

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Bicentennial Planning, June 13, 2001

Lincoln in Spencer County

Presented By William E. Bartelt

Over sixty years ago, south western Indiana sculptor and Lincoln enthusiast, George Honig, told a story of when years earlier he was studying under Harmon McNeil, a New York sculptor. McNeil was working on a Lincoln statue and Honig commented to a colleague that Lincoln spent many years near Honig's hometown of Rockport, Indiana. "Nonsense said the glib New Yorker. Of course Lincoln and his family went through Indiana on their way to Illinois, but they weren't there more than a few days."¹

This story presents us with the first obstacle we must overcome in discussing Lincoln's Indiana years. Although Honig's story happened perhaps seventy five years ago, even today many Americans have no idea that the American icon Lincoln ever lived in Indiana--or at least have no realization that he spent one quarter of his 56 years in the Hoosier state. Those who know there is an Indiana connection know little more than the words used in the narration of Aaron Copland's musical composition *The Lincoln Portrait* -- "He was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, and lived in Illinois."²

If we overcome that first obstacle to understanding--and people do know something about Lincoln in Indiana--we are immediately faced with another. Years ago, while I was working the information desk here at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, a small boy came up to me and made an unexpected statement. He rather hesitantly announced, "I have a friend who doesn't believe in Abraham Lincoln." I assured the boy that Abraham Lincoln was not a fairy tale. He had indeed been a real person who had lived at this site when he was the age of the boy who had made the announcement. I then gave the boy an arm full of material on the life of Lincoln to give his friend. The boy seemed pleased and promised he would set his friend straight.

I have thought about that incident frequently over the years. The more I consider what the youngster said the more I understand his friend's confusion. In an effort to turn Lincoln into a perfect example for young people to emulate, some have made him as believable as a bunny dispensing eggs, or a jolly fat man who rides through the winter sky delivering toys. Stories such as Lincoln reading every book within fifty miles of this place are simply absurd. If that were true he would have read every book in Boonville, Corydon, Evansville, Princeton, Rockport, Tory and--if measured by the way the crow flies--Vincennes and New Harmony, plus Brandenburg, Calhoun, Cloverpot, Hardinsburg, Hartford, Hawesville, Henderson, and Owensboro Kentucky.³ Lincoln did read all he could but he never visited most of these towns--let alone read their books.

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Even if we convince the public that Lincoln lived here for fourteen years and lived a childhood that was not superhuman, the most difficult barrier to understanding his Indiana years yet remains. That barrier is simply--what are the facts?

Lincoln left Indiana at age 21. He was well known in this community--but he was a member of just another family who was a part of the frontier for a while and then moved on. We have no contemporary accounts of how he and his family lived here. No documentary evidence of their existence beyond land records, a few county records, a church minute book, and a few copy book fragments. It would be thirty years later before interest in Lincoln in Indiana was raised, and then only material which could be used politically was sought. Serious inquiry did not begin until after his assassination in April, 1865.

Law partner William Herndon addressed a letter on June 5, 1865 to "some good union lawyer, Rockport, Indiana" to solicit information about the Indiana years. J.W. Wartman responded some days after with a few incidents of the martyred President's life and promised to collect more information.⁴ After several more weeks Wartman wrote with the names of contacts and in a post script summed up the dilemma when he said "It is extremely difficult to give exact times, dates, and persons. About such a year, is as near as I can come to anything."⁵ Still later in the summer Wartman wrote Herndon "It is now about 35 years since Mr. Lincoln left here and a new generation is come."⁶

Herndon, being a lawyer by profession, visited southern Indiana in September, 1865 to personally interview those who knew Lincoln during his boyhood.⁷ In addition in Illinois, he interviewed Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln (Abraham's step-mother), Dennis Hanks (a cousin who lived with the Lincolns in Indiana), and Lincoln's step siblings. The work of Herndon--now housed at the Library of Congress--remains the most detailed account of Lincoln's life in Indiana. Three years ago all of Herndon's letters, interviews, and statements about Lincoln were published for the first time in Doug Wilson's and Rodney Davis' Herndon's Informants. Let me caution you that this is the raw stuff of history. It is contradictory and is many times self-serving, especially in the case of Dennis Hanks. But it does provide us with a teaching opportunity. The original available on microfilm, can be a challenging exercise in translating bad handwriting of not well educated people and interpreting information.

Once we have historical data to work with, we are faced with one more challenge--what do we make of it? Biographers, historians, and Lincoln site interpreters are faced with this problem daily.

Pulitzer prize winning Lincoln scholar Mark Neely examined this idea in an insightful little piece called *Escape From the Frontier: Lincoln's Peculiar Relationship with Indiana*. Neely begins with a quote from Chauncey Black, who was the ghost writer of

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Lincoln's friend Ward Hill Lamon's 1872 book *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Lamon stated, "It is our duty to show the world the majesty and beauty of his character as it grew, by itself and unassisted, out of this unpromising soil. We must point mankind to the diamond glowing on the dung hill."⁸

By making the family shiftless and neer-do-well, and making the early experience almost uncivilized and barbaric, the greatness of the slain President would loom even greater. But by the early 20th century the country was nostalgic about the frontier. The view became one of being almost an extended camping trip. Neely feels Ida Tarbell's work captured this view when she emphasized the "delights and interests the country offers a child." "The horse, the dog, the ox, the chin fly, the plow, the hog. . . these companions of his youth became interpreters of his meaning, solvers of his problems in his great necessity, of making men understand and follow him."⁹

Neely sums up these ideas when he writes, "Benjamin Thomas, a modern Lincoln biographer, aptly called the earlier view the "dung hill" thesis. The alternate view might be called the "chin fly" thesis."¹⁰ Which is right?

I propose we let Lincoln answer the question for himself. What would Lincoln tell us about the fourteen years he spent here? He never kept a journal while he was here nor did he write his memoirs but he did prepare three short autobiographical statements. The first was in answer to a questionnaire in 1858 for a book on all who had served in Congress up to that date. His response consisted of less than fifty words and the only reference to the Indiana period was listing his education as defective.¹¹

In December of 1859 Lincoln obliged Jesse W. Fell with a longer statement and in June 1860 he gave John Scripps an even more detailed response written in the third person.¹² These two statements, in addition to the poetry of the 1840s and a few stories he told years later, give us insight into what he considered significant in his Indiana youth.

Now I want to make clear from the outset that I am not playing psycho-historian here and will not analyze the psychological meanings of what he selected. While I will not deal with the psychological intent, I must remind you that these statements did have political intent. They were provided to assist Lincoln in first obtaining the Republican nomination and later to win the Presidency in 1860. I will simply examine in more detail the comments he made.

As an aside I might mention that using these statements can be an effective teaching device for understanding the issues and images of the 1860 campaign. I have asked students to speculate on why certain items were included, why some things were not, and how voters would react in 1860.

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Lincoln tells us that in his eighth year--today we would say he was seven years old--in the autumn of 1816, the Lincolns reached their Indiana home about the time the state came into the Union, which we know was December 11, 1816. He said, "This removal was partly on account of slavery, but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in Kentucky."¹³

The slavery issue in Indiana is not as simple as it might first appear. We know slavery was not allowed in the Indiana Territory by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and Indiana was admitted as a free state. I have found that students naturally assume that as a result the people of Indiana were opposed to slavery only on moral and humanitarian grounds and sympathetic to slaves themselves. But for many it was a personal economic question. It was difficult for a free small land owner to compete with the "peculiar institution".

The land title issue is more straight forward. Kentucky used the "metes and bounds" system, which allowed for a confusing and inaccurate method of land description. As a result claimants would appear in court to decide who actually owned the land. Even if the owner could document a good faith sale, he could lose the land if a mistake had been made generations before. This happened to Thomas Lincoln three times in Kentucky.

But in Indiana, thanks to the Land Ordinance of 1785 with its township and section survey system, he could be assured of a clear title. This is the one component of the Indiana Lincoln story which can be fairly documented by using original documents in the National and Indiana State Archives.

>As I stated, the Lincolns came to Indiana sometime in November or December of 1816. It was not until the following fall, October 15, 1817, that Thomas Lincoln made the trip to the Vincennes Land Office to file for the southwest quarter of Section 32, Township 4 South, Range 5 West. At \$2.00 per acre the 160-acre quarter-section price was \$320.00. Lincoln paid \$16.00, one-twentieth, in cash. More than two months later, on December 26, 1817, Lincoln paid an additional \$64.00 to make his total \$80.00. In the initial transactions the receipts were issued to Thomas "Linkorn" or "Linkern" of Perry County, Indiana. Since the records are always filed under the name of the original claimant, this error in the name would be maintained until the patent was issued for the land in 1827. The county designation is correct since Spencer County was not created until 1818.¹⁴

Lincoln took advantage of the Land Acts of 1800 and 1804, which provided for a minimum sale of 160 acres of federal land at \$2.00 per acre. The purchaser was to pay one-twentieth down, one-fourth in forty days, another fourth in two years, another in three, and the last in four years. Interest was to be charged at the rate of 6

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percent. The promise of a clear title to land purchased on a credit system drew thousands of settlers into the old Northwest Territory--many of whom would not be able to meet their obligations to the government--especially after the Panic of 1819. Thomas Lincoln was typical of these pioneers. On December 3, 1820, individuals who claimed public land on credit owed the United States government \$21,173,489.87. The government could not foreclose and take the land back from thousands of citizens, so in the 1820s relief was provided for people like Thomas Lincoln.

Lincoln, who had not paid any additional amount beyond the original \$80.00, took advantage of the relief by traveling again to Vincennes on April 30, 1827. This complicated transaction gives us a view of the business sense of these backwoods pioneers. Lincoln owed the government \$240.00--no interest had been charged. according to provision of the relief law, he relinquished 80 acres or one-half of his Spencer County land. This simply canceled his purchase of that land and he received a credit of \$160.00, lowering the debt to \$80.00. He also relinquished 80 acres of land he acquired in Posey County. This allowed for an additional \$80.00 to be applied toward Spencer County land, and on June 6, 1827 he was issued a land patent signed by John Quincy Adams for the remaining 80 acres most of which to day is located in this park.

The details of the acquisition of the Posey County land are still somewhat unclear, but there is no indication that he had any contact with that land, and undoubtedly it was simply a paper transaction. A deed in the Spencer County Recorder's Office documents that Thomas Lincoln also purchased an additional twenty acres adjacent to his property. Thus, when the family left Indiana they sold one hundred acres of land. This somewhat confusing story can be an excellent classroom case study for the Land Ordinance of 1875 and subsequent land laws.

Of this land, Abraham Lincoln said in his autobiographical statements, "It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. **There I grew up.**"¹⁵ He also described the area as ". . . an unbroken forest; and the clearing away of surplus wood was the great task ahead. [Speaking in the third person by referring to himself as A he added] "A though very young, was large of his age and had an axe put into his hands at once; and from that till within his twenty third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument--less, of course in plowing and harvesting seasons. At this place A. took an early start as a hunter, which was never much improved afterwards. (A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log-cabin, and A. with a rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack, and killed one of them. He has never since pulled a trigger on any larger game.)"¹⁶

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This autobiographical passage describes more than just the wooded nature of the land and its animal inhabitants. It documents when a cabin was built. The completion of his eighth year was on February 12, 1817. There is disagreement about the number and types of structures the Lincolns lived in here, but if we accept this at face value, we learn that a log cabin--and not a half-face camp--was their home within a month or two after arriving. It is easy to assume this is the case when we realize that all of the material needed to build a cabin was close at hand and Thomas would have the skills and tools necessary to complete the project.

It is not difficult to imagine the fright and fascination that the wild animals would give a young boy of Lincoln's age. The impact was so strong that it was the topic of one of the poems he wrote in the 1840s. Two of the sixteen verses of *The Bear Hunt* are:

When first my father settled here,
"Twas then the frontier line;
The panther's scream, filled night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.

But wo for Bruin's short lived fun,
When rose the squealing cry;
Now man and horse, with dog and gun,
For vengeance, at him fly.¹⁷

Lincoln included some brief comments about his family members. His father's father was killed by Indiana in Kentucky, resulting in Thomas Lincoln becoming a wandering laboring boy who grew up literally without an education, he could only bunglingly sign his own name. Of his mother he simply said she was born in Virginia. Death visited the family frequently during the early years of Abraham's life and it is understandable that the topic is included in the autobiographical statements. He wrote, "In the autumn of 1818 his mother died;. . ." ¹⁸ As you read the short reference about his mother's death, you can almost sense the emotion that traumatic event produced for the nine year old boy. We know now that her death on October 5, 1818 was caused by mild sickness, or actually a poison called tremetol. obtained by cows eating the white snake root plant--a weed still growing abundantly in the wooded areas of the old Lincoln farm. Lincoln does not share that Nancy Hanks Lincoln's death was just one of a number in the community which occurred at the time, including neighbors and close family member such as Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow. Lincoln concluded the sentence about his mother's death with ". . . a year afterwards his father married Mrs. Sally Johnston at Elizabethtown, Kentucky--a widow with three children of her first marriage. She proved a good and kind mother to A..." ¹⁹ The three children gave Abraham an older step sister

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named Elizabeth, a younger step sister named Matilda, and a step brother of about his own age named John D..

His only real brother died in infancy in Kentucky. Of his true sister (Sarah) he said she was grown and married, but died many years ago, leaving no child. She died on January 20, 1828, having married Aaron Grigsby a year and a half earlier on August 2, 1826 at age 19. Former neighbors commented years later about the strong affection between Abraham and his sister Sarah. The joy of anticipating a new child in the family turned to sorrow as death came to both Sarah and her baby. A neighbor described the scene, "We went out and told Abe. I will never forget that scene. He sat down in the door of the smoke house and buried his face in fingers and his gaunt frame shook with sobs. We turned away."²⁰

Perhaps the most intriguing comment in the Lincoln statements is this one: "In his tenth year he was kicked by a horse, and apparently killed for a time."²¹ Herndon said Lincoln considered this one of the remarkable incidents of his life and often referred to it during discussions in the Springfield law office. In Herndon's Life of Lincoln we have the reminiscence as told by Lincoln himself.

One day, taking a bag of corn, he mounted the old flea-bitten gray mare and rode leisurely to Gordon's Mill. Arriving somewhat late, his turn did not come till almost sundown. In obedience to the custom requiring each man to furnish his own power he hitched the old mare to the arm, and as the animal moved round, the machinery responded with equal speed. Abe was mounted on the arm, and at frequent intervals made use of his whip to urge the animal to better speed. With a careless "Get up, you old hussy," he applied the lash at each revolution of the arm. In the midst of the exclamation, or just as half of it has escaped through his teeth, the old jade, resenting the continued use of the goad, elevated her shoeless hoofs and striking the young engineer in the forehead, sent him sprawling to the earth. Miller Gordon hurried in, picked up the bleeding, senseless boy, whom he took for dead, and at once sent for his father. Old Thomas Lincoln came--came as soon as embodied listlessness could move--loaded the lifeless boy in a wagon and drove home. Abe lay unconscious all night, but towards break of day the attendants noticed signs of returning consciousness. The blood beginning to flow normally, his tongue struggled to loosen itself, his frame jerked for an instant, and he awoke, blurting out the words "you old hussy," or the latter half of the sentence interrupted by the mare's heel at the mill.²²

Lincoln devoted more space to his education--or lack of it--than to anything else in the statements. If there was one park of his Indiana experience that he felt the need to apologize for, it was his schooling. In the Jesse Fell sketch he said:

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There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond "readin, writin, and ciperin," to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course when I came of age I did not know much. Still somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.²³

In the Scripps statement he is a bit more specific.

While here A. went to A.B.C. schools by littles, kept successively by Andrew Crawford, --- Sweeney, and Azel Dorsey. He does not remember any other. A. now thinks that the aggregate of all his schooling did not amount to one year. . . He regrets his want of education and does what he can to supply the want.²⁴

Herndon in his 1865 visit collected a number of stories about the Lincoln school days from fellow students, but his greatest educational find came from Sarah Lincoln, the step mother. In the September 8, 1865 interview with her, Herndon wrote "He had a copy book--a kind of scrap book in which he put down all things and this preserved them. He ciphered on boards when he had no paper or no slate and when the board would get too black he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again: When he had paper he put his sums down on it. His copy book is here now or was lately."²⁵ In the Collected Works of Lincoln are twenty fragments of the sum book which are today scattered in libraries and private collections. These papers are perhaps the most valuable Indiana Lincoln artifacts. Not only do they show us his early handwriting and mathematical abilities, but also some of the early humor he would become so famous for. On one page is written

Abraham Lincoln
his hand and pen
he will be good but
god knows when

on another is

Abraham Lincoln is my name
And with my pen I wrote the same
I wrote in both haste and speed
And left it here for fools to read.²⁶

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To the twenty-first century reader these papers reveal evidence that perhaps Lincoln was better educated than his words imply. Lincoln was one of those students who would learn regardless of obstacles presented them. In spite of the fact that Lincoln was poorly schooled and too poor to attend college, he was gifted with an amazingly retentive memory and a passion for reading and learning.

While his formal education may only have amounted to a year, his practical education was continuous. He learned from almost everyone he met. He engaged neighbors and strangers in dialogue. He learned from his contact during his work as a hired hand to neighbors, as a ferry boat operator on the Anderson River, and as an employee of local entrepreneurs James Gentry and William Jones. Indeed, one of the most educational opportunities he had while living in Indiana was his first flat boat trip down the river. He said:

. . . when he was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, had made his first trip upon a flat-boat to New Orleans. He was a hired hand merely; and he and a son of the owner, without other assistance, made the trip. The nature of port of the cargo-load, as it as called--made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the Sugar coast--and one night they were attacked by seven Negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee, but succeeded in driving the Negroes from the boat, and them "cut cable" "weighed anchor" and left.²⁷

It takes little imagination to understand why thirty years later this adventure was still one of the important memories of his youth. Think of the sights this trip presented the young man floating down the Ohio and Mississippi. Most biographers concentrate on the contact with slavery, but this trip was much more than that. Seeing the great city of New Orleans, witnessing the commerce of the young country on the river, and experiencing the responsibility of safely guiding the boat of valuable cargo down the river, and then being involved in the successful sale of the goods--is an education few, if any of us, had at age nineteen.

Lincoln concludes the Indiana years portion of his autobiographical statement with, "March 1st, 1830--A. having just completed his 21st year, his father and family, with the families of the two daughters and sons-in-law of his step-mother, left the old homestead in Indiana and came to Illinois. Their mode of conveyance was waggons (sic) drawn by ox-teams, or [and] A. drove one of the teams."²⁸ Unfortunately, he does not give us the exact route traveled, and historians and two state commissions don't agree on the roads used and towns visited.

We may turn to one more source to understand what Lincoln thought about his Indiana period--for the only poetry he wrote dealt with that time of his life. This poetry resulted from the one visit he made to this area after 1830. In 1844 he campaigned in southern

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Indiana for the Whig candidate Henry Clay. Two years later he felt poetic and penned a long poem called *My Childhood Home I See Again*, as well as *The Bear Hunt* poem mentioned earlier. The childhood home poem shares the melancholy feeling which emerged when he again saw "woods and fields, and scene of play, and playmates loved as well."²⁹ In fact a large part of the poem actually deals with the madness of his friend Matthew Gentry.

As we prepare for the observance of the bicentennial of his birth in Kentucky, we must not forget those fourteen years in Indiana. Perhaps we should turn to the last verse of his *Childhood Home* poem--although far from being great poetry, it reminds us of the importance of this site. He said

The very spot where grew the bread
That form my bones, I see
How strange, old field, on thee to treat,
And feel I'm part of thee!³⁰

End notes

¹"Rockport Sculptor Builds Fame On Lincoln Legend" *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 3, 1940.

² Aaron Copeland, *Lincoln Portrait* (CBS Records, 1988).

³ Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, Seven to Twenty-one, 1816-1930* (New York, 1959), 164.

⁴ Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana, 1998), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111-133.

⁸ Mark E. Neely, Jr, *Escape from the Frontier: Lincoln's Peculiar Relationship with Indiana* (Lincoln National Life Insurance, Fort Wayne, undated),1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York, 1982), 14.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, *Autobiography Written for Jesse W. Fell*, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* ed. Roy P. Basler (9 vols., New Brunswick, J.J., 1953-1959), III, 511-512. Abraham Lincoln, *Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps*, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, IV, 60-67.

¹³ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 61-62.

¹⁴ William E. Bartelt, "The Land Dealing so Spencer County, Indiana Pioneer Thomas

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Lincoln," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXXVII, No.3 (September 1991) 211-223.

¹⁵ Lincoln to Fell, *Collected Works*, III, 511.

¹⁶ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 62

¹⁷ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, I, 386-389

¹⁸ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 62.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Warren, *Lincoln Youth*, 173.

²¹ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 62.

²² William Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln* (New York, 1930), 51-52.

²³ Lincoln to Fell, *Collected Works*, III, 511.

²⁴ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 62.

²⁵ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 107.

²⁶ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, I, XXIX-1.

²⁷ Lincoln to Scripps, *Collected Works*, IV, 62.

²⁸ Ibid. 63.

²⁹ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, I, 367-370.

³⁰ Ibid.