

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865)

*To Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography*

Lincoln's humility and brevity are legendary, and at first glance this "little sketch" seems to confirm both. But we might also ask how this sketch illustrates the condition of autobiography in America in 1859.

According to Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, none of the eleven U.S. presidents between Jefferson and James Buchanan (Lincoln's immediate predecessor) wrote an autobiography. There are many possible reasons for this, but one is that autobiographies were often the objects of suspicion. Of the roughly eight hundred written between 1800 and 1870, approximately seventy per cent were written by either clergymen or people who had experienced some unusual adventure or distress.<sup>1</sup> Persons in the mainstream of American life, including political leaders, did not write their life stories. Lincoln's reticence, therefore, may be due more to social-literary conventions than to inherent modesty.

Jesse W. Fell was secretary of the Illinois Republican State Central Committee and a Lincoln backer. He asked for this biographical information for use by a newspaper in Pennsylvania. The article based on it was published February 11, 1860, and reprinted by other papers. As a man who had not held previous national office (except for one term in Congress, 1847-49) and who had not acquired a national reputation until his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, Lincoln needed to be better known. In June 1860, following his nomination for President (on May 18, 1860), he wrote a second sketch much like this one for a Chicago newspaperman, and it was used in preparing a campaign biography. Significantly, it was four times longer, but written in the third person. So Lincoln appears to have gladly cooperated with the publicists who were helping to advance his candidacy, but he also wanted to make sure that the publicity "must not appear to have been written by myself."

There are many other interesting features to this sketch, such as the emphasis on his humble education, his frontier background, and his pleasure in being elected captain by his fellow volunteers in the Black Hawk War. The sketch skillfully performs self-promotion by means of the self-irony and humor that are sympathetic to his audience.

There are many Lincoln biographies. For a documentary of his life, see Earl Schenck Miers, et al., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960).

### Reading

Speeches & Letters of Abraham Lincoln, 1832-1865  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14721>