

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S HONORED STEPMOTHER

The annual observance of Mother's Day has a tendency to cultivate an interest in the maternal influence exerted over famous men. Abraham Lincoln was fortunate in having a double portion of motherly attention as both his own mother and his stepmother had a share in his early training.

While it is very natural that Nancy Hanks Lincoln should contribute much to her son's welfare, it is rather unusual to find a stepmother as keenly interested in a stepchild as Sarah Bush was in Abraham Lincoln. A brief history of her life up to the year when Lincoln moved out from under her influence in 1830 is especially timely at this season of the year.

The Bush family was of German descent, and, according to one who knew the pioneer Bush well, he was a "stirring industrious man." On August 6, 1781, he entered two hundred acres of land including a mill site in what later became Hardin County, Kentucky.

### *Sarah's Girlhood Days*

Sarah Bush was born near Elizabethtown, Kentucky, on December 13, 1788. She was the youngest daughter of Christopher Bush, his family comprising six boys and three girls. It is likely that Thomas Lincoln first saw Sarah Bush in 1797 when he went to work in Elizabethtown and remained there a year or more. As Sarah was but nine years old at this time and Thomas had just become of age, it is not likely that he took much notice of her.

When Thomas Lincoln returned to Elizabethtown in 1803 Sarah was fifteen years old, and at the time Thomas became associated with Christopher Bush in 1806 as a patroller in his company, Sarah was approaching the age of eighteen. There is no question but what he was often in her home and it is likely that he may have paid her some attention. There is a tradition to the effect that she spurned Thomas Lincoln's advances and rejected him for another suitor.

Whatever truth there may be about the rejection of Thomas Lincoln by Sarah Bush at the termination of their early courtship, it is very evident that she made a very serious mistake in appraising the worth of the two contestants for her hand.

### *The Jailor's Wife*

Daniel Johnston, whom Sarah married on March 13, 1806, apparently was unable to write, and the Hardin County Commissioner's books do not show that he ever owned any property but one horse. He was placed on the delinquent list for not paying poll tax. He borrowed money from his wife's brothers and they sued him to try and recover it. An endorsement on the bill "without funds" shows the circumstances in which Sarah Johnston was

living. In 1814 Johnston was appointed jailor of the county, but he was obliged to secure six men to go on his bond when usually two were sufficient. None of his brothers-in-law appeared as bondsmen.

It is evident that the large part of the jailor's work fell on his wife, who was obliged to get meals for the prisoners, clean the court house, and do other tasks that would be anything but agreeable. The salary which Johnston received as jailor for the year between October 1814 and October 1815 was twenty-three pounds and five shillings, approximately \$100.00, or about thirty cents a day. Johnston was expected to provide fuel and lights out of his annual consideration.

The jail at Elizabethtown was a stone structure of two stories and the jailor's family lived in a room above the jail. The youngest child of Sarah Bush Johnston, John D., was born here. Two daughters, Elizabeth and Matilda, were also born in Elizabethtown.

### *The Widow Johnston*

Daniel Johnston died as early as July, 1816, but the exact date is not known. The sequel to this first matrimonial venture of Sarah Johnston is found in an order in the county court in which an executor of the estate is appointed, "the widow of Daniel Johnston, deceased, having in open court declared that she refused to take upon herself the burden of said administration."

Sarah Johnston's father made his will in 1812 and it was probated on February 8, 1813. The will indicates that previous to this time Sarah Bush Johnston had received her share of the estate. After the death of her husband Sarah purchased from Samuel Haycraft, for the sum of twenty-five dollars, "the lot with the cabin in which she now lives," just outside the town limits of Elizabethtown. Here, according to Mr. Haycraft, "she lived an honest, poor widow." With three children dependent upon her and what little she had received from her father's estate already gone, we can feel sure she was in very humble circumstances.

### *The Second Wedding*

Sarah Johnston had been a widow three years when the widower, Thomas Lincoln, arrived in Elizabethtown and began his second courtship. It was in Elizabethtown where Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln had gone to keeping house and where they lived for the first two years of their married life. The widow had every opportunity to know all about this man who had left Kentucky for Indiana but three years before and who had now come back a widower suing for her hand.

The wedding of Thomas Lincoln and Sarah Bush Johnston was solemnized at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, on December 2, 1819, by Rev. George L. Rogers, and immediate preparations were

made for the removal to Indiana. Previous to the wedding, tradition claims that Thomas Lincoln paid off several small debts which Sarah had incurred during her widowhood.

If one will study the surroundings of Sarah Bush Johnston both during her marriage to Johnston and the years that followed, he will be convinced that it was she rather than Thomas Lincoln who profited most economically through this union. She had every reason to look back on this union as the dawning of a new and better day for her and it must have been partly out of appreciation to Thomas Lincoln that she became such a sympathetic mother to his children.

### *The Stepmother*

The new cabin home over which Sarah now presided consisted of three orphan groups, and we might say she adapted herself to the task of serving as a matron in this cabin orphanage greatly to her credit. There were the two Lincoln orphans, Sarah and Abraham; the three Johnston orphans, Elizabeth, Matilda, and John D.; and another orphan boy, Dennis Hanks, whose foster parents had died at the same time Nancy Hanks Lincoln passed away.

The new Mrs. Lincoln was but thirty-one years of age when she took charge of these orphan groups. Her husband was twelve years her senior. Abraham Lincoln had now reached the age of ten and from this time until he was twenty-one he was under his stepmother's direction continually. As Sarah Bush was noted for her "sprightliness and industry," there is every reason to believe that her cabin home was kept clean and tidy and that the Lincoln children profited greatly by her oversight of the home that had been without a woman in it for more than a year.

Apparently the most valuable contribution which the new Mrs. Lincoln made to Stepson Abraham was her sympathetic attitude towards his ambition to learn. Having lived all her life in a community where there was a very fine academy and having come in contact continually with educated people she would be quick to encourage any ambition which Abraham had to make an educated man of himself.

This statement credited to her is undoubtedly true, "I induced my husband to permit Abe to read and study at home as well as at school. At first he was not easily reconciled to it but finally he too seemed willing to encourage him to a certain extent. . . . We took particular care not to disturb him—would let him read on and on until he quit of his own accord."

What contributions Sarah Bush Lincoln made to Abraham Lincoln were made before he left her home at twenty-one years of age, and we have his own testimony that she was a good mother to him.