

# LINCOLN LORE

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### WASHINGTON'S CONTRIBUTION TO LINCOLN

Those who are making a new appraisal of the worth of Washington, on this two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, cannot fail to observe the tremendous influence which he has exerted over the American youth of past generations.

The hero-worshipping, adolescent boy found in the athletic and picturesque leader of the American forces just those qualities which would appeal to the sons of the American Revolution and their children.

Among Washington's most ardent devotees was Abraham Lincoln, although it has not been recognized generally that the father of our country exercised any distinctive paternal influence over Abraham Lincoln as a boy.

In the following testimonial, Lincoln establishes the fact that he came under the spell of Washington.

"Away back in my childhood, the earliest day 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."

He also remarked how these stories had fixed themselves on his memory and that "early impressions last longer than others."

Mr. Scripps, who edited Lincoln's autobiographical sketches which were approved by Mr. Lincoln before being given to the public, says that "when Abraham Lincoln was 14 or 15 years old he learned that one Mr. Crawford, a distant neighbor, had in his house Ramsey's *Life of Washington*—a book which he was told gave a fuller and better account of Washington and the Revolution than the volume (Weems') he had read with so much pleasure. He at once borrowed the book and devoured its contents."

In the backwoods of Indiana books were few, but the imagination of youth was cultivated by the very nature of the life it lived. Lincoln's George Washington at least did not assume

the characteristics of a steel engraving—he was a Washington of flesh and blood, and plenty of red blood at that.

The faraway biblical characters in their distant eastern setting, while supplying most of the heroic element which was absorbed by the growing lad, could not possibly be so close to him as this magnetic leader of his own land. In attempting to trace the origin of the appellation, Honest Abe, which was quite early associated with Lincoln, one may have to go back to his mother's teachings, but it is quite certain that the lessons in honesty which so greatly influenced him would be visualized in Weems' narratives about the honesty of Washington.

The critic who would snatch a book out of its unique and original setting and condemn both it and its author from the viewpoint of modern historical research, is an unfair and impartial judge. Parson Weems' story of George Washington so often condemned was an admirable book for a boy living in the year 1820, in the midst of a religious and liberty loving people. It was just the type of a book which was bound to leave a deep impression on an eleven or twelve year old lad.

If Abraham Lincoln "devoured" Ramsey's *Washington* he had a better knowledge of early American history than most of our modern high school students, as it is thorough and accurate in tracing all the difficulties which finally led up to the war with the mother country.

While Ramsey's work undoubtedly gave Lincoln a better historical background for the cause of the Revolution it was the Weems volume which inspired him most and supplied him with maxims which were used to advantage in later years.

The following excerpts from the Weems biography give a good portrait of the idealized George Washington which Lincoln came to know and admire:

"It was one of the cardinal policies throughout the life of Washington to do good for evil—to plant a flower and pluck a thorn."

"Early aware of the importance of character to those who wish to be useful, he omitted no honest act, thought no pains, no sacrifices of ease too great, to procure and preserve it."

"Such was the effect of Washington's policy; the divine policy of doing good for evil. It melted down his iron enemies into golden friends."

"His military habits are laid by with the same ease as he would throw off an old coat. The camp with all its parade and noise is forgotten."

"To be happy in every situation is a proof of wisdom seldom afforded by man. . . . This was the happy case with Washington, to establish in his country the golden reign of liberty is his grand wish. In the accomplishment of this he seeks his happiness. He abhors war; but if war be necessary to this end he bravely encounters it."

"Young reader! Go thy way; think of Washington; and HOPE. Though humble thy birth, low thy fortune, and few thy friends, still think of Washington and HOPE."

In the appendix to Ramsey's work, Lincoln could read Washington's farewell address to the armies of the United States and the will of Washington and schedule of his estate. Weems printed in full Washington's last words to the people of the United States, and Lincoln must have been impressed with these statements from this address which plead for the preservation of the Union.

"Interwoven as is the love of liberty with every ligament of your hearts, no recommendation of mine is necessary to fortify or confirm the attachment.

"The unit of government, which constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence; the support of your tranquillity at home; your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize."

"While then every part of our country thus feels an immediate and particular interest in union, all the parties combined cannot fail to find, in the united mass of means and efforts, greater strength, greater resources, proportionably greater security from external danger, a less frequent interruption of their peace by foreign nations."

"In this sense it is, that your union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.

"These considerations speak a persuasive language to every reflecting and virtuous mind; and exhibit the continuance of the union as a primary object of patriotic desire."

"To the efficacy and permanency of your union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No allowances, however strict, between the parts, can be an adequate substitute."

It is difficult to exaggerate the influences which Washington exerted over Abraham Lincoln as a youth, both in his manner of living and in his philosophy of government.