

Lincoln Lore

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A PILGRIMAGE IN OLD VIRGINIA

The editor of Lincoln Lore has just returned from a trip in Virginia visiting the different communities which lay claim to the birthplace of Nancy Hanks. The immediate cause of this pilgrimage was a conference with Mr. Andrew Price, chairman of the Nancy Hanks Memorial Commission. This West Virginia Committee appointed by Governor Conley is weighing the evidence which claims that Abraham Lincoln's mother was born in their state.

The first person to make a systematic search of the public records referring to the Hanks family in Virginia was Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock. In the spring of 1895, nearly 35 years ago, she spent five weeks in one single itinerary through the southern states, gathering data on the question of Lincoln's maternity. For some time previous to this initial trip she had been collecting information through a voluminous correspondence with members of the Hanks family all over America. In the summer of 1897 her brother, Dr. Charles Steadman Hanks, went to Europe for the purpose of studying the origin of the Hanks family in England. He was successful in bringing together much valuable material relating to the early history of the family.

Mr. Hanks and his sister supplemented these two personal efforts by employing some of the best genealogists in America and England to investigate clues which were discovered on these trips of investigation. Genealogical blanks were then sent out to every known Hanks family in America with the result that more than 1,200 family records were filled out and returned to Mrs. Hitchcock.

From these family histories, court documents, and hundreds of letters Mrs. Hitchcock compiled a manuscript of 800 typewritten pages, giving a history of the American Hankses. The index to this work shows 2,000 names. Many Hanks groups she had discovered could not be included in the work because family lines could not be traced.

Upon completion the manuscript was accepted by the publishers upon condition that a certain number of subscribers be secured before printing. It was a great disappointment to

Mrs. Hitchcock that the necessary subscriptions were not forthcoming and the publishing plans had to be abandoned. This manuscript and all the material, comprising thousands of items, are now safely deposited in the vaults of The Lincoln Historical Research Foundation. When the opportunity time arrives a revised copy of the original work will be published.

With the Hitchcock source material as a background, the editor of Lincoln Lore was able to proceed with his investigations in Virginia with much more satisfaction than on his two previous trips in the Hanks country. Between the years, 1780 and 1790, when Nancy's birthday occurred, there were at least six well defined Hanks colonies, in the territory then comprising Virginia, which have since laid claim to her nativity.

Rockingham County

One of the first Virginia groups associated with Nancy Hanks was located in Rockingham County. It evidently originated in Chester County, Pennsylvania, where members of the family had migrated from Sawley, England, as early as 1682. Members of this group moved to Exeter, Pennsylvania, where they reside within one-half mile of the Lincolns. The fact that a Joseph Hanks and Abraham Lincoln, grandfather of the President, were near neighbors, and later migrated to Rockingham County, Virginia, has given much support to the theory that both Lincoln's father and mother were born in Rockingham County.

Greenbrier County

Another community founded by a member of the Rockingham Hankses was established in Greenbrier County, now Munroe County, West Virginia, about 1787. Descendants of this family are convinced that Nancy Hanks was born there. The Hitchcock correspondence contains several testimonies to this effect, some from the descendants of the Joseph Hanks who lived in Nelson County, Kentucky.

Louden County

One woman, who has done considerable research work on the Hanks family in Virginia, places the site of the birthplace of Nancy near Leesburg in Loudon County. The colony of Hankses residing there at the time of Nancy's birth were evidently from Anne Arundel County, Maryland. A Hanks wedding was celebrated there in St. Anne's Church as early as 1704. In the same church building, occupying pews across the aisle from the Hankses, was a family by the name of Shipley. Traditions which claim the intermarrying of the Shipleys and the Hankses find here good evidence of a close association of these groups.

Hampshier County

The Loudon County Hankses also produced a Joseph born in 1737, ac-

ording to the family historians. There are those who feel he is the one who migrated to Hampshier County, now Mineral County, West Virginia, rather than a Joseph Hanks who lived 200 miles farther south in Richmond County. The traditions that Nancy Hanks was born in Mineral County has just recently been set forth, no traditions to that effect having come down from the past. The only evidence available which would connect this Hanks family with any other group of like name is that it was a large family.

Amelia County

Mrs. Hitchcock became convinced after a very careful study that it was from the Amelia County group that Nancy Hanks was descended. She found land patents which located a Joseph and an Abraham Hanks on adjacent farms in Amelia County as early as 1750. Scribes who copied and indexed some of these early records often made the name appear to be Hawks instead of Hanks, or Hankses as it most often appeared in the earliest documents. Descendants of these same Amelia Hankses wrote several letters to Mrs. Hitchcock, claiming descent from this group and also claiming that Nancy Hanks, the mother of President Lincoln, was born there. Nottaway County now embraces the home site of the first Hanks family in Amelia County. The traditions that the mother of the President was born in Nottaway has come down through many generations.

Bedford County

Some of the Amelia County Hankses migrated to Bedford County by 1780. Within the boundaries, which later became Campbell County, lived a family which included the forbears of Nancy Hanks, according to the tradition of the old citizens. Close by this Hanks family lived the Mitchells, the Shipleys, and the Berrys. As these were the families with whom Nancy Hanks was associated in Washington County, Kentucky, there seems to be some support of this tradition.

It has been the purpose of this broadside to mention only the Hanks communities in which tradition says Nancy was born. There were several other Hanks groups in the state between the years 1780 and 1790 which have laid no claim to the nativity of Lincoln's mother. Possibly the largest community of Hankses, at that time, resided in Richmond County, but, as far as can be ascertained, no tradition that Nancy Hanks was born there has ever been circulated. In some future issues of Lincoln Lore, the claims of the six groups mentioned in this broadside will be discussed in detail. This will give an opportunity to study the spelling of the Hanks name which can be found in several forms wherever the Hanks family lived.