

LINCOLN LORE

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LEGENDARY LINCOLNIANA

It is to be regretted that periodicals which reach large numbers of young people do not pay more attention to the accuracy of their statements when commenting on such prominent American figures as Abraham Lincoln. A year ago the *Reader's Digest* released an article which developed the theme that Lincoln was a miserable failure until he was accidentally elected to the Presidency. No conclusion about his gradual progress and his remarkable political achievements could be further from the truth than the above mentioned contribution.

The *Saturday Evening Post* for February 17, 1940, carried a full-page editorial under the caption "Lincoln had a Stepbrother." How Lincoln attempted to encourage this stepbrother, John D. Johnston, to improve his economic condition is set forth in two interesting letters. However, the comments on the childhood days of Lincoln and the characteristics of his father give a greatly distorted picture of the actual surroundings from which the editor draws some untenable conclusions.

Questionable Paternity

The most grievous and entirely inexcusable error in the editorial is the implication that Thomas Lincoln may not have been the father of the President. No Lincoln student of any repute doubts the oft-repeated statement of Abraham Lincoln that his father was Thomas Lincoln. It may be of some interest that Abraham had a stepbrother, but it is of more importance that Abraham had a sister two years his senior and a brother two years his junior.

Shiftless Father

Thomas Lincoln, the father, seems to have had a difficult time gaining recognition as a worthy and altogether honorable pioneer. The editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* contributes still further to legendary Lincolniana by making Thomas a "shiftless, roving" individual. By the time Abraham was born his father had accumulated at least six hundred acres of land and could never be called a poverty-stricken man in either the Kentucky or Indiana days. He did not arrive in the Illinois country until he was fifty-four years of age and at the time of the correspondence between Abraham Lincoln and John D. Johnston he had reached the age of seventy-five. There would be no occasion for anyone to take special note of him until 1846 when his son was elected to Congress and by that time the old gentleman was seventy. The Thomas Lincoln that Illinois remembered was an aged, broken-down man, not the cabinet maker of Kentucky and Indiana days.

Roving Thomas

With respect to Thomas Lincoln's roving habits it is interesting to note that up to the time Abraham Lincoln was twenty-one years of age the boy could remember moving but once. The Lincolns lived on the same place in Indiana for fourteen years. Thomas lived in the same home in Coles County, Illinois, for nearly twenty years. It might be said that Thomas Lincoln was always a home owner and never a renter. It is unjust to call him a rover although difficulties with land titles in Kentucky and unhealthy locations in Illinois did make it necessary to make some adjustments before he would establish a permanent home.

Slovenly Cabin

Herndon's entirely unreliable description of the Lincoln's Indiana dwelling place may be responsible for causing the editor of the *Post* to refer to it as "Tom Lincoln's floorless, windowless, doorless and dirty cabin." This description was evidently intended for a half-face camp which the editor affirms the Lincolns were living

in as late as December, 1819, three years after the Lincolns settled in Indiana. Abraham Lincoln himself is responsible for the statement that they were living in a new log cabin shortly after the family reached Indiana in 1816.

Speculations on Heredity

The statement in the editorial in question, that "John D. Johnston's heredity, by such evidence as remains, was a good deal superior to Abraham Lincoln's" is not confirmed by the factual evidence available. The only taxable property Johnston's father, Daniel, is known to have owned was one horse, while about the same time Thomas Lincoln owned several horses. Johnston was on the delinquent list for not paying his poll tax while Lincoln always kept his property and poll taxes paid. In August, 1810, Johnston borrowed money from his father-in-law and his brothers-in-law, and, when they brought suit to collect, the notation on the papers stated "without funds." After Johnston died and his administrator was appointed, his widow "in open court declared that she refused to take upon herself the burden of said administration." Practically every record available in Hardin County Court reveals Johnston to have been a worthless individual, while on the other hand Thomas Lincoln was an honorable and honest pioneer who came from an excellent Virginia family. It should be evident to all who are informed about the two men that Thomas Lincoln was far superior to Daniel Johnston in every respect. Inherited tendencies with which Abraham Lincoln was endowed must have been of a higher type than those traits inherited by John D. Johnston.

Environments Compared

The editorial statement that "Prior to 1819 (John D.) Johnston's environment easily was better" than Abraham Lincoln's is most certainly in error. John was born in a room over the county jail, which would not seem to be as wholesome a place to reside as the Lincoln's typical log cabin, where Christian parents presided over the home. After the death of Johnston, the jailor, the widow with her three small children moved into a cabin on an alley in Elizabethtown which she purchased from Samuel Haycraft for \$25.00.

It is difficult to believe that Thomas Lincoln who was able to pay off the debts of the Widow Johnston at the time of their marriage, would have left his own children "half naked and half frozen" in the Indiana cabin as alleged by the contributor to the *Post*. While John Johnston and Abraham Lincoln may have called the same place home from 1819 to 1830 the fact that there was six years difference in their ages would imply that they may not have reacted in the same way to like stimuli. During the last four years of Lincoln's life in Indiana he was living at the various places where he worked and he made one trip to New Orleans.

Minor Inaccuracies

There is no evidence as alleged that Sarah Bush was "courted unsuccessfully" by Thomas Lincoln in his youth. John Hanks did not go to New Orleans with Lincoln in 1831, as stated in the editorial, as Lincoln clearly reveals in an autobiographical sketch. Both the letters displayed in the editorial were not written after Thomas Lincoln's death as alleged but one of the notes was written before Thomas Lincoln died and it contained an appended note to the father. It might be of interest to know that the reason why Johnston wrote Lincoln "he would almost give his place in Heaven for \$70 or \$80" was because he wanted the money to finance a new matrimonial venture on which he was about to embark.