

# LINCOLN LORE

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## UNCLE SAM *alias* ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The celebration of the nation's birthday on July fourth revives interest in the origin and evolution of Uncle Sam, the caricature figure which stands for the United States.

Three men—Samuel Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Nast—seem to have contributed most to the national figure now so well known. The name, Uncle Sam, is said to have originated with Wilson; his general physical appearance was largely copied from Lincoln; and the popularization and acceptance of his standardized characteristics were due to the interpretation of Nast more than anyone else.

The story of Uncle Sam's nativity comes down to us through tradition as follows:

"During the War of 1812 a man named Samuel Wilson was government inspector at Troy (New York) of pork and beef purchased by the Government. The cases containing the provisions shipped to the Government by a contractor named Elbert Anderson were marked with his initials, E. A., and below, U. S., standing for United States. One of the government workmen, new at the task, asked the meaning of U. S., and was jocularly informed that it meant "Uncle Sam" Wilson. This pleasantry was repeated in various forms, and Wilson was congratulated on the extent of his property, as many cases passing there were so marked. The story spread and took firm root, and to-day the allusion is everywhere understood."

It appears that the name "Uncle Sam" first came into use by the troops stationed near Troy. An editorial in the *Troy Post* of September 7, 1813, states: "This cant term for our government has got almost as current as John Bull. The letters 'U. S.' on the government wagons, etc., are supposed to have given rise to it."

In *Niles Register* for 1815 the following definition is given for the term "U. S." or "Uncle Sam." A cant term in the army for the United States."

Two Samuel Wilsons, one born in Delaware and the other in Massachusetts, have laid claim to the distinction of being the original Samuel Wilson of "Uncle Sam" fame.

John M. Wilson, son of the Delaware Wilson, preserved this family history:

"Samuel Wilson was born at Wilmington, Delaware, March 5, 1778, the son of Marmaduke and Mary Wilson who came to America from Scotland. He with his brother joined the Lewis and Clark northwest expedition in 1804. Later they returned to Troy-on-the-Hudson, N. Y., where they were joined by their parents. Samuel secured employment with one Elbert Anderson who owned and operated a general supply store. . . . After the war of 1812, Uncle Sam went to Pennsylvania where he was united in marriage to a

Miss Susan Anderson of Cumberland County. Uncle Sam died March 7, 1878, in Kosciusko County, Indiana, at the age of 100 years and three days. His body was later removed to Merriam, Indiana, where it now rests with other members of the family."

A granddaughter of the Massachusetts Wilson has preserved some interesting family data about her distinguished ancestor, Samuel Wilson. He was born in Arlington, Massachusetts, on September 13, 1766. There were eight children in the family, and he, with his brother, Ebenezer, went to Troy in 1789. They were first brick-makers and later went into the packing business, having two large slaughter houses. In 1812 troops from New York and New Jersey were located there and Samuel Lincoln was appointed an inspector of beef by Anderson, who had a contract for supplying food for the army.

Wilson continued to reside in Troy, and in a local newspaper of 1830 his connection with the Uncle Sam of caricature was mentioned. As late as 1848 he was active in business affairs in Troy. He died in 1854 and his body lies in Oakwood Cemetery in that city.

Two early caricatures may have contributed something to the figure we now recognize as the national symbol. Yankee Doodle, representing a rustic Yankee of pre-revolutionary days, received some attention and did not completely disappear until after 1860. Brother Jonathan came into prominence about the time of the Revolutionary War. He first appeared as a rather stout man with a smooth, round face, dressed in loose fitting shirt and trousers. Although he was the most popular caricature as late as the Civil War, he gradually took on the characteristics later ascribed to Uncle Sam, and until the war between the states began was often portrayed as a southern planter.

The Uncle Sam who was first introduced in caricature about 1850 did not represent any special type but often appeared as a Yankee Doodle or a Jonathan. He was usually short and stout—in fact you might expect him to appear in most any form. He seemed in some instances to be a composite of Yankee Doodle and Jonathan. As late as the month of May, 1865, Uncle Sam appeared as a smooth faced individual in many cartoons.

One author who has written extensively on the caricatures of the nineteenth century, makes this comment:

"From the rich material offered by our war of secession the caricaturists drew little more than the long, gaunt figure and the scraggy beard of Lincoln and the cigar of General Grant."

Very often during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln was dressed by the caricaturists in the striped trousers of red and white and starred vest with swallow tail coat. He was sometimes

called "Uncle Abe" and very often labeled "Uncle Sam." The soft hat of the earlier Jonathan now gave place to the high hat similar to the one worn by Lincoln. In these drawings which accentuated his tallness and slinness, a very vivid contrast was built up between Lincoln as Uncle Sam and the short and stout John Bull who was often introduced into the picture.

Fifteen years ago one of our daily papers was asked the question: "From whom was Uncle Sam's portrait taken or who originated the idea of the face in his picture?" This was the answer in part prepared by the editor:

"It may be that in the gaunt, loose-knit frame, the strong and rugged features, we recognize a kinship to that sterling and essentially American type of man which found its best exponent in Lincoln, and that this is the reason why Uncle Sam has become the most universally accepted and best beloved of all our conventional types. . . . His usual costume may have come from the caricaturist's trick of clothing Lincoln in the stars and stripes. The whole conception of our present Uncle Sam probably owes more to Lincoln than to any other man."

Thomas Nast was one of the foremost caricaturists of America for a period of more than twenty-five years. In 1860 he went to England as special artist for a New York paper. He returned to New York in 1861, and the following year he began drawing for *Harper's Weekly* and continued with them through the war. He is said to have been responsible for that interesting political menagerie, the Republican elephant, the Democratic donkey, and the Tammany tiger.

With Lincoln as a subject constantly before him during the war Nast had many occasions to present the President in the conventional striped trousers, starred vest, and blue coat. The Lincoln which he transformed into Uncle Sam wore a beard, and, while the cigar often seen in Uncle Sam's mouth may have been borrowed from Jonathan, possibly it was the famous cigar of General Grant that finally found its way into Uncle Sam's mouth. Lincoln did not use tobacco.

Another caricaturist, John Kippler, seems to have added some characteristics to the Uncle Sam we have accepted. He makes the chin whiskers roughly pointed and gives a much more dignified appearance to his character than Nast. While Nast may not have put the finishing touch on Uncle Sam, it appears as if he contributed more towards the standardized portrait than any other single artist. As one writer has said, "It was Thomas Nast who first gave American caricature a dignity and meaning," and we might conclude that it was Thomas Nast which has allowed us to see in Uncle Sam the prototype of Abraham Lincoln.