

# LINCOLN LORE

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## VALEDICTORIAN OF LOG CABIN SCHOOLS

During the commencement days, very naturally, there is a tendency to pay more attention than usual to the academic attainments of the youth who are graduating from our high schools and universities. Among those students who receive highest honors in scholastic efforts, it would be difficult to determine whether inherited tendencies or acquired characteristics had made the larger contribution toward success.

While unusual native ability and intensified parental guidance function in the making of valedictorians, yet there is one more factor which contributes tremendously to the final scholarly achievement of a youth. It might be called the personal equation or the urge that identifies one as an individual and sets him apart from his associates.

Any attempt to study the factors which may have combined to make Abraham Lincoln the theoretical Valedictorian of Log Cabin Schools, has been blocked by untenable stories in circulation about his questionable parentage, and folklore pictures of his formative years. The "what difference does it make" attitude on the part of skeptics, toward the identity of his parents and the impossible conditions in his childhood home, have been a real barrier to any scholarly canvass of Lincoln's inherited tendencies or the environmental influences thrown about him.

Students who have attacked scientifically the problem of how Abraham Lincoln achieved in so many different fields of endeavor are confident that he need not be approached as a fathomless personality. Furthermore, these students are anxious to preserve the factual story of Lincoln's formative years as a source of inspiration for modern youth who are ambitious to do something worthwhile with their lives.

In the childhood days of Lincoln there appeared a characteristic which was observed and noted by his step-mother and his playmates, which, in a very large measure, must account for many of his achievements. His step-mother said on one occasion that he "was diligent for knowledge, wished to know, and if pains and labor would get it he was sure to get it." Lincoln is said to have called *Murray's English Reader* "the best school-book ever put into the hands of an American youth." In the first word of the first sentence in the book the word "diligence" appears in this setting: "Diligence, industry, and proper improvement of time are material duties of the young," and following it another sentence in these words, "The acquisition of knowledge is one of the most honorable occupations of youth."

A boy who grew up in the home with Abraham Lincoln in observing the same trait in him which his step-mother had noted described the tendency in this way, "He was ambitious and determined, and when he attempted to excel, man or boy, his whole soul, and his energies were bent on doing it, and he in this generally almost always accomplished his ends." In one school text the youth read this motto: "Be emulous to excel." The inscription "I excel" might well have been inscribed upon the face of the Abraham Lincoln escutcheon. It was apparently his life maxim.

This same characteristic of striving for excellency is discovered in his adult life. Scripps claims that Stephen A. Douglas said on one occasion, "Lincoln is one of those peculiar men who perform with admirable skill everything they undertake," and Woodrow Wilson, another statesman who, like Douglas, differed with Lincoln in politics, stated that even upon becoming President "learning as he went, he had found out how much there was to learn, and still had infinite capacity for learning."

However we do not find it necessary to take the words of others to support the fact of Lincoln's personal urge to excel as he apparently speaks from experience in many of the letters of commendation and admonition which he wrote. He replied to a student who inquired the best way to make a lawyer out of himself: "If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself the thing is more than half done already." He then concluded his advice to the young man with this appeal, "Always bear in mind that your resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing."

In 1842 Lincoln had secured an appointment to the United States Military Academy for a boy named George E. Pickett, and gave him some friendly advice. In one of his statements to George he said, "I have a congenital aversion to failure." In other words, he seems to imply that from his very earliest memories failure had been repugnant to him, yet there are those who would try to emphasize that his whole life was a series of failures until accidentally by some political hook or crook he gained the presidency.

A few years after his letter to young Pickett he wrote in some notes for a law lecture, "The leading rule for the lawyer as for the man of every other calling is diligence," and in the same memorandum set forth this most valuable maxim, "Whatever piece of business you have in hand, before stopping, do all the labor pertaining to it which can then be done."

To his own law partner, William Herndon, then a young man, he gave this piece of advice, "You cannot fail in any laudable object, unless you allow your mind to be improperly directed."

After his nomination to the Presidency, Lincoln may have had some misgivings about his lack of ability to carry on, but he had no question about his determination to tackle the task. He wrote to Joshua R. Giddings, "If I fail, it will be for lack of ability, and not of purpose."

Possibly some of the most impressive statements Lincoln ever made, which indirectly point to that spark of determination which had ignited his own ambition throughout his life are to be found in a letter written shortly after he was nominated for the presidency. A friend of his son, Robert, failed to pass the Harvard entrance examinations, and he wrote a letter of encouragement to the boy.

He said, "It is a certain truth that you can enter and graduate in Harvard University." This apparently was put in the form of a challenge and it was immediately followed up by pressing home the need of a positive decision in these words, "Having made the attempt you *must* succeed.—'Must' is the word."

Lincoln then advised the boy that he did not know how he could help him without calling on his own "severe experience" and concluded the sentence with this truism, "You cannot fail if you resolutely determine that you *will* not." Referring to the boy's failure as "temporary" and his "success in the struggle of life" as altogether possible, Lincoln concludes his letter with, "Let no feeling of discouragement prey upon you, and in the end, you are sure to succeed."

Latham was not the last youth, however, whom Lincoln tried to encourage to pursue studies with the ambition of a valedictorian. In June 1862 in the very midst of a great war he took time to write a letter to a discouraged cadet, Quinton Campbell, whom he had never met, "Adhere to your purpose and you will soon feel as well as you ever did.—On the contrary, if you falter, and give up, you will lose the power of keeping any resolution, and will regret it all your life . . . Stick to your purpose."