almost two years lecturing to enthusiastic audiences in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and forming a number of close friendships. Some of his English friends contacted Thomas Auld, Douglass's legal owner, and paid him just over \$700 (about \$17,000 in today's currency) in exchange for Frederick's freedom. When Douglass returned to Massachusetts in 1847, he was legally a free man.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
AND  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS  
30

*An antislavery meeting in London. From an 1841 engraving by Henry Melville. Douglass toured the British Isles for two years, lecturing to large, enthusiastic crowds.*

Famous as a writer and lecturer, Douglass now wanted to broadcast his ideas as widely as possible. He moved his family to Rochester, New York, a flourishing young city and a stronghold of antislavery activities. He bought a printing press, started his own abolitionist newspaper, and launched a new career as a journalist. His paper, the first of several he would publish over the years, was called the *North Star*, a reference to the beck-

oning star that guided runaway slaves as they made their way north.

The *North Star* called for universal emancipation of slaves and championed other causes, such as women's rights and the desegregation of schools. The paper's motto became "All rights for all."

"Justice must be done," Frederick Douglass declared, "the truth must be told. . . . I will not be silent."

*Soul  
on  
Fire*  
31





*A reconstruction of the log cabin on Knob Creek, Kentucky,  
where Lincoln lived as a child.*

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## FOUR

### *Nothing but Plenty of Friends*

By 1848, Frederick Douglass was the most famous black man in America. Abraham Lincoln was an obscure congressman from Illinois, almost unknown beyond his home state.

Lincoln had little firsthand knowledge of slavery. As a young man, on two brief riverboat trips to New Orleans, he had glimpsed that city's teeming slave markets. And when he arrived in Washington as a first-term congressman, he was offended and embarrassed by the flourishing slave trade in the heart of the nation's capital. But he had spent most of his life in Indiana and Illinois, free states with small black populations, and as a newly elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives, he took almost no part in the heated debates over slavery and the growing anti-slavery movement in Congress.

Like Frederick Douglass, whom he had yet to meet, Lincoln took pride

in being a "self-made man"—an expression coined in the 1830s that quickly caught on. Born in a humble log cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809, he had grown up on a succession of hardscrabble frontier homesteads.

Abraham was seven, and hadn't yet learned to read, when his father, Thomas, pulled up stakes and moved his little family from the backwoods of Kentucky to the untracked wilderness of Indiana. At times during their journey on horseback, Thomas had to hack out a path through thick underbrush so that Abraham, his older sister, Sarah, and their mother, Nancy, could follow.

Thomas had claimed a homestead on Little Pigeon Creek in southern Indiana. He built a temporary shelter of logs and boughs, enclosed on three sides, with the open side protected only by a roaring fire to fend off the winter winds and wild animals. Wolves and bears prowled the forests, and as Abraham remembered, "The panther's scream, filled night with fear."

Already big for his age, Abraham helped his father build a proper log cabin. When spring came, they planted their first crop of corn. Soon some of Nancy's kinfolk came to settle at Little Pigeon Creek, along with their adopted son, eighteen-year-old Dennis Hanks. Dennis took a liking to Abraham and became the boy's companion, like an older brother.

Then a mysterious illness called the milk sickness swept through the Little Pigeon Creek community, carrying off several settlers. When Dennis Hanks's family died, he moved in with the Lincolns. Nancy Hanks Lincoln also came down with the disease and suffered for a week. Abraham was nine when his mother passed away. Thomas sawed rough boards to make a coffin, Abraham whittled the pegs that held the wooden planks together, and the dead woman lay in the same one-room cabin where the family ate and slept. The next morning Nancy was

buried on a windy hill beneath trees ablaze with the reds and golds of autumn.

A year later, Thomas went back to Kentucky and returned with a new wife, a widow named Sarah Bush Johnston, and her three children, who ranged in age from eight to thirteen. Now eight people were living in the smoky one-room Lincoln log cabin.

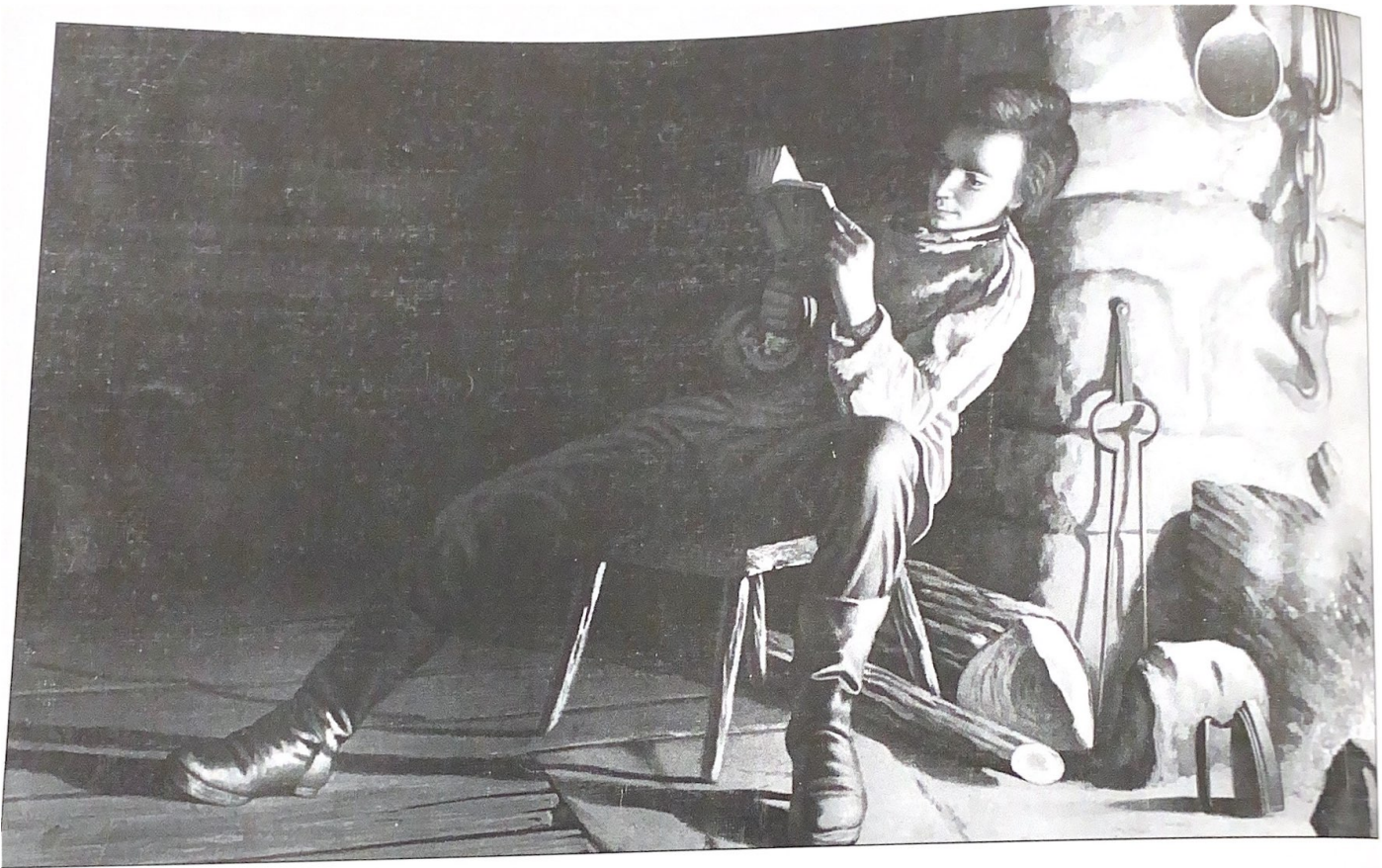
A poor white boy, Abe, as everyone called him, was often rented out by his father to work for neighboring settlers. He felled trees, split fence rails, plowed fields. At the end of the week he turned every cent he had earned over to his father, according to law and custom.

When he could be spared from his chores, he went to one of the log-cabin schools in the neighborhood. For Abe and his sister, Sarah, school was a sometime thing, a few weeks one winter, a month, maybe, the next. One school was four miles away. Abe would walk through groves of scrub trees and across creek bottoms carrying his homemade copybook, wearing his coonskin cap and buckskin trousers that were always too short for his growing legs. Lincoln figured that all his schooling "did not amount to one year."

Mostly, he educated himself. He discovered that he loved to read. He could lose himself in a book and imagine other worlds, and once he got the hang of it, he read all the books he could lay his hands on. "It didn't seem natural, nohow, to see a feller read like that," Dennis Hanks recalled.

Because books were scarce on the frontier, Abe might read a book he liked more than once. He read *Aesop's Fables* so many times, he could write it out from memory.

At sixteen Lincoln stood six feet two inches tall—a gangly youth with unruly black hair, big bony hands, and amazingly long legs. At eighteen he reached his full height of six feet four,



*Abe discovered that he loved to read. From an 1868 painting by Eastman Johnson titled An Evening in the Log Hut.*

unusually tall for that time. Years of swinging an ax had given him arm muscles like steel cables. He could take a heavy ax by the handle and hold it straight out at arm's length, nice and easy and steady, without even a quiver. "He can sink an ax deeper into wood than any man I ever saw," a neighbor said.

He was nineteen before he had a chance to break away from backwoods Indiana and see something of the world. Abe and a neighbor boy were hired to take a flatboat loaded with farm produce down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers all the way to New Orleans, a three-month, 1,200-mile journey. New Orleans was

the first real city the two country boys had ever seen, and there Lincoln had his first encounter with large numbers of slaves. The city was the biggest slave-trading center in North America. Lincoln never forgot the sight of black men, women, and children being driven along the streets, their chains clanking on the cobblestones, and being auctioned off like cattle. "The horrid pictures are in my mind yet," he said twenty years later.

In 1830, Thomas Lincoln decided to pull up stakes again and move on to fertile new land in Illinois. Abe went along, driving two yoke of oxen that pulled a wagon crammed with household goods across the Wabash River and through the forests to a tract of windswept prairie along the banks of the Sangamon River. He helped his father build another log cabin, clear fifteen acres, and split the rails to fence them in.

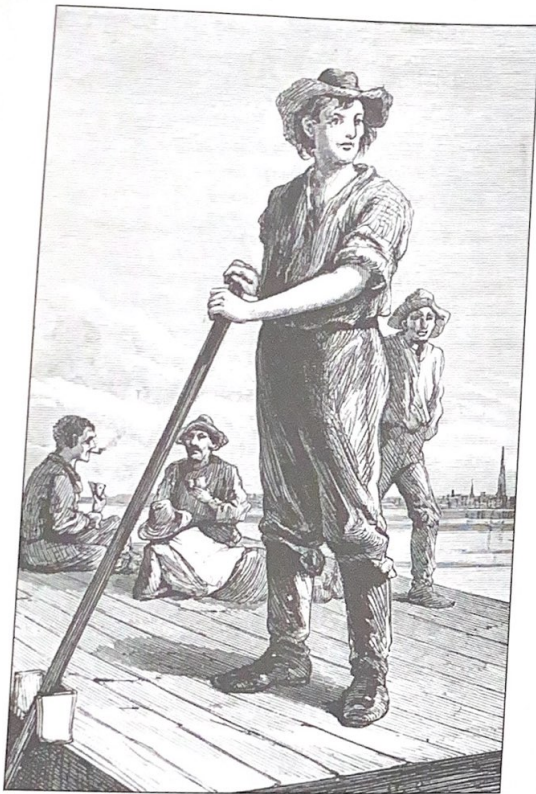
Lincoln was twenty-one now, of legal age and free to strike out on his own. It was time to leave his father's household for good. Offered a chance to take another flatboat loaded with farm goods downriver to New Orleans, he readily accepted. When he returned to Illinois, he paid a quick visit to his father and step-mother, gathered his belongings, and headed for the flourishing village of New Salem, Illinois, where he had been promised a job as a clerk in a general store.

Lincoln showed up in New Salem in the summer of 1831, "a friendless, uneducated, penniless boy," as he later described himself, who had finally "separated from his father."

New Salem, with a population of a hundred or more, was the largest community in which Lincoln had ever lived. He fit in easily. Like his father, he enjoyed cracking jokes and spinning yarns. Folks liked his endless collection of stories, which he would spin out at great length, gesturing with his hands and mimicking the voices of his characters.

*This photograph is traditionally accepted  
as a portrait of Lincoln's father, Thomas.*





Young Lincoln worked as a raftsman on the Ohio River, as pictured in this undated German engraving. In 1828 Abe and a friend floated a flatboat loaded with farm produce 1,200 miles down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans.

He was welcomed into the New Salem debating club, and while he was awkward and self-conscious at first, he quickly grew more confident. In one debate, "he pursued the question with reason and argument so pithy and forcible that all were amazed," a fellow debater remembered.

Lincoln had discovered *The Columbian Orator*—the same popular book of speeches and dialogues that twelve-year-old Frederick Bailey was secretly reading in Baltimore at the same time. Like Frederick, Abraham found that the book was a wonderful self-help manual for speaking and debating. *The Columbian Orator* helped teach both Frederick in Maryland and Abraham in Illinois how to achieve success in the art of public speaking. Pronunciation was crucial, wrote Caleb Bingham, the book's author. "The more natural the pronunciation is, the more moving it will be, since the perfection of art consists in its nearest resemblance to nature."

During the six years Lincoln lived in New Salem, he was a young man in search of a career. He knew that he did not want to spend his life as a backwoods farmer, like his father. But he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He tried his luck as a merchant, opening a general store with a partner, but after a few months the store "winked out," as Lincoln put it, leaving him with a debt that took fifteen years to pay off.

To tide himself over, he split fence rails, slaughtered hogs, helped out at the local gristmill. When an Indian war broke out in Illinois in 1832, he volunteered for the local militia, drilled and marched for three months, but never did sight any hostile Indians.

"Lincoln had nothing, only plenty of friends," one of those friends remembered. With a little help from his friends, he was appointed village postmaster, a part-time job that didn't pay enough to live on but gave him plenty of time to read all the

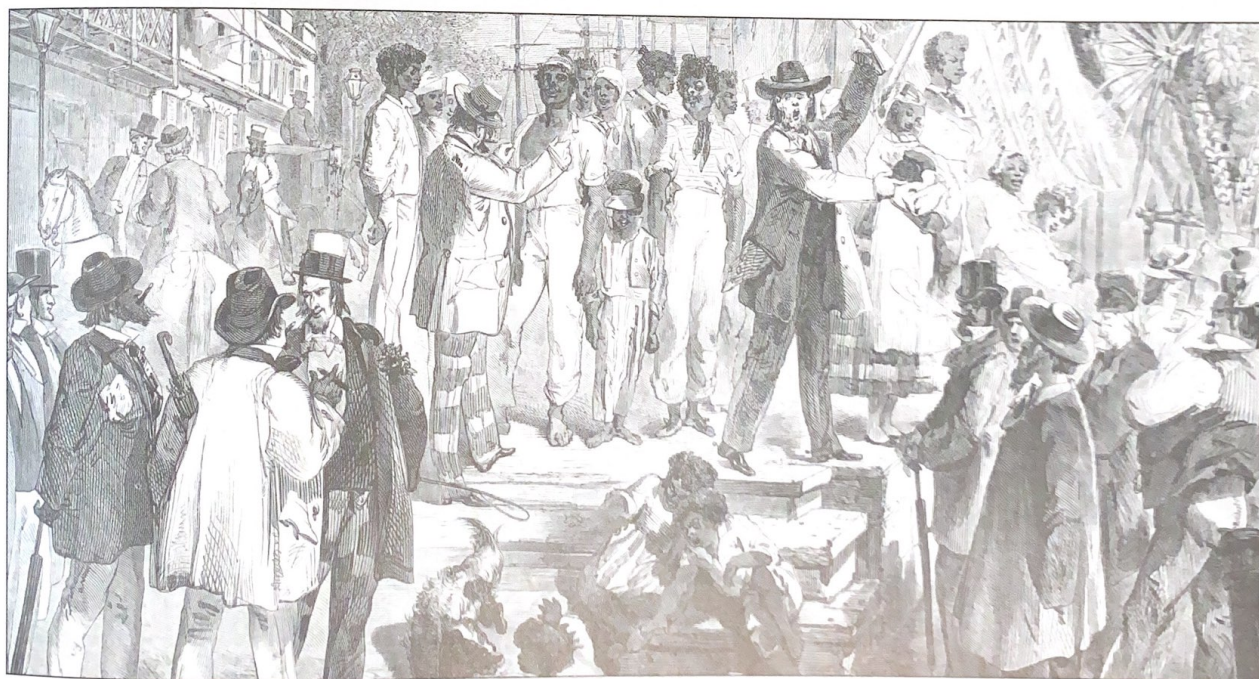
newspapers that came in. If customers failed to pick up their mail at the post office, Lincoln would sometimes walk miles to deliver the mail in person.

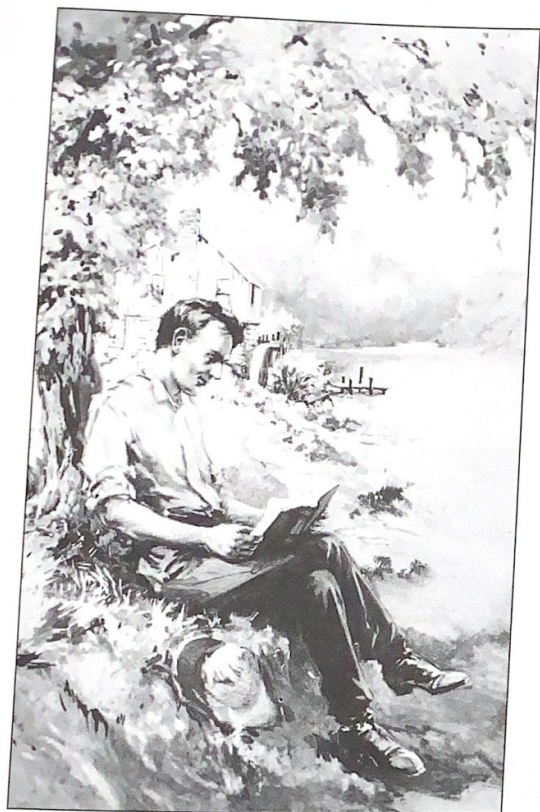
When he was offered the chance to become an assistant to the local surveyor, he bought a compass and a couple of textbooks and "went at it," teaching himself enough surveying to start work—laying out roads and town sites and marking off property boundaries.

His friends urged him to become a candidate for the state legislature. Why not? Everyone in New Salem knew him, and he was well liked. The first time he ran, he came in eighth in a field of thirteen candidates. But he tried again two years later, and in 1834, at the age of twenty-five, Lincoln was elected after conducting a hand-shaking campaign all over the county where his surveying work had taken him.

He borrowed enough money to buy the first suit he had ever

*Slave auction in the American South. An 1862 illustration from a French magazine.*





*Lincoln reading law books. From a painting by an unidentified artist, c. 1934.*

owned and set out in a stagecoach for the Illinois state capital at Vandalia, where he became the second-youngest member of the legislature.

State legislators were paid very little, and only when the legislature was in session, so Lincoln still had to make a living. A fellow legislator, a young attorney named John Todd Stuart, advised him to take up the study of law—an ideal profession for a young man with political ambitions. The law would give him a chance to rise in the world, to avoid a life of hard physical labor. He had served as a juror in the Sangamon County Circuit Court, been called twice as a witness, and seen for himself the give-and-take of legal argument and the informal procedures of the local court.

Yet Lincoln hesitated, because he had so little formal education. Not a problem, Stuart told him. Many leading lawyers at the time had never been to law school; instead, they “read law” in the office of a practicing attorney until they knew enough to pass their exams.

So just as he had taught himself surveying, Lincoln now studied law on his own. Borrowing law books from Stuart, he “went at it in good earnest,” while serving in the state legislature and working as a surveyor when the legislature wasn’t in session. “He read so much—was so studious—too[k] so little physical exercise—was so laborious in his studies,” a friend observed, “that he became emaciated and his best friends were afraid that he would craze himself.”

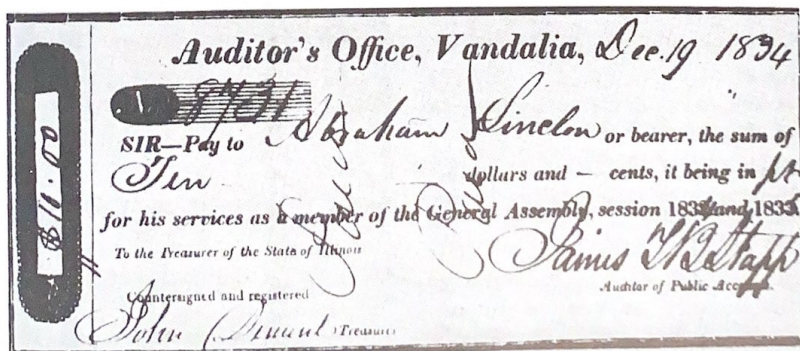
Lincoln read law books and memorized legal codes and precedents for nearly three years before passing his exams. He was admitted to practice on March 1, 1837. Meanwhile, he was reelected to a second term in the Illinois legislature, which was preparing to move from Vandalia to the new state capital at Springfield.

As a young state legislator Lincoln went on record for the first time concerning slavery, which in the Southern states was protected by law. Illinois was a free state—slavery was outlawed—but like most Northern states, it had laws intended to keep free blacks in their place. Blacks in Illinois could not vote, hold political office, sit on juries, or attend public schools, even though they had to pay taxes like everyone else. And while many whites in Illinois said they opposed slavery, they were willing to leave slavery alone in those states where it already existed. Most whites at the time regarded abolitionists as dangerous radicals.

In 1837 the Illinois legislature overwhelmingly passed a resolution declaring that “the right of property in slaves, is sacred to the slave-holding States [and guaranteed] by the Federal Constitution.” Only two legislators—Lincoln and Dan Stone, a former Vermonter—opposed the resolution and voted no. They voiced their belief “that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy.”

At the same time, however, Lincoln and Stone opposed the outright abolition of slavery. They agreed with their fellow legislators that the spread “of abolitionist doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate [slavery’s] evils.”

Lincoln was aware that, in 1837, a strong stand to abolish slavery could put an end to his career as a rising young Illinois politician.



As a member of the Illinois State Assembly, Lincoln was paid only when the legislature was in session. This check for ten dollars was for the session of 1834–35.