

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN THE RIVERMAN

The outstanding Lincoln celebration this month was the bi-annual pageant conducted in Spencer County, Indiana, on July 4, entitled "When Lincoln Went Flatboating from Rockport." This historical presentation was directed by Bess V. Ehrmann assisted by Lucile Richards.

The theme of the pageant recalls the river experiences of Lincoln which had much to do with determining his future career. In recognition of the Rockport pageant several excerpts presenting Lincoln as a Riverman are exhibited in this number of Lincoln Lore. There are several dramatic episodes in his river experiences.

Ferry Keeper

Lincoln's contact with the river began when he was about 16 or 17 years old at which time he was employed to operate a ferry boat across Anderson Creek where it enters the Ohio River. He related to Secretary Seward at Washington a reminiscence of his boyhood days which left a deep impression upon him.

"As he stood at the landing, a steamer approached, coming down the river. At the same time two passengers came to the river's bank who wished to be taken out to the packet with their luggage. Looking among the boats at the landing, they singled out Abraham's, and asked him to scull them to the steamer. This he did, and after seeing them and their trunks on board, he had the pleasure of receiving upon the bottom of his boat, before he shoved off, a silver half dollar from each of his passengers. 'I could scarcely believe my eyes,' said Mr. Lincoln, in telling the story. 'You may think it was a very little thing,' continued he, 'but it was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely believe that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. The world seemed wider and fairer before me. I was a more hopeful and confident being from that time.'"

First New Orleans Trip

Possibly it was his skill as a boatman acquired by his apprenticeship

at Anderson Creek that opened the way for his first trip to New Orleans. One of the neighbors, James Gentry, proposed that he accompany his son, Allen Gentry, on a business trip down the Ohio. Lincoln gave a brief account of his adventure in his own autobiography as follows:

"When he was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, he made his first trip upon a flatboat to New Orleans. He was a hired hand merely, and he and the son of the owner, without other assistance made the trip. The nature of part of the 'cargo load', as it was 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 then 'cut cable,' 'weighed anchor,' and left."

Second New Orleans Trip

After the Lincoln family had moved to Illinois Lincoln's river experiences again opened the way for another opportunity to make a trip to New Orleans. We learn of this new venture also from Lincoln's own testimony.

"During that winter Abraham, together with his stepmother's son, John D. Johnston, and John Hanks, yet residing in Macon County, hired themselves to Denton Offutt to take a flatboat from Beardstown, Illinois, to New Orleans; and for that purpose were to join him—Offutt—at Springfield, Illinois, so soon as the snow should go off . . . This led to their hiring themselves to him for twelve dollars per month each, and getting the timber out of the trees and building a boat at Old Sangamon town on the Sangamon River, seven miles northwest of Springfield, which boat they took to New Orleans, substantially upon the old contract . . . Hanks had not gone to New Orleans, but having a family, and being likely to be detained from home longer than at first expected, had turned back from St. Louis."

Upon the testimony of John Hanks the story has been given wide circulation that Abraham Lincoln on this trip first observed slaves being sold at auction in New Orleans and resolved to help and destroy the institution if opportunity afforded it.

The fact that Hanks is supposed to have heard this declaration at New Orleans when Lincoln himself says Hanks did not make the trip places the oft repeated statement of Lincoln's resolution in doubt.

It would be much more reasonable to conclude that the unfavorable reaction of Lincoln towards the slave market occurred at the time of his first visit to New Orleans.

Louisville to St. Louis

Another boat trip which Lincoln took as a passenger rather than a laborer also left an impression on Lincoln that may have had more to do with his later activities than has been admitted.

In 1841 after a severe nervous collapse he paid a visit to his friend Joshua Speed who lived in Louisville, Kentucky, after returning home he wrote a letter to Mary Speed, sister of Joshua Speed, to whom he related some of the experiences of his return trip. A portion of the letter follows:

"We got on board the steamboat Lebanon in the locks of the canal, about twelve o'clock m. of the day we left, and reached St. Louis the next Monday at 8 P. M. Nothing of interest happened during the passage, except the vexatious delays occasioned by the sand-bars be thought interesting. By the way, a fine example was presented on board the boat for contemplating the effect of condition upon human happiness. A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky, and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one, at a convenient distance from the others, so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trout-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery, where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where; and yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board."

A correspondent writing from Rockport, Indiana, on May 21, 1860, after commenting on Lincoln's nomination says: "Old flatboat men claim him as one of their number, and as he was a safe pilot in guiding hundreds of boats through the torturous windings of the Father of Waters so they are quite willing to trust him with the helm of the ship of state."