

# Abraham Lincoln

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## MR. HERNDON'S LINCOLN

*William H. Herndon was born in Greensburg, Ky., December 28, 1816. His father moved to Troy, Madison County, Ill., 2 years later, and in 1821 to a farm in Sangamon County, 5 miles northeast of Springfield. This was 9 years before Lincoln came to Illinois. Herndon first saw Lincoln in 1832. At that time Lincoln was serving as a pilot of a small steamer on the Sangamon River, working as an assistant to Rowan Herndon, William's cousin. Herndon took up the study of law, and in 1844 Lincoln took the younger man into his office in Springfield. Thus the law firm of Lincoln and Herndon was established. It lasted until Lincoln's death. On his last visit to the office, on February 10, 1861, the day before he left Springfield for Washington, Lincoln asked that the firm signboard at the foot of the stairs remain unchanged. "Let it hang there undisturbed," he said.*

*For more than 16 years prior to Lincoln's departure from Springfield to take up his duties as President, Herndon was the almost constant companion and observer of this remarkable man. Henry C. Whitney, a close friend of both men, has said that Herndon was Lincoln's political mentor; that he was Lincoln's closest political and personal friend; and that he had more to do with influencing Lincoln's political career than any other 10 men. Certain it is that no history of Lincoln's life before 1860 could be written without the Herndon manuscripts. Beginning shortly after the President's assassination, Herndon devoted the remainder of his life, or rather that part of it which could be spared from the task of earning a precarious livelihood, to the task of gathering source material on Lincoln. The following description of Lincoln is from a lecture prepared by Herndon and first given by him at Springfield, Ill., Dec. 12, 1865.*

It is now the time to describe the person of Mr. Lincoln: he was about six feet four inches high, and when he left the city, was fifty-one years old, having good health and no gray hairs or but few on his head; he was thin, wiry, sinewy, raw and big heavy-boned, thin through the breast to the back and narrow across the shoulders, standing he leaned forward; was what may be called stoop-shouldered, inclining to the consumptively built, his usual weight being about one hundred and sixty or eighty pounds. . . . His organism and structure were loose and leathery; his body was well shrunk, cadaverous and shriveled, having very dark skin, dry and tough, wrinkled and lying somewhat in flabby folds; dark hair, the man looking woe-struck. The whole man, body and mind, worked slowly, creakingly, as if it needed oiling. Physically he was a very powerful man, lifting, as said, with ease four or six hundred pounds. . . . When this man moved and walked along he moved and walked cautiously, but firmly, his long and big bony arms and hands on them, hanging like giant hands on them, swung by his side; he walked with even tread, the inner sides of his feet being parallel; he put his whole foot down flat at once, not landing on his heel; he likewise lifted his foot all at once, not rising from the toe, and hence he had no spring to his walk; he had the economy of full lift of foot though he had no spring to his walk or apparent ease of motion in his tread; he walked undulatory, up and down in motion, catching and pocketing time, weariness all up and down his person preventing them from locating. The very first



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opinion that a stranger or one who did not observe closely would form of Lincoln's walk and motion was that he was a tricky man, a man of cunning, a dangerous shrewd man, one to watch closely and not to be trusted, but his walk was the manifested walk of caution and firmness. In sitting down on a common chair or bench or ground, he was from the top of his head down to his seat no better than the average man; his legs and arms were, as compared with the average man, abnormally, unnaturally long, though when compared to his own organism, the whole physical man, these organs may have been in harmony with the man. His arms and hands, feet and legs, seemed to me, as compared with the average man, in undue proportion to the balance of his body. It was only when Lincoln rose on his feet that he loomed up above the mass of men. He looked the giant then.

Lincoln's head was long and tall from the base of the brain to and from the eyebrows. His head ran backward, his forehead rising as it ran back at a low angle, like Clay's and unlike Webster's, almost perpendicular. The size of his hat, measured on the hatter's hat block was  $7\frac{1}{8}$ , his head being from ear to ear six and a half inches. Thus measured it was not below the medium or average size. His forehead was narrow but high; his hair was dark, almost black, and lay floating where his fingers put it or the winds left it, piled up and tossed about at random; his cheekbones were high, sharp, and prominent; his eyebrows heavy and prominent; his jaws were long, upcurved, and massive, looked solid, heavy, and strong; his nose was large, long, and blunt, a little awry toward the right eye; his chin was long, sharp and uncurved; his eyebrows cropped out like a huge jutting rock out of the brow of a hill; his face was long, narrow, sallow, and cadaverous, flesh shrunk, shriveled, wrinkled, and dry, having on his face a few hairs here and there; his cheeks were leathery and saffron-colored; his ears were large and ran out nearly at right angles from the sides of his head, caused by heavy hats in which he carried his big cotton or other handkerchief, his bank book, his letters, and his memoranda generally, and partly by nature; . . . his head was well-balanced on his shoulders, his little gray eyes in the right place. There was the lone mole on his right cheek just a little above the right corner of his mouth and Adam's apple on his throat. Beneath this rough and uncouth exterior was a very fine, an exceedingly fine physical organization, a fine and delicate network of nerves being woven through it along which feelings and thoughts traveled and flashed quicker than lightning.

Thus I say stood, walked, looked, felt, thought, willed, and acted this peculiar and singular man; he was odd, angular, homely, but when those little gray eyes and face were lighted up by the inward soul on fires of emotion, defending the liberty of man or proclaiming the truths of the Declaration of Independence, or defending justice and the eternal right, then it was that all those apparently ugly or homely features sprang into organs of beauty, or sank themselves into the sea of his inspiration that on such occasions flooded up his manly face. Sometimes it did appear to me that Lincoln was just fresh from the presence and hands of his Creator.

HERNDON'S NOTES AND MONOGRAPHS, IN  
EMANUEL HERTZ, *The Hidden Lincoln*.