

LINCOLN LORE

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THE BIRTHPLACE CABIN OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The story of Abraham Lincoln's nativity, as it is usually presented, has contributed much to the legendary aspects of the folk lore which has grown up with reference to his early years. The surroundings of the Lincoln's Kentucky cabin and a stable in Bethlehem of Judea have often been described with striking similarity. No dwelling place in all the world is more quickly associated with a historical character than the house of logs which has been used in many lands as a symbol of opportunity.

While it is admitted that Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin withdrawn from the centers of population, it is equally true that the home was no more humble than the birthplaces of thousands of boys who helped to shape the destinies of the new nation. In fact this Lincoln birthplace cabin might be exhibited as a typical pioneer residence at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century.

The occupants of this abode have been done a great injustice when set apart as the riffraff of the western frontier. They were no more illiterate than the vast majority of brave people who first settled in the wilderness. It is true that they were subjected to the privations of both body and mind that all the pioneers suffered, but these parents gave to Abraham Lincoln a home environment as helpful and wholesome as that enjoyed by the average pioneer boy.

The cabin originally stood on a tract of land which Thomas Lincoln had purchased from William Bush in 1808. It was not situated on a squatters domain as has often been alleged. The Lincoln land was in that part of Hardin County, Kentucky, that later became LaRue County. The home place was three miles south of Hodggen's Mill, around which mill the town of Hodgenville was later to spring up. The immediate site of the cabin was near-by a spring called Sinking Spring. It faced west on the old Cumberland Road which passed directly in front of the cabin.

It is likely that the cabin was already standing on the farm when Thomas Lincoln bought it. If he had built a new cabin upon the land he would have been more reluctant to leave it two years later and move to another farm on the same road eight miles north of the birthplace location. Of this fact we are certain, Abraham Lincoln lived in the cabin in which he was born but two years.

While land transactions indicate that there were improvements on the Lincoln farm after the Lincoln's removal, it was not until 1852 that a direct reference was made to a dwelling on the property. A deed made at this time referred to "the spring where the said Horne now lives." Eight different owners had been in possession of the farm and cabin after the Lincoln's left and previous to the purchase by Horne.

The first person to take an interest in preserving the old cabin was Dr. George Rodman, a practicing physician and an admirer of Lincoln, who owned property one mile north of the Lincoln farm. Some time after Lincoln's election to the presidency, after paying a visit to Lincoln

in Washington, Rodman purchased the birthplace cabin of the President from Richard Creal and had it moved to his own farm.

The next individual who showed an interest in the cabin was A. W. Denette, of New York, who purchased the cabin from John Davenport, then the owner of the Rodman property. Denette also purchased that part of the original Lincoln farm containing the famous spring and old home site. He moved the cabin back to the farm, but rebuilt it on an elevation just back of where it stood at the time of Lincoln's birth.

The cabin was destined to occupy this site but a short time before being removed by Denette for exhibition purposes and it was shown at many different points throughout the country, including the Nashville Centennial in 1894 and at the Buffalo Exposition as late as 1901. When Denette started to move the cabin from place to place, he had each of the one hundred and forty-three logs numbered, so that they might be put together correctly with each log in its place. After its long exhibition itinerary it was acquired by David Creer and stored in the old Poffenhausen mansion on Long Island.

The Lincoln Farm Association acquired possession of the cabin in 1906, and it was shipped to Louisville, Kentucky, the same year, where it was exhibited at the Louisville Home Coming celebration. It was then put in storage in the city until 1909 when it was shipped to Hodgenville and reconstructed for the exercises arranged in honor of the one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth. At this time there was laid the cornerstone of the structure which was especially designed to house the cabin. After the ceremonies the logs were returned to Louisville.

The building planned to enclose the cabin was erected on the elevation where Denette placed the rebuilt cabin in 1894. When the memorial building was completed in 1911, the cabin was reconstructed within its walls, where it has since remained.

Exposed to the elements for many years and subject to hard usage with being moved about the country, it is reasonable to expect that much replacing of logs would be necessary. This does not account, however, for the mutilation of the cabin which took place after it had been preserved for a hundred years.

The foundation prepared for the cabin, when it stood on the Rodman farm, and which now supports a frame building, measures eighteen by sixteen feet. This was the usual size of a one-room log cabin in those days and this was undoubtedly the size of the original Lincoln cabin. As now reconstructed within the memorial building, however, it measures but seventeen by thirteen feet. The loss of one foot in frontage can be accounted for by the squaring off of the ends of the logs which had deteriorated but the loss of three feet in the width of the structure was evidently a mutilation of a different character.

It is greatly to be regretted that the cabin now preserved at the Lincoln Birthplace Farm near Hodgenville leaves the impression that the home occupied by the Lincolns was inferior to other pioneer dwellings, and it further contributes to the unwarranted conclusion that the family lived under more unfavorable circumstances than their neighbors. The surroundings of Abraham Lincoln at birth did not differ in any respect from the conditions existing in thousands of pioneer cabins on the frontier in the year 1809.