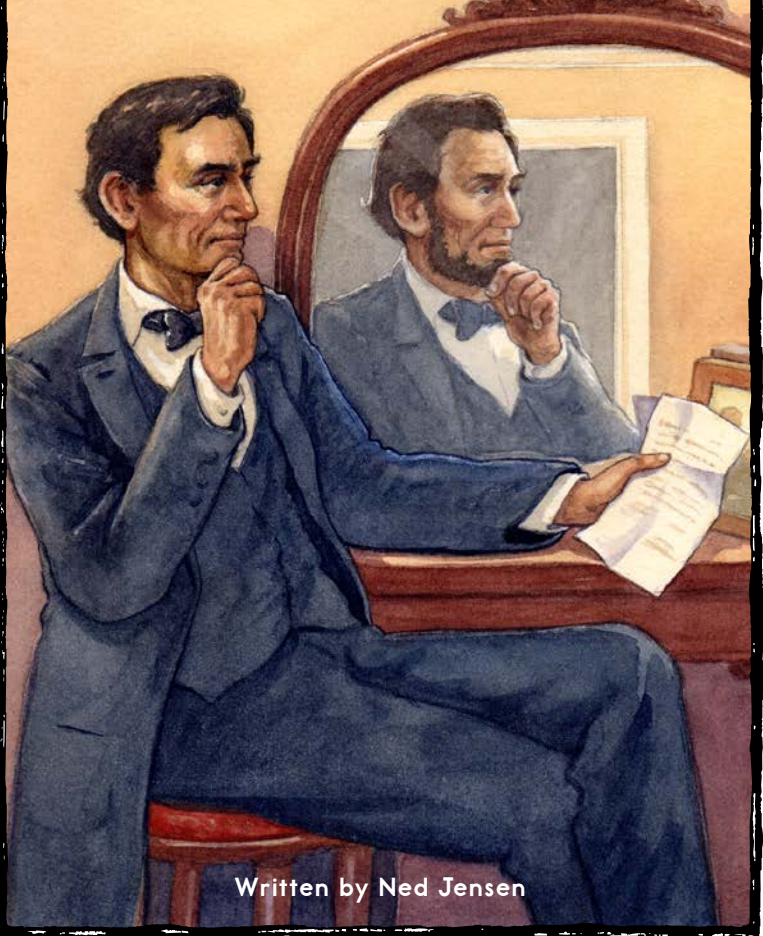


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Why Abe Lincoln Grew a Beard



Written by Ned Jensen

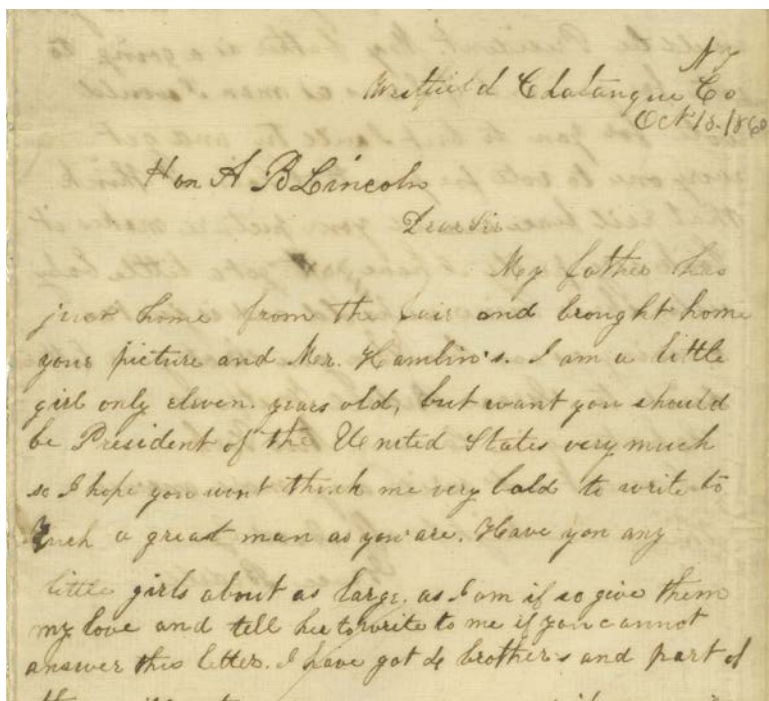
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Grace Bedell's 1860 letter to Abraham Lincoln (above) advised him to grow a beard. Today, Lincoln's letter in reply is said to be worth more than \$1 million.

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Loads of Letters

Before texting, there was email. Before email, there were telephones. Before telephones, people wrote **letters**. They still do, of course. But in the 1800s, letters were the main way people reached out to each other when they weren't in the same place.

Sometimes people fell in love through letters. Sometimes good news—say, of a new grandchild—might reach people through a letter. Sometimes bad news—of a son killed in war—might reach people the same way.





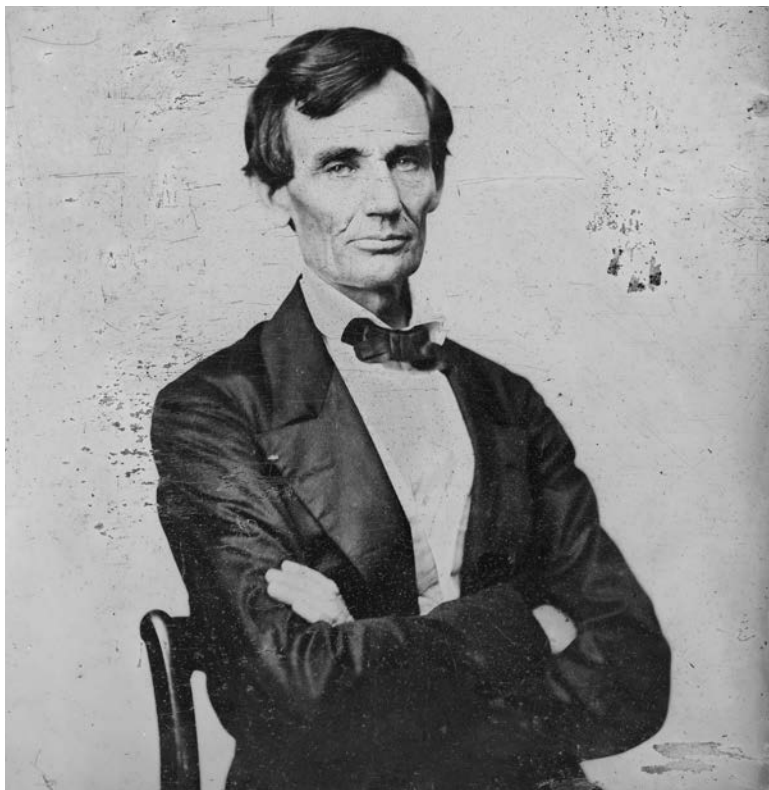
A White House volunteer sorts mail for President Bill Clinton in 1993 while Socks, the First Cat, receives a lecture.

Letters are still a great way to reach out to someone you might never meet in person. U.S. **presidents** receive thousands of letters a day—and ten times that many emails.

Some of those letters are funny, some are angry, some are sad. All of them help keep the president in touch with what's happening around the country.



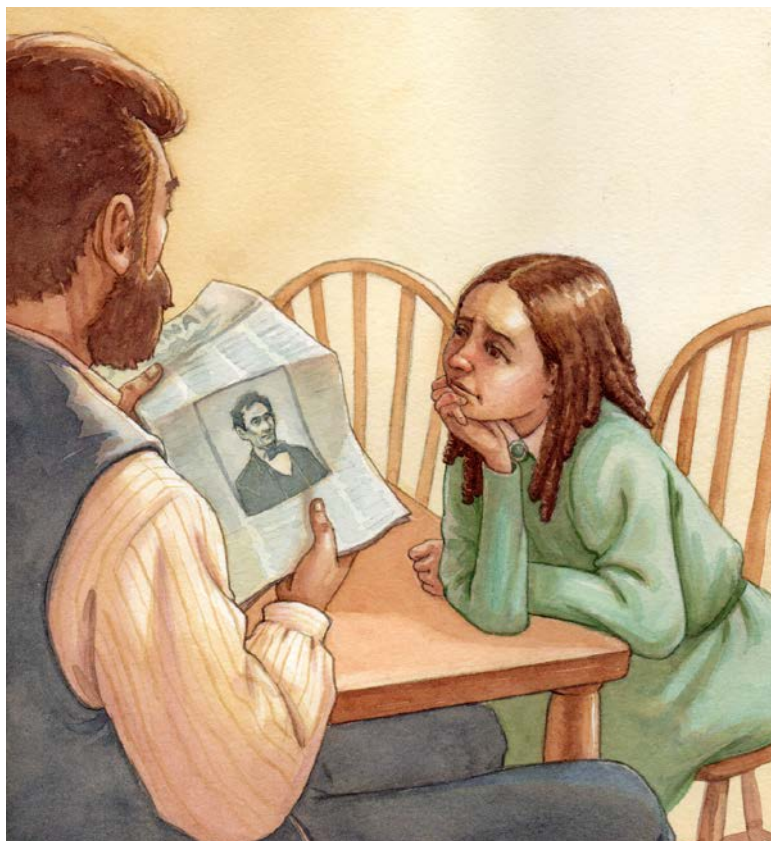
Sometimes children write the president. They might share a story, offer an opinion, or make a **suggestion**. What follows is the story of one such child, one such suggestion, and one of our most famous presidents of all.



The last photo of Lincoln beardless was taken in August 1860.

What About Whiskers?

When you look at most pictures of Abraham Lincoln, including the one on the five-dollar bill, he has a **beard**. He didn't always, though. In fact, before Abe ran for president, he was **clean-shaven**. No one knows for sure whether he ever even thought of growing a beard until an eleven-year-old girl living in western New York decided he should.



The girl's name was Grace Bedell. When her father showed Grace a picture of Lincoln, she was struck by the sadness in Lincoln's eyes, the wrinkles along his mouth, and his long, thin face. She thought that Lincoln would look much better if he grew a beard. (Back then, beards were often called *whiskers*.) On October 15, 1860, she wrote him a letter to tell him so.

Grace asked if Lincoln had any daughters her age. She told him about her family, including her four brothers. “Part of them will vote for you anyway,” she wrote, “and if you let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you...”

She went on to say, “All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you....”

I would vote for you (if I could)



Women struggled for many years to achieve the right to vote. They weren't allowed to vote until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. (Grace was 71 years old by then.)

Penny for your thoughts?

The stamp Grace used to mail her letter to Lincoln cost her one penny, but that penny would have had an Indian's head on it. Lincoln did not appear on the penny until 1909.



Lincoln's Reply

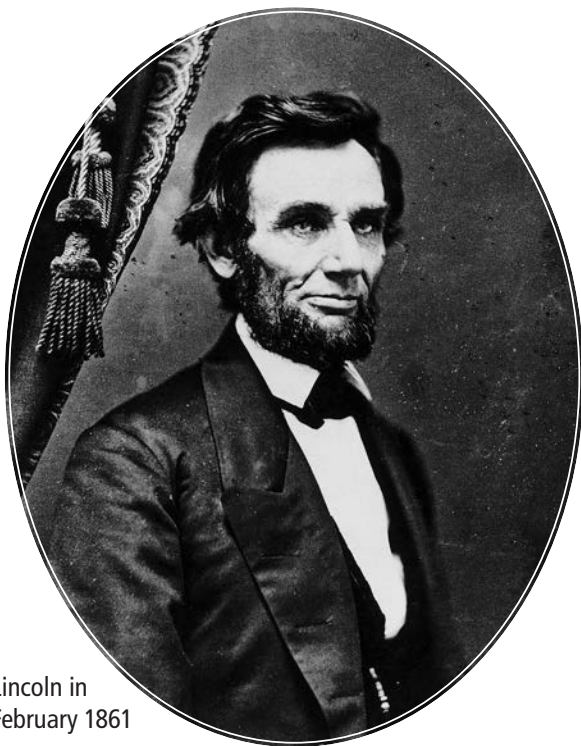
The soon-to-be president wasted little time answering Grace's letter. Within days, she received a letter back.

"My dear little Miss," Lincoln wrote, "... I **regret** the **necessity** of saying I have no daughters. I have three sons—one seventeen, one nine, and one seven years of age."



Mary, Willie, Robert, Tad, and Abraham Lincoln in 1861

Lincoln went on to ask whether people might find it silly if he started wearing whiskers. He had never worn them before and wondered if, at age fifty-one, he was too old to start. Yet Grace's letter must have caused him to start thinking about her suggestion. It wasn't long afterward that he began to grow some. Soon he was voted in as the sixteenth president of the United States. He boarded a train in Springfield, Illinois, and headed to Washington, D.C. By that time, he had a full-grown beard.



Lincoln in
February 1861

A Slow Train to Washington



In February 1861, Lincoln traveled from Springfield, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., to be inaugurated on March 4. He made more than ninety stops along the way. His first stop in the state of New York was Westfield.

Grace and Abe Meet

Lincoln's train rolled through several states on its way to the nation's capital. It made many stops along the way, including a stop in Westfield, New York, the town where Grace lived. In those days there was no television, so people were **eager** to get a peek at their newly **elected** president. A large crowd had gathered to see and hear him. In that crowd stood Grace Bedell and her father.

Knowing he was in Grace's hometown, Lincoln decided to talk about his beard. When he finished, he said that if the young lady who wrote the letter was in the crowd, he would like to meet her.

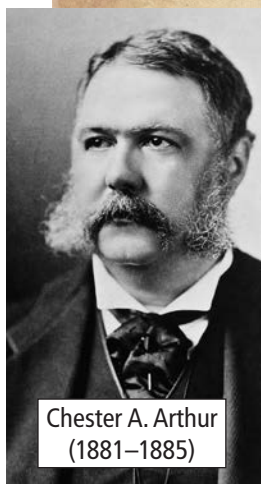


Mr. Bedell, with Grace in hand, struggled through the tight crowd to where Lincoln stood.

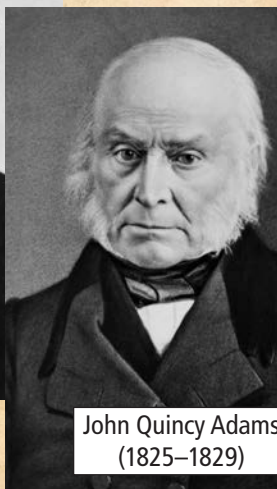
Lincoln climbed down and spoke with Grace. She remembered him saying, "Gracie, look at my whiskers. I have been growing them for you." He gave her a kiss on the cheek. Then, to the sound of cheers, he got back on the train.

A Statue in New York State

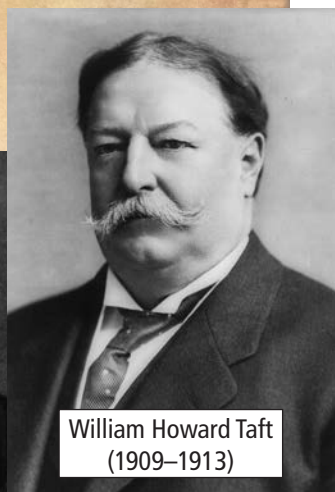
Lincoln was the first president to grow a full beard. None of the fifteen presidents who came before him even had a **mustache**. For the next fifty years, all but two presidents wore **facial** hair.



Chester A. Arthur
(1881–1885)



John Quincy Adams
(1825–1829)



William Howard Taft
(1909–1913)

Mustache or Muttonchops?

Although Lincoln was the first president to have a beard, he was not the first to have facial hair. Several before (and after) him had sideburns. Two even had muttonchops! The most recent president to have any facial hair was Harry Truman (1945–1953). He grew a goatee...but only while he was on vacation.

Fashions come and go, though. The United States hasn't had a president with facial hair since William Howard Taft (1909-1913). He wore a mustache.

As for Grace, she never again saw the president. All these years later, though, you can see Grace. If you ever visit the town of Westfield, New York, be sure to go to Lincoln-Bedell Statue Park. There you will see a statue of President Lincoln greeting Grace Bedell.



Two bronze statues at Lincoln-Bedell Statue Park capture the historic meeting between president-elect Abraham Lincoln and Grace Bedell. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described Grace as "a beautiful girl, with black eyes, who was blushing all over her fair face." The statues were erected in 1999.

Glossary

beard (<i>n.</i>)	hair that grows on the cheeks and chin (p. 7)
clean-shaven (<i>adj.</i>)	having the beard, mustache, or other hair shaved off; having recently shaved (p. 7)
eager (<i>adj.</i>)	excited and interested (p. 12)
elected (<i>adj.</i>)	having been chosen to be a member of government through a voting process (p. 12)
facial (<i>adj.</i>)	of or related to the face (p. 14)
fashions (<i>n.</i>)	popular or current styles or customs of appearance or behavior (p. 15)
letters (<i>n.</i>)	written messages to a person or company (p. 4)
mustache (<i>n.</i>)	hair that grows between the nose and upper lip (p. 14)
necessity (<i>n.</i>)	something that one must have or do (p. 10)
presidents (<i>n.</i>)	leaders of the government in some countries (p. 5)
regret (<i>v.</i>)	to feel sadness or guilt (p. 10)
suggestion (<i>n.</i>)	an idea often used to persuade (p. 6)

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Title page: This is a political campaign button for Abraham Lincoln's first presidential campaign. Hannibal Hamlin, who ran for vice president alongside Lincoln, appears on the opposite side. Photography was a fairly new technology in 1860, but Lincoln relied on it to make himself better known.

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