

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN LORE

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### WEEMS' LIFE OF WASHINGTON

The book most often associated with Lincoln's early life is "Weems' Life of Washington," which first appeared in the year 1800. During the next century more than seventy editions came from the press. The familiar cherry tree story was first told in the fifth edition, published in 1806. Just what edition came into the hands of Lincoln we do not know.

The copy he read was likely the property of his school teacher, Andrew Crawford. He was about eleven or twelve years of age when he read it and it may have been his first borrowed book. It should not be confused with the borrowed book which was damaged by a storm while in his possession, and which he later purchased by hard labor.

Our interest in Weems' work is due to the fact that Lincoln himself mentioned the title while addressing the Senate of the State of New Jersey in 1861. He said:

"May I be pardoned if upon this occasion I mention that away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, such a one as few of the younger members have ever seen, — 'Weems' Life of Washington.' I remember all the accounts there given of the battlefields and struggles for the liberty of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river, the contest of the Hessians, the hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single Revolutionary event, and you all know, for you have all been boys, how these early impressions last longer than others. I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that these men struggled for."

The following scene taken from Weems' story of Washington's advance on Trenton, is one to which Abraham Lincoln referred and which left such a deep impression on him.

"Washington and his little forlorn hope, pressed on through the darksome night, pelted by an incessant storm of hail and snow. On approaching the river nine miles above Trenton, they heard the unwelcome roar of ice, loud crashing along the angry flood.

But the object before them was too vast to allow one thought about difficulties. The troops were instantly embarked, and after five hours of infinite toil and danger, landed, some of them frostbitten, on the same shores with the enemy. Forming a line they renewed their march. Pale, and slowly moving along the neighboring hills was seen, (by Fancy's eye) the weeping genius of liberty. Driven from the rest of the world, she fled to the wild woods of America, as an assured asylum of rest.—Here she fondly hoped, through long unfeeling time, to see her children pursuing cheerful toils unstarved and uncrushed by the inhuman few! But alas! the inhuman few with fleets and armies, had pursued her flight! Her sons had gathered around her, but they had failed—some on their bloody beds; others dispersed; all desponding. One little band alone remained! and now, resolved to defend her or perish, were in rapid march to

roused the thunder of their drums and flew to arms. But before they could form, the Americans, led on by Washington, advanced upon them in a stream of lightning, which soon decided the contest."

Next to Washington's military achievements Lincoln would read with great interest the tales of his athletic prowess. John Fitzhugh, Esq., was Weems' informant who said; "Egad! he ran wonderfully, we had nobody hereabouts that could come near him." Col. Lewis Willis, a playmate, said that he had often seen him throw a stone across the Rappahannock, at the lower ferry of Fredericksburg. While living with the Widow Stevenson, "when his daily toils of surveying were ended, George, like a young Greek training for the Olympic games used to turn out with his sturdy young companions, 'to see' as they termed it, 'which was the best man, at running, jumping, and wrestling'."

This very brief reference to Weems' Washington should not close without presenting the early version of the cherry tree story. It was prefaced by emphasizing the teachings which Washington's father had set forth about honesty.

"When George was about six years of age he was made the wealthy master of a hatchet! of which, like most little boys he was immoderately fond, and was constantly going about chopping everything that came his way. One day in the garden where he often amused himself hacking his mother's peasticks, he unluckily tried the edge of the hatchet on the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree, which he barked so terribly, that I don't believe the tree ever got the better of it. The next morning the old gentleman finding out what had befallen his tree, which, by the way was a great favorite, came into the house and with much warmth asked for the mischievous author, declaring at the same time that he would not have taken five guineas for his tree. Nobody could tell him anything about it. Presently George and his hatchet made their appearance. 'George,' said his father, 'do you know who killed that beautiful little cherry tree yonder in the garden?' This was a tough question and George staggered under it for a moment; but quickly recovered himself, and looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the charm, with the inexpressible charm of all conquering youth, he bravely cried out, 'I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.'—'Run to my arms, you dearest boy,' cried the father in transports, 'run to my arms glad am I George that you killed my tree: for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son is worth more than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold.'"

A HISTORY  
OF THE  
LIFE AND DEATH  
VIRTUES AND EXPLOITS  
OF  
GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON  
WITH  
CURIOUS ANECDOTES  
Equally Honorable to Himself  
and  
Exemplary to His Young Countrymen  
by  
MASON L. WEEMS  
Formerly Rector of Mt. Vernon Parish

face her foe. Pale and in tears, with eyes often lifted to Heaven she moved along with her children to witness perhaps the last conflict.

"The Sun had just tipped with gold the adjacent hills, when snowy Trenton, with the wide tented fields of the foe, hove in sight. To the young in arms this was an awful scene: and nature called a short lived terror to their hearts. . . . Thus steadily rode Columbia's first and greatest son along the front of his halting troops. The eager wish for battle flushed over his burning face, as rising on his stirrups, he raised his sword towards the hostile camp, and exclaimed 'There! my brave friends! are the enemies of your country! and now, all I ask of you, is, just to remember what you are about to fight for. March!' His looks and voice rekindled all their fire, and drove them undaunted to the charge. The enemy saw the danger when it was too late! but, as if resolved by taxing their courage to pay for their carelessness, they