



LINCOLN'S PATENT

Grade Level

4-8

Length of Lesson

45-60 minutes

Objective

By the end of this lesson, students will learn more about how to use primary sources to research our past.

Materials Needed

- Internet access
- Copies of student worksheets

Standards

IL Learning Standards for Social Science

SS.H.2.4-5

SS.H.3.6-8.LC

SS.H.3.6-8.MdC

Lesson Summary

This lesson is designed to help students learn more about Lincoln and his patent for a device to lift boats higher in the water. Students will also learn about the importance of primary sources in researching our past.

Suggested Sequence of Events:

1. Prior to the Lesson: Students should know basic facts about Abraham Lincoln's life, and they should be familiar with what a patent is prior to starting this lesson. See the Teacher Resources page in this lesson for additional ideas and resources related to this background knowledge.
2. Complete the activity following the procedures:
 - Read through the introduction on the Teacher Resources page and show the video.
 - Once students are familiar with Lincoln's patent, pass out the student worksheets to allow students to analyze the letter sent from the Patent Office to Lincoln regarding his patent.
 - Give students time to complete the analysis questions.
 - STEM Extension: If time allows, ask students to rethink Lincoln's invention using technology we have available today. How could they rethink and repurpose inventions since Lincoln's time to come up with a new and improved version of his patented invention?
 - Pass out the "Rethinking Lincoln's Patent" worksheet and ask students to draw and explain their ideas on the page.
3. Whole class discussion and reflection: Ask students to share what they learned through closely reading this primary source. How are primary sources useful to those studying our history?

TEACHER RESOURCES

Introduction:

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, is the only U.S. President with a patent. Lincoln's patent was for a flotation system used to lift longboats stuck in sandbars. There is no evidence that Lincoln's patent was ever actually used on a boat. Let's watch this short video from the National Museum of American History to learn more about Lincoln's invention and see a model that Lincoln had made to earn his patent: <https://vimeo.com/152478552> (2:22 long)

Background Information Resources:

- According to the United States Patents and Trademark Office (USPTO), a patent is, "a property right granted by the government to an inventor for a new, useful, and nonobvious invention." The USPTO has an excellent student website with patent-related resources: <https://www.uspto.gov/kids/>
- The USPTO also has a great video about how the patent application process works, and the importance of patents to innovation in our world, which can be found here: <https://youtu.be/3T-NBDGovno>
- Smithsonian Magazine has an excellent article on Lincoln's patent that would provide additional background knowledge, available here: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/abraham-lincoln-only-president-have-patent-131184751/#:~:text=Lincoln's%20patent%2C%20No.,an%20Illinois%20congressman%20in%20Washington.>

Extension Ideas:

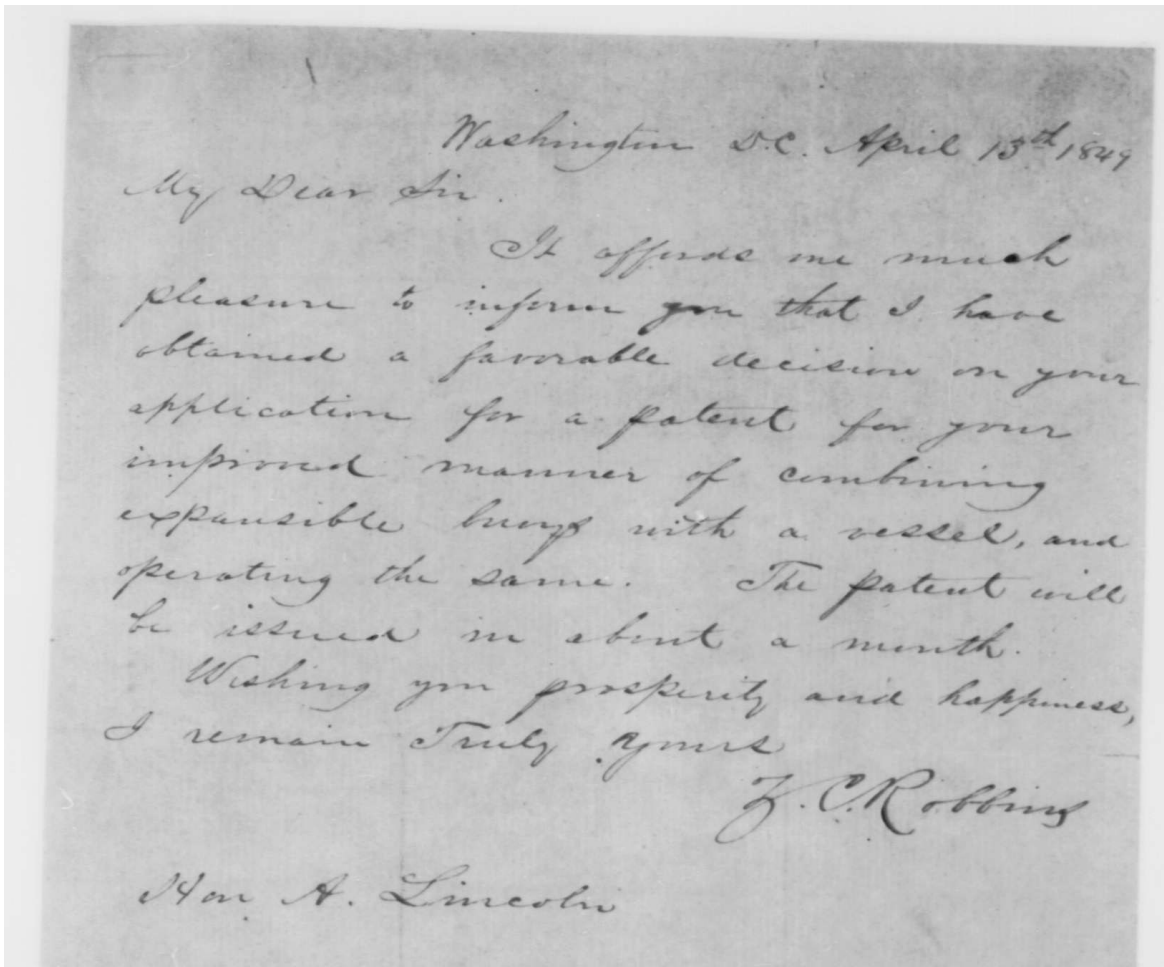
- Have students take on the perspective of Abraham Lincoln and write a return letter to Zenus Robbins. What questions or comments would Lincoln have after reading the letter?
- Have students infer the story surrounding the letter and create a non-fictional comic strip.
- Although Lincoln was never a farmer himself, he understood the importance of agriculture to our growing nation. His patent for a flotation device to assist longboats stuck on sandbars was created because of the importance of transporting agricultural goods along Illinois rivers. There are many good books about Lincoln. We especially like *The Superlative A. Lincoln*, by Eileen R. Meyer, which has a great poem about Lincoln being the "most distracted farmer." We also love *Lincoln Clears a Path: Abraham Lincoln's Agricultural Legacy*, by Peggy Thomas.
- Visit the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) website to learn more about Abraham Lincoln's agricultural legacy. One of his most important accomplishments was forming the USDA. <https://www.nal.usda.gov/topics/lincolns-agricultural-legacy>
- River transportation is still an important issue in Illinois. Today, our rivers have locks and dams to allow large barges to transport goods up and down our rivers. Have students learn more about these vital transportation systems and how they impact our lives in unseen ways.
 - Compare Lincoln's patent to machinery and infrastructure, like locks and dams, that we use today.
 - Have students share why riverways are an important part of agriculture.
- Our Illinois History Ag Mag would pair well with this lesson. An online interactive version is available at www.agintheclassroom.org.
- Go to agintheclassroom.org to contact your County Literacy Coordinator for free classroom sets of our Ag Mags!



LINCOLN'S PATENT

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Below is an image of the original letter sent from Zenas Robbins to Abraham Lincoln regarding Lincoln's patent application. The letter is a *primary source*. A primary source is an artifact of some sort that was created by a person with immediate, first-hand knowledge of a topic or event. Historians use primary sources to better understand our history through the eyes of the people who actually lived it.



Here is a transcript of the same letter:

Washington D.C. April 13th 1849

My Dear Sir.

It affords me much pleasure to inform you that I have obtained a favorable decision on your application for a patent for your improved manner of combining expansible buoys with a vessel, and operating the same. The patent will be issued in about a month.

Wishing you prosperity and happiness, I remain truly yours.

Z.C. Robbins

Hon A. Lincoln



LINCOLN'S PATENT

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Analyzing a Primary Source: Hand Written Letter

You are going to complete a close reading of Zenas Robbins' letter to Abraham Lincoln. A close reading is a careful, critical analysis of a passage or text to develop a better understanding of the meaning of the text without relying on other information.

Use the questions below to help you analyze this text. You will need to read the letter more than once to fully understand it and answer all the questions. You may use either the original letter or the typed transcript to complete these questions.

READ THROUGH #1

The first time reading through the text is to help you become familiar with the general features and ideas.

Read the letter. As you're reading, underline any words you don't recognize.

Who wrote the letter?

Find the date the letter was written and circle it.

Does the author of the letter know Abraham Lincoln? What evidence in the letter supports your answer?



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STUDENT WORKSHEET

READ THROUGH #2

The second time reading through the text challenges you to dig deeper and focus on more specific or individual parts.

Read the letter again. Choose one sentence or phrase that you find interesting or important and write those words in this box.

Why did this sentence/phrase attract your attention?

How does this sentence/phrase help you understand what this letter is about?

FINAL ANALYSIS

1. Write one question you still have about the letter.
2. How could you find the answer to this question?
3. What was the purpose of this letter?
4. Why might this letter be considered an important historical document?



RETHINKING LINCOLN 'S PATENT

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Lincoln used his personal experiences, along with the knowledge and technology available during his time to come up with the idea for his longboat flotation device. Progress in every part of our lives is due to hard-working and hard-thinking people who invent, create, and build new products and ideas.

Though Lincoln's patent was likely never actually used on a boat, it is possible that his ideas had an influence on someone else who was trying to solve a similar problem. We never know how our ideas will be used by others to make the world a better place!

Instructions: Your challenge today is to rethink Lincoln's patent using the knowledge and technology available today in our society. Lincoln's goal was to create a flotation device that would allow a longboat stuck on a sandbar in the river to lift itself out of the water enough to continue to float down the river. How can you improve on Lincoln's patent? Draw and label your design on the images of a longboat on the following page.

Written Reflection: When you have finished your design, write a descriptive paragraph that explains your invention, how it works, and why it is an improvement over Lincoln's design.



RETHINKING LINCOLN'S PATENT

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Instructions: Draw and label your new and improved longboat flotation device below for both the side view (top picture) and the front view (bottom view).

