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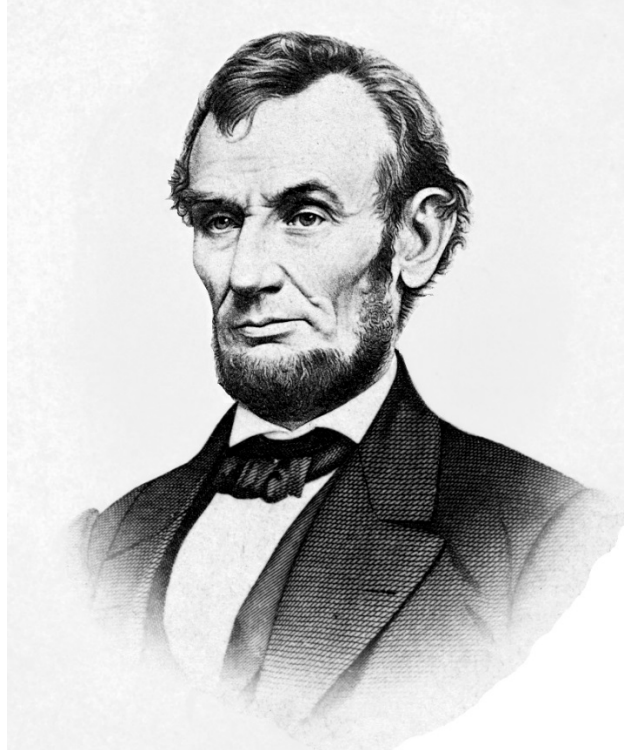
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# Abraham Lincoln in Illinois

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809 near Hodgenville, Kentucky. He was the second child of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln. His sister, Sarah, was two years older than Abraham. Thomas Lincoln was a carpenter and farmer whose father had come to Kentucky from Virginia in the 1780s, before Kentucky became a state. Thomas Lincoln had little wealth or education. In 1816 he moved his family to southern Indiana and started farming. On October 5, 1818, Nancy Hanks Lincoln died of a disease known as the milk sickness, which is caused by drinking the tainted milk or eating the meat of a cow that has eaten white snakeroot. On December 2, 1819, Thomas married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow from Kentucky with three children. Although uneducated herself, Abraham Lincoln's new stepmother encouraged him to read and receive an education. Lincoln would attend one-room schools that were set up in the wilderness, although by Lincoln's later reckoning he did not have more than one year in total of formal education.



The Lincoln family moved to Macon County, Illinois in March 1830 and settled on the north side of the Sangamon River about ten miles west of Decatur. Illinois had been a state for less than twelve years and was still a frontier wilderness. In 1831, Lincoln piloted a flatboat filled with supplies for New Orleans. The trip went from the Sangamon River to the Illinois River to the Mississippi River. Along the way, in the tiny Sangamon County town of New Salem, the boat became stuck on a dam and Lincoln had to spend several hours freeing it. When the trip was finished, the now twenty-two-year-old Lincoln came back to New Salem to live.



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In New Salem he worked a variety of jobs, including as a handyman and as both a store clerk and store owner. He also read a lot and showed an interest in learning the law. In 1832, although he had lived in New Salem for less than a year, he was encouraged by his new neighbors to run for the state legislature. That same year, before the election, the Black Hawk War started. This was the last Indian war in Illinois, occurring when the Indian chief Black Hawk crossed the Mississippi River from Iowa with about 450 warriors and 1,500 women and children to reclaim their tribal homeland. Lincoln volunteered for one month and was elected captain of his company. He served two more short terms of duty, both times as a private, before leaving the service in July 1832. The Black Hawk War was a small affair and Lincoln saw no action as a soldier. He did, however, make some contacts with influential people, including his future law partner, John Todd Stuart.

In August he lost his first bid for the legislature. A short time later, his store failed. Lincoln found work as a postmaster and a surveyor and continued to do odd jobs as a laborer. In 1834 he again ran for the state legislature and this time won office as a state representative. Before he began his term of office, he began the study of law with the help of John Todd Stuart, who was a state representative from the same district. Stuart's law office was located in Springfield about twenty miles from New Salem and Lincoln often visited there.

At this time the Illinois state capital was located in Vandalia, a small town that had been created in 1820 specifically for the purpose of being the state capital. Lincoln began his first term on December 1, 1834. He did not play an active role in the session of the General Assembly, but learned about the legislative process and how to draft bills. He also met many important politicians. While attending the three-month session, Lincoln roomed with Stuart, an experienced legislative leader who served as his political mentor.

Lincoln returned to New Salem after the three-month session and continued the study of law while working as a postmaster and surveyor. He was reelected to the state legislature in 1836 and served a central Illinois district that had seven state representatives and two state senators. These legislators were dubbed the "Long Nine," due to their average height being six feet. They supported internal improvements to the



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state and moving the state capital from Vandalia to the more centrally located Springfield.

Illinois was expanding at this time and was in dire need of a better transportation system. New Salem, for example, was a dying town, as its road system to other towns was poor and the Sangamon River was not deep enough to provide it with a reliable river route. The nine legislators from the district, including Lincoln, were in accord with other legislators who favored spending state money on internal improvements to the state, such as building roads, bridges, railroads and canals. The legislature, with Lincoln's support, approved large funding measures for internal improvements, but in 1837 an economic depression hit the country, ensuring that most of these projects were never built and leaving the state in deep debt for the projects that had been started.

There was a hot contest during the session on relocating the state capital. Several Illinois towns vied for the honor, including Springfield, Alton, Jacksonville and Quincy. Vandalia, of course, did not wish to lose the capital. Using all of the political skills he had learned, Lincoln was able to have the legislature vote to remove the capital to Springfield by 1840. It was one of Lincoln's most lasting legacies to his home state. To this day, Springfield remains the state capital. After the session, on April 15, 1837, Lincoln moved to Springfield, where he would live until February 1861, when he left for Washington D.C. as the president-elect. Lincoln also received his law license in 1837 and he and John Todd Stuart opened a law partnership.

Lincoln was reelected to a third term in the state legislature in 1838. He was now the recognized leader of the Whig Party, the precursor to the Republican Party. Lincoln tried to be elected as Speaker of the House, but was defeated by a Democrat who had the backing of several independent legislators. Lincoln spent the term serving on several committees and working to protect Springfield's interests, which included making sure the vote to move the capital to Springfield wasn't overturned. One of the more controversial issues he faced this term was on dividing Sangamon County into several smaller counties.

In 1840 he was reelected to a fourth consecutive term in the legislature. During this term he again served as the leader of the Whig Party; however, in the book Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years, Paul Simon writes that it



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appears as if Lincoln had lost interest in the legislature. It was during this time that he began courting Mary Todd, his future wife. In 1841, the law firm of Stuart and Lincoln was dissolved and Stephen T. Logan and Lincoln formed a law partnership. During this term of office, Lincoln joined with other legislators to try to tackle repaying the great debt the state had incurred from the internal improvements plan of two sessions earlier. However, the final payment of that debt would not occur until well after the Civil War.

Lincoln finished his fourth term in the legislature in 1842. On November 4, 1842, he married Mary Todd in a wedding in Springfield. On August 1, 1843, their first son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was born. In the fall of 1844, the law partnership of Lincoln and Logan was dissolved and Lincoln started a law firm with William H. Herndon.

In 1846, Lincoln ran for and won a seat in Congress. Illinois had seven congressional districts and was generally a Democratic state. Lincoln's district was the only one that had a chance of electing a Whig candidate. Leading Whig politicians agreed to take turns running for a term in Congress and so Lincoln only ran once. The Democratic Party had a majority in Congress and Democrat James K. Polk was president during Lincoln's one term, so the Whig Party played the part of the loyal opposition. In Lincoln's case, this meant opposition to the Mexican War. However, the war was popular so Lincoln's opposition cost him political favor in his district. His term in Washington allowed Lincoln to meet many of the political leaders of the day and to have a taste of national politics.

Having served his one term in Congress and having opposed an extremely popular war, Lincoln temporarily left electoral politics. He threw himself into his law practice and became one of the leading attorneys in Illinois. He practiced law in front of the state Supreme Court, the federal courts and in the various courthouses of the Eighth Judicial Circuit, which included a wide swath of counties in central Illinois. His law career also took him outside the circuit and sometimes outside the state. Several of his cases focused on transportation issues and he became a leading railroad attorney. He continued to be somewhat active in politics as a Whig Party leader, but the approaching sectional conflict between the North and the South was signaling the death of the Whig Party.



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In 1854 Democrat Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas successfully promoted the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which basically allowed territories to determine whether they wanted to enter the union as slave states or free states. The act outraged many in the North, because it signaled the possibility of unlimited expansion of slavery.

Opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act brought Lincoln back to a more active role in politics. In 1854, he ran for the state legislature, not because he wanted to but because he was popular and was needed to help lead the ticket. His real goal was to be elected to the United States Senate, something not allowed as a state legislator. As such, shortly after winning election to the state legislature, he turned down his election. In January 1855, when the legislature met to elect a United States senator, Lincoln entered the contest with the most votes, but lost on the tenth ballot after he couldn't secure a majority of the legislature.

Undeterred, Lincoln remained active in politics. He helped form the Illinois Republican Party, which, with him acting as manager, elected the governor and other constitutional officers in the election of 1856. On June 16, 1858 the new party nominated Lincoln for United States senator. His opponent was Douglas and the two candidates canvassed the state in search of votes for their party. They met in debate seven times. Although Douglas would go on to win the Senate seat, Lincoln gained such fame and notoriety that in less than two years he became the Republican nominee for president and was elected over Douglas and two other candidates.

Lincoln left Springfield for Washington on February 11, 1861, never to return. He was shot in Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865 and died the next day. He was buried in an impressive tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield. His time in Illinois had molded him for the struggles he had to face as a wartime president and he, in turn, had helped make Illinois the place it is today.

Illinois State Archives.