

LINCOLN LORE

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BAILEY'S ETYMOLOGICAL DICTIONARY

Among the books which came into the possession of Abraham Lincoln while he was still a youth in Indiana, was Bailey's Etymological Dictionary. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this volume in the hands of a boy who had great ambition to learn and but few mediums through which to gather information. We may conclude that the dictionary became one of the chief source books of his formative years.

When William Herndon interviewed Lincoln's stepmother after the death of the President, he claimed that she still had in her possession a copy of the dictionary, "with young Abe's name, in his own hand, written on the flyleaf." The book is said to have been brought over from Kentucky by members of the Hall family. Squire Hall married Abraham's stepsister, Matilda Johnston.

Albert J. Beveridge discovered a copy of Bailey's dictionary which had been in possession of Mordecai Lincoln, brother of Thomas, the father of the President. Beveridge felt this was the same copy used by the President. The book contained an inscription stating that it had been purchased in 1796. There were also several signatures of an Abraham Lincoln in the book, but this writing was undoubtedly done by Mordecai's son Abraham. After the President's parents were married there seems to have been no opportunity for the Bailey dictionary to be passed back and forth as the families of Mordecai and Thomas were far removed from each other. The copy of the book finally discovered in 1879 in an old home once occupied by the Mordecai Lincoln family in Hancock County, could not have been the Bailey dictionary in possession of the President's stepmother in Coles County at the time William Herndon visited her.

A copy of Bailey's dictionary in the library of the Lincoln National Life Foundation bears the date 1763 and is the nineteenth edition. The book was first brought from the press in 1729 and was still having a wide circulation as late as 1802, at which time the thirtieth edition was published. It is said that Johnson used an interleaved copy of the book in preparing his famous dictionary.

Some excerpts made from the title-page of the dictionary will give an idea of the arrangement of its subject matter:

"An Universal Etymological ENGLISH DICTIONARY; Comprehending The Derivations of the Generality of Words in the English Tongue, either Ancient or Modern, from the Ancient British, Saxon, Danish, Norman, and Modern French, Teutonick, Dutch, Spanish, Italian; as also from the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew Languages, each in their proper Characters.

"And also a brief and clear Explication of all difficult Words. . . . Together With A large Collection and Explication of Words and Phrases used in our Ancient STATUTES, CHARTERS, WRITS, OLD RECORDS, and PROCESSES in Law; and the Etymology, and Interpretation of the Proper Names of MEN, WOMEN, and remarkable Places in Great-Britain: Also the DIALECTS of our different Countries. . . .

"To Which is Added a Collection of our most common Proverbs, with their Explication and Illustration. The whole Work compiled and methodically digested, as well for the Entertainment of the Curious, as the Information of the Ignorant; and for the Benefit of young Students, Artificers, Tradesmen, and Foreigners, who are desirous thoroughly to understand what they Speak, Read, or Write."

A few definitions which undoubtedly gave Lincoln his earliest conception of the meaning of certain terms he was to use are of sufficient interest to quote:

"DEMOCRACY (*democratie*, F. *democratia*, L. . . .) a Form of Government where the Supreme or Legislative Power is lodged in the common People, or Persons chosen out from them."

"LIBERTY (*liberte*, F. of *libertas*, L.) Freedom, which is a Power a Man has to do or forbear any particular Action, as seems good to him; Leave, or free Leave: Also a free or easy Way of Expression."

"A SLAVE (*Esclave*, *Esclava*, Span. *Slave*, Teut. q. d. A SCLAVONIAN, of which a great number were taken Captives by the Germans and Venetians) a perpetual Servant, a Drudge, a Person in the absolute Power of a Master."

"A WHIG (*Hwaeg*, *Sax*, *Whey*, etc. first applied to those in SCOTLAND, who kept their Meetings in the Fields, their common Food being sour Milk) A Nickname given to those who were against the Court Interest in the Times of King CHARLES and JAMES II and to such as were for it in the succeeding Reigns."

Lincoln must have read with interest in the introduction to the dictionary such statements as this:

"The Faculty of Speech, which makes so considerable a Difference between a Man and a Brute, is of excellent Use, as it renders Mankind conversible one with another, and as the various natural Endowments, Observations, Experiences, and Attainments of every individual Man, are hereby, with a wonderful Facility, mutually communicated. And we may add to this the Invention of Letters, by means of which we are not confined within the narrow Limits of our Acquaintance and Contemporaries, but one Man may be acquainted with the Attainments of Multitudes of the wisest Men in Present and Ancient Times, either in his own or remote Countries. Words are those Channels, by which the Knowledge of Things is convey'd to our Understandings: And therefore, upon a right Apprehension of them depends the Rectitude of our Notions."

Lincoln prepared and delivered an address on Discoveries, Inventions, and Improvements which may have caused him to recall his early study in the science of words. In reviewing one of the most notable inventions he said:

"Webster, at the time of writing his dictionary, speaks of the English language as then consisting of seventy or eighty thousand words. When we remember that words are sounds merely, we shall conclude that the idea of representing those sounds by marks, so that whoever should at any time after see the marks would understand what sounds they meant, was a bold and ingenious conception, not likely to occur to one man in a million in the run of a thousand years. And when it did occur, a distinct mark for each word . . . would present such a difficulty as would lead to the conclusion that the whole thing was impracticable. But the necessity still would exist; and we may readily suppose that the idea was conceived, and lost, and reproduced, and dropped, and taken up again and again, until at last the thought of dividing sounds into parts, and making a mark, not to represent a whole sound, but only a part of one, and then of combining those marks, not very many in number, upon principles of permutation, so as to represent any and all of the whole eighty thousand words, and even any additional number, was somehow conceived and pushed into practice."

It seems timely to call attention to Lincoln's possession of a dictionary as a youth just when the public schools are about to open.