

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S RESPECT FOR HIS FATHER

The accusation that Abraham Lincoln failed to show proper filial affection for his father is a charge often preferred, not only by those who would discredit the president, but also by his admirers. As January 17th is the anniversary of Thomas Lincoln's death, which occurred in 1851, it seems timely to review, in this number of Lincoln Lore, some of the evidence which has been submitted to support these claims.

Early biographers had little respect for Thomas Lincoln; in fact he was often called the putative father of the president. Herndon and Lamon both contributed much to this theory, and this alleged unnatural relationship is the basis for the traditional barrier between father and son. The supposed cruelty with which Thomas Lincoln is said to have treated Abe as a boy is wholly dependent on one incident when Thomas Lincoln punished his son.

Careful students of Lincoln's parentage now have been able to discredit the false gossip about Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, circulated so widely in early days. With Thomas Lincoln emerging as an honorable pioneer of more than average attainment, the charge of noncompatibility between Thomas and his son, Abraham, loses its chief support.

The misunderstanding about the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and his father in later years is due to the intervention of John D. Johnston, his stepbrother, who with his whole family took up his residence with Thomas Lincoln and proceeded to live on what the old gentleman could acquire.

It is evident from Lincoln's correspondence with Johnston that this stepbrother was continually appealing to Lincoln for financial aid. In 1848, while Lincoln was in Congress, he received a double appeal from the Coles County home of his father. Both letters asked for money. The one bearing the name of Thomas Lincoln requested twenty dollars "to save his land," while Johnston wanted eighty dollars, evidently to pay off some of his personal indebtedness.

It is said that Abraham Lincoln just a few months before had been obliged to borrow money to take care of the expensive trip to Washington, and could ill afford to spare money at this time, but he replied to his father's request, in part, as follows: "I very cheerfully send you the twenty dollars which sum you say is necessary to save your land from sale." He then expressed some surprise that the title to Thomas Lincoln's land was in jeopardy and concludes "Before you pay it, it would be well to be sure that you have not paid it or, at least, that you cannot prove you have paid it."

Those who have felt that Abraham Lincoln mistrusted his father should read the letter which was written to Johnston at the same time. It is evident that Lincoln in writing to his father tried to reveal in as tactful a way as possible that he understood the pressure which Johnston was using. Johnston at this time was thirty-three years of age, and Thomas Lincoln was seventy-two.

On February 23, 1850, Lincoln wrote to Johnston about a mail contract which Johnston wanted to secure. Lincoln said, "I have made out a bid for you at \$120, guaranteed it myself, got our P. M. to certify it, and sent it on." The ultimate outcome of this deal we do not know, but it is evident there was no way for Johnston to lose anything.

In January, 1851, Johnston began another drive on Lincoln. It is very likely that Lincoln's father had been conveniently ill many times, as far as Johnston was concerned. On January 1, 1851, Lincoln received word from one of the other members of the family that his father was really seriously ill. The next day Lincoln wrote to Johnston. The body of the letter follows:

"I received both your letters, and although I have not answered them, it is not because I have forgotten them, or been uninterested about them, but because it appeared to me that I could write nothing which would do any good.

You already know I desire that neither father nor mother shall be in want of any comfort, either in health or sickness, while they live; and I feel sure you have not failed to use my name, if necessary, to procure a doctor, or anything else for father in his present sickness. My business is such that I could hardly leave home now, if it was not as it is, that my own wife is sick-a-bed. (It is a case of baby-sickness, and I suppose is not dangerous.) I sincerely hope father may recover his health, but, at all events, tell him to remember to call upon and confide in our great and good and merciful Maker, who will not turn away from him in any extremity. He notes the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads, and He will not forget the dying man who puts his trust in Him. Say to him that if we could meet now it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant, but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before, and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to join them."

Three distinct subjects are discussed in the body of this letter, all contained in one paragraph. The first two sentences discuss the ever present money question. One must conclude after reading this that Lincoln had made clear that his name could be used to secure funds or professional services for his parents at any time of emergency.

In the introductory paragraph of the letter it is made plain that Johnston did not expect Lincoln to visit his father at this time, and this question Lincoln takes up in the third and fourth sentences printed above. There are those who will never forgive Abraham Lincoln for not going immediately to his father's bedside upon learning that he was ill. These critics are unaware, evidently, that Abraham Lincoln had illness in his own home at the time. On December 2, three weeks before Abraham Lincoln learned of his father's illness, William Wallace Lincoln was born. The Lincolns had lost one of their children by death some months before, and they would be especially anxious for the welfare of this new baby. It was over one hundred twenty-five miles to his father's home, by rail, on slow trains, and with two uncertain connections to make before reaching Charleston, where conveyance would have to be secured for the drive into the country. With his wife "sick-a-bed", as he says in his letter, it does not seem that Abraham Lincoln should have been expected to spend an indefinite period away from home, with the possibility of a long visit. Thomas Lincoln died on January 17, five days after Abraham Lincoln had written to Johnston.

In the last three sentences of the main paragraph, Lincoln addresses himself to the theme of consolation, yet it is in this sacred and heartfelt testimonial that some people have found what they consider to be positive evidence that Lincoln and his father were at enmity.

In order to draw any such conclusions two flagrant violations of interpretation must be made. First, a thought foreign to the general theme of the three sentences (clearly a paragraph in our modern method of division) must be introduced. Second, the last sentence must be cut in two at the first conjunction and the contrast Lincoln is drawing between sorrow and joy completely ignored.

One cannot believe that Abraham Lincoln would stop abruptly in the midst of such a sublime appeal to introduce a note of bitterness, or request that his father be reminded in his dying hour of any traditional discord between them.

As a deathbed scene is usually "more painful than pleasant," and a place of reconciliation rather than retribution, there is no good reason for concluding that there is evidence in this letter, supporting the supposition that ill will existed between father and son. Of course, if one still holds to the groundless theory that Thomas Lincoln was not the real father of the president, it does make a good climax to an imaginative life-long enmity between the two, and, from the writer's viewpoint, this is the motive behind all the controversy over this question.