

BORN TO
FIGHT

LINCOLN
and
TRUMP

GRETCHEN WOLLERT

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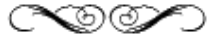
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DEDICATION



To Mike, whose strength, forbearance, and faith are all I need.
To my four daughters, a constant joy and encouragement.
And to my Dad, who always knew I would do something bright.

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CHAPTER 1

IT'S IN THE GENES



I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, and from a young age I knew something of Abraham Lincoln's humble beginnings. He was born in a log cabin in what today is Larue County, about an hour south of where I grew up. From Louisville, you take Interstate 65 south and go several miles past Elizabethtown before getting off the interstate. Then you take Highway 61 for a bit before it converges with 31E south. Boom, you're there—Honest Abe's birthplace.

Lincoln's rags to riches story was meant to be inspirational and motivational for us budding American dreamers. Other than that story, all I ever really knew about his ancestry before starting work on this book was that Lincoln was born in a cabin, his dad was a farmer, and Abe, most historians tell us, embodied such character virtues as goodness, kindness, honesty, industry, and obedience. Those, our teachers told us, were commendable aspirations for us all.

Before Donald Trump announced his candidacy for U.S. president, I knew even less about Trump's childhood, his upbringing, and his family. As he emerged onto the Republican primary stage, starting in 2015 after announcing his candidacy, my only impressions of his youth were assumptions—four of them: that he was rich, he was born rich, he grew up rich, and, according to most accounts, he was very rich. By his own account, he was very, very rich.

With such a clear contrast in beginnings, in areas such as geography and wealth (or lack of it), I saw no apparent resemblance between the Lincoln and Trump. Then again, at that point, I had not been looking. I had no reason to. But once I started foraging through all the murky misconceptions and

preconceived notions about both men, I discovered a reservoir of startling similarities.

George Washington had his cherry tree, Abe Lincoln his log cabin. If you were a child raised in America and schooled on the rudiments of U.S. history, those two iconic symbols were likely engraved on your mind and have remained there to this day. They rank right up there with the Declaration of Independence, the Liberty Bell, and John Hancock's autograph.

Abraham Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, in a one-room log cabin on the outskirts of Hodgenville, Kentucky, at a spot on the map then known as Sinking Spring Farm. That's where the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park now stands, replete with replica cabins. There's also a large stone edifice that seems a bit out of place nestled in the woods of central Kentucky.

If you visit this historical site, you can't help but notice the neoclassical granite and marble structure, which is fronted by fifty-six steps—one for each year that Lincoln lived—and partially tucked into a frontage of woods, although easily spotted by the grownups and kids stuffed into the vehicles pulling into the nearby parking lot.

The gaudy stone building resembles more a Greek-styled temple than the pathetic (if yet charming in romanticized retrospect) Lincoln birth home described in history books. Once inside, you find a replica of the renowned one-room log cabin, measuring 13 by 17 feet—the original is believed to have been 16 by 18. There's just the one front door with a single window cut out next to it. Inside there is a dirt floor and stone fireplace, the latter a necessity to make life tolerable for occupants on chilly nights or, worse, the occasional bouts of arctic-like cold that threatened a nineteenth-century pioneer family with misery and illness.

Lincoln's parents and sister had moved to Sinking Spring Farm a few months before Abraham was born; his dad having paid two hundred dollars for 348 acres of stony ground situated on the south fork of Nolin Creek. 'Sinking Spring Farm' referred to a spring on their property that bubbled out of a deep cave still visible today, although Abe admittedly could never picture it later in life when asked to recount his childhood. He was only there 'til he was two, and then the family moved just down the road to Knob Creek Farm.

Infant Abraham was the second-born of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, born into a family that by almost any objective standard, even for

early nineteenth-century America, was poor, even if young Abe couldn't yet see it that way. How do you know that you are actually poor if for one thing your mode of living is no different than it is for those who live around you, and for another your upbringing is grounded in work ethic and a familial embrace of virtuous qualities, where success and contentment aren't measured by salary, commissions, and stock options. If nothing else, you don't have time or opportunity to think about what you don't have. What you have is what you've got, and that is enough. As long as Thomas brought in sufficient living to keep clothes on everyone's backs and Nancy could throw together enough food for meals, life was what it was for the Lincolns.

"Poor" is in the eye and ear of the beholder. In "Some New Facts about Abraham Lincoln's Parents," published in the October 16, 1921 edition of *The National Republican*, Kentucky's then-assistant attorney general, Thomas B. McGregor, opines that Abe's parents deserve a "fairer estimate" than what had been assumed by many Lincoln biographers, writing, "In fact, they were well-to-do pioneers of their day; of sturdy, ancestral stock, owned a farm, domestic animals, tools—and a family Bible; (and were) neighborly, sacrificing, and active church-going members."¹ Thomas Lincoln was, in a way, an entrepreneur. Isn't that, after all, what a farmer is? The desire to work for oneself to produce one's own living was a most basic ambition. Lincoln himself, years later, put his own positive spin on growing up on a farm, generously proclaiming, "no other human occupation opens so wide a field for the agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought . . . an exhaustless source of profitable enjoyment."²

Donald Trump wasn't born in a log cabin, but a closer look at his ancestry, when placed next to Lincoln's, offers interesting parallels between the two and their forbears. Put it this way: it's not a huge stretch one way or the other to put them on a similar level.

Generally speaking, the similarities of family ancestries include the fact that both sets of ancestors traveled to new and hopeful places in search of a better life (the Lincolns first from England to Massachusetts, and then a few generations later from Virginia to Kentucky; the Trumps from Germany to America); both sets of ancestors lost assumed inheritances because of the current laws of the land; both paternal grandfathers died young in a sudden manner; neither President Lincoln nor President Donald Trump were ever

forthcoming on the subject of ancestry or from where they had come; both imagined or fantasized a different upbringing; and yet both grew up relatively normal, ordinary kids with early happy childhoods.



Lincoln's ancestral ties to America date back to 1637, just thirty years after Jamestown was founded as America's first permanent English colony, in what would become known as Virginia. This was just seventeen years after the first Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth in Massachusetts. Samuel Lincoln, the future sixteenth president's great-great-great-great-grandfather, migrated to that famous "rock" along with his two brothers. Their purpose: to save the English Puritan Revolution.³

Upon his arrival at the Plymouth Colony, Samuel Lincoln, then fifteen years old, settled in the town of Hingham. That's where he would stay for the rest of his life, his two brothers providing a stabilizing force centered around family, one that grew in number while staying rooted. In 1680—by which time Samuel was in his late fifties—the town of Hingham numbered 280 residents, one-fourth of whom bore the surname Lincoln.⁴

Mordecai Lincoln Jr., Samuel's grandson, was thirty-four years old in 1720 when he moved to Reading, Pennsylvania. From there the son of Mordecai Jr., whose name was John—and who became known as "Virginia John"—eventually headed farther south. At age fifty-two in 1768, John made his way to Rockbridge County in Virginia's Valley, where he would be joined by four of his brothers, all of them settling in next to the magnificent Blue Ridge Mountains.

Virginia John's son, Abraham, had more than a few pinches of Manifest Destiny in his DNA. Near the end of the Revolutionary War, this Abraham—the paternal grandfather to our nation's sixteenth president—set out from Virginia and soon joined up with a distant cousin of his, Daniel Boone (yes, the legendary trailblazer) as well as several other Boones and Lincolns, to make the trek across the Cumberland Gap to Kentucky, which at the time was rumored to be a rich land of plentiful opportunity. This Abraham bought thousands of rich, untilled acres near Louisville, in what he believed to be a wise purchase that would permit his family and their descendants to thrive and prosper. The land would enrich a family legacy with the indomitable spirit of

the pioneer, the striving for “riches” beyond the horizon, and culminate in presidential proportions.



Before there was a Donald Trump, there was a Fred Trump; and before there was a Fred Trump, there was Friedrich Trump: Donald’s paternal grandfather—a man Donald never knew or saw.

Friedrich was born and raised in Germany, all the way up to his sixteenth year of life before he bolted in a fit of youthful adventure for a faraway land. He had grown up in the village of Kallstadt in southwestern Germany, in an area known as Pfalz. A century later Pfalz was described as a lush, pleasant, and affluent place,⁵ but those many decades earlier it was a disturbing place for a restless lad with lofty ambitions, offering nothing of note for young Friedrich.

No question; he wanted out of Pfalz, a region nestled in the foothills of the Haardt Mountains. Shunning a military service obligation that was to soon kick in for him, sixteen-year-old Friedrich set off, alone, for America in October 1885. In running away from home, he boldly abandoned his family and an inheritance that had become so small as to be almost useless. (Napoleon’s mandated apportionment laws meant family lands were divided up equally among offspring.) There was little to tempt Friedrich to stay. Instead, he was determined to seek success and fortune in the United States. He intended to become wealthy with haste by brandishing the grit and determination that had become a Trump trademark.

Friedrich didn’t cross the Atlantic, destination New York, without having a trade skill in hand. Back in Germany, he had served an apprenticeship for about two and a half years as a barber, cutting hair. Also, he wasn’t entirely alone when he got to America. His older sister, Katharina, had immigrated to New York several years earlier and was now living with her husband, Fred Schuster, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, in a neighborhood of numerous Palatine German immigrants.

Good fortune sometimes comes to the bold. As fate would have it, young Friedrich quickly met a German-speaking barber, who was looking for someone immediately available to take on an assistant’s role cutting hair. For the next six years, Friedrich worked as a barber, all the while knowing this wasn’t going to be his life’s work. It certainly wasn’t an occupation that would

bring wealth quickly—by the time nine years had passed, he had merely several hundred dollars to his name, accompanied by an itch to get to work for real, and, in his case, to move on to greener pastures.

And what a move it was—completely across the country. Friedrich Trump left Manhattan in 1891 and headed west to Seattle, where he used his modest life savings to buy a restaurant in the city's red-light district, which he furnished with new tables, chairs, and a range. He excelled at serving the public and assured patrons a good meal, a stiff drink, and even more recreational pursuits.

For the next ten years, Friedrich Trump—by now better known as “Frederick” Trump—bounced around the Pacific Northwest, leaving Seattle after only three years. In British Columbia and the Yukon, he rubbed elbows with miners while still making a go of it in the hotel and restaurant business. Eventually, he and a business partner founded the Arctic Restaurant and Hotel in Bennett, British Columbia. Then two years later, in 1900, they launched the Yukon-based White Horse Restaurant and Inn. It proved to be a huge financial success, serving three thousand meals a day, with plenty of space available to feed one's taste for gambling. A year later, Trump sold his share in the business to his partner and headed back to Germany as a somewhat wealthy man.⁶

Back home in Kallstadt, Frederick wasted no time in finding a wife. He married Elisabeth Christ, eleven years his junior, before moving back to New York City in 1902. Elisabeth's homesickness made it a brief stay in America, less than two years. Before leaving the U.S., however, Elisabeth gave birth to their daughter Elizabeth in April 1904. A few months later, they were headed back to Germany. That, too, would be a short stay. Bavarian authorities finally caught up with Friedrich's earlier avoidance of military service, when he had first fled to America. They now labeled him a draft dodger.

A royal decree issued in February 1905 informed Trump that he had eight weeks to get out of the country for not having properly registered his 1886 departure with authorities. He put his wife and baby on a boat and headed back to America for good. That summer of 1905 their first son, Fred, (Donald Trump's dad-to-be) was born.

Having invested in land in the Pacific Northwest about a decade earlier, Frederick wasted little time in buying another chunk of real estate. In 1908, he purchased property on Jamaica Avenue in the Woodhaven area of Queens,

New York. Two years later, he moved his family there and rented out rooms in the spacious residence, helping to defray some of the family's living expenses. As he was starting to build his real estate portfolio, Frederick Trump was also working as a hotel manager at a property at 6th Avenue and 23rd Street.

Still in his early forties, Frederick was finally able to enjoy the modest wealth he had accumulated (equivalent to a little over a half million dollars in today's currency), with designs to further expand his investments into land. What he hadn't planned for was an early death. It was on a Wednesday near the end of May 1918 when Frederick Trump and young Fred, twelve at the time, were walking along Jamaica Avenue. They often did this in the afternoon, dropping in to chat with realtors along the way. At some point Frederick suddenly turned to his son, saying he felt sick. They hastened home, where the elder Trump immediately crawled into bed and then died within hours, "just like that," in the words of young Fred, recalling the event years later.⁷

Frederick Trump was forty-nine years old when he died; the cause—Spanish flu. Five days later, his brother-in-law, Fred Shuster, passed away, also a Spanish flu victim, putting them among the tens of millions of people worldwide who eventually died from one of the deadliest epidemics of the twentieth century.⁸

The first Abraham Lincoln, Honest Abe's grandfather, also died at a young age. That Abraham was forty-two, although his death involved different circumstances—he was killed by an Indian in a surprise attack at the family's homestead. This was in 1786, and it occurred in the presence of three of his children; Mordecai was the oldest at fifteen; Josiah, the middle son; and Thomas (Abe's father), age eight.

A few years earlier, Abraham, the elder, had sold his farm in Virginia and moved over the mountains into Kentucky, where, he had been told by others, including his cousin Daniel Boone, that rich lands awaited them, offering golden opportunities for those willing to risk the dangers of a vast, untamed territory. Within several years Abraham had achieved ownership of more than fifty-five hundred acres of land in what was considered to be one of the opportunistic areas of Kentucky. Trouble came while, joined by his three sons, Abraham was planting a cornfield; Indians emerged from the woods and attacked them, killing Abraham. A startled but cool-headed Mordecai sent Josiah running to a nearby settlement for help, while he sprinted to a cabin close by for refuge.

Thomas hadn't followed his big brother to the cabin's sanctuary—the young boy was still at his deceased father's side, in the cornfield, mourning his loss. Once inside the cabin, Mordecai peered out through the cracks between the logs only to see another Indian coming out of the woods, stealthily moving toward an unaware Thomas. Mordecai picked up a rifle, aimed it at a silver ornament hanging from the Shawnee Indian's neck and pulled the trigger, instantly killing the attacker and missing his little brother by inches.

Well into his adult years, Thomas Lincoln would beam with pride each time he related the story, to anyone who would listen, about how quick-acting Mordecai had heroically saved his life. Thomas recounted the story so many times, that it eventually led Honest Abe to describe it as “the legend more strongly than all others imprinted upon my mind and memory.”⁹

Because he was the oldest son in the family, Mordecai, according to Virginia law, inherited all his father's rather impressive estate once he came of age. That left young Thomas with none of the family inheritance. On his own, he would have to rely on grit and resolve to determine his future.

As husband to Nancy and father to two children, Thomas was not long in Kentucky, eventually defeated by property laws that rendered the land he had purchased next to worthless. Lands weren't properly surveyed by the state, and between the vaguely defined boundaries and cunning salesmen, who were slick at convincing farmers that their lands were not legally purchased, land ownership was often challenged in court. Expensive litigations were no-win situations for small farmers. Young Abe's dad believed he had no choice but to surrender the legal skirmish and find a new home—in another state.

So, in the fall of 1816, Thomas took leave from his wife and two children to head north and explore Indiana. His intent was to find and claim a plot of land, mark his spot, and then return to Kentucky to gather up his family and make the move. In those days, pioneers could purchase federal land in Indiana, for pennies, that offered plenty of appeal and properly surveyed boundaries. At the time, Indiana was a sparsely populated frontier; it was barely a state, having joined the Union less than a year earlier.¹⁰

Thomas Lincoln would need plenty of pluck, luck, and tenacity to pull off this move. Traveling alone on the Ohio River on a flatboat he had constructed using his impressive carpentry skills, Thomas came ashore in Troy at the southern tip of Indiana. His trip there had been near-tragic, his boat capsizing

at one point, although he was able to recover almost everything that had fallen out of the boat before continuing on the arduous journey.

Once back on land, and now in Indiana, he navigated nine miles along what could generously be called a wagon road, and eventually reached a dense wilderness that was totally unsettled. No more wagon roads, no cleared paths—he would have to hack through seven miles of tall, gnarly underbrush to find a destination he hoped would serve as the family home for the foreseeable future. At first it seemed he would have better luck digging a hole through to China with his bare hands. Undaunted, he eventually slashed his way to a plot of land he could claim as his properly surveyed and U.S.-government-issued corner of heaven. He went about cutting and gathering up brush to pile into each of the lot's four corners, taking the added measure of burning notches into trees to mark his newfound plot with unmistakable certainty. That done, he made his way back to Kentucky—the return trip much easier than the original trek—to retrieve his family and take them to their new Indiana home before winter settled in.



As interesting and richly anecdotal as the respective family histories—their ancestry—are, neither Abraham Lincoln nor Donald Trump were ever much for talking about it themselves. It just wasn't a subject that had much appeal for them. It was evident, though, that each man had been greatly shaped by the work ethic and ideals of their ancestors. Both saw themselves as self-made men, but with a reticence to talk about their upbringing or other elements of their ancestries. Their attitudes seemed to be, *Why bother? It doesn't mean anything.*

Lincoln, for instance, simply never saw a purpose in expounding on his family tree. When he was asked in 1859 by supporters for biographical information they could use to tout him for his presidential campaign, Lincoln said only, "My parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families—second families, perhaps I should say." When approached by the *Chicago Tribune's* John Locke Scripps to write his campaign biography, an apparently unamused, yet unwittingly amusing, Lincoln muttered, "Why Scripps . . . it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in *Gray's*

Elegy: ‘The short and simple annals of the poor.’ That’s my life, and that’s all you or any one else can make of it.”¹¹

In similar manner, Trump doesn’t relish questions about himself, his upbringing, or his ancestry. In one account, he writes, “Contrary to what a lot of people think, I don’t enjoy doing press. I’ve been asked the same questions a million times now, and I don’t particularly like talking about my personal life. Nonetheless, I understand that getting press can be very helpful in making deals, and I don’t mind talking about them. I just try to be very selective.”¹² Trump also says that people who watched him on *The Apprentice*, read his books, or attended his Learning Annex seminars, might think they know him, but they know only part of him—his business side. “I usually don’t speak much about my personal life or about my personal values or about how I came to be who I am today,” he points out.¹³



There has long been a question about Lincoln’s true lineage, and it is as much about his father as it is about his mother. It involves a long-held perception that as smart and ambitious as Abe Lincoln was, his father was regarded as neither, at least not in the eyes of some of those who knew both father and son. Some historians have hinted or even concluded that Thomas Lincoln lacked ambition, that he was low on energy and something of a dullard, even shiftless, while Abe would come to be known for his superior intellect—his well-documented love for books fed that assessment—as well as his robust drive and knack for thinking quickly on his feet, even earning a reputation for his occasional, albeit dry, wit (all of which could just as easily describe Donald Trump).

Apparently, it was reasoned, these qualities of Abe’s could *not* have been genetic pass-me-downs from his father. That leads to speculation that whatever drove Abraham Lincoln and set him apart from his peers must have been from his mother Nancy’s side of the family tree, or, perhaps, Lincoln’s biological father was not Thomas. That, in turn, gives rise to speculation that what made Lincoln great could have come from one of the more prominent families in that part of Kentucky, perhaps a Hardin or a Marshall, or one of the other families in that part of the country that held social and intellectual sway.¹⁴

That sort of scuttlebutt, present in Lincoln's lifetime, displeased Abe to no end. He believed that his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, had been an illegitimate child, a scenario which opened up all kinds of possibilities. During a long buggy ride, an adult Lincoln told his riding companion that his mother Nancy was the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks, the result of Lucy's fling or some other sort of sexual rendezvous with a presumably unknown but well-bred Virginia farmer or planter. Or so the story goes. It was from this mystery man, the future president reasoned, that he had been bestowed his keen analysis, logic, mental acuity, ambition, and whatever other qualities that distinguished him from previous ancestors of the Lincoln family. "God bless my mother; all that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her," Lincoln was quoted as saying, with a strong hint of melancholy.¹⁵

Fred Trump, Donald's dad, who was forty-one years Donald's senior, had concerns about his own family's heritage, but it had nothing to do with illicit affairs or the like. Fred was described as self-conscious, perhaps even ashamed, of his German lineage, instead telling people that he was Swedish—that his father, Friedrich, had come to the United States from Sweden and not Germany. This is a claim that Donald Trump has repeated in at least one book.¹⁶



Although the two presidential fathers were born and lived separated by more than a hundred years—one a poor backwoods country laborer of southern roots (Thomas Lincoln) and the other something of a city slicker of northern privilege and opportunity (Fred Trump)—both managed to instill, either purposely or unwittingly, similar qualities in their respective president-to-be sons.

Neither Abraham nor Donald were intimidated by their fathers. Even as teenagers and young adults, they were not afraid to stand up to their dads without backing down. Yes, all things considered, Thomas Lincoln, was pleased that his son was determined to improve himself academically by poring over books. (Abraham read as many as he could get his hands on—a point hammered home by the history books.) However, when Thomas perceived that Abe's reading interfered with work around the farm, such as chopping wood or building fences, Thomas would physically punish his son. Impudence was not

to be tolerated, and the chores were not to be delayed or ignored. As a young boy, Abraham would occasionally jump into the middle of adult conversations, and Thomas would not tolerate this either, sometimes striking his son to drive the point home. Even as a youngster unable to match his dad physically, Abraham “never balked, but dropt a kind of silent unwelcome tear, as evidence of his sensations.”¹⁷

We know Donald Trump wasn’t intimidated by his dad and had no fear of standing up to him because younger Trump said so: “Fortunately for me, I was drawn to business very early, and I was never intimidated by my father, the way most people were. I stood up to him, and he respected that. We had a relationship that was almost businesslike. I sometimes wonder if we’d have gotten along so well if I hadn’t been as business-oriented as I am.”¹⁸

It was that Trump nose for business and Fred Trump’s business acumen and ambition that set the Trumps apart from the Lincolns’s world of modest means. By age twenty-one, Fred Trump was already diving headfirst into New York City real estate, joining forces with his mother, Elisabeth, to do business as E. Trump and Son. Where the Lincolns and Trumps did share a philosophy was in their penchant for playing it safe when it came to business. Thomas Lincoln chose the remote frontier over the conflicts of the settled Kentucky community. In the case of the Trumps, they chose the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens for their business ventures rather than fighting it out with cutthroat developers in the fierce (and expensive!) competitive fires of Manhattan (although Donald would eventually change that).¹⁹



When Abraham was nine, his mother, Nancy, suddenly passed away at age thirty-four, having become violently ill with what was known as milk sickness. It was a malady caused by consuming milk or other dairy products from cows foraging on the poisonous white snakeroot plant, which grew abundantly near the Ohio River during pioneer days. Milk sickness claimed thousands of lives among migrant families in the early nineteenth century.²⁰

About a year later, in 1819, Thomas Lincoln remarried, exchanging vows with Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow whose husband had died three years earlier. Sarah's brother, Isaac, had been the one to sell the Kentucky Sinking

Spring Farm to Thomas. As a stepmom, Sarah was a blessing to Abraham. She was well-read and highly literate in her own right and enthusiastic about introducing her brainy stepson to a world of literature beyond what he had experienced. This pleased Thomas immensely. As a man of little or no education who could barely write his name (according to his son), Thomas took pride in his son's smarts and in how literary Abe was becoming (as long as he still put work first). When it came to public service, Thomas was active in public affairs and church activities, serving as a militia member, local constable, prison guard, jury member, and road commissioner. Thomas provided a shining example to his son of the importance of performing public service.²¹

Frugality was a hallmark of both the Lincoln and Trump households, each in their own way. For Thomas Lincoln it was a matter of survival, as simple as that. He essentially struggled his whole life, working valiantly to make ends meet between his carpentry and farming vocations, despite being seen by those who knew him as a “tinker—a piddler—always doing but doing nothing great.” The financial pressure became more pronounced after he married Sarah; she brought three of her own children from her previous marriage into the house. There they were also joined by Dennis Hanks—a cousin to Nancy Lincoln, who was ten years older than Abraham. This upped the count of household members to eight. It was up to Abraham, now a strapping adolescent, to help out when his father's health started to fail. (He reportedly began losing his sight in both eyes, among other ailments.) This made it necessary for Abraham to spearhead the farming, hoeing, fence-making, and so on to pick up the slack and keep the family afloat. On top of that, Thomas hired his son out to work for other farmers in the area. According to local law, Thomas got to keep all the money Abraham earned until Abraham came of age at twenty-one.²²

When it came to his version of frugality and being a model caretaker of finances and goods, Fred Trump had few peers. There are many stories about his penny-pinching, such as how he would pick up stray nails at a job site and return them to the workers the next day— simultaneously saving money and setting an example for his son Donald. To cut down on supply costs, Fred had chemists research the formula for the floor disinfectant he was purchasing in large quantities. Then he had workers mix up batches of the disinfectant at significantly lower cost than he had been paying a vendor. If he felt there were

any lights that could be turned off without affecting the overall lighting, he would think nothing of getting up on a stepladder and removing the light bulbs.²³ How many Trumps did it take to change a light bulb? One, apparently.

Fred Trump typically worked twelve-hour workdays (also known as “half-days” to the world’s most devoted workaholics), sometimes busting it right alongside his construction workers. Fred didn’t always click with Donald when it came to business matters, but he respected his son’s robust work ethic and his knack for producing great results. At one point Fred told a business magazine, “Everything Donald touches turns to gold!” There were also times when Proud Papa Fred would pull out a photo of Donald in a tuxedo and show it around. Sometimes his audience would already know who the young Trump was, a sure sign of the impact Donald was making in the business world at an early age.

Fred Trump also made it a point to know what was going on in the world around him, especially when it might involve business matters. Following in his own father’s business footsteps, Fred discovered something in the mid-1930s that would provide a sustained lifeblood of opportunities in the construction business. At the time Fred was hitting his thirties and Donald was still ten years away from being born. This newfound ticket to business success: the government.

Thanks to a number of New Deal programs pushed into existence by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, new heavily financed opportunities were being offered to help float businesses such as Fred’s. He proved skilled at determining how to take full advantage of these programs. In so doing, Fred Trump “joined the ranks of entrepreneurs who constitute one of the oldest fraternities in the Republic: multimillionaires who owe their fortune to subsidies from a grateful government.”²⁴

Thomas Lincoln never became rich from his government-subsidized Indiana land. He never even approached middle class by nineteenth-century standards, but he managed to exhibit his own means of self-improvement that didn’t go unnoticed by his son. The fact that Thomas was able to purchase farmlands in two different states was at least indicative of a commitment to making a better life for his family, despite the critics who had seen him as “piddling.” As a carpenter, he was self-taught and came to be respected for his craftsmanship. If

nothing else, Thomas Lincoln was a model of self-betterment. Even though Abraham significantly surpassed his father in that regard, there's no disputing that his aspiration to improve himself was something that had been exemplified, to some degree, by his father.²⁵



Fred Trump was described as a man of grit, someone who embodied discipline, consistency, and a determination to get the job done right. If it wasn't right, he would make sure it got fixed, often taking care of it himself. He was not one to give up easily on a matter, even when friends and colleagues suggested that he take another course of action—a quality of stubbornness often associated with Donald. About Fred Trump, attorney Sydney Young once said, “You could never tell Fred Trump what to do. You could tell him how to do it, but not what to do. He was very strong-willed.”²⁶

Fred ensured that his son was better educated than he. While Trump grew up surrounded by his father's wealth, little was given to Donald during his schooling years. He was put to work, and it was hard work, long hours; there was no coasting for any of the five Trump siblings. Trump's mother, Mary Anne (MacLeod), was part of that hard-work ethic as well, working fulltime in various ways alongside her husband and children.

Many times when Fred went to collect rent from tenants in tough sections of Brooklyn, he would bring young Donald along, as much to learn the business as to be exposed to seedier parts of the city he otherwise would not have cause to visit. At times, Donald watched his dad ring the doorbell at a tenant's residence then stand off to the side of the door, knowing an angry tenant might shoot through the door in lieu of paying rent. “My work ethic came from my father,” Donald said. “I don't know anybody who works harder than I do. I'm working all the time. It's not about money—I just don't know a different way of life, and I love it.”²⁷

Life inside the Trump home on Midland Parkway in Queens was caring but strict, complete with rules and curfews. For Donald's sister, Maryanne, that meant no lipstick. Sweets and snacks between meals were not allowed, and when Fred, the dad (there was also a Fred Jr., Donald's older brother) came home from work at night, Mom would dutifully inform her husband about what the kids had done that day and how they had behaved. Then he would

mete out whatever punishments were called for. In that sense, Donald was subject to the same sort of discipline, including physical measures—such as paddling with a wooden spoon—that his presidential predecessor Abraham had been subject to as a child and an adolescent. “Spare the rod, spoil the child.”

All five Trump children—Maryanne, Fred Jr., Elizabeth, Donald, and Robert—were taught to be frugal and respect the value of a dollar. That meant turning out all the lights in rooms not being used, cleaning their plates at every meal, and being aware of and attentive to starving children around the world. Each of them worked summer jobs, which for the three boys included paper routes; their only concession being that when it rained or snowed, they could use a limousine to get to all of their delivery destinations. “The first time I ever realized that my father was successful,” Maryanne said, “was when I was fifteen and a friend said to me, ‘Your father is rich.’ I was stunned. We were privileged, but I didn’t know it.”²⁸

Like Donald Trump, Lincoln, too, worked for his dad into his twenties. In the first half the nineteenth century, young men were more duty-bound to work in ways that probably would be considered akin to slavery by modern standards. Case in point: Lincoln continued working, subservient to his dad, even a year beyond what was required by frontier law or custom. That involved back-breaking work, mostly as a backwoods laborer; Lincoln spent many years wielding that familiar axe in his lean yet strong arms.

During the time Lincoln continued working for his dad, without pay, beyond his twenty-first birthday, he helped his father and the rest of the family make the move from Indiana to their new home in Illinois. This was March 1830. It was a two-week, 225-mile journey. Abe drove one of the two rickety wagons, each pulled by two oxen, fording the Wabash River at Vincennes, Indiana. Then they navigated through swollen streams and water-saturated soil to central Illinois. About a dozen miles west of the small hamlet of Decatur, Illinois, they arrived at a ten-acre plot controlled by the federal government that cousin John Hanks had suggested they try out. Eventually, they decided to purchase it as their new homestead.²⁹

Both Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah, and Trump's mother, Mary Anne, had powerful influences on their sons, the fulfillment of their considerable ambitions and their respective roles as matriarchs of the home. Both women had been adventurous and secure enough in themselves to leave their homes to marry husbands, and both embodied civility, cleanliness, and care. They each nurtured their children, filling their homes with love, but they also prodded their children to follow pursuits of self-betterment, to be all they could be.

It was generally known that Thomas Lincoln had remarried well in choosing Sarah Bush as his second wife. In Sarah, Thomas saw the character and willingness to be a great stepmother to his son. There certainly was a strong mutual respect between Abraham and his stepmother, who took her stepson's embrace of reading and literature to a new level.

In later years, Lincoln expressed ample praise for his stepmother. In fact, he visited her at her home in Coles County, Illinois, right before he went to Washington, DC to be sworn in as U.S. president. In the letters he wrote to her, he referred to her as "Mother," and later he gave her use of a forty-acre tract of land he had acquired following his father's death, allowing Sarah to use it for the remainder of her lifetime.³⁰

The strong mother-son connection between Sarah and Abraham had been born almost from the time she moved into the Lincoln home after she and Thomas married. This was in 1818, when Abe was nine. What she brought first into the family was a gift of love. Thomas had been a single parent for a year, and his children were suffering from it. After seeing young Abe and his sister Sarah dirty, not properly clothed, and looking hungry, Sarah took it upon herself to clean the children—soaping and rubbing the layer of filth away.

Next came a makeover of the house itself, a reorganization blueprinted by the stepmom. Thomas Lincoln and Dennis Hanks were convinced to give up hunting long enough to split logs and put down a floor in the cabin, over the dirt. They then finished the roof, constructed a proper door, and cut a hole for a window that was covered with grease paper for added protection against the elements. Other modifications to the log cabin, presumably designed by Sarah Bush and accepted by Tom, were to add a loft accessible by pegs driven into the wall. This loft was where the three boys in the blended family could sleep. Thomas also put his carpentry skills to use by building another table and

stools, all done with minimal friction between dad and mom. Sarah's influence transformed a crude cabin into a proverbial castle.

Sarah also pulled off the remarkable feat of blending the two families without tolerating strife or envy, and in the process she grew quite fond of Abraham. "Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested of him," she said. "I never gave him a cross word in all my life. . . His mind and my mind—what little I had—seemed to move together—move in the same channel."³¹

There was a similar connection between Trump and his mom, Mary Anne. In Donald's case their relationship involved a shared competitive streak, a virtue when it came to dealing with the vagaries of the competitive real estate business in which they worked alongside Fred. Indeed, Mrs. Mary Anne Trump had a strong bearing and confidence about her, a commanding feminine presence, influenced by the fact that she was fair, tall, and slender with blue eyes and blonde hair, and by her slight Scottish brogue. (She had been born in the Scottish village of Tong, which is closer to Iceland than London.)

Mary Anne MacLeod Trump was a most impressive woman of her era, almost regal in countenance and appearance. She was definitely "queen" of her castle. She made a home as useful and modern as the one Sarah Bush had created in her time, and Mary Anne made sure it was ruled by order, competence, and love—and with as much added splendor as she could muster. "My mother was silently competitive," Donald said, long after she had passed away at age 88, in 2000. "She was a very competitive person, but you wouldn't know that. She had a great fighting spirit, like Braveheart."³²

Over the years, Donald Trump has been given hundreds of Bibles by admirers who no doubt have hoped and prayed for his faith and his salvation. He says that he has kept all of them safely stowed away in a safe place in Trump Tower. When he took the oath of office as U.S. president in January 2017, he placed his hand on two Bibles—one was given to him by his mother upon his confirmation as a boy, which he counts as the one most special to him—and the other was a Bible that had belonged to a former U.S. president: Abraham Lincoln.

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