

Indiana in Lincoln's Time



Lesson Plan

Text, Activities and Resources

Grades 3-8

Image above from the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum

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LINCOLN'S LIFE IN INDIANA

A study of the life of Lincoln's family in Indiana reveals their story was similar to those of other pioneer settlers in the state. Pioneers came to Indiana for a new start where land was cheap, plentiful, and rich for raising crops and animals. These pioneers tamed the wilderness and began to shape the state of Indiana. The story of the Lincolns is a good example to use when teaching about the hardships and triumphs of Indiana settlers.

THE STORY OF THE LINCOLNS

The Journey to Indiana

In 1816, Indiana was a new state, forged out of the Western frontier of the United States. The land, abundant with animal and plant life, attracted men and families daring enough to make the journey and create a home in the dense forests. The Lincoln family of Knob Creek, Kentucky, was one family willing to take that risk.

Unable to deal with disputes over land boundaries and disagreeing with Kentucky's pro-slavery stance, Thomas Lincoln decided to leave in the early fall of 1816 and seek a new home for his family in southern Indiana. Like many new settlers, Thomas faced this challenge by first searching for land he liked, building a temporary home (which gave Thomas first claim to the land), and then returning to prepare his family for the journey.

In November 1816, the Lincolns packed their few belongings and traveled north to Indiana. Thomas traveled with his wife, Nancy, their daughter, Sarah (age 9), and son, Abraham (age 7). Upon reaching the Ohio River, the Lincolns loaded their goods onto a ferry boat, losing some of their belongings during the crossing. Their journey got even harder once they reached the other side. The Lincolns now had to traverse dense forests where no road led in the direction they needed to go. Thomas and Abraham cut down brush while Sarah and Nancy led the wagon. The Lincolns arrived at their new home near Pigeon Creek, now in Spencer County, in mid-December 1816.

Now the Lincolns had to prepare for the long winter ahead. Upon his first visit to the site, Thomas had built a half-faced cabin (a cabin missing one wall). A large fire was lit in the opening and was continuously stoked so that the family would not freeze to death during the long winter. This served as their home until they could build a more durable shelter. Wasting no time, Thomas worked through the winter to build the family a cabin. Sarah and Abraham helped by chinking the open spaces between the logs with splintered wood and clay. By early 1817, Thomas had finished the cabin, and the family moved in.

Beginning a New Life in Indiana

Now that a home was finished, it was time to start focusing on planting crops. It was important to do this as soon as the weather allowed so the Lincolns would have the food they needed to survive. In the meantime, Abraham and Thomas continued to fell the dense trees around them. Felling, or cutting trees, that were 18 inches or smaller was the first major task. Then, Abraham and Thomas stacked the felled trees around the larger ones and set them on fire to bring the larger trees down. The crops the Lincolns relied upon were corn, wheat, flax, tobacco, and cotton. However, the Lincolns also raised a vegetable and herb garden for cooking and medicinal purposes.

Life went well for the Lincolns until Nancy became ill with milk sickness in 1818. Milk sickness develops when a person drinks milk from cows that have eaten the toxic plant white snakeroot. The disease spread through the Little Pigeon Creek community, and it was not long before it affected the Lincolns. Nancy died on October 5, 1818, and was buried near the log cabin. She had greatly encouraged young Abraham's love of education, and her death affected him greatly.

The family survived despite losing Nancy. Food and water were plentiful around Pigeon Creek, and their cabin was sufficient for them to survive the often horrible winters. At age 11, Sarah assumed the role of the family's head female, something that happened often in families who chose life in the wilderness.

A New Arrival

In November 1819, Thomas Lincoln decided his children had been without a mother long enough. He set off for Elizabethtown, Kentucky, a former home, and married Sarah Bush Johnston. Sarah was already the mother of three children: Matilda, John and Elizabeth. Abraham and Sarah Lincoln welcomed their new mother, brother and sisters with open arms and were happy to have company in the sometimes lonely wilderness.

Life in Little Pigeon Creek

Soon after the Lincolns started their new life in Little Pigeon Creek, other settlers, many from Kentucky, followed. As in any growing community, there were mills, a mercantile store, a church, and even several schools. It became common to see one's neighbors weekly if not on a daily basis. The Lincolns were comforted by the thought that they could rely on their neighbors to help them through troubled times.

It was not uncommon for the Lincolns to see travelers. One road, which passed along the Lincoln's property, was often busy with travel. Abraham made a habit of greeting travelers and asking what news they had of the world beyond Little Pigeon Creek. Abraham enjoyed this immensely, as he often wished he could travel.

The Lincolns were members of the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church. Thomas Lincoln helped build the church meetinghouse, which became an integral part of the community. The Lincolns never missed a Sunday and, as was the tradition, did not work on the Sabbath.

Abraham and his sister Sarah attended school on several occasions. The family had to pay for them to attend. In all, Lincoln received about one year of education, never attending for longer than a few months at a time. His education was the best one could get on the frontier. Teachers required students to learn out loud, which often meant repeating what the instructor had said or written. The main subjects taught were simple arithmetic, reading, and writing. Later in life, before becoming president, Lincoln wrote of his education in Indiana: "If a straggler supposed to understand Latin [sic.], happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education*."


Abraham was not satisfied with frontier schooling and worked to educate himself further in reading, vocabulary, history and speech. He loved reading and borrowed books from Little Pigeon Creek neighbors whenever possible. It was not uncommon for Abraham to read books more than twice, memorizing passages that impressed him. He also loved adventure stories. Some of his favorites were *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Sinbad the Sailor*. Abraham also read periodicals when he could find them, to get the news of the state and beyond.

Abraham received his first impressions of politics while living in Little Pigeon Creek. It was not uncommon for locals to come to the Lincoln cabin to discuss elections and local issues. Abraham was known for giving impromptu speeches to help develop and show off his vocabulary and speech skills. He also traveled to local courthouses to hear cases, gaining an introduction to law.

On a pioneer farm, everyone in the family pitched in to keep things working and the family fed. Physical work occupied pioneers from dawn to dusk. We still tell tales of Abraham Lincoln's strength, but he often let his love of reading get in the way of work. As a result, he gained a reputation for being lazy. When Lincoln did work, he often accomplished more in an average day than other men in his community. But by age 16, he knew he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps and become a carpenter, and he began taking jobs away from home.

Lincoln's first job was to cut and load wood for steamer ships on the Anderson River in Troy, Indiana. Lincoln enjoyed the chance to meet strangers traveling through the state, and this became another place he could hear about news and current events. In 1828, Lincoln was hired by mercantile store owner James Gentry to help his son Allen build a boat and deliver produce to New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. On this trip, Abraham witnessed a slave auction, his first experience with the severity of slavery in the United States.

In 1828, Abraham lost his sister Sarah, who had married Aaron Grigsby, a Little Pigeon Creek neighbor, in 1826. She died of complications while giving birth, and the baby did not survive either; both were common realities on the frontier. Sarah's death greatly troubled Abraham. Now the frontier had claimed his mother and sister .



Eventually, the Lincoln family decided to move on from Little Pigeon Creek, attracted by the promise of good farming in the new state of Illinois. Abraham followed his family there in 1830 even though he was legally an adult. From there, he grew to become a prominent lawyer and politician.

It is easy to see how Lincoln's experiences in Indiana helped to shape the great man he was to become. Unsatisfied with the life of a simple frontier farmer, Lincoln challenged himself to learn what lay beyond the community in which he lived. He did not forget the lessons he learned in the Hoosier state. Shortly after winning the presidency, Lincoln was quoted as saying, "You all know, for you all have been boys, how these early impressions last longer than any others**." Indiana gave birth to a thoughtful, compassionate, and witty man who today is one of the most celebrated figures in American history.

Not many Hoosiers who called early Indiana home became great national leaders like Lincoln. However, their experiences on the frontier were similar. The decision to move to the wilderness was not one to be taken lightly. It was hard work to begin a new life where there was no home or community waiting.

*Doug Wilson. *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*. Vintage Books. New York, New York, 1998.

**Francis Marion VanNutter. *Lincoln's Boyhood*. Public Affairs Press. Washington, D.C.: 1963.

LINCOLN'S BOYHOOD

MATERIALS: PBS Documentary, *Young Lincoln* video found here: <https://www.pbs.org/video/wfyi-education-programs-young-lincoln/>

OBJECTIVE: Students will preview Lincoln's life in Indiana.

ACTIVITY: This video is a great way to preview Lincoln's life in Indiana. Feel free to use this as a beginning activity before progressing to the other resources.

SURVEYING AND TOWNSHIPS

MATERIALS: Blank Paper, Gunter's chain image (found online), stakes and rope and/or masking tape

OBJECTIVE: Students will learn how townships were planned in Indiana by studying the township where the Lincolns lived.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Dividing the Land

Indiana was part of the early frontier of the United States, a country that was still fairly young. After the American Revolution, as part of Britain's surrender in the Treaty of Paris (1783), the United States gained all the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. In one day, the size of the United States doubled.

This exciting opportunity for the United States created problems. The government had to decide how to divide the land then called the Old Northwest (renamed the Northwest Territory in 1787 after the adoption of the Northwest Ordinance), consisting of the present-day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota.

Up until the 1780s, many land owners relied on natural markers such as trees, rocks, and water sources, to determine land boundaries. As a result, many land owners became embroiled in land disputes, mostly because these natural markers could be removed. Also, land owners could draw their own boundaries, creating maps that were hard to read.

To solve this problem, Thomas Jefferson advocated for the creation of a grid system that made it easier for land to be surveyed before purchase and which would let land owners make more concrete boundary claims. Jefferson's grid system was adopted in the Ordinance of 1785. The state of Indiana was surveyed using this grid system and divided into townships.

The federal government named surveyors to survey different regions of the territory. It was hard, dangerous, and often lonely work. Once the survey was done, land offices were created to begin the sale and distribution of land tracts. The land offices in Indiana were located in Vincennes (1804), Jeffersonville (1807), Brookeville (1819; transferred to Indianapolis in 1825), Terre Haute (1819; transferred to Crawfordsville in 1828), Fort Wayne (1822), and LaPorte (1833; transferred to Winamac in 1839). These offices were very busy because most settlers in Indiana came to acquire land for farming.

Gunter's Chain

A surveyor needs several tools to help plot tracts of land. The instruments used today are high-tech versions of the same tools surveyors used in the early 1800s. The Gunter's chain is one tool not used today by surveyors, but it was very important in the 1800s. Edmund Gunter created this chain to make the measuring of acres easier. An acre is the standard measure of land in the United States and often refers to how much land is tillable by one man and an ox in one day. A Gunter's chain contains 100 links equaling 66 feet. An acre is equal to 10 square chains.

1 Gunter's chain = 100 links = 66 feet

1 acre = 1 chain x 10 chains = 66 x 660 = 43,560 feet

Essentially, the Gunter's chain was a measuring tape and calculator tool for surveyors. The chain allowed surveyors to physically measure the land while keeping a calculation of their findings. Tracts of land were measured in either squares or rectangles. To help calculate the area of the land, surveyors used this formula:

$$\text{Length} \times \text{Width} = \text{Acres}$$

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ACTIVITY #1: OBSERVATION

1. In this activity, students will become surveyors and will be required to make a written description of a defined area.
2. First, the teacher must determine whether students can do the activity outside or if conditions require it to be done inside the classroom.
 - a. OUTDOORS: The teacher should block out four sections using rope and stakes. The size of the sections does not matter. Make sure each section has a variety of plant life, etc., to help students in their observations.
 - b. INDOORS: Divide the classroom into four quadrants. This can be done using masking tape on the floor.
3. To begin the activity, explain to students that a surveyor often wrote a physical description of the land surveyed. Ask them why a surveyor would do this and what the surveyor looked for.
 - a. Surveyors wrote physical descriptions of the land, which included water and timber resources, as well as an explanation on how good the soil was for farming.
4. Have students do their own observation exercise. Hand out blank sheets of paper and explain that students are now the surveyors. Divide students into four groups and assign them a section to observe. Remind students that they are to do both a physical drawing as well as a written description of what they see. Students are to work alone during this activity.
5. At the end of the activity, have each group come together and compare their observations.

PLAYTIME

MATERIALS: Images of Pioneer era toys and recycled materials

OBJECTIVE: Students will learn about the different toys and games during pioneer times

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Wealthy American families were able to give their children many toys manufactured in Europe. These included lead soldiers, carved animals, miniature tea sets, and wax or porcelain-faced dolls dressed in beautiful handmade clothes. What about the rest of the children? It usually fell to the women or men of the family to produce a whittled wooden toy or to make and dress dolls from cloth for the children. But children also picked up whatever they found lying about and fashioned this raw material into playthings, using their imaginations. Some common toys of the pioneer era were cornhusk or simple rag dolls, hoop rollers, swings, tops, cup and ball, bubble blowers, buzzers, clay marbles, chapbooks, rattles made from bones left over from dinner, jackknives, carved animals, bladder balls, and various wooden whistles.

Most of the background information on toys is an educated guess. Names, such as whirligig or bladder ball, seemed to arise out of what the toy was made from or from what noises the toy produced. Ethnic influences enlarged the available choices. By the middle of the 19th century, homemade toys had reached such popularity that a handful of toymakers began to sell their wares.

Today, homemade toys link us with our beginnings, our joy of play and our own childhoods. Most handmade toys of the pioneer era were distinctly different from our present-day toys. Toys of the 1800s seem to have a great appeal to children today as they demonstrate the effects of gravity, rhythm, inertia, leverage, or reciprocating movement. Some toys demand patience and good hand-eye coordination and supply kids with a “can-do” feeling. Handmade toys are easy to fix if broken and give children hours of pleasure and delight. Toys in the pioneer era were cheap, fragile, and, in most homes, probably damaged and thrown away, only to be replaced by an equally cheap and fragile handmade toy.

ACTIVITY #1:

1. Begin with a discussion about what toys are like today. Make a list on the chalkboard of those toys students enjoy the most. Now cross out all those toys that require electricity or batteries. Discuss with students what they think they would do if they didn't have electricity or batteries to run their toys.
2. Ask students what they think pioneer children did for fun. Remind students that a pioneer child's first duty was doing chores and that he or she only played when free time was available.
3. Show images of pioneer era toys. Ask students whether they can identify the toy or game and how it works.

ACTIVITY #2:

If time allows, let students try to come up with a game on their own. Students may want to divide into groups to create a variety of games. Students may create a fun new game that they would enjoy! Or, have students design a new toy. To help make it challenging, have students design a toy from materials they have available in class or out of recycled materials.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ADULT BOOKS: LINCOLN'S LIFE IN INDIANA

Lincoln's Boyhood, by Francis Marion VanNetter

Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years Seven to Twenty-one: 18616 – 1830, by Louis A. Warren

There I Grew Up: Remembering Abraham Lincoln's Indiana Youth, by William E. Bartelt

ADULT BOOKS: LINCOLN'S ADULT YEARS

The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, edited by Roy Besler

With Malice Toward None, by Stephen B. Oates

Abraham Lincoln: the Prairie Years & the War Years, by Carl Sandburg

CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON LINCOLN

Lincoln: A Photobiography, by Russell Freedman

Abraham Lincoln the Writer: A Treasury of His Greatest Speeches and Letters, edited by Harold Holzer

If You Grew Up with Abraham Lincoln, by Ann McGovern

Abe Lincoln's Hat, by Martha Brenner

More than Halfway There, by Janet Halliday Ervin

Young Abe Lincoln: His Teenage Years in Indiana, by Fred Conway

"House Divided" and "The Gettysburg Address" speeches made by Abraham Lincoln

CHILDREN'S BOOKS: PIONEER LIFE IN INDIANA

A Home in the Woods: Pioneer Life in Indiana, by Howard Johnson (Oliver Johnson's Reminiscences of Early Marion County)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ADULT BOOKS: PIONEER LIFE IN INDIANA

Gardens of the Early Midwest, by David G. Vanderstel, Jane M. Wheeler, and Joyce A. Newby

The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815 – 1840, Vol. 1, by Carlyle R. Buly

Frontier Indiana, by Andrew Cayton

Medicine in Antebellum Indiana: Conflict, Conservatism, and Change, by Katherine McDonell

The Civilization of the Old Northwest, by Beverly Bond

Indiana's Road to Statehood: A Documentary Record, by Hubert Hawkins

Indiana As Seen by Early Travelers, by Harlow Lindley

WEB RESOURCES

The Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection: <https://www.lincolncollection.org/>

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation: <http://www.alplm.org/>

The Lincoln Boyhood Home National Memorial: <http://www.nps.gov/libo/>

