



Chapter 9 ~Thoughts on Slavery

*"You know I dislike slavery; and you fully  
admit the abstract wrong of it." --*

*From the August 24, 1855  
Letter to Joshua Speed*

## Chapter 9 Thoughts on Slavery

"You know I dislike slavery; and you fully admit the abstract wrong of it." --From the August 24, 1855 Letter to Joshua Speed



*Born a Southerner, Lincoln had grown up with slavery. In Indiana and later in Illinois he had been surrounded by Southerners who considered slaves their property. Nevertheless, the thought of one man being owned by another was abhorrent to him. During his first term in the Illinois Legislature he opposed a resolution, saying "the institution of slavery is founded on... injustice." Yet he did not join the growing abolitionist movement, for he feared that should the Abolitionists prevail it would split the Union.*

*When Lincoln moved to Springfield, the new capital of Illinois, he was 28 years old, the law partner of the aristocratic John Stuart, and he had gained entree to the highest social circles--quite a rise for the "backwoods boy" who had left the forests just seven years earlier. Before long he was engaged to Mary Todd, a popular Southern belle with snapping brown eyes. Her ready wit and keen mind attracted Abe but their courtship was marked by great indecision on*

his part. Finally, after numerous break-ups and reconciliations they were married in 1842 and established their first home in the Globe Tavern in Springfield, where they lived until after the birth of their first son, Robert Todd. After John Stuart was elected to Congress Lincoln dissolved their partnership and formed another with Stephen T. Logon. Soon after that he opened his own law office and took on William Herndon (a young lawyer ten years younger than Abe) as junior partner, an association that lasted the rest of his life. Billy Herndon became Abe's most loyal friend and confidant and later wrote a definitive biography of the great statesman.

Life was pleasant enough for the Lincolns. They had bought the home (at the corner of Jackson and 8th Streets in Springfield) which was henceforth to be the family's homestead and which stands today as a state Museum and another son, Edward Baker, had been born. But the dark meanings and drifts of the troubled times were showing in Abe's "long gloomy face and cavernous eyes."

With his election to Congress in 1847 Lincoln entered the national scene. The two great issues facing the legislators in Washington were slavery and the War with Mexico. Abe's position on slavery was well known and presumably shared by at least a majority of the Illinois voters, but his stand against the War made him unpopular with his constituents and he knew before the end of the term that he had forfeited any chance of re-election.

He returned to Springfield and resumed his law practice. By now his reputation as an honest, clever, capable, kindly lawyer was drawing clients from all over the state and once every few months he, a judge and several other lawyers held court in the neighboring counties--called "riding the circuit."

Back in 1820 it had seemed that the tormenting question of the spread of slavery had been pretty well settled through the Missouri Compromise, whereby the state of Maine was admitted as a free state and to maintain the balance

*Missouri came in as a slave state. At the same time it was agreed that slavery should never be allowed in any of the territories lying north of Missouri's southern boundary.*

*But the troublesome issue was appearing again. Two new territories--Kansas and Nebraska--were opening up for settlement. They were both north of the line described in the Compromise. Yet Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois had sponsored a bill setting aside the Missouri Compromise. "Let both the Northerners and the Southerners with their slaves settle in Kansas and Nebraska, and as soon as they are ready for state government let them decide whether their states shall be slave or free," he urged. Douglas called his stand "popular sovereignty." The passage of the bill infuriated Lincoln. He could think of nothing else. Riding the circuit he lamented Congress' mistake, "Free men and slaveholders can't live side by side. They'll be at each other's throats before you know it. And when trouble starts between them there will be trouble between the North and the South... It doesn't belong in a free country which was established for a free people."*

*Slowly a resolution was taking shape in his mind, which would change his life and the future of the country. That year (1855) he ran for the Senate on the Whig ticket and perhaps, providentially, he was defeated, for although the Whigs were willing to have him speak against the spread of slavery, they themselves were not willing to take a firm stand against it.*

*Meanwhile, a new political party was forming in the North. They called themselves Republicans (a name Thomas Jefferson had used) and they flatly demanded that the extension of slavery in the territories be halted. Lincoln joined the party and spoke out at their first convention. Some said he had breathed the breath of life into the newborn party with his stirring speech against slavery. He was proposed for vice-president and received a fair showing of*

votes, but this was not quite his moment. It seemed as though he was waiting. "And while he waited, something in him began to grow, some secret, hidden stir of spirit."

The whole issue of slavery was growing as well. An amazing novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (by Harriet Beecher Stowe), had focused attention on the plight of the Negro in bondage on southern plantation, and a Supreme Court decision--*Dred Scott vs. the U. S.*--which had ruled that slaves were property under constitutional law, had incited the indignation of Northerners.

In 1858 the Republicans nominated Lincoln for the U. S. Senate, and in his acceptance speech he made his views very clear: "A house divided against itself cannot stand.... This government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free... I do not expect the Union to be dissolved--I do not expect the house to fall--but I do expect if will cease to be divided."

The Democrats had nominated Stephen A. Douglas, thereby supporting "popular sovereignty." Lincoln listened to one of Douglas' campaign speeches and felt the time had come to answer. He challenged his opponent to a series of debates, to be held throughout the state. The popularity of the men and the issues drew huge crowds to the flag-decked towns. People were almost as fascinated by the candidates' physical differences as they were by their opposing theories of government. Douglas, a short, thickset man, elegantly dressed and self-assured, spoke with flowery oratory in a deep mellifluous voice; Lincoln, gaunt and towering, his black coat wrinkled, his high tenor voice floating above the din of the crowd, spoke in simple language of the people. Douglas hammered at his stand that each state should be allowed to decide whether or not to permit slavery within its borders, while Lincoln cried out against the spread of slavery.

"Old Abe," as he was affectionately known, was not to be the senator from Illinois, but the debates had brought him into the public eye as an implacable foe

*of slavery and had put him in line for the presidency. Tension continued to mount between the North and the South and in 1859 the nation was shocked when a fanatical Abolitionist, John Brown, led a raid on a government arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to start a slave insurrection. Brown was captured and hanged and became a martyr to the Abolitionists' cause. They Sang: "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, His soul goes marching on." Melody - Battle Hymn of the Republic*

|: John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, :|  
John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,  
But his soul goes marching on.

*Chorus:*

|: Glory, glory, hallelujah, :|  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
His soul goes marching on.

|: He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord, :|  
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,  
His soul goes marching on.

*Chorus:*

|: John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back, :|  
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,  
His soul goes marching on.

*Chorus:*

|: John Brown died that the slaves might be free, :|  
John Brown died that the slaves might be free,  
His soul goes marching on.

*Chorus:*

|: The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down, :|  
The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down,  
His soul goes marching on.

*Chorus:*



## Activity 9.1 ~ Thoughts on Slavery Activity

Use of this activity and the materials are at the discretion of the classroom teacher.

“Who Freed the Slaves??”

*"At the precise moment [Lincoln] told Greeley that he would save the Union without freeing any slaves, he had a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in his desk. That always astonishes me. It always makes you then go back and think about that letter."*

— Louis Masur

Using the Annenberg/CPB Learner.Org Primary Sources: Workshops in American History – “Concerning Emancipation” view the lecture as a whole class and then complete as much of the activities about “What Did Lincoln Believe?” considering his beliefs and political opinions.

This is a graduate level course, yet it is my belief that the questions and some of the readings and reflections are appropriate for middle school students when they are unaware of the complexity of the material and they will accept the challenge and try to do their best.

The questions are related to specific primary documents held on the activity page related to slavery. The Lincoln – Douglas Debates, 1862 Appeal to Border State Representatives for Compensated Emancipation, Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 and final copy in January 1863. Images related to the reading are included.

<http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/primarysources/emancipation/activitiesoi.html>