

# LINCOLN LORE

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## MARKING THE GRAVE OF LINCOLN'S MOTHER

The annual observance of Memorial Day with appropriate exercises at the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln invites a continually increasing number of people to attend the ceremonies each year. This fact suggests that the marking of the burial place of Lincoln's mother is a story which should be preserved. While it is difficult to verify some of the early traditions mentioning markers used at the grave, the accounts of the more formal attempts to honor the president's mother are available.

### *Original Markers*

From our knowledge of the custom of the pioneers, we may feel sure that the grave of Mrs. Lincoln was marked in some way at the time of her burial. Likely nothing more than two rough stones, one at the foot and another at the head of the grave, were used. We are not to assume that Thomas Lincoln was less thoughtful of his wife than his contemporaries were of their departed ones.

How long the original marker on the grave of Mrs. Lincoln remained is problematical, but there is some evidence that there was a plain slab there as late as the president's death in 1865. The following excerpt from the Indianapolis Star of February 3, 1907, supports this assumption:

"Shortly after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln a picnic party from the little town of Dale near Lincoln City went up to the old Lincoln farm and spent the day . . . The Lincoln cabin was still standing and but a short distance up the hill was a plain slab that marked the resting place of Nancy Hanks Lincoln . . ."

However, an artist by the name of Rowbothan was there in 1865, and he claimed that the grave was then unmarked. Inasmuch as nearly fifty years had passed since the death of Mrs. Lincoln, it would not be strange if the markers in a wooded area where there was no regular burial ground had been disturbed and possibly carried off by relic hunters before Rowbothan's arrival.

### *Wartman Armstrong Marker*

That some organized effort was made to mark the burial site within five years after Abraham Lincoln's death is evident from a letter dated February 19, 1870. A portion of this letter which William Herndon wrote to Capt. J. W. Wartman follows: "Received the Rockport Annual from you and for which I am much obliged. I see in it the proceedings of your good people in relation to the erection of a monument to the memory of Mrs. Lincoln, mother of President Lincoln . . . I most heartily endorse what you are doing and the world will do the same . . ."

Another tradition current in Spencer County might suggest that the Wartman memorial effort did not succeed as it is claimed that Joseph D. Armstrong superintended the erection of the first stone: "Having noticed the neglected condition of the grave, he purchased a small marble slab, about two feet high, and also a footmarker at Rockport and placed them on the grave in 1874." It is said that the words "Nancy Hanks Lincoln" were placed on the headstone, and that some of the business men of Rockport assisted in financing the project.

There is some reason to believe that this effort was the culmination of the Wartman project of 1870, and both references may relate to the same attempt to mark the grave. However, the following news item in the Rockport Journal of July 30, 1897, would imply that no stone was placed on the grave at this early date:

"The grave of Mrs. Lincoln was unmarked and was unnoticed by the public until the seventies when three citizens of Rockport began the project of raising a fund to erect a monument, clear off the undergrowth from the grounds, and inclose the grave with a durable fence. The committee solicited subscriptions for several months but the amounts were small. An old settlers' meeting was held at Lincoln City July 4, 1874, when the matter of erecting a monument was talked of but no action taken."

### *The Studebaker Monument*

The first positive evidence about marking the grave of Lincoln's mother is to be found in press dispatches and manuscripts referring to the stone placed there in 1879.

A letter which Mr. P. E. Studebaker of South Bend wrote to Governor Mount on June 11, 1897, states that he read of the neglected condition of the grave in a newspaper, and, at the suggestion of Schuyler Colfax, "I caused a modest slab to be placed over the grave, and at the same time friends placed an iron fence around the lot . . . I have never myself visited the spot." Truman S. Gilkey, the postmaster at Rockport, acted as agent for Mr. Studebaker in purchasing the marker. Alfred H. Yates, the local monument worker, secured the stone from W. H. Sarvis Company of Cincinnati and put upon it the following inscription: "Nancy Hanks/Lincoln/Mother of President/Lincoln/Died/October 5, A. D. 1818/Aged 35 years/Erected by a friend of her martyred son 1879/."

One of the Rockport newspapers described the stone and then concluded: "The old marker was left at the grave and broken up by souvenir hunters." This reference to an earlier marker supports the theory that there was at least one monument placed there before 1879.

The stone was dedicated with appropriate services on November 27, 1879. An iron fence was placed around the grave and one-half acre of land adjacent to it was acquired.

### *The J. S. Culver Stone*

Nearly twenty years passed before a revival of interest was shown in the grave of Lincoln's mother. In the month of June, 1897, Mr. Benjamin B. Dale of Cincinnati visited the grave and was so adversely impressed by the condition of the burial spot that he wrote to Governor Mount of Indiana about it. He said, "It is almost impossible to reach it by reason of the growth of underbrush."

Governor Mount called a meeting of several patriotic societies and the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial Association was formed. In three years time, however, the organization was able to raise but \$56.52 for improvements and maintenance. The plan for the rebuilding of the Lincoln Tomb at Springfield, Illinois, spurred the Association to a new effort and they were rewarded by the gift of \$1,000 from Robert Lincoln, grandson of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. The Spencer County Commissioners at this time acquired sixteen acres of land surrounding the grave which they presented to the Association.

J. S. Culver, who had the contract for the remodeling of the Lincoln Tomb, offered to recut one of the discarded stones of the Springfield Memorial and present it to the Association as a monument to Lincoln's mother. This inscription was placed on the large granite monument: "Nancy Hanks/Lincoln/mother of/Abraham Lincoln/Died, October 5, 1818/Age 35 years." It was dedicated on October 1, 1902. Governor W. T. Durbin presided on this occasion.

### *State Supervision*

By the year 1906 the grave and surroundings were again reported to be in a state of neglect which caused Governor J. Frank Hanley to appoint a commission to take over the books, records, and finances of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial Association, and an act was passed appropriating \$5,000 for the placing of an ornamental fence around the sixteen acre tract and for beautifying the grounds. In 1917 a movement was started in Spencer County to mark the site where the cabin of the Lincoln family stood, and, on April 27, a stone marker was erected on the spot.

The Department of Conservation of the State of Indiana was given direct supervision of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln burial ground in 1925, and such improvements as have been made there and are still being made have been under the direction of this department. The burial lot of Nancy Hanks is now but one of many historical spots embraced within the present boundaries of the State Park which has been established and beautified by the directors of the Indiana Lincoln Union, working in conjunction with the Conservation Department. Such changes as have been made at the grave of Lincoln's mother have been prompted by an effort to harmonize this spot with the entire memorial project where Abraham Lincoln spent one-quarter of his life and where his mother and sister lie buried.