

Henry Clay & Abraham Lincoln

“My Beau Ideal of a Statesman”

One of the least known of Henry Clay’s accomplishments is the influence he had on a young native Kentuckian who transplanted to Illinois. The young Kentuckian, who himself sought a career in politics, was none other than Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln once told a sculptor carving his likeness that he “almost worshiped Henry Clay.” Although Lincoln is not known to have ever met Clay, there can be little doubt of the profound impact Clay had on him. For Lincoln, Clay was his “beau ideal of a statesman,” a political role model to be emulated and supported.

Lincoln cast his first presidential vote for Clay in 1832. In 1844 Lincoln campaigned vigorously for Clay and served as an elector for him in the State of Illinois. Lincoln, as a member of the Springfield Clay Club, signed an invitation which was extended to Clay to speak in Springfield during his 1844 presidential campaign.

In 1847, Lincoln and his wife Mary Todd stopped in Lexington on their way to Washington D.C. Lincoln was to assume the seat to which he had been elected in the US House of Representatives. While in Lexington, Lincoln heard Clay deliver a speech on November 13, 1847 at the Market House.

And on July 6, 1852, at the Statehouse in Springfield, Lincoln delivered a stirring eulogy of his political idol.

When Lincoln himself entered the political arena, he did so largely on a platform borrowed from Clay. Lincoln often quoted Clay in speeches to reinforce his own ideas or, at times, even in place of them. In the great debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln quoted Clay at least 41 times.

When Lincoln was elected president, he selected a published edition of a speech Clay gave in support of the Compromise of 1850 as one of four books to keep with him during the writing of his first inaugural address.

In 1862, Lincoln appointed Clay’s son Thomas to the posts of Minister to Nicaragua and ultimately to Honduras for little more reason than he was Henry Clay’s son. In 1862, Clay’s son John sent Lincoln a snuff box owned by his father. Lincoln wrote back. “I recognize his voice, speaking as it ever spoke, for the Union, the Constitution, and the freedom of Mankind.” Henry Clay’s voice provided guidance for President Lincoln as he led his country through its darkest hour.