

# Abraham Lincoln: From Log Cabin to the White House

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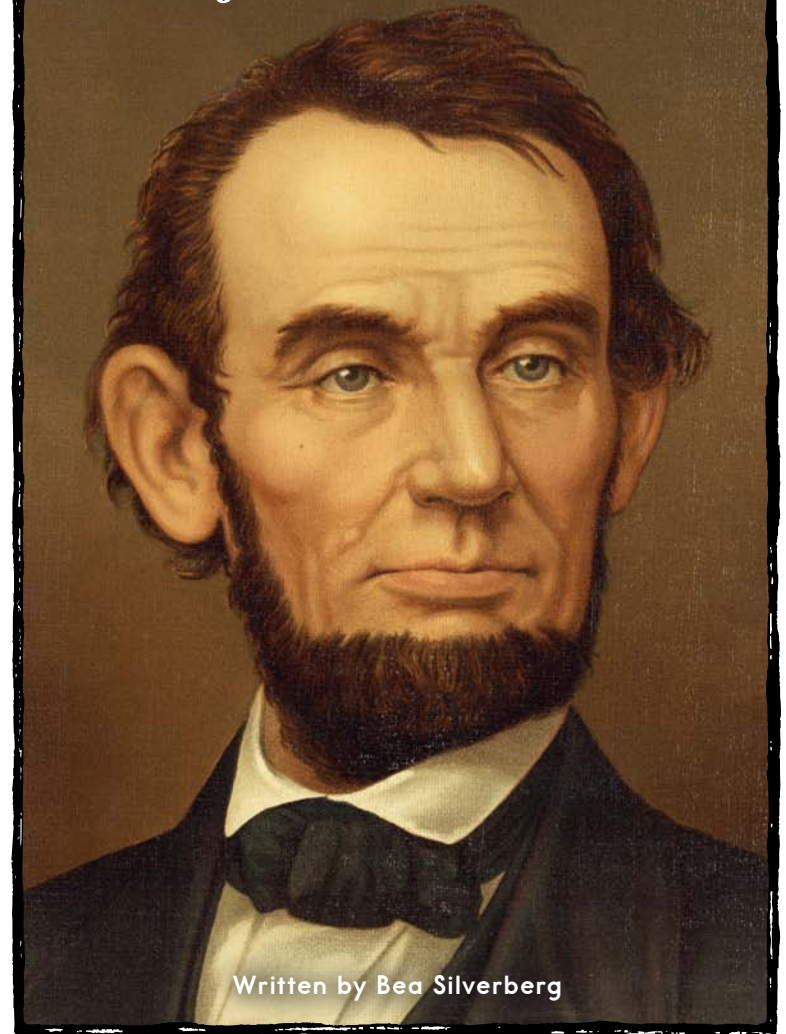
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# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

## From Log Cabin to the White House



Written by Bea Silverberg

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Abraham Lincoln:  
From Log Cabin to the White House  
Level Z Leveled Book  
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#### LEVEL Z

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| Reading Recovery  | N/A |
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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 “education,” 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.



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.



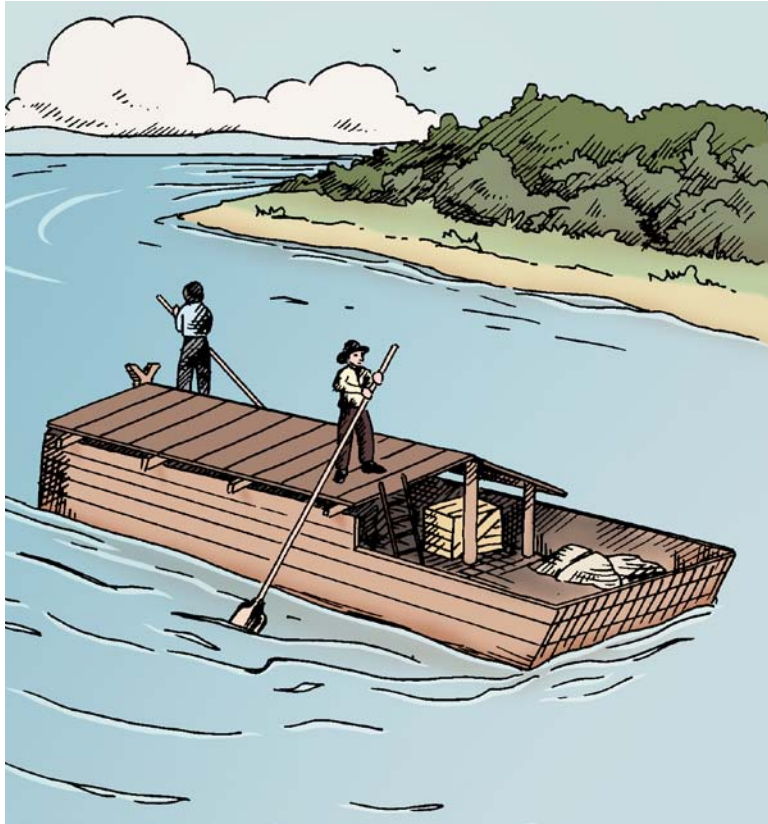
Lincoln became known as a "rail splitter" from his work as a young man.

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.



Although he rarely went to school, Abe was devoted to learning.

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 back woods. They prepared him for adulthood and his political career.



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

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 slave-holding pens and auction blocks to be bought and sold.



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 free 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 free labor.

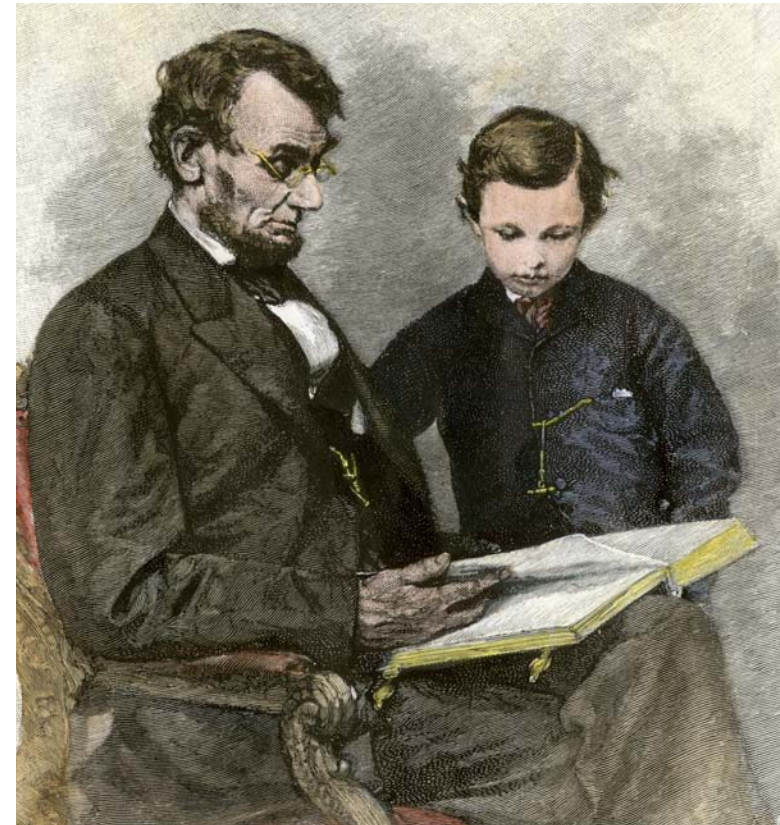
Lincoln opposed slavery, but as an Illinois representative in Washington, he believed that the practice was protected by the state laws in the South. However, he fought the spread of slavery in the western territories.



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.



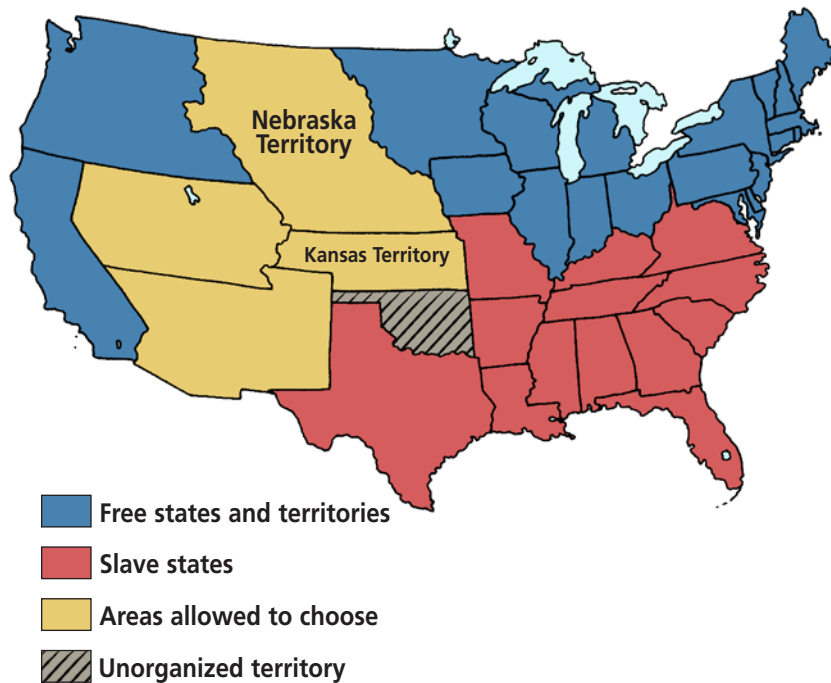
Lincoln with his son Tad, 1864

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.

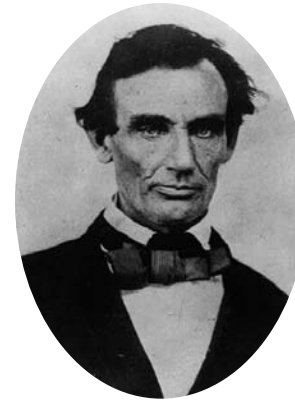


## America Divided

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

Abraham 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

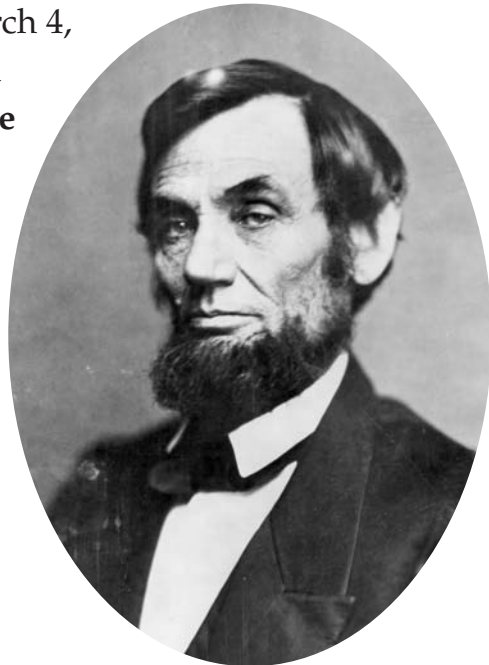
debates, which captured the attention of the country. Lincoln, with great oratorical skill, exclaimed that slavery was causing a national crisis. “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.” Lincoln argued that blacks were 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 first grew a beard after winning the presidency but before moving to Washington. The beard was a suggestion from an 11-year-old girl.



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 Sumpter 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 sits 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. On the war front, the Union lost the second battle of Bull Run, and at Antietam in September 1862, 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.

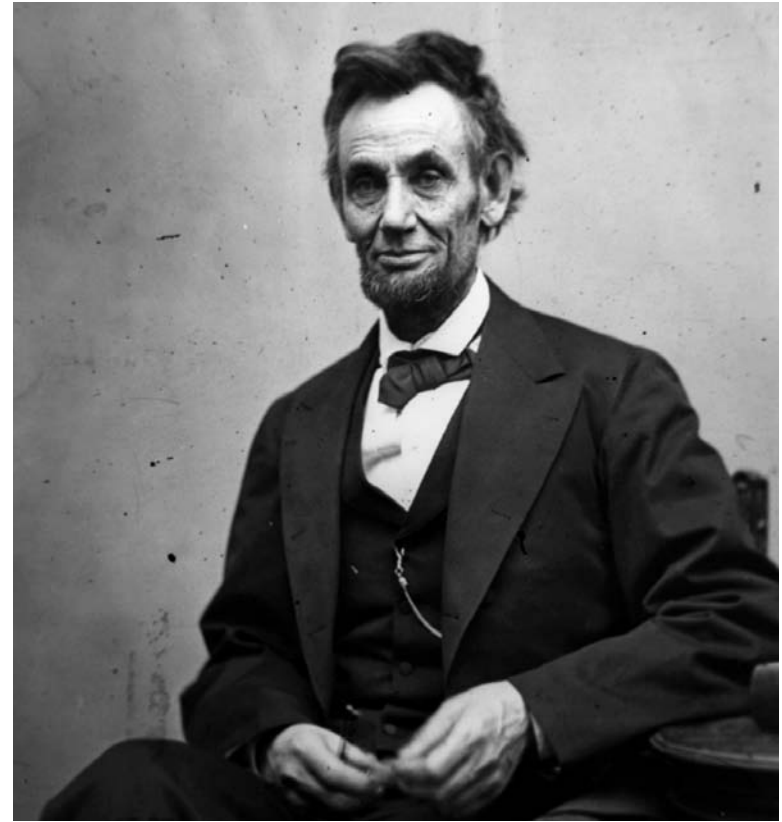


Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry was composed of former slaves and other free black men.



Dead Union soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

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 on both sides, 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."



One of the last photographs taken of Lincoln, February 1865

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 reelected 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.

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 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

## Timeline

- 1809 Abraham Lincoln born on February 12 in Kentucky
- 1818 Abraham's mother, Nancy, dies  
Thomas Lincoln marries Sarah Bush Johnson 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 Sumpter
- 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

## Explore More

### ① At the Library

Ask your librarian to help you find more books about Abraham Lincoln. You may also want to look for books about the Civil War and the end of slavery.

### ② On the Web

- In the address window, type: *www.google.com*
- Then type: *Abraham Lincoln*. Click on “Google Search.”
- Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
- When you want to explore other links, click the “back” arrow on the top left.
- You can also try different searches: *Civil War*, *Emancipation Proclamation*, *Lincoln-Douglas debates*, or *abolition*.

### ③ 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.*

## Glossary

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>bondage</b>      | slavery; capture (p. 13)   |
| <b>civil rights</b> | citizens’ rights, such as voting, based on a nation’s constitution (p. 12) |
| <b>eloquent</b>     | simple, powerful, and elegant in speech or writing (p. 5)                  |
| <b>emancipator</b>  | a person who sets others free (p. 4)                                       |
| <b>engagement</b>   | battle (p. 20)   |
| <b>fell</b>         | cut down (p. 7)  |
| <b>homespun</b>     | humble; from a simple rural background (p. 17)                             |
| <b>homey</b>        | familiar, simple, and humble (p. 7)  |
| <b>inhumanely</b>   | without dignity or kindness (p. 12)  |
| <b>mobilized</b>    | positioned troops and supplies in preparation for war (p. 18)              |
| <b>orator</b>       | a public speaker (p. 10)   |
| <b>secede</b>       | to separate from (p. 17)   |
| <b>solemn</b>       | serious; slightly sad (p. 5)   |