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LINCOLN BORN IN BURLINGTON

In the archives of our county and state buildings there lie buried many Utopian communities. They are as interesting as the ruins of ancient towns discovered by the excavations of scientific and historical expeditions. After the settlement of the colonies, the Kentucky country became the rendezvous of the land speculator and the adventurer. Here, in this wonderland, the pioneers planned their dream cities. Some of the efforts expired shortly after the first enthusiastic outburst of the immigrants who built their cabins in an apparent "Garden of Eden." Other settlements survived long enough to announce lot sales and advertise the advantages of their ideal locations. Still other towns flourished for a time and then gradually disappeared as some more convenient centers of trade and social life sprang up near by. Until Abraham Lincoln was twenty-seven years of age he lived in, or near, one of these now extinct communities.

New Salem, Illinois, Lincoln's home before removing to Springfield, was one of those towns which "winked out," as Lincoln put it. Not far from his Indiana home, and but a short distance from a point on the Ohio River where he worked for two years, the city of Ohioptomingo was laid out. It was to be built on the Kentucky shore of the Ohio, and its location was designated on some of the early maps of the western country. Here the promoters proposed to develop, on the very frontier of civilization, a city of great beauty and influence. Building sites were presented to officials prominent in governmental affairs. At each one of the four corners of the town a lot was laid off "for the reception of Indians." Near Lincoln's boyhood home on Knob Creek, in Kentucky, English speculators proposed to build a magnificent city called Lystra. Its avenues were to be one hundred feet wide, houses were to be set back from the street a specified distance, lots were reserved for churches, a college, public buildings, and park sites. Lystra, which appeared on an early map as the most prominent town in the Kentucky country, and Ohioptomingo, the queen of the frontier, never became much more than names.

Adjacent to the farm which Lincoln's father bought in 1808, there

was established the town of Burlington. Similar to the efforts already mentioned, it was little more than a "paper city." This brings us to the tale of two towns struggling for economic supremacy, unconscious of the greater honor which was to be the reward of the survivor. In this backwoods contest the name of America's "Bethlehem" was at stake.

The earliest settlements in Kentucky grew up about the forts. With the passing of the Indians the mills became the community centers. On the same day, December 9, 1788, four years before Kentucky became a state, two men walked into the courthouse at Bardstown, in Nelson County, then Virginia, later Kentucky, and presented petitions for the establishment of mills on Nolin River. Around the mill of Robert Hodgen, one of these pioneers, there grew up a settlement which was to bear his name. Near the mill of John Close, the other pioneer, a community gradually took form which was to be known as Burlington.

The will of Robert Hodgen was dated February 1, 1810, a year after the birth of Lincoln. To his wife, Sarah Hodgen, he gave "the plantation where I now live together with the grist mill." On February 7, 1818, the widow and John Hodgen, executor of the Robert Hodgen estate, petitioned the justices of Hardin County for the establishment of a town on the Hodgen plantation. Two days later the following record appears: "A town is established on the lands of Robert Hodgen, deceased, on Nolin, agreeable to the said petition and plan which is to be ordered to be entered on record, to be called and known by the name of Hodgenville."

On July 1, 1816, John Welsh bought of Alexander Merrifield 100 acres of land, including the mill site formerly owned by John Close. Welsh also purchased of Merrifield 250 acres adjoining this 100-acre tract. This property was adjacent to the farm on which Abraham Lincoln was born. The Welsh holdings were soon in litigation, and it is from the depositions in the suit Welsh vs. Merrifield that we learn the story of Burlington. There is also revealed in these depositions a description of the community in which the Lincolns resided on the South Fork of Nolin River.

The settlement near Close's Mill boasted of a tavern. One of the deponents testified that "it was considered a good stand for some time. It was a very public place." A question by Welsh, the plaintiff, gives us a description of this settlement with some detail: "At the time the place was noted as a good stand, was there not a ball battery and race paths and did you not understand that I immediately destroyed the battery and race paths much to the advantage of the neighborhood?" Further evidence

shows that there was a large distillery, a blacksmith shop, and a store-room in the settlement. The birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, but half a mile away, may not have been such a desolate place as many biographers of Lincoln have imagined.

It was this site, where Merrifield had been conducting his tavern and kindred interests for several years, that Welsh selected for the establishment of Burlington. Many weeks before the petition for the founding of Hodgenville was presented, Welsh employed a man by the name of Findley to lay off the town. In the month of March, 1815, an auction sale of these town lots took place, with Robert McClure as auctioneer. McClure had previously been appointed a trustee of the town by the Hardin County Court, in a deposition he stated he was "the crier of the lots sold in Burlington." He further testified that twenty-four or more lots were sold and that the amount of the purchase money was about twenty-four hundred dollars.

In the deposition of James Redmond, we learn from the questions put to him by the defendant, Merrifield, something of the rivalry which existed between these communities at Close's and Hodgen's Mills: "Did you ever hear the plaintiff complain of fraud until after Hodgenville was erected and the purchasers of lots began to improve their lots? . . . Was not the plaintiff very angry at Hodgen for erecting the town of Hodgenville as he thought he had the first right?" To this last question the deponent replied: "The plaintiff claimed the right and thought he had the best right but as to his being angry with Hodgen I cannot say."

In the pioneer days the old trail, known as the Cumberland Road, which passed immediately in front of Thomas Lincoln's cabin door, missed the site of Hodgenville by at least three miles. A later change in the location of this roadbed directed the travel by Hodgen's Mill, which gave the trading advantage over its rival to Hodgenville. This soon resulted in the collapse of Burlington. Hodgenville did not receive any special recognition until twenty-five years after its establishment as a town. In 1843 the southeastern part of Hardin County was set apart and another county formed. The new county was called LaRue, and Hodgenville was made the county seat.

It was at the expense of Burlington that Hodgenville attained fame as the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln.

A native of LaRue County visited President Lincoln at Washington in the month of July, 1861. In the course of conversation Mr. Lincoln said, "I was born at Cave Spring about two and a half miles south of Hodgenville," and he might have continued, "near where the town of Burlington once stood."