

The Life of Abraham Lincoln

by Stacie Christensen (created in 2025)

Stacie Christensen has taught gifted and general education elementary students in Idaho since 2001 and was named the 2020 Idaho History Teacher of the Year.

GRADE LEVEL(S): 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

OVERVIEW

This lesson is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH™) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance.

In this lesson, students will explore Abraham Lincoln’s early life through his own autobiographical sketch and one of his earliest photographs. They will compare the documents and discuss how these primary sources help us understand history, and demonstrate their understanding through a short explanatory paragraph.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who was Abraham Lincoln?

What qualities made Abraham Lincoln a good choice for president in 1860?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.1: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3: Describe relationships among events, ideas, or individuals in a historical context.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.2: Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2: Write informative/explanatory texts.

MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: Historical Background: “Abraham Lincoln’s Life” by Jonathan W. White, Professor of American Studies, Christopher Newport University
- Activity Sheet 1: Circle Map of Abraham Lincoln
- Activity Sheets 2–8
 - Excerpt from a letter from Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided, 1859, Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3, General Correspondence, 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, December 20, 1859, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/mal4339100/](https://www.loc.gov/item/mal4339100/)
 - Excerpts from Abraham Lincoln’s summary of his own life, written in 1859, Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided, 1859, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/mal4339100/](https://www.loc.gov/item/mal4339100/)
- First known photograph of Abraham Lincoln, 1846 or 1847, by Nicholas H. Shepherd, taken in Springfield, Illinois, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2004664400/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2004664400/)
- Activity Sheet 9: Essential Questions

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Abraham Lincoln's Life

by Jonathan W. White, Christopher Newport University

Although he was born into a poor farming family in rural Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln rose to become one of the greatest leaders in US history. His self-education as a child—especially the books he read about George Washington and the American Revolution—instilled in him a deep “reverence for the laws”¹ and appreciation for the American constitutional system. The principles of the Declaration of Independence—liberty, equality, and government by consent—guided him throughout his adult life, especially as he led the nation through civil war between 1861 and 1865. He stood in opposition to slavery as early as 1837, although he was not yet an abolitionist. As president, he declared that his paramount object was to preserve the Union. Saving the nation would prove to the world that democratic government could survive.

By the time Lincoln was inaugurated president in March 1861, seven slave states had seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. Lincoln quickly began taking steps to restore the Union. His decision-making was guided by his devotion to the rule of law—that he must use the powers delegated to him by the Constitution to uphold his oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution and nation.

In his first inaugural address, Lincoln noted that the Constitution did not authorize him to touch slavery in states where it already existed. Moreover, he knew that issuing an emancipation proclamation would be politically inexpedient, likely causing the border slave states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware to join the Confederacy. Nevertheless, he began striking at slavery in ways that the Constitution permitted. In May 1861, he tasked his administration with destroying the transatlantic slave trade. He also tried to persuade the Border States to abolish slavery on their own by offering federal compensation. (Border State slaveholders roundly rejected these overtures.) Finally, he and Congress abolished slavery in Washington, DC, and prohibited it from spreading into the federal territories.

After a year and a half of war, Lincoln finally issued his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, declaring enslaved people in areas of rebellion to be free and authorizing the recruitment of Black soldiers. Lincoln justified his order as a military necessity because freeing enslaved people would weaken the Confederacy (by removing a coerced labor force from southern plantations) and strengthen the Union (by replenishing Union ranks). Although Lincoln issued the proclamation in accordance with his official duty, it nevertheless aligned with his

¹ Abraham Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (CWAL)*, vol. 1 (1824–Aug. 28, 1848), University of Michigan Digital Collections, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln1/1:130>.

deep “personal wish that all men every where could be free.”² Still, Lincoln knew that when the war ended, the proclamation might cease to be enforceable. Consequently, he supported the Thirteenth Amendment to ensure the permanent destruction of slavery.

While emancipation is the best-known issue of the Civil War, Lincoln dealt with many other controversial topics. In 1861, he suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, an action that led to the arrest of at least 13,000 civilians (the number is likely much higher). Under this policy, at least 4,200 civilians and irregular combatants were tried in military rather than civil courts. Lincoln and Congress also created a national banking system, authorized legal tender (paper currency), enacted homestead legislation that spurred westward migration, instituted a federal income tax, and established a national draft. Most of these actions were upheld during the war; however, some—most notably the military trial of civilians—were later declared unconstitutional. During the war, Lincoln and Congress fought over what reconstruction policy to adopt. This issue would not be settled until after Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865.

Although aspects of his presidency were controversial, Lincoln is remembered for successfully saving the Union, preserving American constitutional government, and ending slavery in the United States.

Jonathan W. White is professor of American Studies at Christopher Newport University. He serves as vice chair of The Lincoln Forum. His recent books include A House Built By Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House, which received the 2023 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize, and Shipwrecked: A True Civil War Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running, and the Slave Trade (2023).

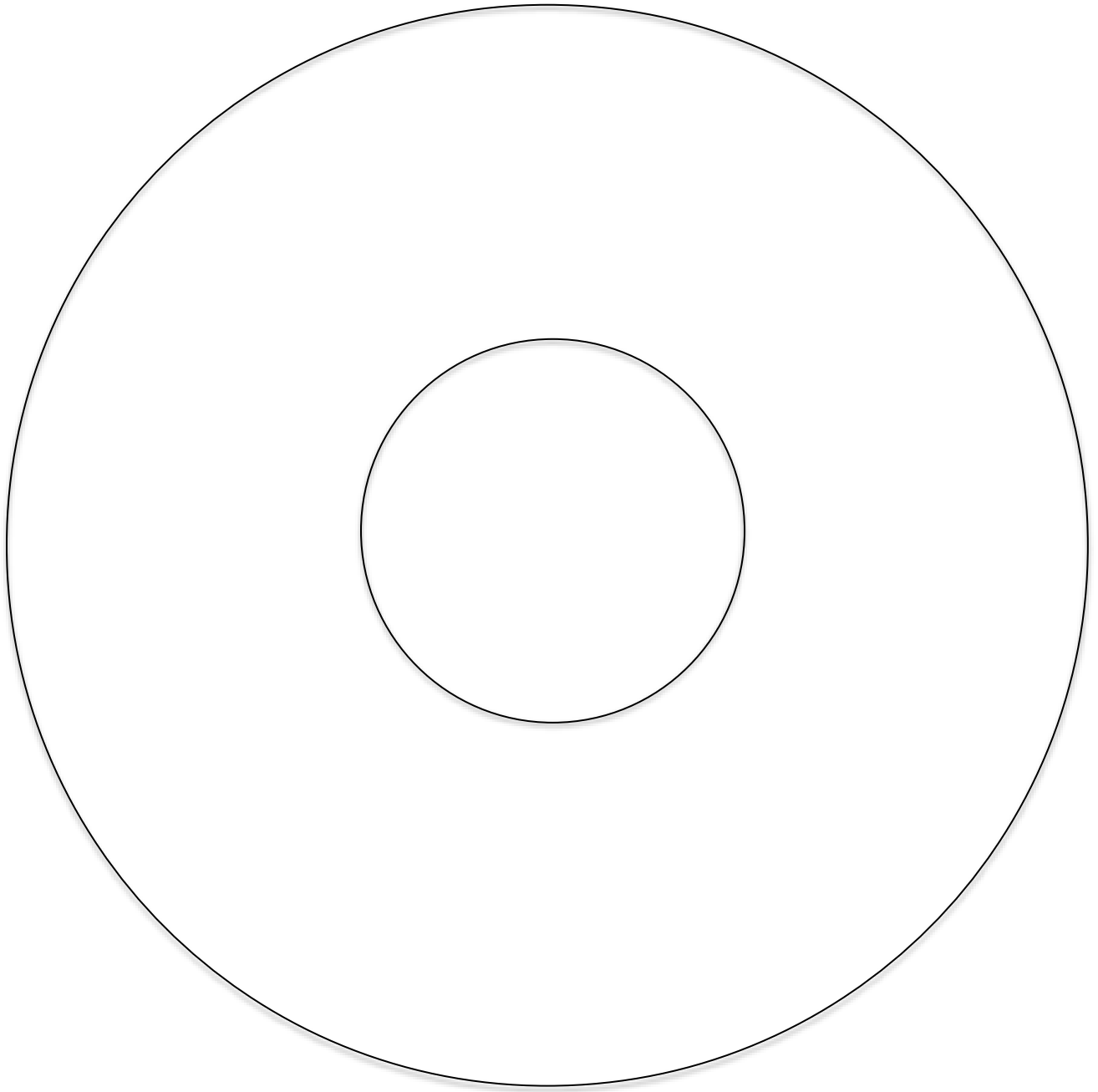
² Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, CWAL vol. 5 (Oct. 24, 1861–Dec. 12, 1862), University of Michigan Digital Collections, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln5/1:848>.

PROCEDURE

1. The Historical Background is provided to supplement your knowledge of this period in history. Feel free to use it as you see fit and share information with your students as necessary. Note that Abraham wrote the biography before he was nominated as the Republican candidate for president in 1860.
2. Engage students in the topic by asking, “What do you know about Abraham Lincoln?” and recording responses on a graphic organizer, such as a circle map provided on Activity Sheet 1. A circle map is a classroom tool used to brainstorm and organize thoughts by placing a main topic in the center and relevant ideas in the outer circle, helping to define concepts, access prior knowledge, plan writing, and structure group discussions. The simple visual structure is effective for students of all ages to develop deeper understanding and explore a subject from multiple angles. You may choose to have students work on this activity first on their own or with a partner before students share out to contribute to a larger class circle map where you record everyone’s responses on chart paper.
3. Follow up this activity by asking students where their ideas came from. Did they learn the ideas from books? movies? friends? family? etc. Introduce or affirm the idea of perspective: one’s point of view or understanding of how one thinks about a situation, fact, idea, or person. In essence, perspective is one’s own unique way of looking at the world based on what one has learned and/or experienced. Help the students connect that the ideas that they generated about Abraham Lincoln are their perspectives of him.
4. Inform students that they are now going to be introduced to Lincoln’s own perception of himself, based on a description that he provided Jesse W. Fell, a long-time political associate, in 1859. The letter and autobiographical sketch are primary sources. Lincoln knew that what he sent Fell might be shared with the public.
5. Hand out the activity sheets containing excerpts from Lincoln’s letter to Fell and accompanying autobiographical sketch (Activity Sheets 2–8). “Share read” the text on Activity Sheet 2 (from Lincoln’s letter) with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in on your second reading. Continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
6. Critical thinking questions are included with each excerpt. You may choose to allow students to answer these questions individually or with partners, or use them as part of a class discussion, depending on time constraints and ability levels of the students. Additionally, you may opt to use a cooperative learning strategy such as the “jigsaw” method. In this cooperative learning strategy, divide the class into seven groups. Then each group becomes an “expert” on their assigned excerpt and questions, and teaches it to their classmates in a shared discussion. This will help to foster understanding through shared learning and collaboration.

7. You may choose to add new ideas gained from the readings to the class circle map using a different color to showcase Lincoln's perspective.
8. Tell the students that you have one more primary source for them to help shed light on "Who was Abraham Lincoln?" Present the daguerreotype. Engage students in further class discussion:
 - Who created this image? The photographer, Lincoln, or both?
 - What do you notice about this image?
 - What does this image tell us about Lincoln?
 - Does this image support what you thought you knew about Lincoln?
 - Does it support what Lincoln says about himself?
 - How does seeing an image add to or change your impression from the text?
9. During this discussion, you may record new information on the class circle map, using a third color.
10. Have students synthesize their learning into a short written response or picture response to a document-based question, taking into consideration their grade level and language ability. Two questions are provided on Activity Sheet 9:
 - Who was Abraham Lincoln?
 - What qualities made Abraham Lincoln a good choice for president in 1860?

Activity Sheet 1: Circle Map of Abraham Lincoln



Activity Sheet 2: Excerpt from Lincoln's Letter, 1859

Vocabulary

sketch: a short piece of writing about a simple topic

modest: moderate; not excessive or extreme; not extravagant

Springfield, Dec: 20. 1859

J. W. Fell, Esq.

My dear Sir:

Herewith is a little **sketch**, as you requested. There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me.

If anything is made out of it, I wish it to be **modest**, and not to go beyond the materials. If it were thought necessary to incorporate any thing from any of my speeches, I suppose there would be no objection. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. Lincoln said he wanted any use or publication of his "sketch" to be "modest." What do you think he meant by that, and what does it say about the kind of person he was?

2. Why do you think Lincoln wanted people to only use the words he actually wrote, and not add extra things?

Activity Sheet 3: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

Vocabulary

autobiography: an account of a person's life written by that person

undistinguished: not celebrated

paternal grandfather: a person's father's father

stealth: secretive or sneaky movement

Quakers: members of the Religious Society of Friends, or Friends church, a Christian group

I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. My parents were both born in Virginia, of **undistinguished** families. . . . My Mother, who died in my tenth year, was of a family of the name of Hanks, some of whom now reside in Adams, and others in Macon counties, Illinois. My **paternal grandfather**, Abraham Lincoln, emigrated from Rockingham County, Virginia, to Kentucky, about 1781 or 2, where, a year or two later, he was killed by indians, not in battle, but by **stealth**, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest. His ancestors, who were **quakers**, went to Virginia from Berks County, Pennsylvania. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. Abraham Lincoln shared details about his family and how they moved from place to place. Why do you think it was important to him to tell about where his family came from?

2. Why do you think Lincoln wanted people to know about his family's struggles and his grandfather's death? What does this help us understand about who Abraham Lincoln was?

Activity Sheet 4: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

My father, at the death of his father, was but six years of age; and he grew up, literally without education. He removed from Kentucky to what is now Spencer county, Indiana, in my eighth year. We reached our new home about the time the State came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. What does Lincoln's story about his father having no education tell us about the kind of challenges his family faced?

2. How does Lincoln's description of living in the "wild region" of Indiana help us understand what his childhood was like and what kind of person he was becoming?

Activity Sheet 5: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

Vocabulary

straggler: one who strays behind a group, an outsider

sojourn: travel to a new place to stay temporarily

There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond "readin, writin, and cipherin" . . . If a **straggler** supposed to understand latin, happened to **sojourn** in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course when I came of age I did not know much. Still somehow, I could read, write, and cipher . . . , but that was all. I have not been to school since. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. What does this passage tell us about the kind of schools Abraham Lincoln went to? How do you think this shaped the person he became?

2. Even though Lincoln didn't have many opportunities to go to school, he still learned some important skills on his own. What does this tell you about his character and determination?

Activity Sheet 6: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

The little advance I now have upon this store [amount] of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.

I was raised to farm work, which I continued till I was twenty two. At twenty one I came to Illinois, and passed the first year in Illinois—Macon County. Then I got to New-Salem (at that time in Sangamon, now in Menard County) where I remained a year as a sort of Clerk in a store. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. How did Abraham Lincoln learn new skills and gain knowledge even though he spent most of his time working on a farm? What does this tell us about how he solved problems or faced challenges?

2. How old was Lincoln when he got a job as a store clerk?

Activity Sheet 7: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

Vocabulary

assiduously: with great care and perseverance

Whig: a member of one of the two major political parties in the mid-nineteenth century

Missouri Compromise: an agreement passed by the US Congress in 1820 that allowed Missouri to enter the United States as a slave state and Maine to enter as a free state, maintaining a balance of power in Congress

Then came the Black-Hawk war; and I was elected a Captain of Volunteers—a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since. I went the campaign, was elated, ran for the Legislature the same year (1832) and was beaten. . . .

The next, and three succeeding biennial elections, I was elected to the Legislature. I was not a candidate afterwards. During this Legislative period I had studied law, and removed to Springfield to practice it. In 1846 I was once elected to the lower House of Congress. Was not a candidate for re-election. From 1849 to 1854, both inclusive, practiced law more **assiduously** than ever before. Always a **whig** in politics, and generally on the whig electoral tickets, making active canvasses. I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the **Missouri Compromise** aroused me again. . . .

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. Why do you think Abraham Lincoln felt prouder of being elected Captain of Volunteers than other achievements, even though he later won other elections? What does this tell us about what mattered to him?

2. Lincoln sometimes won elections and sometimes lost. How do you think these successes and failures helped shape the person he became? What can we learn from his experiences about trying again after setbacks?

Activity Sheet 8: Excerpt from Lincoln's Autobiography, 1859

Vocabulary

brands: a permanent symbol burned onto an animal's hide; Lincoln is making a joke.

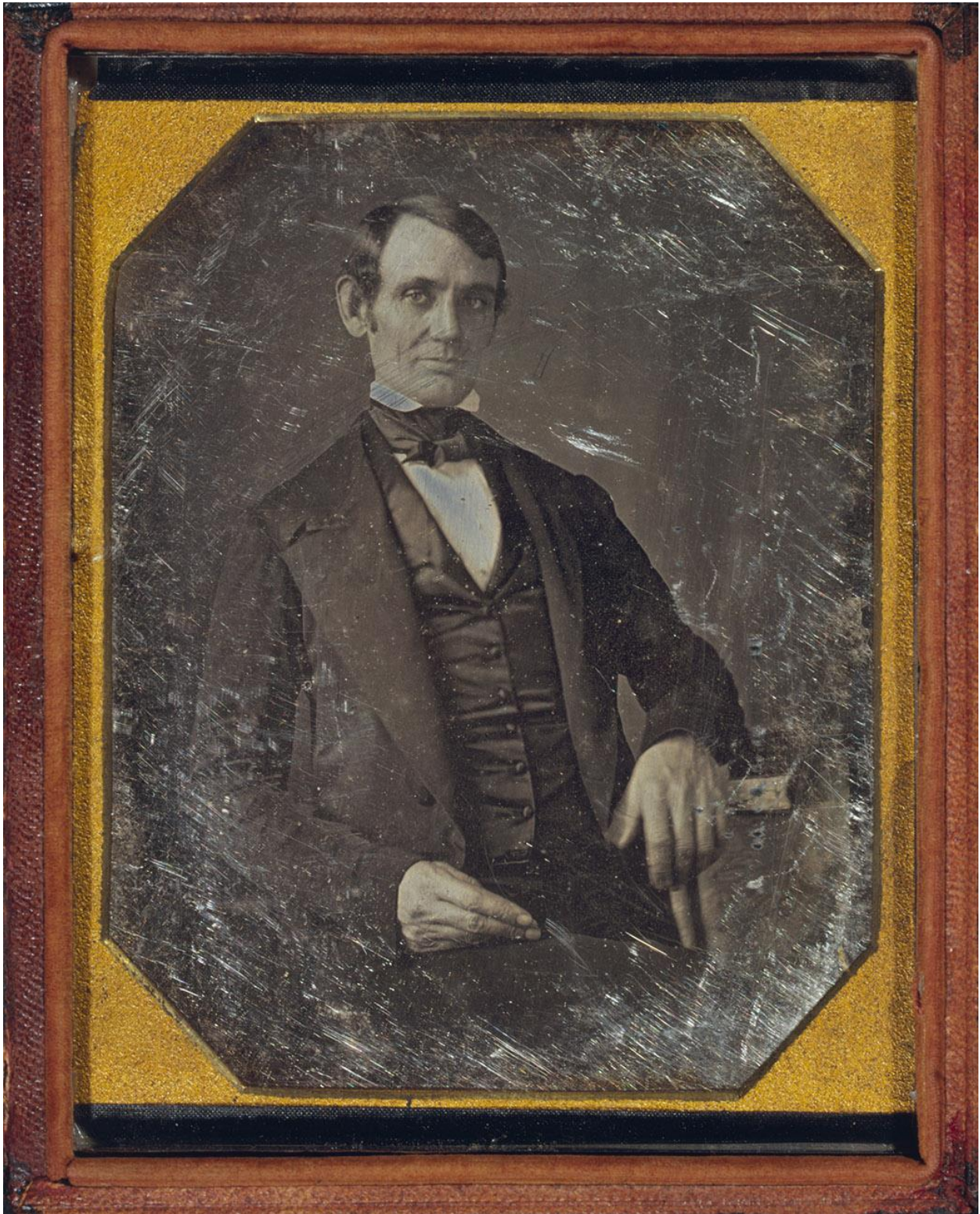
If any personal description of me is thought desired desirable, it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing, on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and grey eyes—no other marks or **brands** recollected.

Source: Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837 to 1897: Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Cover letter and sketch provided. 1859. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

1. Why do you think Abraham Lincoln chose to describe what he looked like in detail? What can learning about his appearance tell us about him as a person?

2. How might knowing what Lincoln looked like help people remember or imagine him in history? Why is it important to pay attention to details like this when learning about someone?

Photograph of Abraham Lincoln, 1846 or 1847



A photograph of Abraham Lincoln, Congressman-elect from Illinois, taken by Nicholas H. Shepherd in Springfield, Illinois, in 1846 or 1847 (Library of Congress)

Activity Sheet 9: Essential Questions

Take some time to reflect back on the primary sources we read that gave us Abraham Lincoln's own words about his life, like his experiences in the Black Hawk War, his political successes and failures, and even his personal description. Now recall our class discussions, and the photograph of Lincoln that we looked at.

Use this information and write your responses to the following questions:

1. Who was Abraham Lincoln?

2. What qualities made Abraham Lincoln a good choice for president in 1860?
