

Abraham Lincoln

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A PRIVATE SECRETARY RECALLS LINCOLN'S WHITE HOUSE HABITS

In response to a request from William Herndon, John Hay, formerly one of Lincoln's private secretaries, wrote out some of his recollections of Lincoln's daily personal and official habits as President. Hay was in Paris serving as Secretary of the United States Legation when he wrote the letter, about a year and half after Lincoln's death. Portions of the letter are given below.

Lincoln used to go to bed ordinarily from ten to eleven o'clock unless he happened to be kept up by important news, in which case he would frequently remain at the War Department until one or two. He rose early. When he lived in the country at Soldiers' Home, he would be up and dressed, eat his breakfast (which was extremely frugal—an egg, a piece of toast, coffee, etc.), and ride into Washington, all before eight o'clock. In the winter at the White House he was not quite so early. He did not sleep very well but spent a good while in bed. Tad usually slept with him. He would lie around the office until he fell asleep and Lincoln would shoulder him and take him off to bed.

He pretended to begin business at ten o'clock in the morning, but in reality the anterooms and halls were full before that hour—people anxious to get the first ax ground. He was extremely unmethodical: it was a four years' struggle on Nicolay's part and mine to get him to adopt some systematic rules. He would break through every regulation as fast as it was made.

Anything that kept the people themselves away from him he disapproved—although they nearly annoyed the life out of him by unreasonable complaints and requests.

The House remained full of people nearly all day. At noon the President took a little lunch—a biscuit, a glass of milk in winter, some fruit or grapes in summer. He dined at from five to six and we went off to our dinner also.

Before dinner was over, members and Senators would come back and take up the whole evening. Sometimes, though rarely, he shut himself up and would see no one. Sometimes he would run away to a lecture or concert or theater for the sake of a little rest.

He was very abstemious, ate less than anyone I know. Drank nothing but water, not from principle, but because he did not like wine or spirits.

HAY TO HERNDON, SEPTEMBER 5, 1866.



One of the most charming of the Lincoln photographs. It is the only one that shows Lincoln wearing glasses. He and his son Tad are caught by the camera in the act of looking over an album of Brady photographs. The artist, Carpenter, used this photograph as a model in executing his painting of the Lincoln family. This photograph was made by Brady in his studio in Washington, February 9, 1864. Courtesy the U. S. Army Signal Corps.