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LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN THE CLERK

There has appeared at intervals in this publication data referring to the various occupations in which Abraham Lincoln was engaged. One of the evidences that he craved social contact even during his youth may be found in his employment by three different merchants.

TAYLOR'S CLERK

Each one of the three clerkships can be associated with some river experience. His first employment was by James Taylor, who hired him to operate a ferry at the mouth of Anderson River where it empties into the Ohio. Taylor was the millwright at this point and also conducted a packing establishment where produce was prepared for shipment to New Orleans. This caused considerable trading on the part of Taylor, and Abraham assisted him while not engaged in running the ferry.

During the several months he worked for Taylor he lived in the most cosmopolitan atmosphere that he ever enjoyed, until he moved to Springfield in 1837. The Ohio River was the Main Street of western civilization and he was fortunate in being located within a mile of Troy, in that day the largest city south of New Albany on the Indiana side of the Ohio River. He was about 17 years of age at this time and one cannot doubt that his experience here was of primary importance in his further ventures as a clerk and finally a merchant.

JONES' CLERK

His knowledge gained in the employment of Taylor opened the way for another position which also resulted in his being retained as a clerk. In 1828 James Gentry, owner of the store at "Gentry's", as it was then called, not far from the Lincoln home, hired Abraham to accompany Allen Gentry, his son, in transporting a load of goods to New Orleans. Upon their return, and with the added experience Lincoln had received in "trading along the sugar coast," as he termed it, he was retained by Gentry or the merchant's former clerk, Jones, as an assistant in the merchandise business at the place then called "Gentry's."

Here, so tradition says, he was expected to cut up pork, wait on the trade, and do other miscellaneous jobs associated with the store business. Some strange stories have been

broadcasted about his business relations with Jones at the time the Lincoln family moved to Illinois.

The story most usually found in early biographies is to the effect that "before leaving he (Abraham Lincoln) bought thirty-five dollars worth of goods from Mr. Jones to sell on the way out to Illinois... a set of knives and forks was the largest thing entered on the bill, the other items were needles, pins, thread, buttons, and the little domestic necessities." According to the son of William Jones, Lincoln wrote to the senior Jones from Decatur, Illinois, that "he had doubled his money on his purchases by selling them along the road."

There is another story current that at the time the Lincolns left for Illinois Jones had for sale an extra large pair of shoes in his store that would just fit Abraham but inasmuch as Abraham desired to buy them on credit Jones would not let him have them.

The editor of Lincoln Lore found in an old paper, unfriendly to Lincoln in the campaign of 1860, still another statement about Lincoln's business transactions with Jones. It was alleged that when Lincoln left Spencer county "he purchased \$16.00 of steel pins at William Jones' Store"... that "Abe had slid" without paying for the pins and "the people expected it." The story further stated that Jones accused Lincoln of running off with his goods and pursued him "regaining the goods by legal process."

On September 5, 1860, William Jones wrote the following letter to the editor of the paper publishing this charge:

"In the columns of your paper I have read a comment signed "Valentine" charging A. Lincoln with running away indebted to me and that I followed him and recovered goods for which he was owing me. I can only say that there is not one word of truth in the assertion.

"Such efforts to electioneer with, are too mean and contemptible to notice, were it not that silence might be construed into an acknowledgment of their truth. As to the offer of proof by some of the good old citizens of this county by affidavit, that is all stuff. I defy any such proof.

"W. Jones."

OFFUTT'S CLERK

A short time after reaching the Illinois country Lincoln became acquainted with Denton Offutt, a trader, who engaged Lincoln to superintend the building of a flat boat and the conveying of a cargo to New Orleans.

Lincoln gives in his autobiographical sketch prepared for Scripps an account of his employment by this same Offutt as a clerk at New Salem:

"During this boat-enterprise acquaintance with Offutt, who was pre-

viously an entire stranger, he conceived a liking for Abraham and believing he could turn him to account he contracted with him to act as clerk for him, on his return from New Orleans, in charge of a store and mill at New Salem, then in Sangamon, now in Menard County."

In the Sangamon Journal for March 8, 1832, the following announcement appears:

Seed Corn

"Denton Offutt takes this method to inform the farmers of Sangamon and Morgan Counties that he will have by the last of this month three or four thousand bushels of seed corn at Salem in Sangamon County which he proposes to sell at \$1 per bushel. He will also have a quantity of cotton from Tennessee which he will sell low, all of which he warrants to be good.

"Denton Offutt,
Salem, March 8, 1832.

"N. B. Subscriptions will immediately be open for seed corn and subscribers will have preference."

On the same day that the above ad appeared in the Journal, Lincoln signed the following order at New Salem on behalf of D. Offutt:

"Mr. James Rutledge, please pay the bearer, David P. Nelson, thirty dollars and this shall be your receipt for the same.

"A. Lincoln for D. Offutt."

On the day following the signing of this order by Lincoln a more important document was written by him. It was his first political statement prepared for publication and it bore the date March 9, 1832. It was published in the Sangamon Journal for March 15, 1832.

These three exhibits, Offutt's advertisement, the Lincoln-Offutt order, and the Abraham Lincoln political document, all appearing at the same time, prove conclusively that Lincoln's first political campaign was launched while he was a merchant's clerk.

In referring to his experience as a clerk for Offutt, Lincoln stated he was hired in July, 1831, and "in less than a year Offutt's business was failing—had almost failed—when the Black Hawk war of 1832 broke out." Offutt's last ad in the Sangamon Journal appeared on April 26, 1832, less than one week after his clerk, Abraham Lincoln, enlisted in the Black Hawk war.

When Abraham Lincoln returned from this skirmish with the Indians his experiences as a clerk under three different proprietors invited him to try for himself the mysteries of merchandising. The complications which arose from this experiment placed upon him what he chose to call "The National Debt."