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ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S FIRST SCHOOL TEACHER

"Before leaving Kentucky, he (Abraham Lincoln) and his sister were sent for short periods, to A B C schools, the first kept by Zachariah Riney, and the second by Caleb Hazel.

"At this time his (Abraham's) father resided on Knob Creek, on the road from Bardstown, Kentucky, to Nashville, Tennessee, at a point three or three and a half miles south or southwest of Atherton's ferry, on Rolling Fork."

Sketch prepared by Lincoln for Scripps

We have Abraham Lincoln's own testimony that Zachariah Riney was his first school teacher. This pedagogue probably exerted the first direct influence over Abraham Lincoln, outside the personnel of his own home.

Riney was born in 1763 in St. Mary County, Maryland. Sixty families living in this community pledged themselves to migrate to the Kentucky country within a specified time. The first twenty-five families moved as early as 1785. Within the next ten years the family group with which Zachariah was associated arrived at the Pottinger's Creek neighborhood near the Holy Cross church. This was the first church of the Catholic faith erected west of the Alleghany Mountains and was built by Father De-Rohan in 1792.

By the year 1795 Thomas Riney, father of Zachariah, had passed away and Zachariah was appointed administrator of the estate. From the settlement papers in the Nelson County Courthouse we learn that Zachariah had a brother by the name of Basil and three sisters named Anna, Mary, and Henrietta. April 2, 1796, the name of Zachariah Riney appeared on the tax list for Washington County as a "white male over 21 years of age." His wife's name was Margaret. Nancy married James Alvey, Mary was united to Clement Gristy, and Henrietta became the wife of John Wathen.

The will of Thomas Riney states that "the negroes of which he died possessed should not be sold out of the family of his children." Thomas Riney

signed the will by making a mark, which would indicate he could not write.

Zachariah was living at the foot of Rohan Knob, on Pottinger's Creek, in 1805, when members of the order of Our Lady of LaTrappe established a colony there. As they remained only four years at the time of this first venture it is not likely that Riney, who was then forty-two years of age, was very greatly influenced by them.

Little is known about Riney's character. Just a single reference to his early reputation is revealed in a deposition taken in 1817 in which the deponent says that, "Riney is well versed in little tricks, that his father was an excellent man, but unacquainted with land titles, that he, as your respondent has been informed, believes Riney was well acquainted with the situation of the land at the time the exchange took place and that this complainant was to run all responsibility in the title and not come back on your respondent." As this was the deposition of the defendant in the case we might expect him to be prejudiced against Riney.

This litigation was over the tract of land on which Riney was then living and which he had purchased in 1811. Part of the farm originally had been in possession of the pioneer Joseph Hanks, and was situated on the banks of the Rolling Fork. The very same year Riney bought the farm, Thomas Lincoln moved his family from the cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born to a farm on Knob Creek about two miles from the home of Riney.

The log school house for the Knob Creek community was situated where the town of Athertonville now stands, about two miles from the homes of Riney and Lincoln, who lived on different sides of the Rolling Fork. Abraham Lincoln probably attended the school taught in this log house in the year 1815.

It is difficult to learn very much about Riney's qualifications as a teacher. Inasmuch as he was 30 years old before he reached Kentucky, he must have had his schooling in Maryland. There are specimens of his handwriting in the early court records, which show him to have been a man of some accomplishments in this branch of the three R's.

We have the testimony of his grandson that Riney was a school teacher by profession and taught several schools in Hardin County. He can hardly be classed among the itinerant school masters. There are no reminiscences in the Riney family of whether or not Abraham Lincoln at the early age of six was an apt pupil.

Thomas Riney, Zachariah's father, was an owner of slaves and Zachariah was obliged to bring suit against one of his brothers-in-law in order to acquire his portion of the estate in the division of the negroes. This would indicate that he had no scruples against slavery so that it is not likely that he carried into the school room any opinions adverse to the institution.

At the time he became the teacher of Abraham Lincoln he must have been nearly 50 years old. It is not to be expected that a man of this age would exert so great an influence on a growing boy as a younger man. In fact, this first school teacher was 13 years older than Abraham's father.

As Abraham Lincoln would have learned little more than his letters under this first school teacher, it is very likely that Riney served the purpose as well as a more highly educated man.

In 1848 another group of Monks of the Trappist Order arrived from France and settled in about the same community, in Nelson County, where their predecessors had lived for a short period from 1805 to 1809. A grandson of Zachariah Riney, who affiliated with this group, wrote this reminiscence about the last days of his grandfather.

"Brother Benedict's grandfather sold his place in Nelson County about 1830 and bought a farm in Hardin County at a place now called Rineyville, on which Brother Benedict's father, Sylvester Riney, lived and reared his family. Grandfather lived with my father for nearly twenty-five years. He was my first teacher, as well as Abraham Lincoln's first teacher.

"Brother Benedict can say that he learned much of what he knows from him, and as I liked him very much a great part of my childhood was spent with him. When 94 years of age he came to Gethsemani in 1856, and I with him. He lived here a little more than two years. He died in 1859."

While there is no evidence that Zachariah Riney was ever associated with the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani until he was 94 years old, his grandson, who prepared the above reminiscence, became a faithful member of this colony while still a young man. Abraham Lincoln's first school teacher lies buried in the graveyard of the Trappist brotherhood within the enclosure of the monastery.

It would seem fitting that the resting place of Zachariah Riney should be simply but appropriately marked with a tablet setting forth the fact that he started Abraham Lincoln on the way to intellectual achievement.