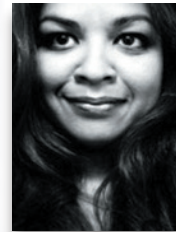


# Lincoln's Boyhood Myths and Legends

Lincoln's humble life and tragic death were a hotbed for myths and legends to grow.



By A. K. Fielding

When on Good Friday of 1865, he shot Abraham Lincoln, who died on the eve of Easter, actor John Wilkes Booth assured his martyred target's assumption into legend as the Great Emancipator, a Christ-like figure who died to make men free. But long before Lincoln breathed his last in an upstairs room at 516 10th Street NW in Washington, DC, he had inspired many a myth about his youth. This article examines two of these persistent legends still alive today.

The birthplace cabin, which is housed in the Memorial Building located at the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park in Kentucky, is a shrine to Lincoln. But is it truly the cabin in which Lincoln was born?

In 1860, Dr. George Rodman, a neighbor of the Lincolns, purchased a log cabin that stood on the Lincoln farm. He believed it to be Lincoln's birthplace cabin and relocated it to his own property. The ownership of the cabin exchanged hands many times and eventually in 1905 came into the possession of Robert J. Collier, editor and later publisher of *Collier's Weekly* magazine. Collier then gifted the land and the logs from the cabin over to the Lincoln Farm Association where the logs were authenticated. In 1909, the construction of a memorial building to house the log

PAINTING:  
Norman Rockwell, 1965  
"Lincoln the Rail-splitter,"  
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cabin began. The structure was designed by famed architect John Russell Pope and constructed in the Neo-Classical style using Connecticut pink granite and marble from Tennessee. The work was completed in 1911, and the Lincoln log cabin found its rightful place in American history.

But in 1948, researcher Roy Hays published the article "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*. Based on oral testimony, Hays argued that the logs in the birthplace cabin were not authentic. A heated debate followed, and another scholar named Louis A. Warren, editor of *Lincoln Lore*, published a different opinion. His findings were also based on oral testimony and stated that some of the logs may have belonged to the original Lincoln birthplace cabin. Today, the National Park Service maintains that the cabin is a "traditional" representation of the original Lincoln birthplace cabin. Yet, people still continue to visit the cabin to pay homage to a structure that—although not authentic—is a symbol of Lincoln's humble origins.

Over the years, various artists have used imagery to create artwork depicting a young, studious Lincoln holding a book to emphasize his love for reading. The earliest work created in 1868 by Eastman Johnson, titled *Boy Lincoln Reading by Firelight*, shows Lincoln seated on a chair in front of the fireplace of his Indiana boyhood home, intently reading a book. In 1965, Norman Rockwell painted Lincoln standing tall, holding an axe in his right hand and a book in his left in *Lincoln the Rail-splitter*. These pieces of art and many similar ones represent the idea that Lincoln loved to read everything. But did Lincoln read indiscriminately?

Much as it is with any of us, Lincoln only read about things that he found fascinating. The notion that Lincoln read every

book in the area where he lived may have sprung from his friend David Turnham who told William H. Herndon, an early Lincoln biographer, "When Lincoln was going about he read everything that he could lay his hands on . . . ." It may also stem from Herndon himself who said, "His stepmother told me he devoured everything in the book line within his reach." In his *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, 1816–1830*, Warren stated that the notion that Lincoln read every book within a fifty-mile radius from his home is simply untrue. He

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asserted that in Indiana, Lincoln had read a select number of books including the *Bible*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Parson Weem's *The Life of Washington*, and he may have read some Indiana newspapers including *Western Sun* from Vincennes, *Western Register* from Terre Haute, and the *Indianapolis Gazette*. One thing is certain, whatever Lincoln read, he did not simply read the words, but he studied them deeply. He developed his love of reading by reading out loud to himself and then absorbing the words into his mind forever.

Lincoln's humble life and tragic death were a hotbed for myths and legends to

grow. Some of these stories were meant to disgrace him, others to uplift him through the passage of time. Not all were rooted in his adult world of politics. Some were also founded in his simple childhood spent on the frontier. 🏠

### About A. K.

A. K. Fielding is an independent historian and artist. She writes about early American topics so she can buy materials with which to paint subjects from that period. The author of numerous historical articles, she is the author of "A Little Book of Revolutionary Quotes" series. She lives in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Visit [trehanstreasures.com](http://trehanstreasures.com) for more information and news from A. K. Fielding.

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