

# LESSON I: BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

GRADE LEVEL 5-8

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Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

## Objectives

- Define “work ethic.”
- Define “self-made man.”
- Identify three characteristics of Lincoln’s beliefs regarding work and success.
- Name at least three jobs Lincoln held in his lifetime.
- Identify John D. Johnston as Lincoln’s step-brother.
- Identify two other members of Lincoln’s family.

## INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln came from a long line of farmers living in a subsistence economy, where families produced all the goods they consumed. They worked at home and made their own food and clothing through the sweat of their own labor. The family—and their work as a team—was the most important component to success. Yet Lincoln came of age during an economic transformation historians call the Market Revolution.

The advent of factory production and improved transportation encouraged families to produce cash crops for sale and to acquire luxury items and mass-produced goods. Rather than wait to inherit the family farm, a young man could seek new opportunities in the cities. This new economic order emphasized initiative, risk and ambition rather than family, tradition or stability. Lincoln clearly embraced the possibilities

this transformation brought with it. He left his family home to find his own way, eventually becoming what historians call a “self-made man.” His philosophy—that any man through his own labors could rise above his condition, was a hallmark of what would later become Whig philosophy; and in a letter to his step-brother denying him a loan, Lincoln spells out his beliefs in no uncertain terms.

In this lesson, students will examine Lincoln’s rise as a “self-made man.” By exploring his early family life, his relationship with his relatives and the types of jobs he held, students will uncover his belief in the individual’s right to pursue economic opportunities through hard work and education.



## Materials

- “BDA Lesson Chart” (in this lesson plan) copied to overhead or onto blackboard.
- Primary documents and images from the “Lincoln Biography Reading Kit” (and on this CD).
  - #1 Lincoln Autobiography (transcription in this lesson plan)
  - #6 Lincoln reading a book
  - #7 Lincoln and the flatboat
  - #8 Lincoln as militia captain
  - #9 Lincoln returning a book
  - #11 Lincoln riding the circuit
- Chart: “Lincoln’s Climb up the Occupational Ladder in Sangamon County” (in this lesson plan).
- Books and resources from the “Lincoln Biography Reading Kit,” the library or online.
- Three letters between Lincoln and John D. Johnston (in this lesson plan). Originals of these letters can be found in the “Lincoln Biography Reading Kit” (#28, #29 and #30).
- Classroom journals or notebooks.



## LESSON 1: BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

### PROCEDURE

1. Ask your students to explain the concept of a work ethic. Ask them, based on what they already know about Lincoln, what they think Lincoln's work ethic was. Document their responses about Lincoln's attitudes towards work and the types of jobs he held on the BDA Chart in the B (Before Lesson) Column.

2. As a class read Lincoln's own account of his upbringing.

- How does Lincoln describe his early life in Kentucky and Indiana?

- Was education a priority for the Lincoln family? For Lincoln?

- How did Lincoln contribute as a family member?

3. Pass out the images depicting Lincoln involved in various occupations during his early life. Ask students what they can infer about Lincoln from these paintings?

- What is Lincoln doing in the painting? Is he having fun or working? Or both?

- How is Lincoln dressed? Does his clothing provide clues about his financial situation or his work ethic?

- Who else is in the image? What kinds of people did Lincoln interact with on a daily basis?

- What do these pictures say about Lincoln? About his character? About his beliefs?

4. Next pass out copies of the chart: "Lincoln's Climb up the Occupational Ladder in Sangamon County." Allow the students some time to study it on their own. Invite students to explain what they

think this chart shows. As a class discuss the chart and what it reveals about Lincoln in relation to the majority of Americans living during the same time period.

- How many types of jobs did Lincoln hold during his life time? In comparing this to the percentages in the right column, is Lincoln's experience normal for the time period?

- What percentage of Americans were farmers in Lincoln's day? What percentage were lawyers or professionals? What does this say about Lincoln?

5. Working in pairs or small groups and using the books and other resources in the *Lincoln Biography Reading Kit* have students research a member of Lincoln's family. Have students write a paragraph describing Lincoln's family member and their relationship and share what they have discovered with their classmates. Students can choose from:

- Thomas Lincoln
- Nancy Hanks Lincoln
- Sarah Bush Lincoln
- John D. Johnston

6. At this point in the lesson, document what students have learned about Lincoln in the D (During Lesson) column of the BDA Chart. Discuss any differences you might find between the two columns.

7. Pass out copies of John D. Johnston's letter, dated December 7, 1848, to Abraham Lincoln. Read the letter as a class. Discuss the following points:

- What does "dunned and

d o d g e d " mean?

- Why is Johnston writing to Lincoln?

- What does Johnston mean by: "Now you think little of this, for you never had the trial." How do you think Lincoln might have reacted to this?

- Why does Johnston bring up his children?

- Do you think Lincoln loaned his brother the money?

8. Pass out copies of Lincoln's reply to Johnston dated December 24, 1848. Read the letter as a class. Discuss the following points:

- Are you surprised Lincoln refused to loan the money? Why or why not?

- Is this the first time he has been asked for help? Did he help in the past?

- What does Lincoln believe to be the cause of Johnston's lack of money?

- How does Lincoln propose that Johnston get the money? Do you think Johnston will agree to his offer? Why or why not? [*Note to teacher: Johnston never did take Lincoln up on his offer to match a dollar for every dollar Johnston earned.*]

9. Pass out the final letter between Lincoln and Johnston. After reading this letter discuss the following.

- Why is Lincoln writing this letter?

- Why does Lincoln think



Johnston's idea of selling land is not a good one?

- What advice does Lincoln give to Johnston?

- What are Lincoln's concerns for his mother?

- Do you think Johnston followed Lincoln's advice? Why or why not?

10. Complete the final column (After Lesson) in the BDA Chart. Discuss the differences or similarities you find in the three columns.

11. Compose a paragraph in your classroom notebook describing Lincoln's work ethic and his rise as a self-made man.

#### Extension Questions:

1. Lincoln was a Whig. What does this mean? What do Whigs believe?

2. How do Lincoln's letters to his step-brother reflect his own Whig philosophy?

3. Lincoln encouraged Johnston to make his own way through hard labor by his own hand. Could Lincoln have advised a slave in the same way? Why or why not?

4. How might these letters shed light on Lincoln's objection to slavery?

# **B**EFORE, **D**URING, AND **A**FTER CHART



TOPIC \_\_\_\_\_

What I know <b>BEFORE</b> the Lesson	What I've learned <b>DURING</b> the Lesson	What I know <b>AFTER</b> the Lesson

## LESSON 1: BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

### ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO JESSE W. FELL, ENCLOSING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

J. W. Fell, Esq Springfield,  
My dear Sir: Dec. 20. 1859

Herewith is a little sketch, as you requested. There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me.

If any thing be made out of it, I wish it to be modest, and not to go beyond the materials. If it were thought necessary to incorporate any thing from any of my speeches, I suppose there would be no objection. Of course it must not appear to have been written by myself. Yours very truly A. LINCOLN

I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. My parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families—second families, perhaps I should say. My mother, who died in my tenth year, was of a family of the name of Hanks, some of whom now reside in Adams, and others in Macon counties, Illinois. My paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, emigrated from Rockingham County, Virginia, to Kentucky, about 1781 or 2, where, a year or two later, he was killed by indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when [where?] he was laboring to open a farm in the forest. His ancestors, who were quakers, went to Virginia from Berks County, Pennsylvania. An effort to identify them with the New-England family of the same name ended in nothing more definite, than a similarity of Christian names in both families, such as Enoch, Levi, Mordecai, Solomon, Abraham, and the like.

My father, at the death of his father, was but six years of age; and he grew up, literally without education. He removed from Kentucky to what is now Spencer county, Indiana, in my eighth year. We reached our new home about the time the State came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond “*readin, writin, and cipherin,*” to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand latin, happened to so-journ in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course when I came of age I did not know much. Still somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.

I was raised to farm work, which I continued till I was twenty two. At twenty one I came to Illinois, and passed the first year in Macon county. Then I got to New-Salem (at that time in Sangamon, now in Menard county, where I remained a year as a sort of Clerk in a store. Then came the Black-Hawk war; and I was elected a Captain of Volunteers—a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since. I went the campaign, was elated, ran for the Legislature the same year (1832) and was beaten—the only time I ever have been beaten by the people. The next, and three succeeding biennial elections, I was elected to the Legislature. I was not a candidate afterwards. During this Legislative period I had studied law, and removed to Springfield to practice it. In 1846 I was once elected to the lower House of Congress. Was not a candidate for re-election. From 1849 to 1854, both inclusive, practiced law more assiduously than ever before. Always a whig in politics, and generally on the whig electoral tickets, making active canvasses. I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again. What I have done since then is pretty well known.

If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing, on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and grey eyes—no other marks or brands recollected. Yours very truly A. LINCOLN

Hon. J. W. Fell.

Source: *Library of Congress*



## LINCOLN'S CLIMB UP THE OCCUPATIONAL LADDER IN SANGAMON COUNTY

Lincoln		Sangamon County, 1840	
OCCUPATION	AGE	OCCUPATION	PERCENT
Lawyer	28-52		
Legislator	25-33	Professions/Engineers	1.9
Surveyor	24-28		
Postmaster	24-27		
Merchant	23-24	Commerce	2.5
Militia captain	23		
Store clerk	22-23		
Miller	22-23	Manufactures/Trades	15.7
Flatboatman	22		
Farmer	7-22	Agriculture	79.9

Source: Winkel, Kenneth J. *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln* (Dallas, 2001): 122.

## LETTER I: JOHN D. JOHNSTON TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN

December 7, 1848  
Coles County, IL

Dear Brother Lincoln:

I owe seventy or eighty dollars and I cannot pay, as I have neither cash nor property. I am dunned and dodged to death by creditors. So I am most tired of living, and I would almost swap my place in Heaven for that much money.

Now you think little of this, for you never had the trial, but Abe, I would rather live on bread and water than to have men always dunning me. I will pay you interest on money you send me. I could raise the money to repay you in three years. I could raise a calf and a pig of my own, for now my sons can do nearly as much work in a crop as a man.

I candidly would rather never own a foot of land than to not pay my debts, nor leave any debts to my children. Indeed, I would rather give possession now than tot live here and have men a watching me to see if I had something the law would take.

Your brother,  
John D. Johnston

Source: *Huntington Library*



## LESSON 1: BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

### LETTER 2: ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO JOHN D. JOHNSTON

December 24, 1848  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Johnston:

Your request for eighty dollars, I do not think it best, to comply with now. At the various times when I have helped you a little, you have said to me “We can get along very well now” but in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again.

Now this can only happen by some defect in your conduct. What that defect is I think I know. You are not lazy, and still you are an idler. I doubt whether since I saw you, you have done a good whole day’s work in any one day. You do not very much dislike to work; and still you do not work much, merely because it does not seem to you that you could get much for it.

This habit of uselessly wasting time, is the whole difficulty; and it is vastly important to you, and still more so to your children that you should break this habit. It is more important to them, because they have longer to live, and can keep out of an idle habit before they are in it; easier than they can get out after they are in.

You are now in need of some ready money; and what I propose is, that you shall go to work, “tooth and nails” for some body who will give you money [for] it. Let father and your boys take charge of things at home—prepare for a crop, and make the crop; and you go to work for the best money wages, or in discharge of any debt you owe, that you can get. And to secure you a fair reward for your labor, I now promise you, that for every dollar you will, between this and the first of next May, get for your own labor, either in money, or in your own indebtedness, I will then give you one other dollar. By this, if you hire yourself at ten dolla[rs] a month, from me you will get ten more, making twenty dollars a month for your work.

In this, I do not mean you shall go off to St. Louis, or the lead mines, or the gold mines, in Calif[ornia,] but I [mean for you to go at it for the best wages you] can get close to home [in] Coles county. Now if you will do this, you will soon be out of debt, and what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again. But if I should now clear you out, next year you will be just as deep in as ever.

You say you would almost give your place in Heaven for \$70 or \$80. Then you value your place in Heaven very cheaply for I am sure you can with the offer I make you get the seventy or eighty dollars for four or five months work. You say if I furnish you the money you will deed me the land, and, if you dont pay the money back, you will deliver possession. Nonsense! If you cant now live with the land, how will you then live without it?

You have always been [kind] to me, and I do not now mean to be unkind to you. On the contrary, if you will but follow my advice, you will find it worth more than eight times eighty dollars to you.

Affectionately Your brother

A. Lincoln

*Source: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum*





## LETTER 3: ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO JOHN D. JOHNSON

November 4, 1851  
Shelbyville, Illinois

Dear Brother:

When I came into Charleston day-before yesterday I learned that you are anxious to sell the land where you live, and move to Missouri. I have been thinking of this ever since; and can not but think such a notion is utterly foolish.

What can you do in Missouri, better than here? Is the land any richer? Can you there, any more than here, raise corn, & wheat & oats, without work? Will any body there, any more than here, do your work for you? If you intend to go to work, there is no better place than right where you are; if you do not intend to go to work, you can not get along any where. Squirring & crawling about from place to place can do no good.

You have raised no crop this year, and what you really want is to sell the land, get the money and spend it—part with the land you have, and my life upon it, you will never after, own a spot big enough to bury you in. Half you will get for the land, you spend in moving to Missouri, and the other half you will eat and drink, and wear out, & no foot of land will be bought.

Now I feel it is my duty to have no hand in such a piece of foolery. I feel that it is so even on your own account; and particularly on Mother's account. The Eastern forty acres I intend to keep for Mother while she lives—if you will not cultivate it; it will rent for enough to support her—at least it will rent for something. Her Dower in the other two forties, she can let you have, and no thanks to [me].

Now do not misunderstand this letter. I do not write it in any unkindness. I write it in order, if possible, to get you to face the truth—which truth is, you are destitute because you have idled away all your time. Your thousand pretences for not getting along better, are all non-sense—they deceive no body but yourself. Go to work is the only cure for your case.

A. Lincoln

*Source: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*

