

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN LORE

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### TAFT'S TRIBUTE TO LINCOLN

The late William Howard Taft was the principal speaker at the dedicatory services of the Lincoln memorial building at Hodgenville, Kentucky, on November 11, 1911. As president of the United States, he paid a tribute to Abraham Lincoln, who was born in the log cabin enclosed by the memorial building. The following excerpts from his address are copied from a booklet published in 1921 by the editor of *Lincoln Lore* which gives the remarks of Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, on their visits to the birthplace of the emancipator.

#### The President's Speech

"There is nothing so fascinating on the one hand and nothing so difficult on the other as tracing by heredity the developments of genius and real greatness. Perhaps this is because there are so few instances in history that prompt the search. The explanation of Lincoln and his wonderful character from his origin and environment is almost as difficult as the explanation of Shakespeare; but the passion of the world grows for more intimate knowledge of his personality and a deeper inquiry into the circumstances of his wonderful life.

"No year passes that something more is not written of him, and testimonials in loving mercy and interest increase. The nation itself, has yet to embody in marble or bronze its widened appreciation of him as its savior. Nothing of his characteristics is too incidental for those who study over again his great speeches and messages and trace again the amazing story from the lowly home in Kentucky whence he sprang to the height of his glory in his martyrdom.

"It is eminently appropriate that the farm where Lincoln was born should come into public possession and should have erected on it a suitable memorial in which to preserve mementoes of his personality and biographies of his life.

"He says he never received any education except reading and writing and arithmetic to the rule of three; but he had access to books, and, whether he kept a store or acted as a flatboatman on the Mississippi or finally came to study law, he read the

books he had thoroughly and they included the Bible and Shakespeare.

"One of his biographers who knew him well, says that after he had finished this small library, he read some but he thought much more. He thought of what he read, and he exercised his intellect by constant practice till he made his logical processes an instrument to search truth and analyze facts that has rarely been equaled by anyone.

"His evident sympathy for the colored race, his roused sense of justice in their behalf, his earnest passions to secure them freedom and equality of opportunity, had their inspiration in the sufferings and limitations of his own early life.

"He was not slow, but he was cautious, deliberate, attentive, as befitted one who insisted on establishing every proposition that he adhered to by original reasoning from fundamental postulates. The lucidity and clearness of his thought manifested itself in the simplicity, directness and clearness of his style. He had imagination and he loved poetry. He had the rhythm of languages, and though purely self-educated, these circumstances developed a power of literary expression that the world and especially the literary world has come fully to recognize and enjoy.

"Humor he used in his conversation, stories of humor he told, as he said once, to enable him to deny requests or to express difference of opinion without abruptness and without hurting the feelings of his petitioner. But humor he rarely introduced into his carefully prepared speeches or his messages. A serious aspect on the subject he was discussing and his intense earnestness in framing the reasons for his conclusions so as to impress its justice on the reader or the listener, prevented him from the use of wit or humor, though it was always at his command.

"He was a lawyer, and a good one. He studied his cases hard, and he prepared his arguments with the force and cleverness that might have been expected from one of his mental makeup. His mind was luminous with truth. His conscience was governed by devotion to right, and the tenderness of his heart was only restrained by his intellect and his conscience. His determination to see both sides and reason out conflicting arguments to a satisfactory conclusion, made him tolerant and patient beyond conception.

"The story of his dealings with McClellan, with the members of his Cabinet, and with others unconscious of the great genius and heart with whom they were in personal touch, exasperates the sympathetic reader

and arouses a protest that vents itself in contempt toward many of those who surrounded him and yet did not measure the great nature they were privileged to know. The diary of his Cabinet officers show how under his very nose and generally with his clear conception of it, political combinations were formed, only to be dissolved and fall harmless through the patient tact of this master of men, this greatest of diplomats.

"When he came to the Presidency he had only experience of two terms in the Legislature, of one term in Congress, of the political discussions and debates in the interior districts and of the great debate with Douglas. He had no training at all in administrative matters, and when they were presented to him the awful task which the threatened secession of the Southern States presented he had to feel his way.

"In the outset Mr. Lincoln encountered the difficulties that fall to the lot of any responsible head of a Government; difficulties which are intensified by the greatness of the issues at hand, but which all have the same characteristics when they arise from the overzeal of moral reformers. Those who wished slavery abolished felt toward Mr. Lincoln a greater degree of hatred and contempt during the two years of his administration than even the rebels themselves. Brooking no delay, accepting every excuse as a mere pretext, they pounced upon Mr. Lincoln with emphatic denunciation and bitter attack, but he knew better than they what was necessary before he took the step of emancipation they were pressing.

"He knew better than they the loss of support he would suffer in the border States. He knew better than they that he must delay until the emancipation proclamation could be issued, not to break up slavery, but to effect a constitutional amendment, but only for military reasons and with military purposes and so he bared his breast to the shafts of criticism from the most important element of the Republican party and waited. No man in public life was ever so much abused as Lincoln. The contrast between his position in history today and the description of him by his friendly critics during the Civil War can hardly be credited.

"The great reason for the present memorial is the constant reminder it furnishes of the unexplained and unexplainable growth and development, from the humblest and homeliest soil, of Lincoln's genius, intellect, heart and character that have commanded the gratitude of his countrymen for the good he worked with them and awakened the love and devoted administration of a world."