

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## **The Kentucky Home** from *Four Great Americans*

JAMES BALDWIN

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*This story of Lincoln's early life was included in educator James Baldwin's (1841-1925) 1897 collection Four Great Americans: Washington, Franklin, Webster, Lincoln—A Book for Young Americans. This selection tells the story of Lincoln's humble beginnings in a small one-room cabin on a farm in central Kentucky. Lincoln's parents—Thomas and Nancy Lincoln—moved to the farm in 1808, and Lincoln lived there until the age of seven when his family left for Indiana. Two years later, his mother died of milk-sickness, an illness caused by drinking contaminated milk. The next year, Thomas married Sarah Bush Johnson, a widow with three children.*

*How did these early hardships affect Lincoln, in Baldwin's telling? Lincoln himself cautioned his biographers of making much of his early life: "It is great folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed to a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in Gray's Elegy: 'The short and simple annals of the poor.'" Do you agree with Lincoln? Describe Lincoln's childhood education: What kinds of books did he read? How might they have influenced him? In particular, what does the example of George Washington mean to Lincoln?*

Not far from Hodgenville, in Kentucky, there once lived a man whose name was Thomas Lincoln. This man had built for himself a little log cabin by the side of a brook, where there was an ever-flowing spring of water.

There was but one room in this cabin. On the side next to the brook there was a low doorway; and at one end there was a large fireplace, built of rough stones and clay.

The chimney was very broad at the bottom and narrow at the top. It was made of clay, with flat stones and slender sticks laid around the outside to keep it from falling apart.

In the wall, on one side of the fireplace, there was a square hole for a window. But there was no glass in this window. In the summer it was left open all the time. In cold weather a deerskin, or a piece of coarse cloth, was hung over it to keep out the wind and the snow.

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At night, or on stormy days, the skin of a bear was hung across the doorway; for there was no door on hinges to be opened and shut.

There was no ceiling to the room. But the inmates of the cabin, by looking up, could see the bare rafters and the rough roof-boards, which Mr. Lincoln himself had split and hewn.

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There was no floor, but only the bare ground that had been smoothed and beaten until it was as level and hard as pavement.

For chairs there were only blocks of wood and a rude bench on one side of the fireplace. The bed was a little platform of poles, on which were spread the furry skins of wild animals, and a patchwork quilt of homespun goods.

In this poor cabin, on the 12th of February, 1809, a baby boy was born. There was already one child in the family—a girl, two years old, whose name was Sarah.

The little boy grew and became strong like other babies, and his parents named him Abraham, after his grandfather, who had been killed by the Indians many years before.

When he was old enough to run about, he liked to play under the trees by the cabin door. Sometimes he would go with his little sister into the woods and watch the birds and the squirrels.

He had no playmates. He did not know the meaning of toys or playthings. But he was a happy child and had many pleasant ways.

Thomas Lincoln, the father, was a kind-hearted man, very strong and brave. Sometimes he would take the child on his knee and tell him strange, true stories of the great forest, and of the Indians and the fierce beasts that roamed among the woods and hills.

For Thomas Lincoln had always lived on the wild frontier; and he would rather hunt deer and other game in the forest than do anything else. Perhaps this is why he was so poor. Perhaps this is why he was content to live in the little log cabin with so few of the comforts of life.

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But Nancy Lincoln, the young mother, did not complain. She, too, had grown up among the rude scenes of the backwoods. She had never known better things.

And yet she was by nature refined and gentle; and people who knew her said that she was very handsome. She was a model housekeeper, too; and her poor log cabin was the neatest and best-kept house in all that neighborhood. . . .

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There was still another thing that she could do—she could read; and she read all the books that she could get hold of. She taught her husband the letters of the alphabet; and she showed him how to write his name. For Thomas Lincoln had never gone to school, and he had never learned how to read.

As soon as little Abraham Lincoln was old enough to understand, his mother read stories to him from the Bible. Then, while he was still very young, she taught him to read the stories for himself.

The neighbors thought it a wonderful thing that so small a boy could read. There were very few of them who could do as much. Few of them thought it of any great use to learn how to read.

## SCHOOL AND BOOKS

Just how Abraham Lincoln stood in his classes I do not know; but I must believe that he studied hard and did everything as well as he could. In the arithmetic which he used, he wrote these lines:

“Abraham Lincoln,  
His hand and pen,  
He will be good,  
But God knows when.”

In a few weeks, Azel Dorsey’s school came to a close; and Abraham Lincoln was again as busy as ever about his father’s farm. After that he attended school only two or three short terms. If all his school days were put together they would not make a twelve-month.

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But he kept on reading and studying at home. His stepmother said of him: “He read everything he could lay his hands on. When he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards, if he had no paper, and keep it until he had got paper. Then he would copy it, look at it, commit it to memory, and repeat it.”

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Among the books that he read were the Bible, the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the poems of Robert Burns. One day he walked a long distance to borrow a book of a farmer. This book was Weems’s *Life of Washington*. He read as much as he could while walking home.

By that time it was dark, and so he sat down by the chimney and read by fire light until bedtime. Then he took the book to bed with him in the loft, and read by the light of a tallow candle.

In an hour the candle burned out. He laid the book in a crevice between two of the logs of the cabin, so that he might begin reading again as soon as it was daylight.

But in the night a storm came up. The rain was blown in, and the book was wet through and through.

In the morning, when Abraham awoke, he saw what had happened. He dried the leaves as well as he could, and then finished reading the book.

As soon as he had eaten his breakfast, he hurried to carry the book to its owner. He explained how the accident had happened.

“Mr. Crawford,” he said, “I am willing to pay you for the book. I have no money; but, if you will let me, I will work for you until I have made its price.”

Mr. Crawford thought that the book was worth seventy-five cents, and that Abraham’s work would be worth about twenty-five cents a day. And so the lad helped the farmer gather corn for three days, and thus became the owner of the delightful book. He read the story of Washington many times over. He carried the book with him to the field, and read it while he was following the plow.

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From that time, Washington was the one great hero whom he admired. Why could not he model his own life after that of Washington? Why could not he also be a doer of great things for his country?

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