



The incredible story behind Lincoln's university

Why is there a university named for Abraham Lincoln in Harrogate, near the Cumberland Gap?

Part one: In 1782, a time when European settlers were first making their way past the Appalachians, an army captain named Abraham Lincoln migrated west with his family as a part of one of Daniel Boone's expeditions. Like thousands of immigrants, the Lincoln family came right through the Cumberland Gap, a pass in the mountains where the present-day states of Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky all meet.

Four years later, Capt. Lincoln was shot by Native Americans near his farm in present-day central Kentucky. His son, Thomas (President Abraham Lincoln's father), was only a boy then.

Part two: During the Civil War, most of the people living in East Tennessee remained loyal to the Union. Nevertheless, much of East Tennessee was occupied by Confederate troops for most of the war, and Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's overall strategy for winning the war put little emphasis on "rescuing" East Tennessee. This bothered Lincoln, especially since he felt a sense of bond to the people in East Tennessee.

One day, Gen. Oliver Otis Howard was meeting with President Lincoln. The two men were discussing the fate of East Tennesseans and the Cumberland Gap in particular. According to Howard, the president told him that if he made it through the war alive that he wished he would do something for the people who lived there.

Lincoln, of course, was assassinated after the war. Howard survived and

became head of the Freeman's Bureau after the war. Among Gen. Howard's legacies are Fisk University in Nashville and Howard University, named for him, in Washington, D.C.

Part three: A generation after the Civil War, the Cumberland Gap became the site of a great economic boom and bust, fueled by the development of the railroads and the promise of mining iron ore. In 1892-1893 a group of British investors created Middlesboro, Ky., on the northwest side of the gap at about the same time as a massive hotel and resort was being developed in Harrogate, on the southeast side of the gap.

Both enterprises were disasters. Harrogate's Four Seasons Hotel had an unbelievable 700 rooms, pools, restaurants, spas and other things expected by wealthy travelers of that era. It went broke shortly after it opened. A few years later, the hotel was bought for scrap, the lumber used to build it sent by train to Chicago. Through this process, the hotel property fell into the hands of Rev. A.A. Myers and his wife, Ellen, proprietors of an institution called Harrow Academy.



At left, a statue of a young Abraham Lincoln stands on the Harrogate campus of Lincoln Memorial University. The university was established near the Cumberland Gap, below left and right, a pass through the Appalachian Mountains where Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia meet. During the Civil War, President Lincoln wanted to "rescue" East Tennessee, which sympathized with the Union but remained under Confederate control for most of the war.

Part four: Shortly after his retirement from the army, Gen. Howard was traveling through the area on his way to Chattanooga (in an effort associated with the preservation of battlefields there). Stopping in Harrogate, he stayed with Rev. Myers and recalled the discussion he had with President Lincoln more than three decades earlier.

Working together, Howard and Myers began organizing a college on the land that had previously held the Four Seasons Hotel. When the Chicago Tribune first ran an article about the effort in 1898, the university's purpose was said to be "to educate the youth of the mountain districts of that part of the country, where education has been much neglected." And it would stand as a permanent monument to Abraham Lincoln (the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., would not be built until 1914).



Part five: On Lincoln's birthday in 1900, Gen. Howard made a speech about what Lincoln said to him and about the college that was then under construction. Here is what he said, according to the New York Times:

"The last time that I saw Mr. Lincoln, he led me to the frame that held his charts, and he pulled down the large government map of the two states, Tennessee and Kentucky. He put his finger on that spot where we are now trying to establish a memorial institution to his name — Cumberland Gap — and thrilled me as he told me of the character of the mountain people. His idea was that they were strongly in favor of the Union, that we might somehow seize Knoxville and deliver them from the thralldom of the Confederacy and that all Tennessee would be ours when it was done. The people of the mountains — thousands and thousands of them — suffered excessively during the entire period of the war, being driven hither and thither by the several contending armies.

"The Lincoln Memorial University at Cumberland Gap, which we are trying to make a worthy monument to our beloved Lincoln, declares that it 'shall ever seek to make education possible to the children of the humble, common people, among whom Abraham Lincoln was born.' What an inspiration in his name." ☺

Tennessee History for Kids



Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.