

*Looking Back*

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## The Inventor President

Only one President of the United States ever patented an invention. That was Abraham Lincoln, whose bicentennial we celebrate on February 12, 2009.

As a young man, Lincoln had spent some time on riverboats, transporting farm produce and other cargo down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. In 1848, then-Congressman Lincoln was a passenger on a boat in shallow Illinois waters when a passing boat ran into a sandbar. He watched as the captain ordered his crew to place anything that would float—especially empty barrels and boxes—under the sides of the boat for buoyancy. That incident was the direct inspiration for Lincoln’s invention: “buoyant air chambers” made of “water-proof fabric”; they could be inflated and deflated as needed to help keep a boat afloat.

He obtained a patent for this invention, “Buoying Vessels Over Shoals,” in 1849. A decade later, on the lecture circuit, he described the first English patent laws as one of the three greatest “inventions and discoveries” in history (along with the written and printed word and the discovery of America), for their addition of “the fuel of *interest* to the *fire* of genius in the discovery and production of new and useful things.”

Like many of his other endeavors, however, Lincoln’s foray into engineering was a failure. As far as we know, his invention was never built and the patent never brought him a cent. Even his “Discoveries and Inventions” speech was a flop: his law partner William Herndon remarked that “this last effort demonstrated that he was no lecturer.” It certainly had its choice silly moments—in comparing young American entrepreneurs to the original Adam, Lincoln sorrowfully observed how narrow was the scope of the father of mankind’s life because “no part of his breakfast had been brought from the other side of the world.” Continuing his Edenic reflections, he envisioned Eve constructing an apron of fig leaves with Adam standing by to thread the needle: “That proceeding may be reckoned as the mother of all ‘Sewing societies’; and the first and most perfect ‘world’s fair’ all inventions and all inventors then in the world, being on the spot.”

More seriously, however, Lincoln selected writing—“the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the eye”—as “the great invention of the world...great, very great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space.” We can all be grateful for our penned communion with Lincoln himself. His writings and speeches—eloquent, graceful, powerful, and witty—are a window on a great soul—a man of assorted failures and misadventures who saved the nation in her hour of crisis, extended freedom, and paid with his life. For his words, for his wisdom, and for his work of securing the union, we honor and remember him.