

LEVELED BOOK • Z²

ABRAHAM LINCOLN:

From Log Cabin to the White House

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Written by Bea Silverberg

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Focus Question

Why is Abe Lincoln considered one of the most famous American presidents?

Words to Know

abolitionist
civil rights
eloquent
emancipator
equality
homespun

inhumanely
momentous
orator
secede
solemn
sovereignty

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Correlation

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
The Early Years	6
Law and Politics	9
America Divided	13
The War Years	16
Glossary	24



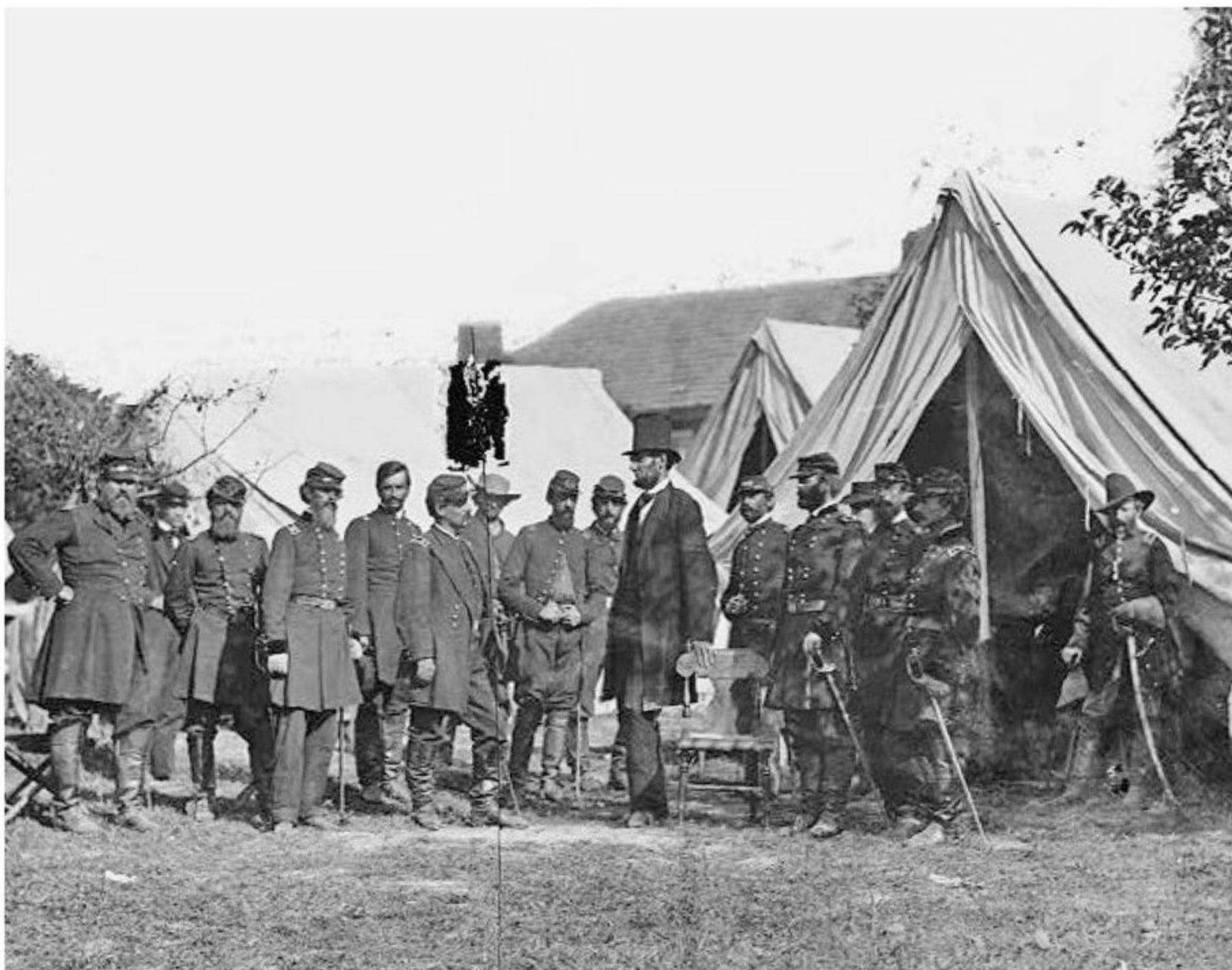
The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln, one of the most famous American presidents, is remembered for his dedication to freedom. Lincoln led the United States during the Civil War, 1861 to 1865, when the Northern and Southern states fought to decide the future of the country. He is known as the “Great Emancipator” because he freed the slaves. After the war, the United States became one nation, pledged to freedom and democracy for all.

We think of Abraham Lincoln as a great American folk hero and tell many stories and legends about him. He is often pictured as tall, lanky, and **solemn**. He is remembered as a “common man” who was born in a log cabin in Kentucky with little regular schooling. Yet he became a great lawyer, speaker, and political leader. His **eloquent** speeches about freedom, justice, and uniting all Americans are carved in stone at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

His belief was simple: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.”



President Lincoln with General McClellan and a group of officers, Antietam, Maryland, October 3, 1862

The Early Years

Abraham Lincoln was born to Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln on February 12, 1809, on a small log-cabin farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky. After moving to nearby Knob Creek, Abe and his older sister, Sarah, went to school for short periods during the winters. His mother, Nancy, encouraged their “edication,” but his father, Tom, wanted Abe to help with chores.

When Abe was seven, the family moved to Indiana, hoping for a better life. Two years after Tom built a new log cabin, Nancy became ill with “milk sickness” and died. Abe and Sarah mourned the death of their hard-working, loving mother.

Soon after, Abe’s father married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow and mother of three whom Tom had known in Kentucky. With love and care, she created a warm life for Abe and Sarah. She encouraged Abe as he grew into a tall, awkward youth. He spent much time in the woods using his ax to fell trees and split logs for fences, wagons, and farm equipment. Friends told of Abe’s moody quietness, even though Abe told homey, humorous stories.

Abe went to school for only a few weeks in the winters, walking 18 miles (29 km) daily. Mostly he educated himself by borrowing books and newspapers from neighbors and travelers. These were frontier days when people moved westward, following Daniel Boone, Johnny Appleseed, and other pioneers. Their stories, and the books he read, sparked ideas of a world larger than Abe's backwoods. They prepared him for adulthood and his political career.

As a teenager, Abe, now a strong 6 feet 4 inches (2 m), traveled down the Mississippi on a flatboat loaded with produce. He floated, steering with a pole, to the busy port of New Orleans, where he saw the city's wonders and people of many colors and nationalities. For the first time, Abe saw black men, women, and children chained at slaveholding pens and auction blocks to be bought and sold.



Abe traveled on a flatboat to the city of New Orleans.



Abe's early campaigns made him a skilled communicator.

After Abe's return, his father again moved the family westward to central Illinois near the town of Decatur. Abe helped his father build a new log cabin, and soon after, left the homestead at age 22. In the frontier village of New Salem, Abe worked various jobs, including storekeeper, surveyor, and carpenter. He became well known as a wrestler and as a skilled **orator** in the New Salem Debating Society. He ran for the Illinois state legislature, losing in 1832 but succeeding two years later. A lawyer and fellow legislator, John Todd Stuart, encouraged Abe to study law. Abe read law books, passed the exams in March 1837, and joined Stuart's law practice, moving to Springfield, where the Illinois legislature met.

Law and Politics

Abraham Lincoln's views were based on his strong belief in democratic rights for the common man—that each person was important regardless of wealth or privilege. He became a respected member of the Whig Party, supporting strong central government in Washington, D.C. The other leading party, the Democrats, believed in "states' rights," or that states should control their own affairs without interference from Washington.

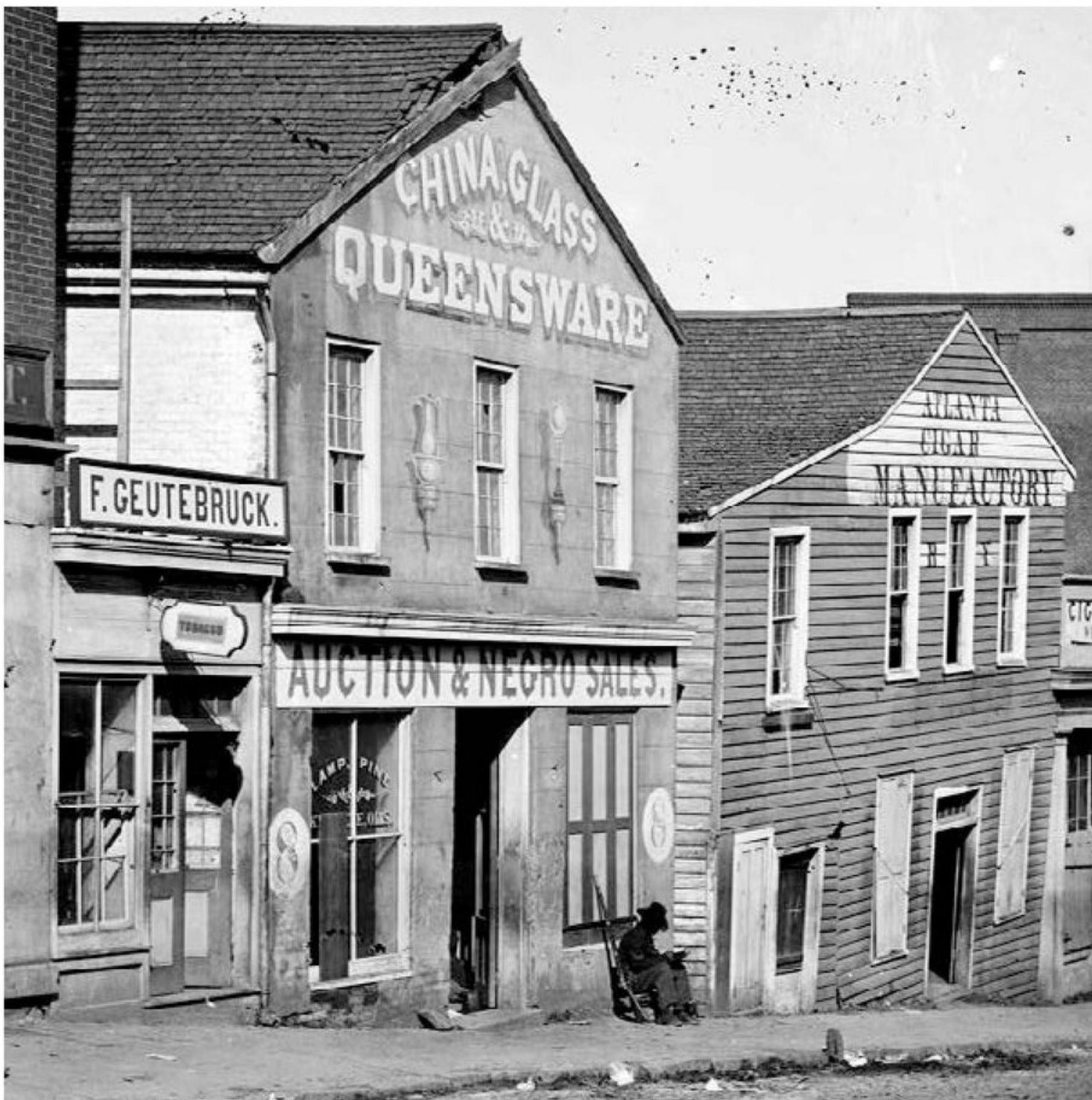
At the age of 30, Lincoln met his future wife, Mary Ann Todd. She was the fashionable daughter of a wealthy Kentucky banker. Her background was very different from Lincoln's, yet they fell in love. After overcoming Mary's parents' objections, they married on November 4, 1842. In 1843, their first son, Robert, was born. In 1846, Lincoln won the election for Illinois representative to the U.S. Congress and moved to Washington, D.C., with his family.



Mary Todd Lincoln, 1846

Lincoln was in Congress as the Northern and Southern states became more divided over the issue of slavery. The North depended on paid laborers in its factories and small farms, and believed in a strong central government. Slavery was outlawed in the Northern states. The South, whose economy revolved around “King Cotton” grown on large plantations, used slave labor. Slaves, primarily black Africans, were owned as property. Most lived under very poor conditions and were treated **inhumanely**. They had no personal or **civil rights**. The laws of Southern states allowed and protected slavery. The United States expanded as western territories applied for statehood. Would these states enter as “free” or “slave” states? The South wanted new lands for slave-grown cotton. The North wanted the country to promote independent farms and paid labor.

Lincoln opposed slavery, but as an Illinois representative in Washington, he believed that the practice was protected by the state laws in the South. However, he fought the spread of slavery in the western territories.



This building in Atlanta, Georgia, was used to sell slaves.

During the 1840s, the **abolitionist** movement, which wanted to outlaw slavery, grew. Its followers, both whites and free blacks, demanded an end to the horrors and inhumanity of holding humans in bondage.

Lincoln returned to Springfield after two years in Washington and for the next few years shared a successful law practice with his partner, William Herndon. Lincoln became known for his honesty, legal abilities, wit, and fine oratory.

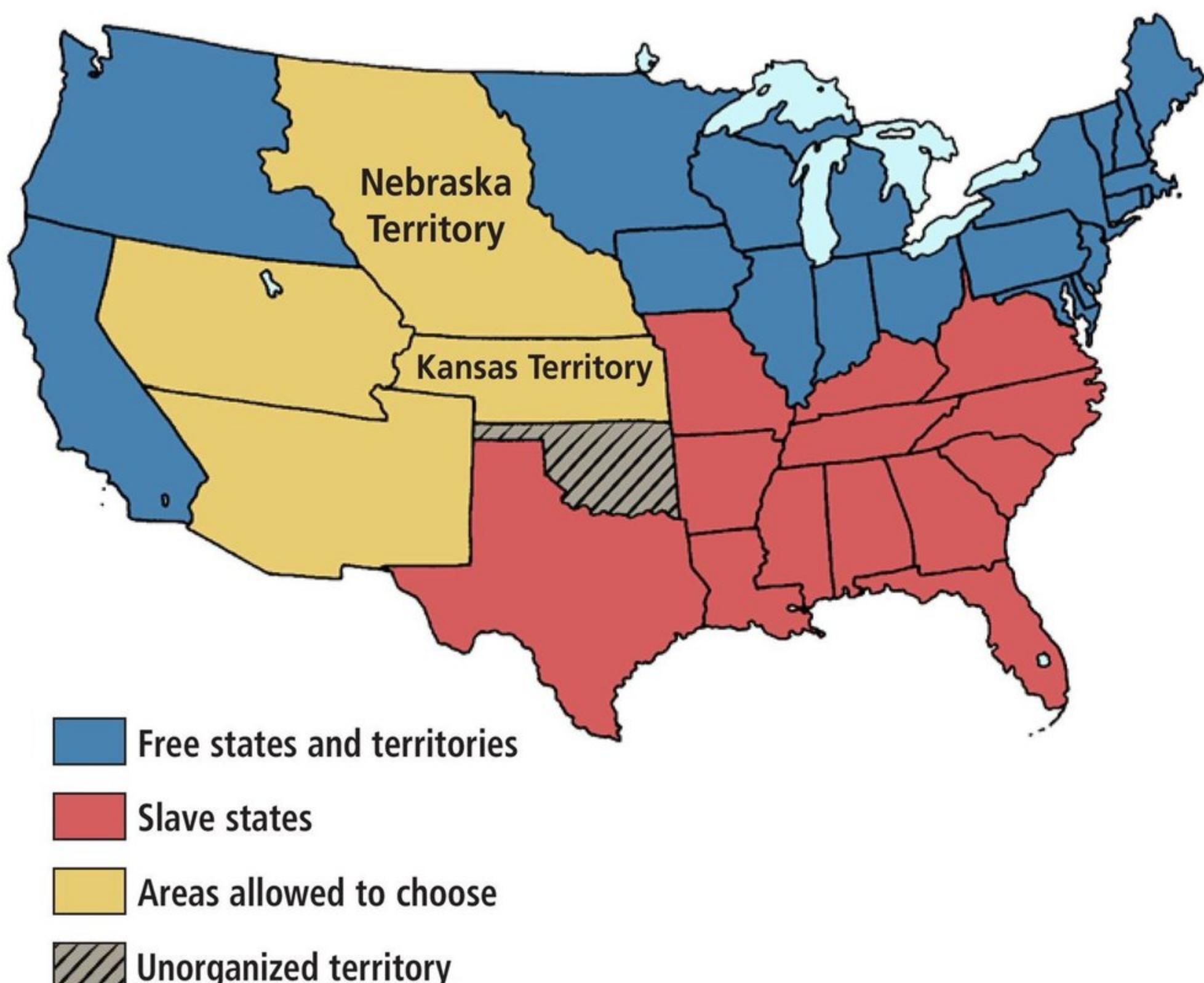


Lincoln with his son Tad, 1864

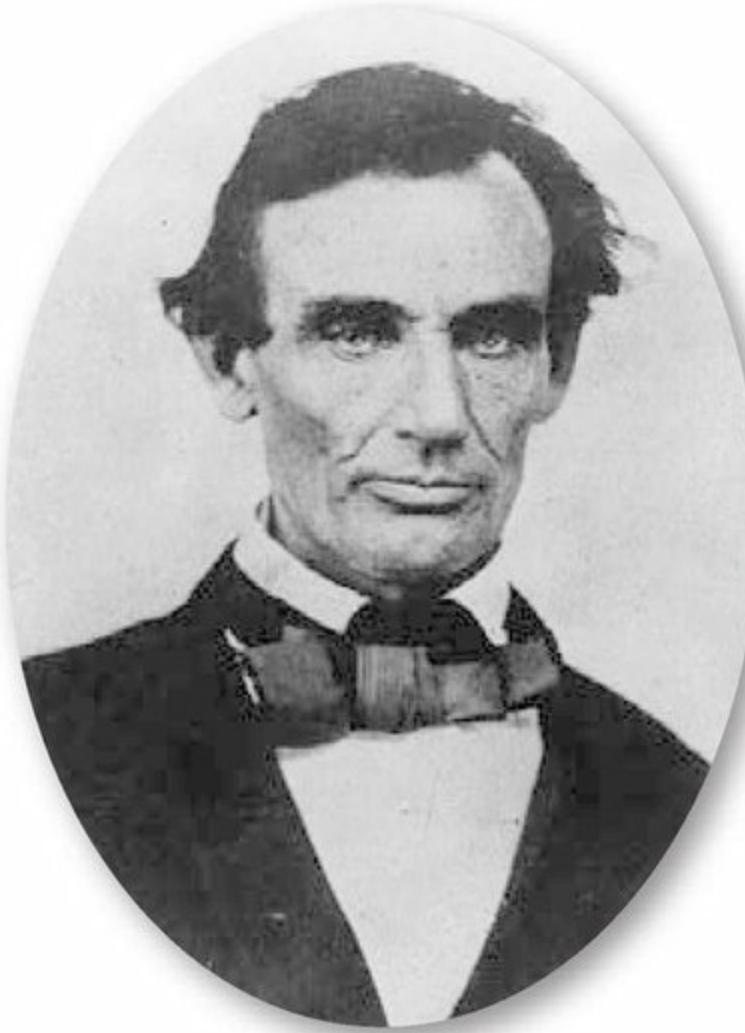
In February 1850, Abraham and Mary faced tragedy when their boy Eddie, nearly four years old, died of tuberculosis. Both parents were deeply depressed, and Mary showed signs of emotional imbalance. In December of that year, a son named William Wallace was born, and three years later came another son, Thomas, or Tad for short. Lincoln was very close to his sons and was a proud and loving father.

America Divided

Meanwhile in the 1850s, the pro- and anti-slavery forces struggled for power. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This cancelled an earlier law that forbade slavery in these territories. The new law allowed the residents to decide whether they wanted to be free or slave states. This principle of letting the people decide, called “popular sovereignty,” was introduced by an old political rival of Lincoln’s, Stephen Douglas, now a U.S. senator from Illinois.



The free and slave states shortly before the Civil War



Lincoln in 1858, two weeks before his final debate with Douglas

Lincoln decided it was time to speak out against the spread of slavery and to try again for political office. He joined the new Republican Party, which opposed slavery, and was nominated in 1858 as their candidate for senator. His opponent was his old enemy, Senator Douglas. During the campaign, they held the Lincoln-Douglas

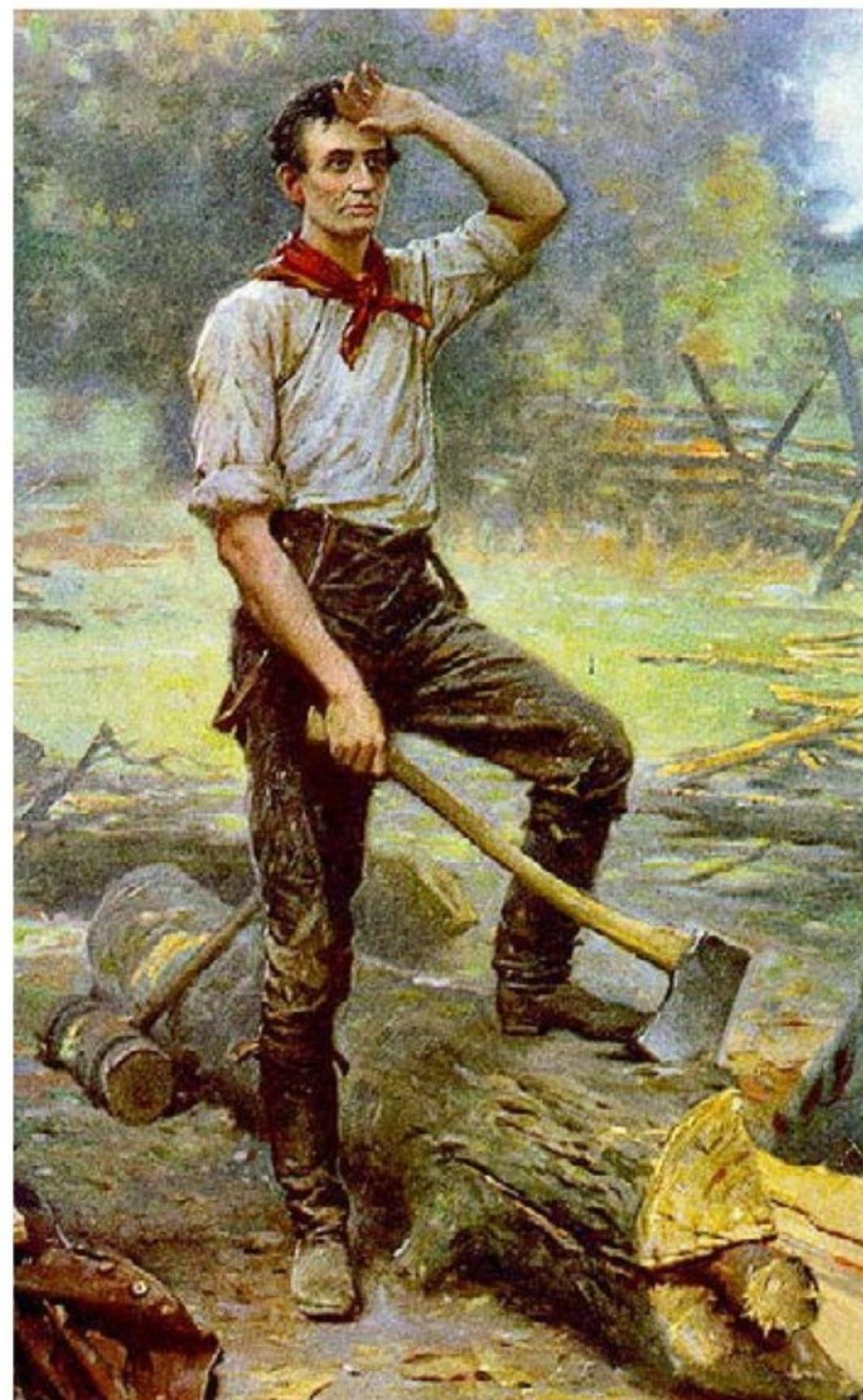
debates, which captured the attention of the country. Lincoln, with great oratorical skill, exclaimed that slavery was causing a national crisis. "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." Lincoln argued that blacks were entitled to the "right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," just like whites. Douglas said that the Constitution guaranteed **equality** only to white citizens, not to blacks. Each state, he believed, had the right to decide whether it would be slave or free.



Stephen A. Douglas

Lincoln lost the election, but the debates made him popular, particularly in the Republican Party. By 1860, he was the party's choice for president. In his campaign rallies and parades, he was called "Honest Abe," the **homespun** rail-splitter, a man of the people who stood for equality and freedom.

On November 6, 1860, Lincoln was elected president of the United States. The North and the western territories rejoiced; the South was outraged. Even before Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, 1861, seven Southern states voted to **secede** from the United States of America. By February, the pro-slavery states had established a government, the Confederate States of America, under President Jefferson Davis, and prepared for war.



Lincoln became known as a "rail splitter" from his work as a young man.



The inauguration of Lincoln took place on March 4, 1861, at the U.S. Capitol, which was still under construction.

The War Years

President Lincoln, still hoping to avoid bloodshed, said in his inauguration speech, “In your hands, my dissatisfied countrymen, and not in mine, is the **momentous** issue of civil war.” But events moved swiftly, and by April 14, Northern troops had surrendered Fort Sumter after South Carolina cannons fired on the fort. Both sides, the Union and the Confederacy, quickly mobilized, calling volunteers and collecting arms and supplies. President Lincoln, from his home and office in the Union city of Washington, D.C., could look across the river to the Confederate state of Virginia.

The South's superior military leadership defeated Union forces in the first battle at Bull Run. Lincoln struggled to find strong commanders to lead the Union troops throughout the war. Under General George B. McClellan, the Union armies had some successes, but by 1862 they were stopped by Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Although Union forces controlled New Orleans and the Mississippi River, there were few victories. Lincoln took over more of the military planning as the North called for action. Enormous numbers of young soldiers on both sides were killed, wounded, or missing as the war continued into its second year.



President Lincoln with General McClellan at Antietam. General McClellan would soon be replaced.

For Mary and Abraham Lincoln, personal loss threw them into deep despair. Their second son, Willie, died of fever in February 1862. Mary would never fully recover from her grief. Abraham shared his great sadness when he met with the many families mourning war dead.

The Union lost the second battle of Bull Run, and at Antietam both sides suffered the bloodiest engagement of the war. Powerful Republican senators urged President Lincoln to make the abolition of slavery a war goal. They argued that to fight the war successfully, the Union needed to remove the issue that caused the war. Lincoln was finally convinced that as president, he had the authority to order abolition in the South. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, freeing “thenceforth and forever” all the slaves in the South. Freed blacks rushed to join the Union army, and by the end of the war, over 180,000 former slaves had volunteered.



Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry was composed of former slaves and other free black men.

Historical Perspective

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was only the first step toward granting African Americans equal rights. Until the civil rights movement of the 1960s, African Americans were routinely denied jobs, voting rights, and basic human respect. Ask your librarian about books on the civil rights movement, or search the Internet for *civil rights movement* or *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

The summer of 1863 brought victory to Union forces at Gettysburg, a turning point in the war. President Lincoln, while dedicating a cemetery to the many soldiers who had died, delivered his famous Gettysburg Address. The speech lasted only two minutes, yet it is remembered for its simple beauty and eloquence. Lincoln spoke of the war as a test of whether the nation could survive as a democracy. He challenged those still alive to complete the unfinished work of those who had died, “that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”



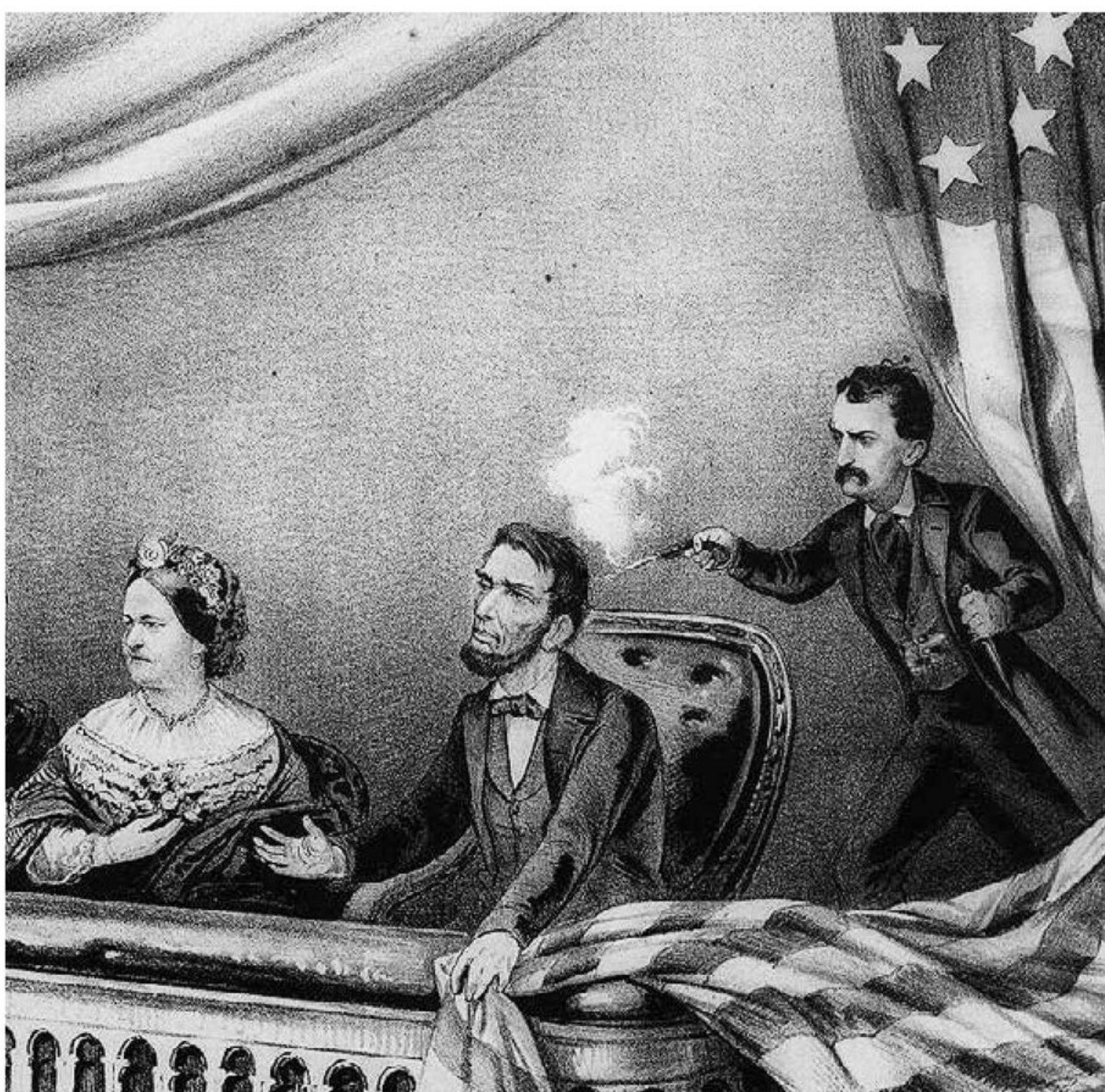
Dead Union soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Under the newly appointed General Ulysses S. Grant, the Union armies were victorious in the West and South. Lincoln saw hope of the war's end as Confederate troops were defeated in Georgia and Virginia in late 1864. He was re-elected president and, in early 1865, cheered the Congressional passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited slavery in the United States.



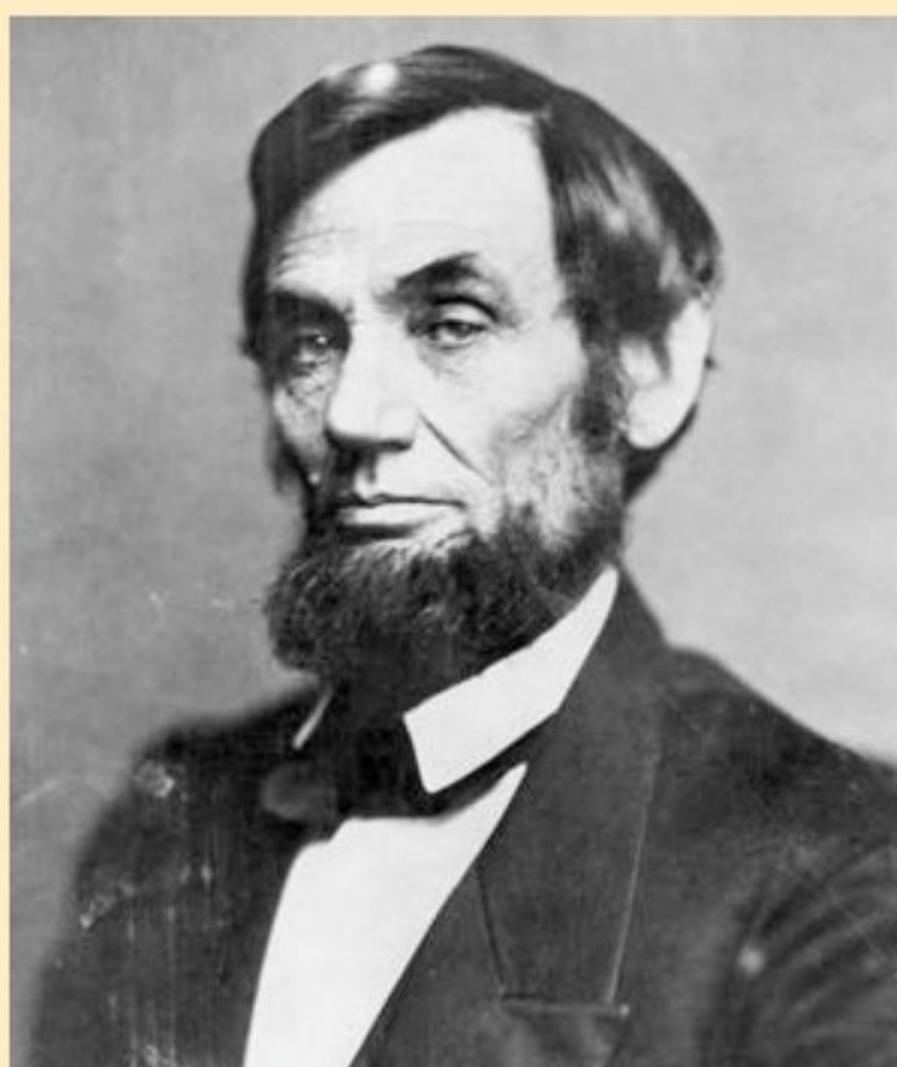
One of the last photographs taken of Lincoln, February 1865

The war ended on April 9, 1865, four years after it began, and cost 600,000 lives. The Union was preserved, and slavery was abolished. But only six days later, President Abraham Lincoln lay dead from an assassin's bullet. A Confederate sympathizer, John Wilkes Booth, shot Lincoln while he attended a play at Washington's Ford's Theatre. As Lincoln's body was carried back to his beloved Illinois on a funeral train, mourners by the roadside silently saluted this great American hero.



An 1865 depiction of Lincoln's assassination

Do You Know?



↑ This cabin is constructed of logs that are believed to be from Lincoln's birth cabin. The cabin is located at the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site in Hodgenville, Kentucky.

◀ Lincoln first grew a beard after winning the presidency but before moving to Washington. The beard was a suggestion from an 11-year-old girl.

Timeline

- 1809** Abraham Lincoln born on February 12 in Kentucky
- 1818** Abraham's mother, Nancy, dies; Thomas Lincoln marries Sarah Bush Johnston the following year
- 1834** Lincoln elected to Illinois state legislature
- 1837** Opens law practice in Springfield, Illinois
- 1842** Abraham marries Mary Todd
- 1846** Lincoln elected to U.S. House of Representatives
- 1850** Four-year-old son, Edward, dies
- 1858** Lincoln-Douglas debates; Lincoln becomes a leader on anti-slavery issue
- 1860** Lincoln elected president of the U.S.
- 1861** Civil War begins when Confederates fire on Fort Sumter
- 1862** Son William dies at age twelve; Battle of Antietam
- 1863** Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation; Union victory at Gettysburg
- 1865** Confederate forces surrender, ending the Civil War; Lincoln shot on the evening of April 14 and dies the following day

Glossary

abolitionist (<i>n.</i>)	a person who fought to make slavery illegal (p. 11)
civil rights (<i>n.</i>)	legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 10)
eloquent (<i>adj.</i>)	simple, powerful, and elegant in speech or writing (p. 5)
emancipator (<i>n.</i>)	a person who sets others free (p. 4)
equality (<i>n.</i>)	the condition in which everyone has the same rights (p. 14)
homespun (<i>adj.</i>)	humble; from a simple rural background (p. 15)
inhumanely (<i>adv.</i>)	in a manner lacking any dignity or kindness (p. 10)
momentous (<i>adj.</i>)	hugely important or of great consequence (p. 16)
orator (<i>n.</i>)	a public speaker, especially an eloquent one (p. 8)
secede (<i>v.</i>)	to formally withdraw from membership in an organization or group (p. 15)
solemn (<i>adj.</i>)	serious or sad (p. 5)
sovereignty (<i>n.</i>)	the freedom to be in charge of one's own affairs (p. 13)

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A Reading A-Z Level Z2 Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,991

Connections

Writing

Create five interview questions that you would ask Lincoln if you could. Develop responses to the questions based on how you think Lincoln would respond.

Social Studies

Look up the text of the Gettysburg Address. Research vocabulary you do not understand. Rewrite the speech in your own words.

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