

“THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN”

by the artist, Thomas Kennedy

My name is Thomas Kennedy. I have been a professional artist for over 35 years. In the fall of 2005, I was presented with a challenge, the 2009 Bicentennial Celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth. My first thought was to do the very best portrait of Lincoln I could possibly do. I knew that I would have to become inspired. I could only recall a handful of things about him. In order to learn more, I went to several area libraries and checked out all available books on Abraham Lincoln.

My original fascination with Lincoln was partially due to the fact that I have lived in three of the four places Abraham lived. I was born 35 miles from his Kentucky birthplace, lived and worked in Chicago, Illinois and now reside within 35 miles of his boyhood home in Spencer County, Indiana. I was also interested in the fact that he was self-taught and learned by reading the bible. I too study the bible and am self-taught. I became more and more convinced that these coincidences made me the right artist for this undertaking.

As soon as I began reading, I became intrigued. There were no color photos of him, but after looking through sixty or more black and whites, I began to suspect that his eyes were not the dark brown I had always seen them painted. Now I'm having fun and getting into my subject. I was on a mission to prove to myself that the irises of Abraham's eyes were too light to be dark brown in color. Six or seven books later, I found passages describing his eyes as hazel gray! Thank you God! I would later learn that at least two artists had painted Abraham from life, so obviously they would have painted his true eye color.

*After reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals*, I learned that my frustration was also shared by Walt Whitman, who said that of all of the photos taken and portraits painted of Lincoln, "none caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there." Whitman went on to say that "...a painter from another time or generation is needed."*

This observation seemed a direct challenge to me to begin working on his portrait. As I did, I became fascinated with what Lincoln's eyes would tell me about the soul of the man. I was able to detect - if there is such a thing - a sadness yet equally strong kindness. He was as sad as he was kind.

I did the eyes first and knew I had a winner! I sensed that I had a strong foundation for a significant piece of art. I was prepared to let it take as long as it would take. The work consumed over two years of my life from concept to final stroke. The hand lettering throughout the painting was very time consuming and required well over one hundred hours. I wanted it to look as if it was set type.

In my quest to discover his eye color, I had learned so many other things about Abraham, and because Abraham was such a great storyteller, I decided to tell the life of Abraham in the form of a story by way of a montage painting depicting highlights of his life which would weave around a centralized portrait. I thought the final image would be maybe 3 ft. by 4 ft., though I was not ready to put anything to canvas quite yet. I had to first see it with my "mind's eye" and pull it out a little at a time in abstract form. I was then able to shape, re-shape and define the work. I needed a great deal more time to cross reference books and get my facts straight. It was of great importance to me from the very beginning that my work be historically accurate. - It had to be the truth.

I was so curious to see what Abraham looked like with his true eye color that after I transferred the entire drawing to canvas, I quickly began to apply paint to his eyes. Three weeks later, without a moment's hesitation, I had completed the central portrait and began to paint my scenes. As I recall, during the drying time of applications of glaze to the central portrait, I would skip around adding color to the scenes.

HODGENVILLE, KENTUCKY

My visual story begins at the bottom of the painting where Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln are shown at their little cabin on the farm they called "Sinking Spring". Tom and Nancy married near Elizabethtown, Kentucky in 1806. Tom had first asked Sara Bush to marry him and when she refused, he asked Nancy to be his wife.

Their first child, Sara, was born on February 10, 1807 followed two years later by Abraham, born February 12, 1809. There is speculation that Sara Lincoln was named after Sara Bush. As in real life, there are many twists and turns, so it would be that Tom and Sara did in fact marry one year after Nancy's death in 1819. She proved to be a loving stepmother for Abraham.

In my painting, I portray a tranquil setting in Hodgenville, Kentucky and have indicated that Sara threw out cracked corn for the animals to eat. Footprints of a nervous father, Tom, are

made in the snow from the barn to the outhouse.

KNOB CREEK, KENTUCKY

Abraham would comment years later that the earliest recollection of his childhood went back to his days in Knob Creek when he and Sara would walk two miles to attend a "blab" school. He also commented that he never received over one year of formal schooling.

TROY, INDIANA

In 1816, the Lincolns moved from Knob Creek, Kentucky. They crossed the Ohio River where the Ohio and Anderson's Rivers meet near Troy. It was in Troy that Tom Lincoln obtained his claim to property along Little Pigeon Creek. Years later, Abraham would return to work as a ferryman using perhaps the same ferry on which he and his family had crossed the Ohio River.

SPENCER COUNTY, INDIANA

At eight years of age, Abraham had already become proficient with an axe. By the time he had reached sixteen, he was strong and over six feet tall. People would recall hearing sounds echoing through the woods as if three men were chopping down trees. When Abraham appeared from a distance, they would be astonished that he was alone. They were also amazed at how deeply he could sink an axe into a tree. It was remarked that his arms were like steel cables. At the age of eight, he helped his father cut the logs for their cabin on Little Pigeon Creek in an area then called Gentry Settlement in Spencer County, Indiana. Abraham was ten years of age when his mother Nancy died from milk sickness. Abraham was crushed by her death. Before she died, she told him to be kind to his father, his kin and all the people in the world.

Abraham's poor surroundings did bother him some. He loved to read. It was an escape for him. He read Shakespeare and many other books, but the book he was most familiar with was the Bible. It was of great importance to his mother Nancy that he read it.

Only ten years after his mother's death, Abraham's beloved sister, Sara, died giving birth to a stillborn child. Abraham was deeply scarred by the loss of his sister and mother for the rest of his life.

Shortly before Abraham and his family left Indiana, he and his friend, Allen Gentry, embarked on what must have been the adventure of a lifetime for both of them. Allen's father, James, owned the general store in Gentryville and wished to send goods to New Orleans where they could get a good price for them. It was along the sandstone bluff of Rockport, Indiana that Abraham and Allen built a flatboat, loaded the cargo and waved goodbye to their friends. They journeyed down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for over a thousand miles. After three long months, they reached the harbor of New Orleans. While in New Orleans, Abraham witnessed the families of slaves being separated as they were auctioned off like cattle. Abraham remarked to Allen "If ever I can do anything about this, I will".

WEST ALONG THE WABASH RIVER

John Hanks, Abraham's cousin, had left Spencer County for Illinois. He wrote to Tom telling him about the fertile soil there and the absence of milk sickness. Abraham, his father Tom, cousin Dennis Hanks, stepmother Sara and her children all left Spencer County in the winter of 1830 and headed for Illinois. Abraham was twenty-one.

During the trip, Abraham noticed his dog was no longer following behind him. He backtracked and discovered that the dog had fallen through the ice. Abraham immediately went into the icy water and rescued his dog from certain death.

SANGAMON RIVER AND NEW SALEM, ILLINOIS

When the Lincolns first entered Illinois, they settled about ten miles northwest of Decatur on the Sangamon River. Abraham helped his father, his cousins and stepbrother to build a cabin, split rail fence and clear ten acres for corn. Abraham made another flatboat trip to New Orleans and upon his return home, he set out alone at the age of twenty-two to a small village called New Salem, Illinois.

While in New Salem, he was given the nickname "Honest Abe". Most of the residents of this small community were illiterate. Abe was of service to them in a variety of ways including

counting their change as a store clerk, marking off their property lines as a surveyor and reading their mail to them as a U.S. Postmaster.

Abraham met John Todd Stuart during his three months of duty in the Black Hawk War. Stuart saw much promise in Abraham and encouraged him to run for the state legislature and to study law. Abraham took Stuart's advice. He met up with him again in Vandalia after Abraham had been elected a state representative. Later, Stuart would send Abraham law books to study.

Abraham had been appointed Postmaster of New Salem by President Andrew Jackson and as postmaster of this small community of perhaps one hundred people he would have plenty of time to pursue his interest in law.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

In 1837 Abraham left New Salem and began his law practice with John Todd Stuart who would be the first of three men with whom Abraham would eventually partner. The others would be Stephen Logan and Billy Herndon.

It was through John Todd Stuart that Abraham met Mary Todd, a relative of John's. Abraham and Mary eventually married and had four children. Eddie and Willie died during Abraham's lifetime. Tadd died only six years after his father. Robert eventually had to commit his mother, Mary, to an insane asylum. Mary never spoke to Robert again.

Abraham had accumulated a wealth of friends in Springfield. Lincoln was very appreciative of these loyal friends, knowing that they played no small part in his successful presidential campaign.

From the day that Abraham was elected President, he received death threats by mail. On the morning of his departure from Springfield, thousands came to the train depot to see him off. Lincoln had prepared a speech, but broke down as the crowd cheered him. He found that he could not speak at all and the crowd cheered him even more.

As the train pulled out of the station on its way to Washington, Abraham stayed in his car alone. He remained there in solitude for many hours. He was mourning the loss of his friends because he was certain he would never see them again. He never did.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

From the day of his inauguration until his assassination, Abraham showed little regard for his own safety. It was clear to him that what confronted this nation was of much higher importance than himself. Guards outside his bedroom door said there was not a single night that passed when Abraham did not moan and groan in his sleep. The last photo taken of him was only a few days before he was murdered. He was fifty six years old, but appeared to be a man of nearly ninety. I was fifty six when I completed the portrait part of the painting. A fixation with death then crept into my thinking. I prayed to God that He let me finish this painting! Abraham was shot on a stormy Good Friday evening, April 14, 1865. He died the next morning at 7:22 am. For this scene, I have shown a wet lawn, a limp flag at half-mast and the White House grayed in tone to suggest an overcast sky. In this dismal setting, I then lit the gas lamps.

CIVIL WAR

Abraham's worst nightmare was that of America becoming a house divided. His language was symbolic and I could think of no stronger symbolic means of expressing the reality of this nightmare than to portray the angled out, ragged, bullet riddled flags of the Union and Confederate forces.

PLANTATION

The story of Abraham Lincoln cannot be told without reference to slaves and the system that held them. The slaves were viewed as a part of the southern economy centered on "King Cotton". They were not thought of as human beings, only tools to keep the economy strong.

I was tempted to show the scars on the slaves' backs, or perhaps a ship scene of those slaves who did not survive the long hellish voyage and had been tossed to the sharks. I decided instead that the most direct and effective way to address emancipation in a symbolic way was to paint the American symbol of freedom, the bald eagle, breaking the chains of bondage from a hopeless weary looking group of slaves. The eagle and broken chain also represents my interpretation of Abraham's follow through with the words he spoke in his 1860 speech at Cooper Union, New York when he said, "Have faith that right makes might".

When a youthful Abraham took that flatboat trip from Rockport, Indiana to New Orleans and witnessed the raw injustice of slavery he turned to his friend, Allen Gentry and said, "If ever I can do anything about this, I will". With my knowledge of Abraham today, these words strike me as the beginning of a self fulfilled prophecy.

NOTES ON THE TITLE

The current title of my painting is "The Life of Abraham Lincoln", but the working title was "A Narrow Path to Walk". From the beginning, I was amazed that a man who lived in so few places could have such a tremendous influence on our country and people throughout the world. The working title was also a reference to the moral fiber of the man. Abraham Lincoln learned to read by reading the family bible. His life was a testimony to the values he learned through his bible study. The title of the painting as it is now known came about when it was first introduced to the public in working form, but it will always be a work about a man who walked a narrow path to greatness.

IN CLOSING

Though I finished my painting months ago, I continue to read about Abraham. He was a focused and determined person, undistracted by the many things that compete for our attention today. Had I not made the decision to "tune out" the world these past two years, I would not have been able to create this painting.

I recommend to anyone who may read this, do yourself a favor, spend time reading and learning about and from Abraham. He will lead you to new friends and good things.