Abraham Lincoln was a complex man who many times throughout his life experienced periods of emotional depression for reasons that were not clearly understood by either him or his close friends. Some have suggested that these bouts of depression may have begun after his mother, Nancy Lincoln's, sudden death in 1818 when he was nine years old or the loss of his first true love, Ann Rutledge in 1835. Regardless of the causes for Lincoln’s periods of sorrow, he often used humorous stories and jokes to help return a smile to his heart. Jonathan Birch, an Illinois lawyer described years later how Lincoln’s colleagues would gather around him as he began one of his stories.

Very often he could be seen there surrounded by a group of lawyers and such persons as are usually found about a courthouse, some standing, others seated on chairs or tables, listening intently to one of his characteristic and inimitable stories. His eyes would sparkle with fun, and when he had reached the point in his narratives which invariably evoked the laughter of the crowd, nobody’s enjoyment was greater than his.

After Lincoln became President in 1861 the administrative burdens of his office during America’s Civil War weighed heavily on him most days. He often sought quiet in the solitude of reading books, but was frequently interrupted by long lines of uninvited visitors who came to the White House to ask personal favors of him as the country’s new president. Whenever these visitors over-stayed their allotted time Lincoln would use a funny story or joke to highlight a particular point he wanted to make with his guest, and when the visitor began laughing he would quietly ease the person out his office door so that he could return to his work.

When the Lincoln family moved into the White House in March 1861, they found the rooms and furniture in very poor condition which made Mrs. Lincoln very unhappy. In addition the city of Washington during the Civil War bristled with army troops that clogged the streets, and there was neither a reliable source of clean drinking water nor a sanitary waste disposal system for the city’s inhabitants. As a result disease plagued Washington, and Lincoln’s third son, William Wallace, eventually died from dysentery on February 10, 1862. Of the many challenges that Abraham Lincoln faced while in Washington, the death of his much loved Willie stung his heart the most because the humorous antics of Willie and his youngest son, Tad, who often used the White House for their personal playground, always made Lincoln laugh.

After hearing that his Illinois colleague, William McCullough, had been killed in the battle of Cullerville, Mississippi on December 2, 1862, Lincoln wrote to McCullough’s daughter, Fanny, to give her strength during this difficult time.

In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You cannot now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once.

The Sorrows of Lincoln was developed by Sally Thompson’s fifth-grade students of Martin Luther King Elementary School during the 2016 spring semester as part of the America’s Civil War through Music sessions developed by Scott Schwartz and Marten Stromberg. This is the fifth year the students have helped write a new song building on the knowledge they have acquired through weekly history lessons and music performances by Scott, Marten, Hannah Jellen, Aaron Kromm, and Ryan Ross. The students’ song this year builds on several of the difficult challenges that Lincoln faced during his presidency as well as highlight some of the things that he either made fun of to keep his spirits up or his son’s youthful exploits which inevitably always made him laugh.

Story by Ms. Thompson’s King School 5th Grade Class. Music and Lyrics by Hannah Jellen, Scott Schwartz, and Marten Stromberg, 2016.