

Lincoln's Upbringing Interview Thread Transcript

David Reynolds

Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin in Kentucky on property that his father had bought. And later on, Lincoln said that we had to leave Kentucky when Lincoln was quite young because of two reasons, because of real estate and slavery. Now, the real estate situation had to do with this. Kentucky had once been an extension of Virginia. And what happened is a lot of Eastern buyers bought up a lot of land out in what later became Kentucky. And they claimed ownership. They would buy 10,000 acres at a time, that kind of thing. And so, but then later explorers and settlers moved to Kentucky and purchased this land and it began a process of what was called shingling. So that technically the original owner owned the land and yet these people bought the property. It became, and sometimes properties were shingled several times where other buyers would come in and buy it. But the initial purchaser was completely left out and it became a kind of quicksand situation of real estate. And finally, Thomas Lincoln – even though he had accumulated a couple of hundred acres of land by the end, because they moved a couple of times within Kentucky – ended up indebted, technically indebted, to the original owner of the land. And he had a lien on the land and he literally had to sort of escape.

The same thing happened to Daniel Boone, who was a frontiersman. He moved there and he was living on this so-called shingled land. And he eventually had to move out of state, too. So, that was one.

Even though Thomas Lincoln never went on record as far as we know on the slavery issue, we do know that he was part of a Baptist sort of sect that broke off from the regular Baptist church because this small sect was anti-slavery. The preachers were emancipationists.

And so young Abraham Lincoln was raised in a basically emancipationist, abolitionist household. And his father who has gotten frankly kind of a bad rap from historians and biographers. And in part, because he was fundamentally illiterate or only basically literate, he was not a book reader and so forth. And people say that he sort of enslaved the young Abe by making him work for the family and everything. But the fact is, is that frontier families – that's what you did, particularly the male children, worked for the family until they were 21. And school was not that important at that point. And the father was actually known, to people who actually knew him, as an upstanding moral person. A good person who kind of took life easy, was not materialistic.

I do believe that he was fundamentally anti-slavery. And when Lincoln, who said, "I can never recall a

moment in my entire life when I did not hate slavery," was not opposed to slavery. And when he looked back on childhood, he said, "I had a joyous, happy childhood in spite of our pinched circumstances." No, they never became wealthy. They kind of had a subsistence lifestyle, but if you were living on the frontier back then even during the Depression of 1819, even if the economy was sinking, you could live fairly well. If you were living off the land.

If you had a subsistence lifestyle, you could survive. You could live off the land. You grew your own vegetables and made your own food and stored it and everything. And through barter, you didn't even always need money through barter. You could trade some corn for the cloth and that kind of thing. So we think of Lincoln from being this kind of squalid poverty-stricken background, but Lincoln didn't really feel it that way. He basically looked back with happiness on his childhood.

There was kind of a difference between finances and class because what was happening in the East Coast, where they did not live, there was increasing capitalism. And yes, America was increasingly defined by success, by material accumulation. But if you lived on the frontier or on the farm, you weren't quite as conscious of that as you were if you were engaged in the whole kind of capitalist rat race. You were much more self-sufficient.

And it's kind of funny that Henry David Thoreau, he was raised in kind of a middle-class, he went to Harvard, raised in a middle-class village. And he felt he had to move to a single room log cabin to confront to engage in what he called the wild, contact with the wild and everything. Lincoln had contact with the wild from during most of his childhood. He had done his Thoreau bit already. He had lived in the single room log cabin and he was very accustomed to that. And he was naturally anti-materialistic. Lincoln was never, he was very ambitious, but he was never into things, accumulating things or status symbols or something material status symbols, or something like that.

He had kind of a natural connection, I think, with the earth. He was almost like Henry David Thoreau without having to train for it, so to speak.

James Oakes

We sometimes think of the argument against slavery as a kind of economic abstract argument, right? That free labor is economically superior to slave labor, right? It's as opposed to a moral argument. But if you listen to the way Lincoln made that economic argument, he phrased it in biblical terms, right? And the right to the fruits of his

labor, the slave is my equal, and the equal of any living man, right?

He says it about women and the right to the fruits of her labor. The Black woman is my equal and the equal of any living man, right? It applied to men and women. It applied to Blacks and whites. The right to the fruits of your labor is not simply an economic argument for the superiority of free labor. It's a moral conviction, right? And it derives, again, from the principles expounded in the Declaration of Independence, right? The third of the three rights. It's the right to life, the right to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness. Which included the right to the fruits of your labor.

It's very hard to say whether Lincoln felt a personal stake in that. I should tell you that it's controversial among scholars whether Lincoln actually ever said, "I was a slave," because it came as a recollection many years after, right? And, in certain ways, it's incompatible with his notion of what free labor is all about. That is, he grew up, he knew he was going to be freed when he was 21 years of age. He knew that that's the way that the free labor system worked. So I'm not entirely sure what the personal experience was.

His real personal experience was the experience of upward mobility. Which he believed slave systems thwarted, right? So he said, famously, that, "The normal expectation in a free labor system is that you start your life as a farm laborer, you grow up on a farm, you grow up on a farm, you go to work for someone else, you save enough to buy a farmer of your own, and eventually you will be sufficiently prosperous if you're hardworking and industrious and do what you're supposed to do, you will eventually end up hiring farm laborers of your own." And his experience was that, as a young man, still in his father's household, he was sent to work for others. And the fruits of his labor became his father's.

And he remembered the first time someone paid him for his own labor and that it wasn't his own money. It's very interesting. There's a very similar story that Frederick Douglass tells about having escaped from slavery, arriving in New England, arriving and getting his first job. And the first time he gets paid and realizing this was the fruits of his own labor, finally being paid, right?

So the experience of a slave coming into freedom and being paid and the experience of a young man in his father's household being paid and having to give it to his father, is in that sense, they're parallel kinds of stories, except that the son knows that when he reaches the age of 21, he's on his own and the fruits of his labor will be his own.

Sean Wilentz

Lincoln comes out of a part of Kentucky where the Baptist Church was actually very strong, and it was an anti-slavery Baptist Church. People forget, it was probably

more anti-slavery, organized anti-slavery, in the border states at the time that Lincoln was a young man, 1810, 1820, than there was in the North. And the Methodists, the Baptists in particular had a very strong anti-slavery animus. That was all going to go. That was all going to disappear by the time he got to the 1840s and 50s. But earlier on in the 19th century, it was pretty strong.

Indeed, many of the migrants who start off in the border states like Kentucky, who end up in Illinois, Indiana, Illinois, were relatively, I don't want to say poor, but they were not rich, middle-class? That's not the right word. They were farmers who wanted to get away from slavery as much as anything else. Now, they just thought that it was a disgusting institution and they didn't want to be living amidst it. They also didn't like the fact that there were slaveholders who were running the show. They just wanted to get away from all of that. And Lincoln's family was like that. So they ended up in Indiana and then in Illinois.

Does it take? Abraham Lincoln is not a Baptist. Abraham Lincoln is sort of something of a free-thinker, actually, and this is part of his growth, his evolution. As a young man, he's reading Thomas Paine and people like that. And he never becomes a conventional Christian actually, despite the fact that many have tried to make him into such a thing, despite the fact that he mobilizes religious speech and particularly King James Bible, as effectively as anybody in American history has. Despite all of that, and he went to church, but he was never a particularly believing Christian. So he didn't buy the Baptist part of all of that. But I think that when he said that he was naturally anti-slavery, I think that that's part of it and it goes all the way back to his youth in Kentucky, amidst the anti-slavery Baptists.

There are many stories of Lincoln seeing coffles of slaves on his trips down the Mississippi as a river boatman and so forth, and they're true, but I don't think there was a moment where the scales suddenly fell from Abraham Lincoln's eyes, where he was one thing and then all of a sudden he discovered that slavery was a terrible thing. And that's what I think he meant by all of that. I don't think he ever had an idea that slavery was an institution or a human relation or a form of oppression that he could abide, let alone something that he could support. So that's what I think happened. He didn't go through a pro-slavery or indifference to slavery then suddenly become anti-slavery. I think it was there from the beginning.

John Stauffer

So, Lincoln's rough and tumble background was important because it helped him, in essence, become a leader. He grew up in backwoods. He had less than a year of formal education. He learned to read and write by reading the same five, six books. He was an obsessive reader and he was also blessed with being very tall, big and strong at a time in which fighting was a pastime and a kind of art

form. And he needed to know how to defend himself. So, he was very big, very strong. In fact, both Douglass and Lincoln, in essence, defined a fight as a turning point in their careers, in which they defeated an enemy in physical combat. For Douglass it was the sadistic slave owner Edward Covey. For Lincoln it was Jack Armstrong.

Lincoln grew up in these backwoods communities in which fighting was an art form. It was one of the few forms of entertainment, and it could be brutal. Lincoln's strength, his height benefited him greatly as it did Douglass. Lincoln was 6'4" in his bare feet, as he would later say. And the average height of men at that time was about 5'6". So, that gives you a sense of how much Lincoln towered over the average man. Douglass was roughly 6'1" or so. So, both were very big, strong men and that benefited them. So, to be a leader, one needed to be able, especially in the communities in which they lived, and Douglass as an African American, you had to be able to defend yourself, not just with the words, but, when it came down to it, with your muscles.

Lincoln was immensely curious. He fell in love with reading, and it was the age before common schools, and he essentially recognized the power that literacy provided. He read continually, in fact his father at times beat him when he was supposed to be farming and he wanted to read. It was one of the ways in which one could rise up. And we don't know whether it was this natural or innate inclination for reading and for literacy, but the fact is that in my view, Lincoln was, as a nonfiction writer, one of the best nonfiction writers in the United States by the time he was a politician and adult. He had the capacity to, as a political writer, to write some immensely powerful prose. He had a sense of humor, which is important, was very good. He's the kind of writer who still surprises people, and that's hard to do. And, let's face it, Lincoln grew up, it was the golden age of elocution, in which speaking and writing were one of the few forms of entertainment, especially public speaking. And so Lincoln cut his teeth on becoming an orator. It was that era before the rise of formal sports and other activities in which you could become a public person. So, if you were ambitious, if you wanted to become a leader, it was crucially important to master language and to be a good public speaker and writer.

How is it that Lincoln does not become coarsened, given the brutal rough environment and distant father that he had? I think one reason is, it's one of the virtues of reading, of literacy. Part of the power of reading a book, or listening to a story, is the capacity to empathize. To empathize with the plight of other people. Even someone whom you might perceive to be an enemy, to be able to put yourself in the position, to imagine yourself in the position of someone else. To imagine why someone else might think that they feel threatened by you actually helps to disarm the desire for revenge or the desire for not wanting to build friends and a community.

So, I could go on. I think that's one reason. Another reason was both his mother and stepmother really recognized Lincoln's passion for reading and they encouraged it, even though, at this time, his father was the leader, so to speak, of the household. But they cultivated Lincoln's passion for books.

I think the melancholy that he suffered and that plagued him on and off did serve as an important generative source to be able to imagine a better different world, to be able to reconcile differences with people who had been his enemy. And you see that both then and now there are numerous instances of melancholy being a catalyst for generation or regeneration. And that's actually now recognized in medical literature. So, it's not just a wild fantasy. That's now been documented and researched.