

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE THOMAS SPARROW WILL

The discovery, in the Spencer County, Indiana, Court House, of a copy of the Thomas Sparrow will, bearing the name of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, mother of the President, establishes many dates which have lacked documentary confirmation and opens up other questions which have long been debated.

It is to be regretted that the original will has not been discovered; but the copy preserved is just as important for all historical purposes. The copy of the will brought to light was made by John Morgan, Clerk of the Spencer County Court, in 1818 at the time the will was probated. The clerk's record, confirming the validity of the will is valuable for establishing certain historical data. We only have room in this issue of Lincoln Lore for the reproduction of the copy of the will.

### *The Will*

"October 9th, 1818—This twenty-first day of September in the year Eighteen Hundred and Eighteen Thomas Sparrow is in his perfect senses on this date above mentioned, that all the goods and chattels that the above mentioned Thomas Sparrow has is to belong to his wife Elizabeth Sparrow so that she can do as she pleases with it until her death and after her death the whole of the property above mentioned is to fall to Dennis Hanks when he comes of age and that the above T. Sparrow has made chois of Thomas Carter to be his Executor for his effects above written this from under my hand and seal.

"Thomas (X) Sparrow (his mark).  
"Test: David Casebier, Nancy (X) Lincoln (her mark).

"Indiana State & County of Spencer. Sct."

### *Nancy Lincoln's Mark*

The fact that Lincoln's mother made her mark instead of writing her own name is the first observation of importance. While this is not absolute proof that she could not write, it contributes much to that supposition. Thousands of pioneers who could read their Bibles, other books, and newspapers had little need of the art of writing, which they did not learn. The only other signature of Lincoln's mother known to exist is on a deed signed in 1814 in which she joins with her husband in conveying the title to the land they owned on Mill Creek in Kentucky. On this occasion, also, she made her mark.

### *A Hoosier Woman*

As far as is known there has not been available, before the discovery of the Sparrow will, a duly authorized document which would establish the residence of Nancy Hanks Lincoln in

the State of Indiana. Although no one has ever questioned the fact that she resided in the Hoosier State and that she lies buried in what is now Spencer County, her name on the will of Thomas Sparrow becomes an exceedingly valuable exhibit of proof, and from the viewpoint of the documentary historian supplies an authoritative source of the very greatest importance.

### *The Date of Mrs. Lincoln's Death*

Apparently it was not until 1851, after his father had passed away, that Abraham Lincoln entered in the family Bible the date of his mother's death. Whether it was copied from some record or recalled from memory is not known, but the date of the Sparrow will and the dates on the record of probate, which is also inscribed on the early manuscript, seem to confirm the family record as to the approximate date of Nancy Lincoln's death.

That Mrs. Lincoln was living on September 21, 1818, is evident from her signature on the document bearing that date. Evidently she was not available for testimony as to the validity of the will on October 9, 1818, at the time the will was probated, or she would have been summoned by the clerk. This would place the date of her death between September 21, 1818, and October 9, 1818. Abraham Lincoln wrote in the family Bible:

"Nancy Lincoln, wife of Thomas Lincoln, died October 5, 1818."

### *The Death of Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow and Mrs. Lincoln*

The story of Nancy Lincoln's death has usually been associated with the passing of Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow. The story in part, as related by Herndon, follows:

"Early in October of the year, 1818, Thomas and Betsy Sparrow fell ill of the disease (milk sick) and died within a few days of each other . . . Meanwhile Abe's mother had also fallen a victim to the insidious disease. Her sufferings, however, were destined to be of brief duration. Within a week she too rested from her labors. She 'struggled on day by day,' says one of the household, 'a good Christian woman, and died on the seventh day after she was taken sick.'"

Just one week after the will was made, on September 28, 1818, Thomas Carter made oath that he was "a bystander and heard the same (the will) acknowledged." It is likely that it was on this day that Thomas Sparrow passed away. On October 5, 1818, just one week after the previous date, David Casebier, who had joined with Nancy Lincoln in witnessing the will,

made oath that Thomas Sparrow was of sound mind when he made the will. It may be observed that this oath was made on the same day that Mrs. Lincoln died.

Between the dates of September 21 and October 5 Elizabeth Sparrow, wife of Thomas, passed away, all of which is in harmony with the general details of the family tradition.

### *The Beneficiary*

There are affidavits in Hardin County, Kentucky, which grew out of the settlement of Thomas Sparrow's estate, which affirm that Thomas and his wife had no children of their own and that Dennis Hanks became the heir to their property. The newly discovered will supports this affidavit, as Dennis Hanks is named as the only beneficiary after the death of Mrs. Sparrow.

There is no doubt about the relationship between Dennis Hanks and the Sparrow family, as we have the former's own statement to the effect that he was the illegitimate child of Nancy Hanks (not to be confused with Lincoln's mother), a sister of Elizabeth Hanks Sparrow, and that he was brought up by his foster parents, Thomas Sparrow and wife.

### *Mrs. Lincoln's Relation to the Sparrows*

Herndon claims that "Nancy Hanks, the mother of the President, at a very early age was taken from her mother Lucy,—afterwards married to Henry Sparrow,—and sent to live with her aunt and uncle, Thomas and Betsy Sparrow." There are those who may feel that her signature as a witness on the will of Thomas Sparrow would contribute to the reliability of the above conclusion. If the Sparrows had reared Nancy Hanks Lincoln from childhood, as Herndon alleged, or as Lamon, who used the Herndon manuscripts states, "that they were the only parents she ever knew," the place to look for her name would be among the beneficiaries, instead of among the witnesses to the will.

The fact that she was not named in the will supports the well-established claim that no such relation existed between the Sparrows and Nancy Lincoln as has been alleged. Although she may have been directly related to Mrs. Elizabeth Hanks Sparrow through her father and also to Thomas Sparrow by her own mother's marriage to Henry Sparrow, brother of Thomas, no conclusion may be drawn from her name as a witness on the will, that Thomas and Elizabeth were her foster parents.