

LINCOLN LORE

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THE ELIZABETHTOWN CARPENTER

Abraham Lincoln was the son of Thomas Lincoln, a carpenter who for several years worked at his trade in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. In November, 1808, about three months before Abraham was born, Thomas evidently decided to try farming, for he purchased of William Bush, one of his Elizabethtown friends, a tract of land about fourteen miles from the town on which there was located a most famous spring. On this place Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809.

Just when Thomas Lincoln served his apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker is not known, but by the time he was twenty-one years of age he was doing rough carpentry. He had steady employment at Elizabethtown, where he was employed in building a mill dam as early as 1797. For the next four or five years he seems to have been roaming about the country, spending a year with his Uncle Isaac in Tennessee and some time with his mother in Washington County, Kentucky.

By the year 1803 Thomas had acquired a piece of property near Elizabethtown where he lived with his mother, and here evidently he began to do odd jobs of cabinet-making as well as raising some stock on the two hundred forty acre tract of land he had acquired.

At some time during the early period of Thomas Lincoln's residence in Hardin County, some merchants operating under the name of Bleakley and Montgomery opened a store at Elizabethtown. Just how much of Thomas Lincoln's trading was done at this store is not known, but books then used by the company and now available reveal some interesting facts about the early vocation of Abraham Lincoln's father. It is to be regretted that all of the ledgers kept by the Bleakley and Montgomery store during the period the Lincolns lived in Kentucky have not been found. It is also to be lamented that in many instances the ledgers now available have not itemized the purchases evidently shown in the missing day books, and the entries merely appear in the ledgers under "Sundries".

On August 8, 1804, however, Thomas purchased "1 casteel saw" for which he paid the sum of eighteen shillings, a shilling then being worth about twenty cents. At other times during the year there are itemized, one plane bit at one shilling and six pence and one file at the same price. The majority of purchases, however, are marked "Sundries".

In February, 1805, Lincoln purchased another saw, this time paying but nine shillings for it, another file, and some brass rings which are also listed. About this time Thomas entered into a contract with Denton Geoghegan to get some logs for a mill. This was probably the biggest contract Lincoln had secured, and it was necessary for him to go to court to collect the contract price. The court found that Lincoln had completed his task in "a workman-like manner" and ordered Geoghegan to pay the bill and the court costs. In 1806 Thomas Lincoln was hired by Bleakley and Montgomery to go to New Orleans as a hand on a flatboat. As was usually the case in such contracts he was probably hired to help build the boat. Besides being paid sixteen pounds for going to New Orleans he also received from some source, at the same time, gold to the amount of thirteen pounds. This gold may have been

wages paid for building the boat. It is apparent that the New Orleans trip netted him twenty-nine pounds.

At Thomas McIntire's sale in 1807 he bought an old sword. This undoubtedly was made into a drawing knife to give him further equipment for the carpenter's chest. The Bleakley and Montgomery books indicate that he was still plying his trade at this time as sandpaper, screws, a gimlet and so on are listed. The following year he was also charged with items which were used in his business, and a credit of twelve shillings was made, indicated by the storekeepers as "Balance put to his credit of work done."

An old friend of the Lincoln family, Christopher Columbus Graham, who claims to have visited in the Lincoln home and to have known the family well, claims that "Tom Lincoln had the best set of carpenter's tools in Hardin County."

There are several pieces of cabinet-work still extant which Thomas is known to have done. A corner cupboard, now in possession of the Speed Museum at Louisville, has his initials inscribed in an obscure place within the cabinet, and there are other evidences of his handiwork preserved in Hardin County in the form of old mantles which he made.

His cabinet-work did not stop after he reached Indiana. Here as in Kentucky he was active in his profession. In the Ford collection at Dearborn is another old corner cupboard which was made by him for his neighbors, Josiah and Elizabeth Crawford, while residing in Spencer County, Indiana. Here, likewise, are many products of his talent, and there can be little doubt but that his work was much in demand in the pioneer settlements in which he lived.

William Woods, another neighbor of the Indiana Lincolns, made this statement in some reminiscences which he wrote on September 15, 1865: "Thomas Lincoln often and at various times worked for me, made cupboards, etc., and other household furniture for me; he built my house, made floors, ran up the stairs, did all the inside work for my house." It is also well known that Thomas was on the committee that superintended and helped to build the Pigeon Church where the Lincolns attended. The pulpit which was used for more than seventy-five years by the church was made by Thomas Lincoln.

Apparently Abraham Lincoln did not intend to follow the cabinet-makers' trade although he did engage in rough carpentry. The last task he completed in Indiana is told by a neighbor in these words, "Abe whipsawed, saw him cutting down a large tree one day: I asked him what he was going to do with it: he said he was going to saw it into planks for his father's new house—the house was not completed until after Lincoln left for Illinois. Abe sold his planks to Crawford—Josiah Crawford put the planks in his house."

Centuries ago there lived one known as "The Carpenter's Son" whose influence could not be circumscribed by the environs of a carpenter shop on the boundaries of a rural community. It is also true, with respect to the son of the Elizabethtown carpenter, that he too laid aside the tools of manual labor and matched his genius with the men of the open forum who were building a nation.