

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S CONTACTS WITH LAW STUDENTS

When Lincoln's fame as a lawyer became known throughout Illinois there were many law students who aspired to a place in his office. To one young man who wrote for a position he replied, "Mr. Herndon controls our office in this respect and I have known of his declining at least a dozen applications like yours within the last three months."

Lincoln's attitude towards young men desiring to study law is illustrated by the following accounts of the contacts he made with them.

### *Isham Reavis*

Isham Reavis wrote to Abraham Lincoln in 1855 expressing a desire to read law with him. Lincoln replied on November 5th, "I am from home too much of my time, for a young man to read law with me advantageously." Lincoln then proceeded to give the young man some valuable information and wrote, "If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself the thing is more than half done already." Lincoln further concluded that "It is a small matter whether you read with anybody or not . . . get the books and read them till you understand them, in their principal features, that is the main thing . . . Always bear in mind that your resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing."

### *Henry B. Rankin*

Henry B. Rankin was but ten years of age when first he met Abraham Lincoln, and nine years later he entered the Lincoln and Herndon law offices. Rankin says, "I never had any hesitancy, while a student in his office, about going to Lincoln with a question regarding a point of law or the minutest details of papers I was expected to prepare. He never dismissed me with impatience. If he knew the answer to my question he stated it, or told where to find it."

Rankin says that "there was something exquisite in Lincoln, a native majesty and refinement of soul which impressed young men deeply." Possibly Mr. Rankin's reminiscences are the source of Joseph Fort Newton's conclusion that "No country law office ever had a finer intellectual air, and this, with its homely simplicity of fraternity made it an inspiring place for young men to study . . . Both partners were gracious to young men by nature as well as by political habit."

### *William H. Grigsby*

A letter written to Lincoln by William H. Grigsby soliciting a place in his office brought this bit of advice, "If you wish to be a lawyer, attach no consequence to the place you are in, or the person you are with; but get books, sit down anywhere, and go to reading for yourself. That will make a lawyer of you quicker than any other way."

### *John H. Littlefield*

A brother of John H. Littlefield met Lincoln at Ottawa in 1858 and spoke to him about John entering his office to read law. Lincoln said, "All right, send him down, and we will take a look at him." Littlefield has left us the following reminiscence about this early contact:

"The morning I entered the office Mr. Lincoln and his partner, Mr. Herndon, were both present. Mr. Lincoln addressed his partner thus: 'Billy, this is the young man of whom I spoke to you. Whatever arrangement you make with him will be satisfactory to me.' Then, turning to me, he said, 'I hope you will not become so enthusiastic in your studies of Blackstone and Kent as did two young men whom we had here. Do you see that spot over there?' pointing to large ink stain on the wall. 'Well, one of these

young men got so enthusiastic in his pursuit of legal lore that he fired an inkstand at the other one's head, and that is the mark he made.'"

### *Mr. Widner*

James Thornton wrote requesting that a Mr. Widner be permitted to become a student in Lincoln's office. Mr. Lincoln replied on December 2, 1858, that inasmuch as Mr. Widner apparently was no longer a young man, "the cheapest, quickest, and best way for Widner to make a lawyer of himself is that he read books for himself without an instructor . . . Let Mr. Widner read Blackstone's Commentaries, Chitty's Pleadings, Greenleaf's Evidence, Story's Equity, and Story's Equity Pleadings, get a license, and go to practice, and still keep reading." Lincoln further concluded, "That is precisely the way I came to the law."

### *Elmer E. Elsworth*

During the month of December, 1859, Elmer E. Elsworth was in Springfield, Illinois, on official business connected with his state position. At this time he says he was urged to come to Springfield in the spring to "study law with Abraham Lincoln."

Upon his return to Chicago Elsworth received a letter from John Cook of Springfield who wrote he had seen Lincoln several times "and never without the conversation turning upon you and his expressing an earnest desire that you should make this place your home, and his office your headquarters. He has taken in you a greater interest than I ever knew him to manifest in anyone before."

It was not until August, 1860, that Elsworth finally became established in the Lincoln-Herndon office. However, it is rather doubtful if he ever studied much law, as he became interested in the political campaign and spoke "every night and two or three times daily until election," and he finally accompanied Mr. Lincoln to Washington.

### *J. M. Brockman*

Even after Lincoln became a presidential nominee he took time to give advice to young men desiring to study law, as the following letter to J. M. Brockman, dated September 25, 1860, reveals:

"Yours of the 24th, asking 'the best mode of obtaining a thorough knowledge of the law,' is received. The mode is very simple, though laborious and tedious. It is only to get the books and read and study them carefully. Begin with Blackstone's 'Commentaries,' and after reading it carefully through, say twice, take up Chitty's 'Pleadings,' Greenleaf's 'Evidence,' and Story's 'Equity,' etc., in succession. Work, work, work, is the main thing."

### *Robert Lincoln*

It is a significant fact that Abraham Lincoln's only son to arrive at maturity became a lawyer, and we are fortunate in having Robert Lincoln's account of what he calls the "only talk I ever had with my father as to my studying law." He wrote, "I was going back to Cambridge to enter the Law School. He (Abraham Lincoln) said he thought I was right. 'If you become a lawyer you will probably make more money at it than I ever did but you won't have half the fun.' He of course had in mind the life he so much enjoyed on the circuit."

On one occasion Abraham Lincoln prepared some notes for a law lecture and made two direct appeals to young men, first warning them not to "rely too much on speech-making" and in conclusion made his now famous statement: "Resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer."