

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1310

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 17, 1954

## DR. FRANKLIN INFLUENCES THE BOY LINCOLN

Among the books which Abraham Lincoln read as a Hoosier youth the story of Benjamin Franklin has been given little or no attention. Even those of us who seem to have placed special emphasis on Abe's formative years apparently have failed to appreciate the tremendous influence this volume may have had in moulding the character of the impressionable boy.

Lincoln prepared for John Locke Scripps the most exhaustive autobiographical sketch of his life and also answered many questions about his youth upon being personally interviewed by the author of the first 1860 campaign biography. Scripps listed in their proper chronological sequence the early books which Lincoln read. *Dilworth's Speller*, *The Bible*, *Aesop Fables* and *Pilgrim's Progress* were first named in that order and these two sentences follow: "Then came the *Life of Franklin*, *Weems' Washington*, and *Riley's Narrative*. Over the two former (Franklin and Washington) the boy lingered with rapt delight."

The authenticity of this list is supported by the fact that upon reading a preliminary draft of the book Lincoln left the foregoing statements stand as written, whereas he did correct Scripps with respect to one other book erroneously mentioned as having been read in the Indiana days. There can be little doubt that *The Life of Dr. Benjamin Franklin*, written by himself is the text which Abe first perused. The *Franklin Autobiography* in hand bears the date of 1809, the year of Lincoln's birth. The particular edition to which Lincoln had access is really a book of three parts. The autobiographical section brings Franklin up to 1737, his thirty-first year. At this point in the narrative which has consumed 122 pages, Dr. Stuber takes over and in the next 70 pages brings the life of Franklin to a conclusion. The last ten pages prints the last will and testament of Franklin which is in itself a document of interest.

Weems also published a biography of Franklin and the Foundation is happy to own a volume dated 1829 with Lincoln's signature on the flyleaf, also an accompanying affidavit which seems to authenticate Lincoln's ownership. This volume was published too late to have been associated with the earlier reading mentioned by Scripps.

Inasmuch as Scripps listed the books in the order in which they were used, we are able to locate rather definitely the period when Lincoln first came in contact with the Franklin story. At Trenton on his way to the inaugural Lincoln made this statement in a speech before the New Jersey Senate:

"May I be pardoned, if, upon this occasion, I mention that away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, such a one as few of the younger members have even seen, *Weems' Life of Washington*."

This testimony with respect to the Weems' book indirectly establishes the time element involved in the reading of the Franklin volume, both having been read in the "earliest days" of the boy's reading experience. Furthermore, it is fortunate that the Franklin volume came first as it served as an excellent historical background for the causes which led up to the Revolution so eloquently dramatized by Weems.

However, it is not the historical content of the Franklin volume which should be given the emphasis with respect to its influence on Lincoln. Possibly the value of the book to the impressionable youth can best be put in Franklin's own words. He wrote a letter to Benjamin

Vaughn on October 24, 1788 in which he explained the purpose of his autobiography in these words:

"I omit all facts and transactions that may not have a tendency to benefit the young reader, by showing him, from my example, and my success in emerging from poverty, and acquiring some degree of wealth and reputation, the advantages of certain modes of conduct which I observed, and avoiding the errors which were prejudicial to me."

There are many phases of Lincoln's moral character and lifelong habits that would be difficult to understand if we did not know of his deep interest in this idealistic story of Franklin. In Lincoln's case especially it appears as if the book as far as its boyhood influence on him is concerned is just what Dr. Franklin had in mind.

Franklin states: "From my earliest days I had been passionately fond of reading" and further notes that he could not remember when he was unable to read. At twelve years of age while serving as an apprentice to a printer he would often spend a greater part of the night reading, possibly a borrowed book that was to be returned the next morning. Very early he started to write down his own thoughts on different subjects and by the time he was fifteen he relates that "One of the greatest objects of my ambition" was to be a successful writer of the English language. One of the severe losses suffered by manuscript collectors was the destruction of the voluminous home made copy book in which Abraham Lincoln as a boy wrote down pieces of literature which appealed to him. It will also be remembered that Lincoln prepared for the press at a very early age a manuscript on politics and another on temperance.

Perhaps the key to Lincoln's temperate habits can be traced to the admonitions which were so forcibly presented by Franklin. His daily diet for years consisted of buns and water with occasionally some barley soup as a luxury. The story of his entrance into Philadelphia with a long loaf of bread under each arm while he was feasting on another is well known to all students of his life. Although he did not go into long discussions about the evils of intoxicants, the illusions which he made to this type of intemperance and the failures of individuals he mentioned resulting from drunkenness undoubtedly contributed to Lincoln's attitude towards strong drink. For instance, Franklin observed "clearness of ideas, and quickness of conception, are the fruits of temperance in eating and drinking."

Franklin also admitted his own shortcomings and hoped that his misbehavior might serve as warnings to others about to fall into habits which he felt were "prejudicial" to youth. His religious experience was not unlike Lincoln's own in many respects and even Franklin's position on the slavery issue which Lincoln mentioned in his Cooper Institute speech was not overlooked.

In 1788 Franklin was made president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. The following year as the executive officer of the society he signed a memorial presented to the House of Representatives of the United States "praying them to exert the full extent of powers visited in the constitution in discouraging the traffic in human species." Curiously enough this last public document which he signed was dated February 12, the very day of the month Lincoln was born.

Benjamin Franklin might well be called the Thomas Edison of his day as the enterprises he promoted and developed in almost every field of effort is astounding.