

Abraham Lincoln
(1808-1865)
President of the United States

One may wonder how Abraham Lincoln meets the stated criterion for inclusion in this volume of *The Chronicle*. But while not a Pennsylvanian, he certainly had ties with Gettysburg and with Methodism. The following article was written in 2009 by Paul L. Whalen, special contributor to the United Methodist Reporter, and appeared on the UM Portal website. A note accompanying the article described Mr. Whalen as “a member and Sunday school teacher at Highland UMC in Fort Thomas KY and an attorney who is completing a master’s degree in history.” The article is a fitting complement to the other stories in this volume, and we thank the United Methodist Reporter for special permission to include it in our collection.

Abraham Lincoln and the Methodists

As the world reflects upon the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln (born on Feb. 12), those who call themselves Methodists today might be interested to consider incidents in the life of Lincoln that touched Methodists in the 19th century.

While Lincoln never joined a church, many Methodists influenced his life. Lincoln’s interaction with Methodist laypersons and clergy indicates the degree of respect that he had for the Methodist Church.

This is reflected in a letter he wrote on May 18, 1864, in response to a visit of a group of Methodist clergy (as recorded in William E. Barton’s 1920 book, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln*): “God bless the Methodist Church—bless all the churches, and blessed be God who in this our great trial, giveth us the churches.”

The first instance of Methodist influence on Lincoln’s life was the marriage of his parents, Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks conducted on June 12, 1806, by Methodist pastor, the Rev. Jesse Head, on Beech Fork in Washington County, Ky.

Lincoln would probably say that not all of his encounters with Methodists were positive. His only election defeat in the popular vote came in 1832, when the famous Illinois Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright defeated him for a seat in the Illinois legislature. (Lincoln’s defeat by Stephen Douglas for a seat in the U.S. Senate was based on a vote of the Illinois legislature, not the popular vote.) In 1846, their fortunes were reversed when Lincoln defeated Cartwright in the future president’s only bid for Congress.

Some say that Lincoln’s strong feelings against slavery came after attending a Methodist Camp Meeting on Aug. 13, 1837, at Spring Creek near Springfield, Ill.

The Rev. Peter Akers (several times a president of McKendree College) preached on certain prophecies, including the end of slavery.

During a discussion on the way home, Lincoln is said to have told friends that he was impressed with the preacher and found the sermon instructive. In respect to Akers' prediction of the breakdown of civil and religious tyrannies, Lincoln is quoted as predicting that he would be "somehow mixed up with them."

There are also Methodist connections in Lincoln's career as a defense attorney. His most famous trial, "The Almanac Trial," had origins at a Methodist Camp Meeting on Aug. 29, 1857, in Mason County, Ill. Lincoln represented William "Duff" Armstrong, who was accused of murder. Armstrong and a man named Jim Norris had been allegedly involved in a fight with a James Metzger at the outskirts of the camp meeting, where there had been much drinking.

Armstrong was accused of striking Metzger with a small metal ball enclosed in a leather sling. Metzger left the fight on his horse while drunk. Due to his drunken state, Metzger fell off his horse several times. He saw a doctor the following day, who found that his skull was fractured in two places; two days later Metzger died.



With Metzger's death, Norris and Armstrong were arrested and indicted for murder. Norris was tried first and was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in the state penitentiary. On May 8, 1858, "Duff" Armstrong was tried in the Cass Circuit Court in Beardstown, Ill. Lincoln, a friend of Armstrong's late father, defended "Duff."

The primary witness against "Duff" Armstrong was Charles Allen, who testified that he saw Armstrong strike Metzger at 11 p.m. from a distance of 150 feet under the light of a full moon. On cross-examination, Lincoln asked the court to enter the 1857 almanac into evidence. The court granted his motion, and Lincoln then had Allen read the almanac entry for Aug. 29, 1857: There was no full moon that night.

Lincoln had caught Allen in a lie. The jury retired with the almanac and returned with a "not guilty" verdict for Armstrong.

More than a year later, from Aug. 31 to Sept. 3, 1859, Lincoln's life again intersected with the famous Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright. This time, Lincoln was hired to save Cartwright's grandson, Peachy Quinn Harrison, who had been charged with murder.

Harrison had been charged with thrusting a 4-inch knife into the ribs of a fellow named Greek Crafton in a drugstore in Pleasant Plains, Ill. Lincoln's star witness in the case was Cartwright.

The preacher testified that he had been with Crofton when he was dying. He further stated: "Crofton said, 'Yes, I have brought it upon myself, and I forgive Quinn and I want all my friends to know that I have no enmity in my heart against any man. If I die, I want it declared that I die in peace with God and all mankind.'" The jury deliberated for over an hour before bringing back a verdict of not guilty for Cartwright's grandson.

During the Civil War, Lincoln dealt with Methodists and members of the Methodist Church concerning many issues. The Methodist Church at the time was the largest denomination in the U.S.

Lincoln was known to have attended worship services at many churches in Washington, D.C., during his tenure as president. One church he visited was Foundry Methodist Church. Lincoln became a life director of the church's Methodist Missionary Society.

In January 1862, Lincoln appointed a Methodist to his cabinet, Edwin M. Stanton, an Ohio native and Washington, D.C., lawyer. Stanton, who had served briefly as the U.S. attorney general under President James Buchanan, was appointed as Lincoln's second Secretary of War, and his tenure was highlighted by the Union victory over the Confederacy in 1865.

One of Lincoln's most prominent friends in the Methodist Church hierarchy was Bishop Matthew Simpson. Lincoln and Simpson became acquainted when Simpson lived in Illinois from 1860-61 while serving as president of Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Theological Seminary) on the campus of Northwestern University. Simpson met with Lincoln in order to garner support for Northwestern. They became fast friends, even though during the Lincoln presidency, Simpson lived in Philadelphia.

Due to his role as a Methodist bishop, Simpson was one of the few people in his day that traveled widely around the U.S., including to the west-coast states of California and Oregon. The president routinely kept the White House door open for frequent visits with Simpson, often consulting with the bishop on public opinion in different parts of the nation. The friendship between the president and the bishop was seen in 1864, when Simpson represented Lincoln at the opening ceremonies of the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair.

With Lincoln's death in April 1865, Simpson had an important role in the funeral ceremonies. He gave the concluding prayer at Lincoln's funeral in Washington, D.C., and preached the funeral sermon at ceremonies in Springfield prior to Lincoln's interment. Methodists were an important part of Lincoln's life.