

Civil War Treasures: LSU's Lincoln Lexicon

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *Civil War Treasures: LSU's Lincoln Lexicon.*

Few have ever mastered the English language like Abraham Lincoln. From his days as a young, backwoods bibliophile to one of history's most expressive writers, Lincoln's love of language helps us understand not only the man, but all that he represents.

How did Lincoln acquire his remarkable way with words? An eighteenth-century dictionary now in the LSU Libraries' Special Collections sheds some light on the question.

First published in 1721 and reissued many times over the next eighty years, Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* was the most successful lexicon of its time. Though printed in London, copies would have been found throughout the English-speaking world. In the new state of Kentucky, Mordecai Lincoln, the future president's uncle and one of the most influential figures in his early life, owned a copy as early as 1792.

Scrawled in the margins next to Bailey's definitions of catfish and castanets are the words: "*Mordecai Lincoln, his hand and pen, he will be good, but God knows when. When he is good, then you may say, the time is come and well hurray.*"

Thirty years later, the first part of this jovial rhyme shows up in a copybook, written in southern Indiana by a teenage Abraham Lincoln. The copybook may be the earliest surviving example of his writing.¹ Scholars have been unsure whether Lincoln coined the rhyme himself or copied it from an unknown source. LSU's copy of Bailey's dictionary presents evidence that the phrase was probably being used as a penmanship exercise in the Lincoln family long before their most famous son repeated it.

Mordecai Lincoln was clearly glad to own a copy of the dictionary. In addition to including his name in the verse mentioned above, he inscribed it in

two other places: first on the page headed by the word *unalterable*, alongside the date "April 28, 1792," then adjacent to a description of the English city of Lincoln. And at the middle of a group of pages discolored by some type of memento once stuck between them, we find the definition of the Hebrew name Mordecai ("Queen Esther's guardian").

Most intriguing is the front endpaper. Though badly mutilated, it still bears the inscription "Abraham Lincoln, his book, brought [sic] in the year of our Lord 1795." Above this inscription is another that has almost disappeared due to paper loss, but the date 1772 is still visible, as well as the partial word "Linc—," presumably a sign that other Lincolns owned the book before Mordecai.

The rhyming inscription and the fact that we know Abraham Lincoln read dictionaries in his youth has led several historians to believe this was one of the books that passed through his hands. Though he may have borrowed the book from his uncle, it is far more plausible that the "Abraham Lincoln" of the inscription is the president's cousin, Mordecai's son Abraham, who was born around 1795. Could the mysterious usage of the word *brought* refer to his birth—i.e., brought forth? The word has mistakenly been given as *bought* by historians. The original may be a simple misspelling, but no matter what it signifies, it is hard to see how it could apply to the president, who was not born until 1809.

Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge, author of a well-known 1928 biography of Lincoln, was the foremost advocate of a connection between Bailey's dictionary and the erstwhile Hoosier. Beveridge knew about the volume through James A. McMillen, librarian at Washington University in St. Louis and later library director at LSU.² McMillen claimed to have acquired the book from his aunt, who in 1879 found it in a Hancock County, Illinois, house formerly occupied by one of Lincoln's cousins—or, some say, by "Honest Abe" himself.³ (Mordecai's son Abraham died in Hancock County in 1852, more reason to believe that the book belonged to him and not the president).⁴ When we trace Beveridge's footnotes, it is clear that he confused Bailey's dictionary with James Barclay's, a book the young Lincoln cherished.⁵ Yet writers on Lincoln have reproduced Beveridge's error over the years.

Regardless of whether Lincoln ever read from his uncle's copy of Bailey's dictionary, it is a testimony to his legacy that so many have wanted this to be a tangible relic of his life. Even if it is not what some have claimed, the book does,

in fact, advance our understanding of Lincoln. Though he was unusually bright, those around him were not all as suspicious of “book larnin’” as his father, Thomas, is supposed to have been. At least one other member of the Lincoln family, we can be sure, found a dictionary to be a valuable object. Did he simply use it to better understand the Bible, or did he have grander aspirations? We may never know, but this small window into the world in which Lincoln grew up is a fascinating example of the kinds of questions scholars can raise by exploring the riches of the LSU Libraries’ Special Collections.

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¹ Harold Holzer, ed., *In Lincoln’s Hand: His Original Manuscripts* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2009), 2-3.

² Albert Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, vol. 1, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 21, note 3.

³ “Abraham Lincoln his book,” in *Lumières* (Friends of the LSU Library newsletter), April 1976; “A Lincoln Book,” *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. VII (1913), 165-66.

⁴ This view was shared by James Minor Lincoln, historian of the Lincoln Family and Genealogical Association, in 1913. See “A Lincoln Book.”

⁵ Douglas L. Wilson, ed., *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 42, 101, 105.