

## **Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln: Contrasts North and South**

One of the greatest ironies of the American Civil War is that both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were both born in Kentucky. The two men who would lead Americans in the most titanic struggle in our history were born about a hundred miles apart. History records that Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, near Hodgenville, Kentucky in present day LaRue County. Davis was born June 3, 1808, in Christian, now Todd County, Fairview.

These two men served as wartime leaders for four bloody years. From 1861 to 1865, Lincoln and Davis oversaw the fortunes and vicissitudes of their respective nations. We may well wonder how much of Kentucky these men took with them in their very different lives.

Lincoln is still portrayed as the epitome of the simple man. Born in a log cabin of undistinguished parents, he had very little formal education, yet went on to become the greatest president in the history of the United States. Davis on the other hand represents aspirations to Southern aristocracy. His family sent him to school in some of the best educational institutions in Kentucky. He attended Transylvania University in Lexington, where he learned the classics.

The contrast in Lincoln and Davis could not be more marked. Lincoln with little education had a natural genius that enabled him overcome an economical deprived background. He studied law, and became successful in his chosen field. Although his family moved to Indiana, and then Lincoln himself moved to Springfield, Illinois, the sixteenth president of the United States never forgot his native state. In 1842 Lincoln married Mary Todd of Lexington, thus ensuring a continuing association with Kentucky.

The family of Jefferson Davis moved to Mississippi, where Davis became involved in cotton planting. As a plantation owner, and a former military man (he graduated from West Point in 1828), he became the beau ideal of a Southern gentleman. In 1845 Davis married Varina Howell of Natchez, Mississippi. His first wife had been the daughter of fellow Kentuckian, Zachary Taylor. In a strange twist of fate, Lincoln had married into the old Southern aristocracy of the Todd family of Lexington, Kentucky, while Davis had married aristocratic woman of New Jersey descent.

Both Lincoln and Davis had military careers. Davis by far, had an extensive military background. Davis served in the U.S. Army, and fought in the Mexican War. President Franklin Pierce appointed him secretary of war in 1853. In contrast, Lincoln's military experience rested on a brief stint in the Black Hawk War of the 1830s. He found that the life of a soldier was not for him.

In image, Lincoln and Davis seemed worlds apart. Davis stood with a military bearing. He often looked rather dour. No one doubted that Davis thought of himself as a statesman. Lincoln, on the other hand, seemed to be a gangly, too tall, skinny

backwoodsman. His demeanor earned him the reputation of being approachable. He loved to tell jokes, and often seemed to be less than dignified.

While Davis served in the Mexican War, Lincoln as a congressman from Illinois opposed the war. This would not be the last time that they would be on opposite sides. Davis had joined the Democrats, and Lincoln had become a Whig. When the old Whig Party began to die out in the 1850s, Lincoln joined the newly formed Republican Party.

The influences of their native state never really left either Lincoln or Davis. Lincoln had a number of friends from "Kentucky" including the Speed family of Louisville. Davis remembered the state of his birth very fondly. He named his favorite horse, Kentucky. One of Lincoln's favorite songs, "Dixie," became the anthem of the South.

The two men that shaped our nation's history had a passion for their beliefs. Both men were willing to sacrifice all they had for their respective countries. Both men had their faults. Davis could be a cold and demanding leader. Many historians feel he was a frustrated general caught in the role of a civilian official. Lincoln could be dictatorial, and often overrode the Constitution when he felt the necessity.

Davis suffered from neuralgia, and often seemed distant due to his predisposition to try and hide his pain. Deep depression plagued Lincoln throughout his life. Both men were very human. History has often shrouded the humanity of Davis and Lincoln under a veil of heroism. This does an injustice to both men.

When the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia fell in the spring of 1865, Lincoln traveled there, and in a brief moment of triumph sat at the desk of Jefferson Davis. Witnesses recalled that the president had a "dreamy" expression on his care worn face. Within all too brief a time, John Wilkes Booth would end forever the hopes and dreams that Lincoln had for the reunited country.

When Jefferson Davis heard that Lincoln had been assassinated, he mourned his fellow Kentuckian's death as one of the darkest days for the South. Both Lincoln and Davis have now achieved mythic status in American and Kentucky history. Their statues stand in the rotunda of Kentucky's capitol building. Throughout the nation, statues of Lincoln abound. In the South, Davis, who had been vilified during his presidency of the Confederacy by many of his fellow Southerners, now is immortalized in bronze and marble throughout the South.

Davis and Lincoln remain a part of Kentucky. They are two figures that will forever be representative of that time in American history when brother fought against brother in the cruelest of all American wars.