

LINCOLN LORE

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HOW LINCOLN DEALT WITH A DEPRESSION

A depression in the home of Abraham Lincoln's father which reached a critical state in 1851 called for Abraham Lincoln to write a letter to his stepbrother, John Johnston, offering some practical suggestions as to how he might put the household on a sound economic basis.

Johnston was the youngest child of Thomas Lincoln's second wife, the former Sarah Bush Johnston. He was thirty-eight years of age in 1851, only four years younger than Abraham Lincoln. He was married and had seven children. Evidently he had been living on the generosity of his stepfather since the days Lincoln left home on becoming of age, and after his first marriage in 1834 Johnston and his continually increasing family still made their residence with Thomas and Sarah Lincoln.

It is evident from the letter printed in full in this bulletin that Johnston had constantly been appealing to Lincoln for help and had received assistance from him when Lincoln was needing all the money he could make for his own family. Just a year before he had tried to get Johnston a mail contract and had become security for him.

There is evidence that Johnston was continually bothering Lincoln and that he often tried to use Lincoln's own father as a medium of appeal. On one occasion Lincoln wrote to Johnston: "You already know I desire that neither father nor mother shall be in want of any comfort either in health or in sickness, while they live; and I feel sure you have not failed to use my name if necessary to procure a doctor or anything else for father in his present sickness."

It was not the need of money by Thomas Lincoln or his wife which made Johnston say he was willing to almost give his "place in heaven for seventy or eighty dollars." The fact is his first wife had died and he wanted to marry another woman which would call for some ready money.

Although Johnston's stepfather died on January 17, 1851, and left him to care for his own mother, less than two months later, this poverty stricken man with seven children, married again; but there is no evidence that he profited by Lincoln's suggestions about going to work.

The letter from Lincoln to Johnston, dated January 2, 1851, appears below, divided into sentences that the plan presented by Lincoln may be more easily visualized.

Dear Brother:

Your request for eighty dollars I do not think it best to comply with now.

At the various times when I have helped you a little you have said to me, "We can get along very well now";

But in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again.

Now, this can only happen by some defect in your conduct. What that defect is I think I know.

You are not lazy, and still you are an idler.

I doubt whether, since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work in any one day.

You do not very much dislike to work, and still you do not work much, merely because it does not seem to you that you would get much for it.

This habit of uselessly wasting time is the whole difficulty;

It is vastly important to you, and still more so to your children, that you should break the habit.

It is more important to them, because they have longer to live, and can keep out of an idle habit before they are in it, easier than they can get out after they are in.

You are now in need of some money;

And what I propose is, that you shall go to work, "tooth and nail," for somebody who will give you money for it.

Let father and your boys take charge of your things at home, prepare for a crop, and make the crop,

And you go to work for the best money wages, or in discharge of any debt you owe, that you can get;

And to secure you a fair reward for your labor, I now promise you, that for every dollar you will, between this and the first of May, get for your own labor, either in money or as your own indebtedness, I will then give you one other dollar.

By this, if you hire yourself at ten dollars a month, from me you will get ten more, making twenty dollars a month for your work.

In this I do not mean you shall go off to St. Louis, or the lead mines, or the gold mines in California, but I mean for you to go at it for the best wages you can get close to home in Coles County.

Now, if you will do this, you will be soon out of debt.

And, what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again.

But if I should now clear you out of debt, next year you would be just as deep in as ever.

You say you would almost give your place in heaven for seventy or eighty dollars. Then you value your place in heaven very cheap,

For I am sure you can, with the offer I make, get the seventy or eighty dollars for four or five months' work.

You say if I will furnish you the money you will deed me the land, and, if you don't pay the money back, you will deliver possession.

Nonsense! If you can't now live with the land, how will you then live without it?

You have always been kind to me, and I do not mean to be unkind to you.

On the contrary, if you will but follow my advice, you will find it worth more than eighty times eighty dollars to you.

Affectionately your brother,

A. LINCOLN.

The sequel to this attempt to lead Johnston out of the depression is found in an excerpt from another letter written to him by Lincoln in November, 1851:

"Now, do not misunderstand this letter; I do not write it in any unkindness. I write it in order, if possible, to get you to face the truth, which truth is, you are destitute because you have idled away all your time. Your thousand pretenses for not getting along better are all nonsense; they deceive nobody but yourself. Go to work is the only cure for your case."