Abraham Lincoln - Humble Beginnings

Abraham Lincoln is considered America's greatest president by many historians. He was the person who saved the Union, thereby preserving the nation. But ... who was Lincoln, the person?

His early life was poor and hard. He was born on the 12th of February, 1809 in a one-room cabin in rural Kentucky. He was the first in his family who could read. He preferred to read instead of work in the fields. He loved great speeches and reenacted some of his favorites to his friends.

On a trip to New Orleans, during his young adulthood, he first witnessed slavery and its effects on families. He was shocked at what he saw.

Lincoln passed the bar in 1837. Being a lawyer, he was also exposed to politics. In a way, law was just a means to politics.

In New Salem (Illinois), he met Ann Rutledge. Some biographers think that Ann - who died of fever before the couple could marry - was his greatest love. Others disagree, especially in light of a scandal—during 1928—when supposed letters between Lincoln and Rutledge were first reported. Known today as the Minor Forgeries (based on their source, Wilma Minor), they were later shown to be a hoax.

Lincoln had an incredible ability to tell stories and became a very successful trial lawyer. He married Mary Todd, who was from a slave-owning family. Applying standards of the time, his new wife was "socially superior" to her husband.

By 1860, there were about 4 million slaves in America. Lincoln found slavery repugnant. His problem was that the law gave states the right to determine whether "the peculiar institution"—as he called slavery—was legal. Even so, he believed that the country—which had 15 free states and 15 slave states—was a house divided. And ... as he stated ... "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

While pursuing a political career, the future president debated Stephen Douglas. As those debates were profiled in the press, more and more people became impressed with Lincoln and his positions. By the time he decided to run for president, in 1860, the country was ready for him to take the national stage.

But ... not everyone felt that way. People in the South were deeply distrustful of Lincoln and his motives.

See, also:

Abraham Lincoln - President During the Civil War

Abraham Lincoln - Saves the Union

Credits:

Clip from "Greatest Heroes in History - Lincoln," Episode 7 of a BBC series which originally aired on August 23, 2002. Online, courtesy BFI National Library.

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