

Abe Lincoln: An Acceptable Nickname?¹

Joshua A. Claybourn

Abraham Lincoln despised the nickname *Abe*. Or so we learn reading certain Abraham Lincoln scholars. Indeed, Lincoln biographer Stephen B. Oates wrote in his 1979 book *Our Fiery Trial* – without citing any primary source –

He commanded the respect of his colleagues, all of whom called him “Mr. Lincoln” or just “Lincoln.” Nobody called him Abe – at least not to his face – because he loathed the nickname. It did not befit a respected professional who’d struggled hard to overcome the limitations of his frontier background.²

Russell Freedman, winner of the 1988 Newbery Medal for his work *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, may have relied on Oates when he wrote, “As for the nickname Abe, he hated it. No one who knew him well ever called him Abe to his face. They addressed him as Lincoln or Mr. Lincoln.”³

In his 1995 book *Lincoln*, the eminent historian David H. Donald reported that Abraham’s cousin Dennis and other boyhood associates called him Abe but asserted that Lincoln “always disliked the nickname.”⁴ Donald apparently based his case on Lincoln always addressing his law partner William Herndon, nine years his junior, as “Billy” while Herndon called him “Mr. Lincoln.”⁵ But with Lincoln as the older law partner and mentor to Herndon, the relationship naturally lent itself to differences in title and deference.

Even the National Constitution Center, an institution established by Congress, noted in a list of “Top 10 Abraham Lincoln Facts” that Lincoln “hated being called Abe. Apparently, he preferred being called by his last name.”⁶

This contention among scholars seeped into the popular press as well. For instance, *Parade* cited one of ten “facts” about Lincoln as, “He hated the nickname ‘Abe.’”⁷ Reporters for

¹ This article was adapted for publication as “Abe Lincoln: An Acceptable Nickname?,” *For the People*, A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association 20, no. 3 & 4 (Fall-Winter 2018): 8.

² Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 64.

³ Russell Freedman, *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 4.

⁴ David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 26-27.

⁵ Donald, *Lincoln*, 101.

⁶ NCC Staff, “50 interesting facts about Abraham Lincoln's life,” *Constitution Daily*, available at <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/50-shades-of-abraham-lincoln-2>.

⁷ Alison Abbey, “Happy Birthday, Honest Abe! 10 Facts You May Not Know About Lincoln,” *Parade*, 10 February 2017, available at <https://parade.com/546420/alison-abbey/happy-birthday-honest-abe-10-facts-you-may-not-know-about-lincoln/>.

the *Chicago Tribune* offered “10 things you might not know about Abraham Lincoln” with number one an assertion that “Lincoln detested the nickname Abe, and his friends and family avoided using it in his presence.”⁸

But do these assertions hold up under scrutiny? A review of available source material provides no direct evidence that Abraham Lincoln hated or even disliked the nickname *Abe*. In fact, the available record indicates close family members and associates used that name often without any suggestion that Lincoln disfavored it. From his childhood those around Lincoln referred to him as *Abe* and those who knew him well continued calling him *Abe* throughout his life.

Following Lincoln’s assassination, his former law partner, William Herndon, began collecting stories of Lincoln’s life from those who knew him, eventually resulting in a Lincoln biography and a trove of primary material about Lincoln. Herndon’s notes from his interview with Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, consistently use the name *Abe* – 28 times, in fact.⁹ Either Herndon or Sarah Lincoln, or both, used the nickname in conversation or shorthand to refer to Abraham Lincoln.

Other close family and friends repeatedly used this same nickname when speaking about Lincoln to Herndon, including Dennis Hanks, Lincoln’s cousin and boyhood companion; Nathaniel Grigsby, Lincoln’s brother-in-law; Matilda Johnston Moore, Lincoln’s stepsister; and John Romine, a man who hired Lincoln to work on his farm.¹⁰ When Dennis Hanks wrote to Lincoln on 5 April 1864, he addressed the letter, “Dere [*sic*] Abe”.¹¹

After winning the Presidency, Lincoln told a visitor: “All through the campaign my friends have been calling me ‘Honest Old Abe,’ and I have been elected mainly on that cry.”¹²

⁸ Mark Jacob and Stephan Benzkofer, “10 things you might not know about Abraham Lincoln,” *Chicago Tribune*, 11 November 2012, available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/ct-perspec-1111-things-20121111-story.html>.

⁹ Sarah Bush Lincoln interview with William H. Herndon, 8 September 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, eds. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 106-109.

¹⁰ See Wilson and Davis, eds., *Herndon’s Informants*.

¹¹ Dennis Hanks to Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833 to 1916: Family affairs. 5 April 1864. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal3213400/>.

¹² J. K. Morehead, interview with John G. Nicolay, Washington, D.C., 12 and 13 May 1880, Michael Burlingame, ed., *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 41. Cf. Ward Hill Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln: From His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: Osgood, 1872), 460.

Although Lincoln expressed concern about living up to his honest reputation if his appointees turned out to be corrupt, nothing suggests Lincoln disliked the name *Abe* itself.¹³

A journalist who reported Lincoln's activities almost daily from the time he was elected until he left Springfield for Washington, Henry Villard consistently used the nickname *Abe*. For example, Villard reported on receptions for Lincoln in Springfield in November 1860:

No restrictions, whatever, being exercised as to visitors, the crowd, that daily waits on the President, is always of a motley description. Everybody who lives in this vicinity or passes through this place, goes to take a look at 'Old Abe.' Muddy boots and hickory shirts are just as frequent as broadcloth, fine linen, etc. . . . Today's work was the hardest 'Old Abe' did since his election. He had hardly appeared at the State House when he was beset by an eager crowd that had been on the lookout for him ever since daylight.¹⁴

Viewing the available record as a whole, we find no evidence that Lincoln "hated" the nickname *Abe*. Although some mid-20th century historians latched on to this view, perhaps as a result of Oates's initial assertions, several notable modern historians now question Oates's, Donald's, and Freedman's conclusions about *Abe*. Lincoln historian Michael Burlingame notes,

I have not come across anything indicating that Lincoln hated the nickname *Abe*. I do recall seeing something to the effect that he was teased for having the name Abraham and that is why he regularly referred to himself as A. Lincoln, but that's not the same as saying he hated the nickname *Abe*.¹⁵

Douglas L. Wilson, co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College, likewise could not identify any source indicating Lincoln hated being called *Abe* and noted the nickname was "certainly what he was called by his friends as a young man."¹⁶

Abraham Lincoln rooted much of his persona in the image of a common, self-made man.¹⁷ Rather than a nickname that Lincoln despised, *Abe* may well have been a nickname Lincoln embraced in his political career to underscore his authentic, humble character. Either way, we know that when Lincoln's associates frequently used *Abe*, he expressed no concern about the

¹³ Lincoln wondered, "What will be thought now if the first thing I do is to appoint Cameron, whose very name stinks in the nostrils of the people for his corruption?" Ibid.

¹⁴ Henry Villard, *Lincoln on the Eve of '61* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 15-19.

¹⁵ Michael Burlingame, email to Joshua A. Claybourn, 10 September 2018.

¹⁶ Douglas L. Wilson, email to Joshua A. Claybourn, 9 September 2018.

¹⁷ See Kenneth J. Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Volume 21, Issue 2 (Summer 2000), 1-16.

practice. Surely Lincoln scholars and historians can freely deploy *Abe* as an appropriate moniker for Mr. Lincoln.