

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN THE SEXTON

The approach of the Christmas season offers a religious atmosphere, which invites the release of a story, not generally known, about one of Lincoln's traditional occupations. The president is said to have been as a youth the sexton of Pigeon Baptist Church in Spencer County, Indiana.

This church was established on June 8, 1816, a few months before the Lincolns arrived in this community. In 1819 the church voted to build a meeting house. It was not until the month of March, 1821, that a site for the building was agreed upon and the size of the structure determined.

A resolution entered on the minute book of the church specifies that "The house is to be of the size and form as follows:

"30 by 26 feet of hewed logs, 8 feet in the under story and 6 feet above the joists."

Abraham Lincoln's father joined this church on June 7, 1823, by letter. On June 12 at a meeting of the congregation three members: Ruben Grigsby, William Barker, and Thomas Lincoln were appointed trustees to arrange for the repairing of the meeting house. In the month of July, 1827, it was decided to build a brick chimney for the meeting house, the brick to be made by William Barker. The following year Thomas Lincoln asked to be released from his duties as a trustee of the church.

It was probably sometime between 1823, when Lincoln's father joined the church, and 1828, when he resigned as trustee, that Abraham served as sexton. He was, during this period, between the ages of fourteen and nineteen.

While the tradition of Abraham Lincoln's connection with Pigeon church as its sexton has come down to us from several different sources, the story as it appears in a letter to the Kansas City Journal of January 22, 1909, seems to give some direct evidence of this occupation of his youth.

"I have knowledge of an incident which I have never seen in print. In the year 1866 while a teacher in Rock-

port Academy at Rockport in the southern part of Indiana, I was invited by the Methodist presiding elder, the Rev. J. J. Stallard of the Rockport District, Indiana Conference, to attend and assist him in conducting a quarterly meeting to be held in Gentryville, Indiana. The meeting was near where Mr. Lincoln's mother lies buried. We visited the grave of Mr. Lincoln's mother and were taken to the cabin where the Lincoln family had lived. We then visited an old log church standing probably a quarter of a mile distant from either the cabin or the grave, an old log Baptist church not then in use, but where my guide told me the Lincoln family had formerly worshipped.

"While in the old church I climbed up into the loft to familiarize myself with the building and discovered in a crevice between two of the upper logs an old faded memorandum book that had been used in other years. Opening it and scanning its contents I found this entry where the church was charged

Dr. to 1 broom

" 1/2 doz. tallow candles

and signed

Abe Lincoln, Sexton

"To me it was an interesting discovery but I did not then realize the value of that little entry in Lincoln's own hand writing as I have realized it since. So after noting it carefully I placed the book yellow with age back in the crevice where I had found it.

"I have never seen it referred to, or the fact in print that Mr. Lincoln was the sexton in an old log church. I have thought the world should know it.

"May it not be that while he ministered at the altar in that old church and listening to the man of God that occupied the pulpit of that primitive sanctuary Abraham Lincoln caught some of the inspiration and learned some of the principles that were manifested in his remarkable life in after years."

Caleb A. Obenshain,

Pastor, Memorial Baptist Church
Dewey, Okla., Jan. 18, 1909.

Reminiscences of the old church by those who remembered it while it was yet standing support the statement of Rev. Obenshain that entrance could

be made to the loft where the old record book was said to have been found by him. One early resident of the Pigeon Church community said that he remembers the structure as:

"A long narrow building one and one-half stories high, having a very large fireplace at one end of the building, with a pulpit made of roughly hewn boards. It had a window with no glass but heavy wooden shutters immediately behind it, at one end of the structure, and a ladder led to the upper story where people might stay overnight."

Pictures of the old church which are available also bear out the fact that access to the loft of the church was possible and there is also a window shown in the loft directly above the window in the wall of the first story.

The original structure stood until the year 1880 when it was razed and the logs sold to use in building a barn.

One of the duties of the sexton of an early church was to dig the graves for the interment of the bodies to be buried in the church cemetery.

On December 10, 1825, the following record was entered on the Pigeon Church minute book:

"By motion agreed that there be three members appointed to lay off the burying ground of Pigeon meeting house, then named as follows: R. Grigsby, Wm. Barker and N. Gordon."

Abraham Lincoln's sister Sarah Lincoln married Aaron Grigsby, August 2, 1826, four months after she had joined Pigeon Church. She died on January 20, 1828, and was one of the first members of the congregation to be buried in the new burial ground. If Abraham Lincoln was then serving as sexton of the church it would have been his task to dig the grave for his own sister.

Thomas Lincoln was still serving as a Trustee of the church at the time of his daughter's death and it is likely that Abraham Lincoln's services as sexton extended over some period of his father's administration as an officer.

If it could be proven positively that Lincoln served for any length of time as the sexton of Pigeon church his attendance at all of the services of the congregation would be implied. This humble task may have paid generous wages in the currency of character with which he was so richly endowed.

Note. The editor of Lincoln Lore was told many years ago that besides the Pigeon Church Record book now in the possession of Mr. Vawter, there was extant an account book of the congregation. It is possible that the book seen by Mr. Obenshain was recovered and preserved. Any information about this missing book would be welcome.