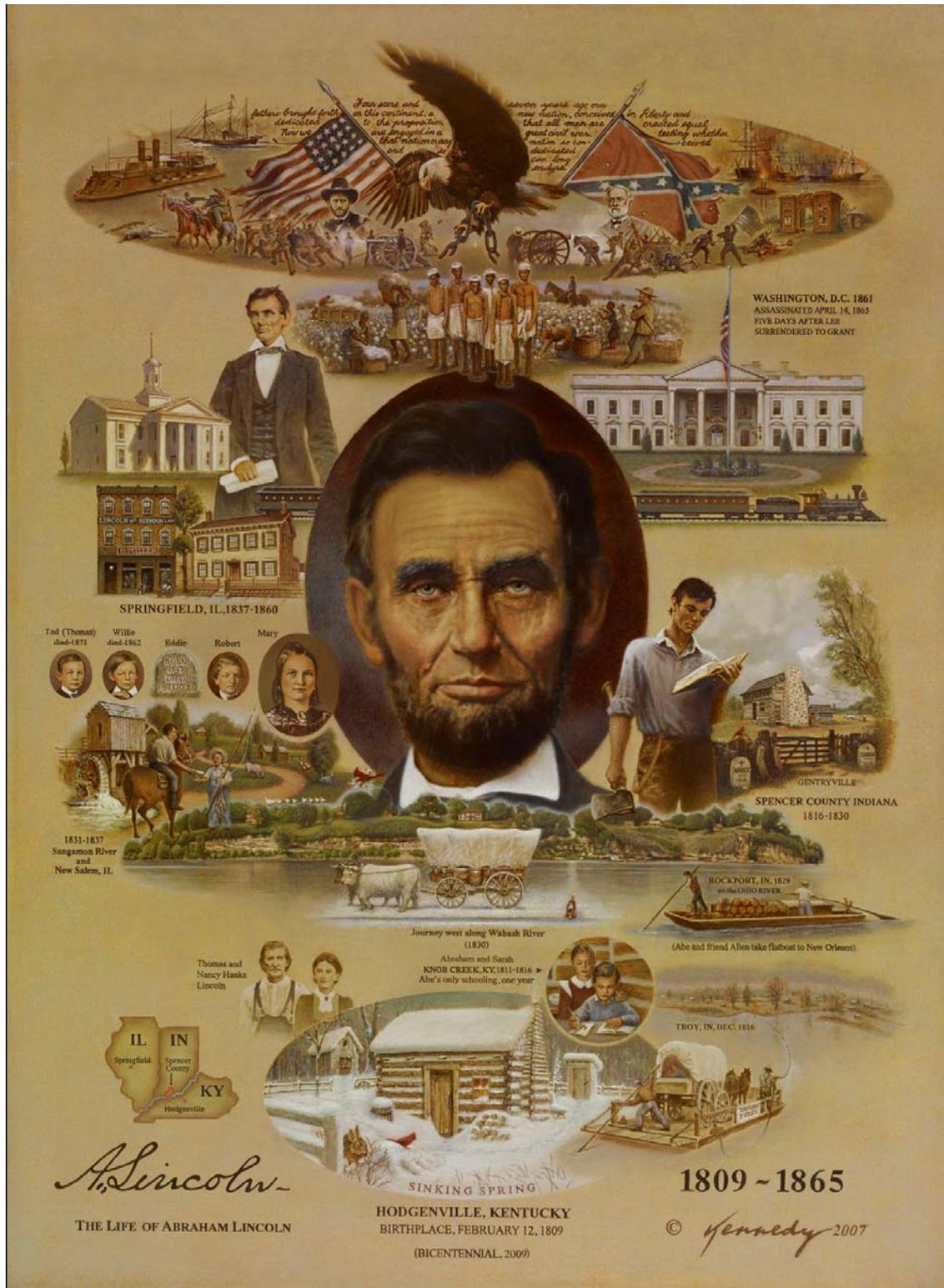


The Life of Abraham Lincoln (The Painting)



My name is Tom Kennedy. I have been an artist by profession for 35 years or so. In the fall of 2005, I was presented with a challenge, The 2009 Bicentennial Celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth. My first thought, of course, was to do the very best portrait of Lincoln I could possibly do. To do this, I knew I would have to become more inspired. I could only recall a handful of things about him. So for this reason I went to several libraries and checked out all the books on Abraham Lincoln I could.

After a short period of reading, I had become intrigued with his life. Of course, there were no colored photos of him. But after looking through sixty or more black and whites, I became suspicious that perhaps Abraham's eyes were not the dark brown as I had always seen them painted. Now I'm having fun and getting into my subject. I was on a mission...to prove to myself that the irises of Abraham's eyes were lighter than portrayed. Six or seven books later his eyes were described as hazel gray! Thank you God! I would learn later that at least two artists painted Abraham from life so obviously they would have painted his true eye color.

It was after reading Doris Kearns Goodman's *Team of Rivals* that I learned that my frustration was also shared by Walt Whitman who said that of all of the photos taken and portraits painted of Lincoln "none caught the deep though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there." Whitman went on to say that "a painter from another time or generation is needed."

This fact challenged me to begin working on his portrait. As I did so, I became fascinated with what Lincoln's eyes would tell me about the soul of the man. What I was able to detect, if there is such a thing, was a sadness yet kindness of equal strength. He was as sad as he was kind.

I did the eyes first and then I knew I had a winner! I sensed that I had a strong foundation for a significant piece of art. I was prepared to take as long as it would take. It took me over two years from concept to last stroke. The hand lettering was extremely time-consuming because I wanted it to look like set type. This process alone probably took over a hundred hours or more.

In my quest to discover his eye color, I learned so many other fascinating things about Abraham that I had already determined I wanted to do a montage oil painting depicting various highlights of his life, which would weave around a centralized portrait, maybe 3ft. by 4ft., I thought. I was not ready to put anything to canvas yet. I had to first see this with my "minds eye" and pull it out a little at a time in abstract form. Then I was able to shape, reshape, and define it. I also needed a great deal more time to cross reference books and get my facts straight. It was of great importance to me from the beginning that it be historically accurate. It had to be the truth.

Even I, the artist, was so curious to see what Abraham looked like with his true eye color that after I transferred the entire drawing to canvas, I quickly began to apply paint to his eyes. Three weeks later, without a moment hesitation, I had completed the portrait, and began to paint the scenes. As I recall, between the drying of glaze applications to the portrait I would skip around adding color to the scenes.

Hodgenville, Kentucky

My story begins at the bottom of the painting where I show Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln at their little cabin on the farm they called "Sinking Spring". Tom and Nancy had married near Elizabethtown, Kentucky in 1806. Their first child was Sara, who was born on February 10, 1807.

Sara was two years old when Abraham was born on February 12, 1809. In my painting I visualize a tranquil setting at Hodgenville, Kentucky and have suggested that Sara threw out cracked corn for the animals to eat, while the footprints of a nervous father, Tom, are made in the snow from the barn to the outhouse.

Knob Creek, Kentucky

Abraham would comment years later that the earliest recollection of his childhood went back to his days in Knob Creek when he and Sara would walk two miles to attend a "blab" school. He also commented he never received over one year of formal schooling.

Troy, Indiana

In 1816 the Lincolns moved from Knob Creek, Kentucky. They crossed the Ohio River where the Ohio and Anderson's Creek meet near Troy. It was in Troy that Tom Lincoln obtained his claim to property along Little Pigeon Creek. Years later, Abraham would return to work as a ferryman, using perhaps the same ferry on which he and his family had crossed the Ohio River.

Spencer County, Indiana

At the age of eight, he helped his father cut the logs for their cabin on Little Pigeon Creek in an area then called Gentry Settlement in Spencer County, Indiana. Abraham was ten years of age when his mother Nancy died from milk sickness. Abraham was crushed by her death. Before she died, she told him to be kind to his father, his kin, and all the people of the world.

Abraham loved to read; it was an escape for him. He read Shakespeare and many other books, but the book he was most familiar with was the Bible. It was of great importance to Nancy that he read it.

A year after Nancy's passing, Tom returned to Hodgenville to ask Sara Bush to marry him. She did and returned with him to Spencer County. She became a loving mother for Abraham.

Ten years after his mother's death, Abraham's sister, Sara, died after giving birth to a stillborn child. Abraham was deeply scarred by the death of his sister and mother for the rest of his life.

Shortly before Abraham and his family left Indiana, he and his friend, Allen Gentry, embarked on what must have been the adventure of a lifetime. Allen's father, James, owned the general store in Gentryville and wished to send a cargo of goods to New Orleans where they could get a good price for them. It was along the sandstone bluff of Rockport, Indiana that Abraham and Allen built a flatboat, loaded the cargo and waved bye to their friends. They journeyed down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for over a thousand miles. After three long months they reached the harbor of New Orleans. While in New Orleans, Abraham witnessed the slave families being separated as they were auctioned off like cattle. Abraham remarked to Allen that, "If ever I can do anything about this, I will."

West along the Wabash River

John Hanks, Nancy's brother, had already left Spencer County for Illinois. He wrote to Tom telling him about the fertile soil and no milk sickness in the area. So, Tom packed up the family and headed for Illinois in the winter of 1829. Abraham was twenty-one.

Sangamon River and New Salem, Illinois

When the Lincolns first entered Illinois, they settled about ten miles northwest of Decatur on the Sangamon River. Abraham helped his father, his cousins, and stepbrother build a cabin, a split-rail fence and clear ten acres for corn. From here, Abraham would make another flatboat trip to New Orleans and upon his return home at the age of twenty-two he would set out on his own to a small village called New Salem, Illinois.

While in New Salem, he was given the nickname "Honest Abe." Most of the residents of this small community were illiterate. Abe served the community by counting their change correctly as a store clerk, marking off their property lines as a surveyor and reading their mail to them as U.S. Postmaster.

In 1832, Abraham met John Todd Stuart during his three months enlistment in the Black Hawk War. Stuart saw much promise in Abraham and encouraged him to run for the state legislature and study law. Abraham took Stuart's advice.

As with other elements in my painting the cardinal that appears in three vignettes in Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois is the state bird in all three states. The cardinal remains year round in the area, even during the harshest winter months. So, as years go by and more people become familiar with my painting, I feel it will be difficult for them to see a cardinal and not think of Abraham Lincoln.

Springfield, Illinois

In 1837 Abraham left New Salem and began his law practice with John Todd Stuart and two others, Stephen Logan and Billy Herndon. It was through John Todd Stuart that Abraham would meet Mary Todd. Abraham and Mary married and had four children: Eddie, Willie, Tad and Robert.

Abraham was a successful lawyer and accumulated a wealth of influential friends in Springfield. He was encouraged to run for U.S. President and in 1860 won the election.

Washington D.C.

From the day of his inauguration until his assassination, Abraham showed little regard for his own safety. It was clear to him that what confronted this nation was of much higher importance than himself. The last photo taken of him was only a few days before he was murdered. He was fifty-six years old but appeared to be a man of near ninety years. I was fifty-six when I completed the portrait part of the painting. A fixation with death then crept into my thoughts I prayed to God that He would let me finish this painting!

Abraham was shot on a stormy Good Friday evening, April 14, 1865. He died the next morning at 7:22 am. For this event, I have shown a wet lawn, a limp flag at half-mast, and the White House grayed in tone to suggest an overcast sky. In this dismal setting, I then lit the gas lamps.

Civil War

Abraham's worst nightmare was that of America becoming a house divided. His language was symbolic and I could think of no stronger symbolic means of expressing the reality of this nightmare than to portray the angled out, ragged, bullet riddled flags of the Union and Confederate forces.

Plantation

The story of Abraham Lincoln cannot be told without reference to slaves, and the system that held them. The slaves were viewed as part of a southern economy centered on cotton. They were not thought of as human beings only tools to keep the economy strong.

I was tempted to show the scars on the slave's backs or perhaps a ship scene of those slaves who did not survive the long hellish voyage and had been tossed to the sharks. I decided instead that the most direct and effective way to address emancipation in a symbolic way was to paint the American symbol of freedom, the bald eagle, breaking the chains of bondage from a hopeless weary looking group of slaves.

The eagle also represents my interpretation that Abraham followed through with the words he spoke in his 1860 speech at Cooper Union, New York when he said, "Have faith that right makes might." When a youthful Abraham took that flatboat trip from Rockport, Indiana to New Orleans and witnessed the raw injustice of slavery he then turned to his friend, Allen Gentry and said, "If ever I can do anything about this, I will." With my knowledge of Abraham today, these words strike me as the beginning of a self-fulfilled prophecy.

In Closing

Though I finished my painting months ago, I continue to read about Abraham. He was a focused and determined person, undistracted by the many things that compete for our attention today. Had I not made the decision to "tune out" the world these past two years, I would not have been able to create this painting.

I recommend to anyone who may read this – Do yourself a favor, spend time reading and learning about and from Abraham. He will lead you to new friends and great things.