

# LINCOLN LORE

No. 74

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 8, 1930

## LINCOLN LORE

BULLETIN OF  
THE LINCOLN  
HISTORICAL  
RESEARCH  
FOUNDATION



ENDOWED BY  
THE LINCOLN  
NATIONAL LIFE  
INSURANCE  
COMPANY

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### WILLIAM DOWNS

William Downs came in closer contact with the Lincoln family in Kentucky than any other minister with the possible exception of David Elkin.

His father, Thomas Downs, settled in the Kentucky country about 1780, and lived in the old fort at Vienna, now Calhoun. Several years later the Indians, having corralled the cows in hopes of drawing some of the whites into ambush in search of the cattle, were successful in tempting Downs, who declared as he left the fort that, "the children should cry no longer for milk." He did not return alive.

Both of the orphan sons of Thomas Downs became pioneer preachers. William, born in 1782, was bound out to Evan Williams who lived in Nelson County not far from the Rolling Fork Church. Here the growing boy heard the famous emancipation preacher Joshua Carmen and it was while Carmen ministered for this church that Downs affiliated with it.

As early as 1796 Carmen tried to induce the congregation to have no fellowship with slaveholders. He was successful in influencing the church to withdraw from the Baptist association on account of slavery and it remained independent until 1802.

Young Downs who was given a good education decided to enter the ministry undoubtedly due to the encouragement of Carmen. When Carmen moved to Ohio, Downs succeeded him as minister of the South Fork Church.

By the year 1805, however, the churches in the association were cautioned "not to let William Downs preach among them he having been excluded from Rolling Fork Church." There is evidence that he was following the teaching of Carmen on the slavery question.

In the year 1806, William Downs was living in Ohio County close by where he was born. He served as clerk of an election in the house of George Ashley on one occasion.

He soon returned, however, to the community where he grew up, and according to Spencer, the Baptist historian, "he continued to preach among the Separate Baptists, till he raised

up a large church of that order, called Little Mount. It was located about three miles north east of Hodgenville, and contained a number of highly respected citizens."

It appears that the nucleus for the membership of this church came from the South Fork Baptist church which was located near the farm where Abraham Lincoln was born. The minute book of this church records that on the fourth Saturday in November 1812, "the church thinks William Downs to be in disorder and they are not to invite him to preach in the houses or meeting house."

On the fourth Saturday in February 1813, an item in the minute book reveals that Jesse Friend, who married Mary Hanks, had joined Downs and his party. The sequel to this unrest in the church is noted in a meeting on the fifth Saturday in July, the same year. "We think Jesse Friend has forfeited his seat with us for going off and joining a disorderly set of people who call themselves Separate Baptists." It was evidently the slavery question which was again responsible for the division in the church.

The reference here is to the Little Mount Separate Baptist Church with which Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln had affiliated, and it must have been about this time that Abraham Lincoln, as a small child, first saw William Downs.

Just how closely he was associated with Thomas Lincoln is not known, but that he was entertained in the Lincoln cabin home is quite certain. The family lived but three miles from the church and a large group of their membership lived on Knob Creek where the Lincolns resided from 1811 to 1816.

When Caleb Hazel, Abraham Lincoln's school teacher, married the second time, Thomas Lincoln signed the marriage bond, and William Downs performed the ceremony. We have here associated in these marriage papers the names of the three men who exerted the greatest amount of influence over Abraham Lincoln up to the time he was eight years of age.

When Downs organized the Little Mount Church he was about thirty years of age. He had been preaching for eight years, at least, and was just the type of pioneer manhood that would interest a growing boy like Abraham Lincoln. Spencer gives us the following picture of him at this period of his life.

"Mr. Downs was fond of controversy and engaged in several debates. His exceeding familiarity with the Sacred Scriptures, his ready wit, keen sarcasm, and brilliant oratory attracted the attention and won the admiration of the most intelligent and refined people within the limits of

his acquaintance. Hon. Benjamin Hardin, one of the leading lawyers and statesmen of Kentucky, greatly admired his oratory and embraced every opportunity to hear him preach."

Judge Little, the biographer of Ben Hardin, gives some local reminiscences about Hardin's interest in Downs. Mr. Hardin took pains to arrange several public debates between his champion and clergymen of different viewpoints and on one occasion when an especially large group was to hear the discussion, presented the preacher with a handsome suit of clothes to wear on the eventful day.

There might not be any reason for continuing the biographical sketch of Downs beyond the period of the Lincolns' leaving Kentucky as they evidently were out from under his direct influence after 1816.

It is interesting to note, however, that his oratorical ability was soon used on the stump as well as in the pulpit. In 1820 an election was held in Hardin County to choose four electors to vote for president and vice president of the United States.

Downs was one of the twenty candidates aspiring to the office but when the votes were counted he was in fifth position. He was not discouraged at this defeat but took an active interest in politics for many years.

About the fall of 1829 he returned again to Ohio County where he was born. The marriage register of the county shows that he exercised his ministerial authority in the solemnizing of weddings with some regularity from September 10, 1829 to June 2, 1836.

His controversial powers did not diminish, however, with his interest in politics although there is some evidence that his morals suffered somewhat by the new associations he made.

Spencer tells of one of his later debates with a preacher of another faith. His opponent on this occasion was "a very handsome man and dressed very elegantly . . . Mr. Downs was clad extremely shabbily."

His opponent upon observing his appearance expressed his disgust by asking, "Is this the man you have brought here to debate with me?"

The elegant gentleman "in debate with the old experienced controversialist, was as a pigmy in the hands of a giant. Mr. Downs played with him as a cat plays with a wounded mouse." As the close of the argument Downs' opponent made a hasty retreat.

The last years of Downs are said to have been spent in obscurity and poverty, but to Abraham Lincoln he must always have been the aggressive young debator and orator whom he heard at Little Mount Church.