

# LINCOLN LORE

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## GROUNDWORK IN LINCOLNIANA

The scientific attitude in the modern day is nowhere demonstrated to better advantage than in the persistent effort of psychologists to pry into the structures responsible for human behavior. Biographers who write for succeeding generations will have a clearer conception of the real Lincoln and the motives, incentives and impulses which directed him than it is possible for us to have today. The one vastly important contribution which present day students may make to the consummate study of Abraham Lincoln, is the factual groundwork and the testing of the sources on which future biographers will rely.

Already there have been a few attempts to write psychobiographies of Lincoln. While the authors may have been thoroughly trained in the science of psychology they have in most instances drawn their deductions about Lincoln's remarkable achievements from a study of false premises. They have attempted to account for the development of a personality whose heredity contributions came from a traditional father called a "worthless vagabond," and an equally fictitious mother who was a waif in childhood and an unworthy woman as an adult. For environmental influences they have drawn deep from Herndon's "stagnant, putrid pool" which never existed.

The critical attitude which the Foundation has taken toward some early biographies of Lincoln is not due to "author's jealousy" which so often affects writers working in the same field, but is a sincere effort to winnow from these much utilized sources, many of them valuable, however, the mass of information which is now known to be erroneous. It is not difficult for an author to get recognition and approval of the clan if he starts to debunk an historical character. If he tries to challenge some biographical debunking, however, or finds more favorable surroundings for his character than has been anticipated heretofore, he is liable to be classified as a eulogist and not a biographer.

The term foundation implies groundwork and for fourteen years the Lincoln National Life Foundation has been directing the major part of its researches in national, state and county archives where documents speak with authority and where one naturally expects to find authentic information. The quest for facts and the bringing to light of documentary evidence to bear upon untenable folklore and tradition, has been the supreme task of the Foundation in its research program.

Most of the critical studies of Lincoln biography and sources have been reported through the monthly publication, *The Lincoln Kinsman*, where more space is available than in *Lincoln Lore*. During the past twelve months a series of six major Lincoln myths has been presented, followed by another series of six numbers testing the ability of certain members of the Lincoln and Hanks families to speak with authority on the subjects they discussed. It will be the purpose in occasional subsequent issues of *Lincoln Lore* to check the sources used by several early biographers of the President.

The Foundation has come to a point where it cannot classify as primary evidence personal reminiscences of Lincoln, newspaper stories with political bias, collections of folklore by relatives or friends and opinions or theories of Lincoln's contemporaries. There are four classes of source material about Lincoln which can be relied upon to produce factual evidence about Lincoln's life and works: Lincoln's autobiographical sketches, Lincoln's correspondence, Lincoln's addresses and duly authorized public records.

### *Lincoln's Autobiographical Sketches*

Autobiographical sketches by some individuals are worthless because of egotistical tendencies, ulterior purposes to build prestige, or a downright misrepresentation of what they have done. In the case of Abraham Lincoln

we are free from all these influences. Some of those unfriendly to Lincoln might conclude that his statements with reference to his background and humble beginning were merely political sympathy appeals, but those who know Lincoln best are quite sure that a very definite inferiority complex which continually kept him humble is more apt to have influenced his own writings about himself. Regardless of this apparent urge to under estimate his station in life and his achievements his autobiographical sketches are by far the most valuable historical sources which we have available.

Aside from abbreviated sketches which he prepared for Lanham, editor of the Dictionary of Congress and Hicks, the artist, the short sketch prepared for Fell and the longer one written in the third person for Scripps will always remain our most dependable Lincoln literature. The general use of these autobiographical sketches by practically every campaign biographer has given to their work a degree of accuracy which has not since been approached, even then Lincoln objected to the publishers of these books referring to them as authorized, authentic, etc.

### *Lincoln's Correspondence*

It is fortunate that many of the earlier biographer's had before them some of Lincoln's autobiographical writings, but it is unfortunate indeed, that some authors who greatly influenced public opinion about Lincoln had no, or comparatively little, access to any considerable number of Lincoln's letters. Nicolay and Hay were the first biographers to make any exhaustive collection of Lincoln's writings and their two-volume "*Works*," publishing the then known correspondence of Lincoln, was of more far-reaching importance than their ten-volume "*History*."

With new Lincoln letters coming to light continually, it is evident that the modern biographers of Lincoln have an ever increasing source of dependable information before them. From its very beginning the Foundation has stressed the importance of gathering every line of writing which may be found in the hand of Abraham Lincoln or over his signature. Twelve years ago *Lincoln Lore* made its most ambitious publishing effort by utilizing ten issues to list the then known Lincoln letters. Another supplement was added in 1932 and still another in 1938. When the first series was completed in 1931 it revealed that 2,311 known pieces of correspondence were available for study. Today the Foundation's cross index file to known Lincoln letters has reached a total of 3,656 memorandums and letters bearing the signature of Abraham Lincoln.

### *Lincoln's Addresses*

It will be a sad day, indeed, for biographers if what a candidate says during a political campaign will be classified along with other irresponsible remarks such as a person might make when intoxicated. Mr. Lincoln did not make a single campaign speech in either one of the 1860 or 1864 contests. We should be able to take as factual all of his addresses written in his own hand, which he used as memoranda or read from manuscripts. This voluminous source of data is also of invaluable interest and occasionally it is supplemented by new discoveries such as the Kalamazoo, Michigan speech which recently came to light.

### *Duly Authorized Public Records*

The repositories of counties, cities, states and government constitute an exceedingly valuable, and we might say in view of the extent of data, an almost untouched source for future Lincoln historians. Along with these documents should be associated the family records, church proceedings, business account books and a large but scattered collection of miscellaneous exhibits in personal possession which speaks with authority in certain fields of investigations.