

Look At Lincoln: More Than Poor: Lincoln's Days In Indiana

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Feature Essay

Summer 2017

Look at Lincoln: More than Poor: Lincoln's Days in Indiana.

Lincoln in Indiana By Dirck, Brian R. **Publisher:**Southern Illinois University Press **Retail Price:** \$24.95 **ISBN:**9780809335657

John Lock Scripps, Abraham Lincoln's 1860 presidential campaign biographer, asked Lincoln about his early life. He responded, "Why Scripps it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence... you will find in Gray's elegy: 'The Short and Simple Annals of The Poor.'" But Lincoln's comments to Scripps hardly tell the whole story as Brian Dirck's book shows despite the scarcity of reliable sources.

From their arrival to departure for Illinois, Dirck explains the Lincoln family's ancestry and migration from Massachusetts to settling near Pigeon Creek. Farms were carved out of the wilderness, livelihoods sustained, and family communities formed.

Thomas Lincoln is described in full and reveals his concept of labor and life – thus, contributing to a strained relationship with his son Abraham who, while an able laborer, could not wait to escape the drudgery of farm work. Abraham's mother is described in detail up to the time of her death from "the milk sick." Enter Sarah Bush – the stepmother and the influence she had on her stepson. Dirck tells us about Abraham's limited education his reading habits, and how he preferred reading over farm work. In essence, Lincoln developed his own "right to rise."

Dirck slices through the myths about Lincoln's youth and, at the same time, discusses the social, cultural, and economic issues of early 19th-Century Indiana. Lincoln wrote a poem, much later in 1846, inspired by the wild he traveled through with his family during that time. It read:

When first my father settled here.

“Twas then the frontier line:
The panthers’ scream, filled the night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.
But wo for Bruin’s short lived fun,
When rose the squealing cry;
Now man and horse, with dog and gun,
For vengeance and him fly...

Lincoln lived a childhood as a genuine frontiersman. Lincoln’s father acquired property in Indiana where he built a cabin and traveled ninety miles away to make a quarter payment on the land he intended for the family home. Carl Sandburg wrote that “they were part of the American Frontier.” They had moved to Indiana just as it had become a state in 1816, like many others, were moving to the state to find land, live on it, and work it as farmers.

From the ages of seven to twenty-one, Lincoln lived in the state of Indiana. Throughout his childhood he faced much adversity: the death of his mother and sister, cramped quarters in a small log cabin, and the hard life of manual labor. Yet, it was in Indiana that he also learned the value of education and reading. After the age of twelve, Lincoln was rarely seen without a book. Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston, who had married his father soon after the death of his mother, encouraged Abraham’s reading and his education at blab schools – amounting to one year, which is equivalent to a sixth grade education.

His experiences in Indiana later helped shape the way that he viewed policy making as President. For example, there’s clearly a link between the genesis of his policy and the reason for its implementation. In 1862 he signed into law the land grant college system, legislation for the transcontinental railroad, and the famous Homestead Act. These legislative accomplishments stem from his fourteen years growing up in the state of Indiana. This volume presents a vivid portrait of the young Lincoln set within the context of the American frontier.

Because this fine volume is “concise” there was no space for exploring the influence Indiana had on President Lincoln. His fourteen years in Indiana taught Lincoln perseverance which was totally essential for his duties as Chief Magistrate. His support of the Morrill Act establishing land-grant colleges, the Homestead Act opening lands for settlement, creation of the Department of Agriculture and the Pacific Railroad Act guaranteeing a transcontinental railroad can all be said to have its genesis during Lincoln’s Indiana years.

During this, its bicentennial year, Indianans can be proud of their fellow citizen – Abraham Lincoln.

Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War and Reconstruction.