

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Lincoln Memorial

MARK TWAIN

On January 13, 1907, American novelist Mark Twain (1835–1910) delivered these short remarks at a fundraiser for the Lincoln Birthplace Farm in Kentucky. In building a national memorial to Lincoln, the Lincoln Farm Association did not want to rely on a few wealthy donors to raise money for the park. Instead, it called upon any willing American to help fund the park, so long as each individual did not give less than twenty-five cents or more than twenty-five dollars.

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Why is it important that Lincoln was born in a border state? What knowledge or insights did it afford him so that he could save the Union? Why couldn't a "New England Brahmin" or "cotton planter" have done the same thing? What significance does Lincoln's birthplace have for Americans, according to Twain? Why is it "worth saving"?

There is a natural human instinct that is gratified by the sight of anything hallowed by association with a great man or with great deeds. So people make pilgrimages to the town whose streets were once trodden by Shakespeare, and Hartford guarded her Charter Oak for centuries because it had once had a hole in it that helped to save the liberties of a Colony.

But it was no accident that planted Lincoln on a Kentucky farm, half way between the lakes and the Gulf. The association there had substance in it. Lincoln belonged just where he was put. If the Union was to be saved, it had to be a man of such an origin that should save it. No wintry New England Brahmin could have done it, or any torrid cotton planter, regarding the distant Yankee as a species of obnoxious foreigner.

It needed a man of the border, where civil war meant the grapple of brother and brother and disunion a raw and gaping wound. It needed one who knew slavery not from books only, but as a living thing, knew the good that was mixed with its evil, and knew the evil not merely as it affected the negroes, but in its hardly less baneful influence upon the poor whites. It needed one who knew how human all the parties to the quarrel were, how much alike they were at bottom, who saw them all reflected in himself, and felt their dissensions like the tearing apart of his own soul. When the war came Georgia sent an army in gray and Massachusetts an army in blue, but Kentucky raised armies for both sides. And this man, sprung from Southern poor whites, born on a Kentucky farm and

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transplanted to an Illinois village, this man, in whose heart knowledge and charity had left no room for malice, was marked by Providence as the one to “bind up the Nation’s wounds.” His birthplace is worth saving.

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