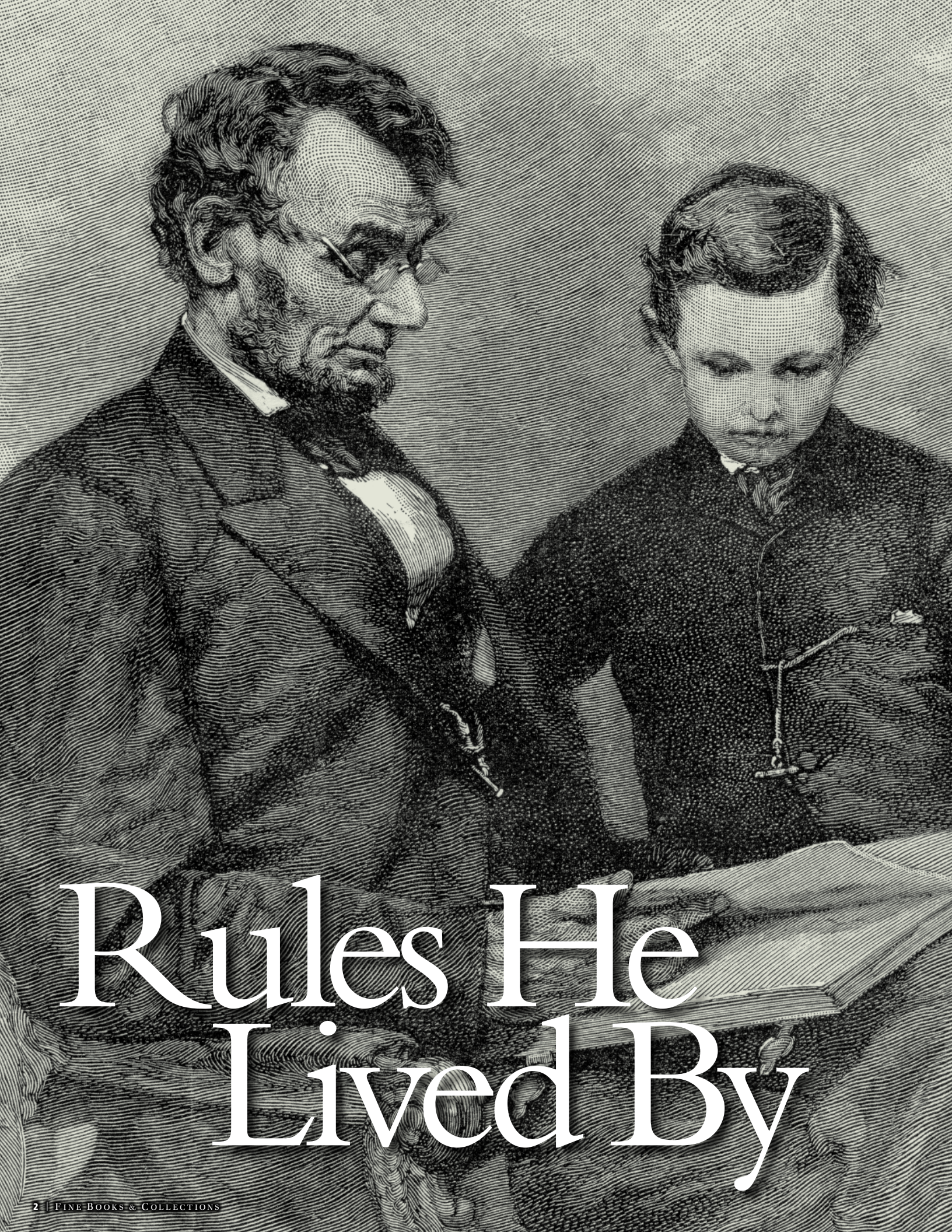


FineBooks & COLLECTIONS



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Rules He Lived By

In 1996, while in Washington to give a lecture at the Library of Congress, *Fine Books* columnist Nicholas Basbanes was invited by Clark Evans, director of the library's rare books division, to examine the nation's "Top Treasures." Among these are Jefferson's hand-written copy of the Declaration of Independence; the manuscript of George Washington's First Inaugural Address; Abraham Lincoln's first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation; and a small volume Evans described as his favorite. Upon first inspection, Basbanes recalls, the latter book "seemed the unlikeliest of choices. The leather on the cover was dull, the binding loose, the paper faded with age, even the edition was not a first printing, but a sixth." Gingerly, Basbanes opened this copy of Kirkham's *Grammar* and found it inscribed by the owner, "A. Lincoln."

From his encounter with one of Lincoln's earliest literary influences, Basbanes conceived a plan to write a series of narratives for young readers about the books that most influenced great minds. What follows is the first in this series—or so Basbanes, waylaid by other writing commitments, hopes. "I still harbor the dream that these narratives will appear between hard covers," he writes, "illustrated with original artwork by Barry Moser, a consummate bookman in every respect—illustrator, engraver, typographer, designer, fine press publisher, bibliophile—and my good friend for over twenty years. Should such a happy consequence take place, it would be a true collaboration between writer and artist, the single goal being a celebration of books and readers in all their glory."—Ed.

Honest Abe's Book of Grammar

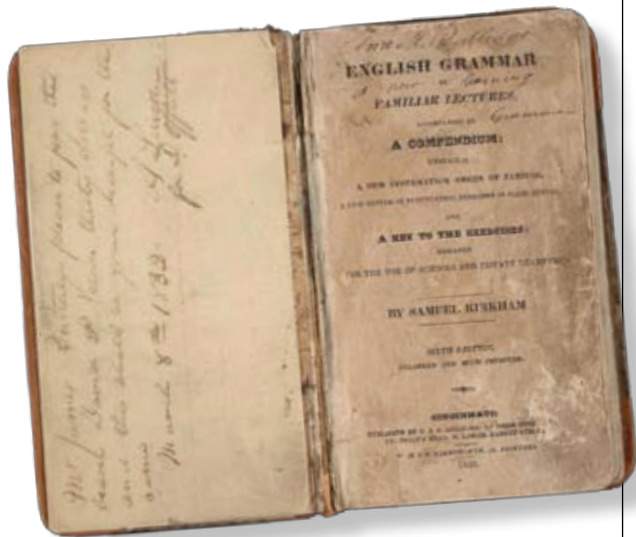
By Nicholas A. Basbanes

Abraham Lincoln spent the first seven years of his life in Kentucky, most of it on a small farm near a clear brook called Knob Creek, surrounded by high hills and deep gorges. By the time the strapping lad's family moved across the Ohio River to Indiana in 1816, he was swinging an axe to split logs and plowing cornfields with a yoke of oxen, essential tasks on the American frontier.

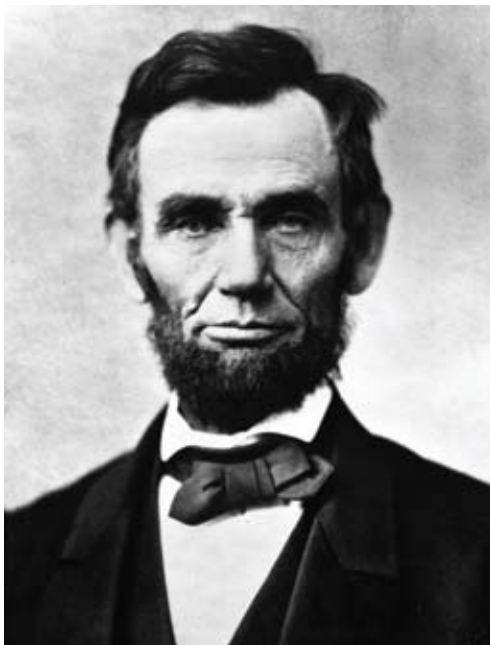
Everyone agreed that young Abe had an active mind and a keen thirst for knowledge. For reading, writing, and arithmetic, his parents sent him to what were known back then as "ABC" schools. But he never spent more than a year in classrooms, with all his schooling coming in what he called "littles"—a little now, and a little then. Most everything else, he learned pretty much on his own.

Not long after the death of his mother Nancy Hanks Lincoln in 1818, Abe's father, Thomas Lincoln, married a widow, Sarah Bush Johnston, who took a strong interest in her stepson's welfare. The two struck up a close bond that was nudged along by the few books she brought to the household.

Along with the family Bible he already knew thoroughly, Abe's new mom encouraged the inquisitive nine-year-old to read everything freely. Dennis Hanks, a cousin who lived with the Lincolns for four years in Indiana, told how Abe became "hungry for books, reading everything he could get



Abraham Lincoln's copy of Kirkham's Grammar is now in the Library of Congress.



The "Gettysburg Portrait," a head-on photograph of Abraham Lincoln taken on November 8th, 1863, two weeks before his Gettysburg Address. By Alexander Gardner

his hands on." When each day's chores were done, he loved nothing more than to take a piece of warm cornbread off the stove, sit in a chair by the fireplace with his long legs stretched up "as high as his head," and spend the rest of the night absorbed in some new volume he had just come across. Anything set down on paper stirred his curiosity and fired his imagination.

From *Aesop's Fables*, Abe learned moral tales that he would use years later to make important points in his political addresses, public debates, and daily conversation. He would recall how Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* thrilled him with its riveting yarn of survival on a desert island. The uplifting story of another poor boy like himself who was eager to make his way in the world—Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*—delighted him, and for pure pleasure and wanderlust he lost himself in the exotic *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. One of the most widely read books in early America, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, moved Abe so deeply with its fast-paced message of hope and salvation that he was unable to finish his supper one night, powerless even to fall asleep. And then there was the unending magic of poetry, with the plays of William Shakespeare and the verses of Robert Burns becoming special favorites that he would return to again and again, quoting favorite passages from time to time at apt moments, reciting phrases word for word.

Once, when he was eleven years old, Abe walked four hours to borrow a copy of Parson Mason Locke Weems's *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* from the farmer Josiah Crawford. He kept it with him at all times, even in bed. One night rain from a heavy storm came seeping through the timbers where he had the volume snugly tucked, badly damaging the pages and binding. To earn the seventy-five cents Crawford said he was owed for the damage, Abe toiled three days in the man's fields "pulling fodder"—husking corn to feed the cows—a lot of hard work to pay for one book in those days, but this is the person, after all, who before long would be known far and wide as Honest Abe.

Sarah Lincoln remembered how her stepson had always memorized his favorite writings, learning them by heart. "When he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there till he did get paper—then he would rewrite it—look at it and repeat it." For all the hard work Abe did to help support the family, her husband made sure there was time set aside for the boy's learning. "Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it," she said. "He would do it himself first."

Because there were no public libraries on the frontier, books were precious possessions, shared and swapped among friends and families. Abe once joked that he probably had borrowed and read every book he "could hear of for fifty miles around." It was in this manner that he found a constable's copy of *The Revised Statutes of Indiana*, a bulky collection of state laws that also included the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, a document that pro-

Kirkham's Grammar was so popular it went through more than 100 printings.

vided the means by which new states would be created out of western lands and admitted into the Union. History fascinated him as much as the law, with one book in particular—William Grimshaw's *History of the United States*—almost certainly leaving a lasting impression. In a section dealing with the American Revolution, Grimshaw had written this: "Let us not only declare by words, but demonstrate by our actions, that 'all men are created equal.'"

As he got older, Abe found different jobs to occupy his time, a few of them out on the waterways that link the American heartland with the Gulf of Mexico. When he decided it was time to leave his father's farm and seek a life on his own, he chose New Salem, Illinois, a rustic hamlet of twenty-five families that sat high on a bluff overlooking the Sangamon River, a key link to the Illinois River, and the mighty Mississippi beyond.

When Abe settled there in 1831, he was twenty-two and thinking long and hard about his future. The idea that he might one day be elected President of the United States was the furthest thought from his mind, yet the next six years formed his character in many vital ways. Looking back decades later on his arrival in the village, Abe compared himself to a "piece of floating driftwood" that had washed ashore, and that wasn't so far off the mark.

Once he decided on pursuing law and politics, Abe determined that if he had any hopes of arguing cases in court or impressing voters on the campaign trail, then he needed to express himself with greater clarity and precision. He had no way of knowing that two of the most memorable speeches ever to be delivered by an American—the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address—would one day be shaped by skills he was about to hone on his own. All he knew was that he wanted to become a better public speaker, and that he should sharpen his use of language.

By far the best primer of the day was a guide written in 1823 by Samuel Kirkham, a Maryland teacher. The book was so popular it went through more than one hundred printings in the nineteenth century, reaching many thousands of people whose only hope of getting ahead was through self-improvement. Known as Kirkham's Grammar, the full title of the book is contained in forty words:

English Grammar
in
Familiar Lectures,
Accompanied by
a Compendium;
Embracing
a New Systematick Order of Parsing,
a New System of Punctuation,
Exercises in False Syntax, and
a Key to the Exercises:
Designed
for the Use of Schools and Private Learners

From Abe's standpoint, the key words there were the final two; if ever anyone was a "private learner," it was Abraham Lincoln. The only problem was that no copy of the book was available in New Salem, though a local schoolteacher, Mentor Graham, told Abe that he knew of a nearby farmer, John C. Vance, who had one.

Abe wasted no time walking the six miles out to Vance's property after breakfast one morning to make an offer. Only this time he didn't borrow the book, he acquired it outright, either with hard-earned cash, or perhaps in return for some work he did in the farmer's fields. Whatever arrangement they made, the name A. Lincoln was written boldly on the inside of the front cover, clear proof that the volume then belonged to him.

In the weeks and months that followed, Abe devoted every spare moment he could muster to his private lessons, sometimes standing alone on a hillside outside his home, practicing aloud. At other times he would stretch out on the counter of the general store he managed, his head propped up on a stack of calico prints while studying the grammar. Some nights, the village barrel maker would allow him to curl up by the fireplace in his shop, known as a cooperage, stoking the flames with wood shavings to make for better light.

When Abe was confident that he understood everything in the 228-page book, he asked several friends to test him with questions. Two of his best helpers—Lynn McNulty Greene and Daniel Burner—actually wrote their own names inside his Grammar.

And what kind of questions might they have asked?

Certainly some of them—such as “What is a noun?” or “What is a verb?”—would have been fairly easy. Quoting Kirkham, Abe would have immediately replied that a noun “is the name of any person, place, or thing, as man, Charleston, knowledge,” or that a verb “is a word which signifies to BE, to DO, or to SUFFER; as I am; I rule; I am ruled.”

Lynn Green and Daniel Burner might also have asked Abe to give examples of “personal pronouns,” “relative pronouns,” “prepositions,” “participles,” or “punctuation”—all those pesky P’s!—but more likely they would have spent a good deal of time on the “parsing” exercises. To parse a word is to give a description of its meaning and to name the part of speech to which it belongs, and then to explain how it relates to other words that appear with it in the same sentence.

So what, we must ask, drove Abe to such great lengths that he would memorize every rule of this book?

Perhaps Samuel Kirkham had the answer, one that appears in the very first chapter of his primer. Grammar, Kirkham wrote there—and you can be sure that Abe was paying very close attention—“is a leading branch of that learning which alone is capable of unfolding and maturing the mental powers, and of elevating man to his proper rank in the scale of intellectual existence.” A few sentences later, Kirkham declared that “in every situation, under all circumstances, on all occasions;—when you speak, read, write, or think, a knowledge of grammar is of essential utility.”

We are left to wonder, too, what Abe might have felt when he read the stirring words that Kirkham used to close that opening section, which he called a lecture:

Remember that “knowledge is power;” that an enlightened and a virtuous people can never be enslaved; and that, on the intelligence of our youth, rest the future liberty, the prosperity, the happiness, the grandeur, and the glory of our beloved country. Go then, with a laudable ambition, and an unyielding perseverance, in the path which leads to honor and renown. Press forward. Go, and gather laurels on the hill of science; linger among her unfading beauties; “drink deep” of her crystal fountain; and then join in the “march of fame.” Become learned and virtuous, and you will be great.

On September 9, 1836, five years after arriving in New Salem—and just four years after walking all those miles to get a copy of Kirkham’s Grammar—Abe was granted a license to practice law in Illinois. He moved to Springfield, the state capital, in 1837, and married Mary Todd in 1845. By that time he had begun an eventful journey that would define the remainder of his life, and would direct a grateful nation during its hour of greatest peril, the Civil War.

In a short sketch of his life written while he was running for the nation’s highest office in 1860, Abe summarized some of the main events of his youth, touching lightly on his education. He took special pains to point out how he had “studied English grammar, imperfectly of course, but so as to speak and write as well as he does now,” which even his political rivals would agree was very well indeed. A few months after writing those words, Abraham Lincoln would take the Oath of Office

as the sixteenth President of the United States.

As for his copy of the Grammar, that followed a destiny all its own. Abe never owned a home in New Salem—he rented rooms in various boarding houses. One place he stayed in from time to time was the tavern owned by James Rutledge, one of the founders of the town, and the father of Ann Rutledge, a beautiful young woman who some historians say Abe had fallen in love with and hoped one day to marry. Sadly, Ann died of a fever in 1835 when she was twenty-two, so no one can say whether that would have happened.

But something the historians do know for certain is that on the title page of *Kirkham’s Grammar*—on the sheet facing Abe’s own signature—are written out the words “Ann M. Rutledge is now learning her grammar.” What probably happened—again, no one can say for sure—is that when Abe had learned all that he needed from the book, he gave it to Ann, who was four years younger, and who by all accounts was just as eager as he was to improve herself. He may also have been her tutor, but that is just another guess.

The slim volume, bound in light brown leather, remained in the Rutledge family for more than ninety years, and was used by a number of relatives over three generations for their own study. Today the binding is loose and the pages show traces of wear after so much thumbing, yet otherwise it is in remarkably good condition.

In 1922, William Rutledge gave the book to the Decatur, Illinois, public library, which ten years later presented it to the Library of Congress in Washington. It is regarded today as one of the Top Treasures of our national collections, an object of uncommon importance and rarity.

In 1846, Abe wrote a poem about his youth he titled “My Childhood Home I See Again,” which was published the following year in a small Illinois newspaper. He was inspired to jot down what he called a canto of ten stanzas after briefly visiting the place where he lived in Indiana, but he just as easily could have been thinking about the time he spent in New Salem. Here is part of what he wrote:

O Memory! thou midway world
‘Twixt earth and paradise,
Where things decayed and loved ones lost
In dreamy shadows rise,

And, freed from all that’s earthly vile,
Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,
Like scenes in some enchanted isle
All bathed in liquid light.

Every word is carefully chosen, each one correctly used. Samuel Kirkham surely would have been pleased by this polished effort at forceful self-expression, of that we may be certain.

And the best was yet to come. 📖



Nicholas A. Basbanes recently received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship to work on his book on the cultural history of paper, which is forthcoming from Knopf. His most recent book is *Editions & Impressions*, a collection of essays. His other works include the acclaimed *A Gentle Madness*, *Every Book Its Reader*, *Patience & Fortitude*, *Among the Gently Mad*, and *A Splendor of Letters*.