

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

The Thanksgiving season creates an environment which invites one to think of the marvelous faith and courage of our fathers who gave to America a Christian heritage. The season also recalls family altars which have influenced so many of our outstanding statesmen. There can be no doubt but what Abraham Lincoln's reliance upon the unseen power was due to the generations of Lincolns before him who had been devout worshippers of God.

The presence of the Lincoln family in America, like so many of the Pilgrim forebears, was due to religious persecution in the mother country. Samuel Lincoln, who came to Massachusetts in 1637, helped to build the oldest house of worship in continual use now standing in the nation; it is the Old Ship Church at Hingham, Massachusetts.

After migrating from Hingham, Massachusetts, Abraham Lincoln's forebears settled in New Jersey, where they intermarried with the family of Obadiah Holmes who was in turn persecuted by the early settlers for his liberal religious views.

The next step in the Lincoln migration brought them to Pennsylvania, and here they were joined in marriage with the Quakers. Mordecai Lincoln, great great grandfather of President Lincoln, was born among the Pilgrims of Massachusetts, married into a "dissenter" family in New Jersey, and was finally buried in a Quaker burial ground in Pennsylvania.

When the Lincolns reached the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia they were caught up by the evangelical appeal of the Baptists, and the Linville Creek Baptist Church was built adjacent to it not on the very land of the Lincolns. With this church Abraham Lincoln, the grandfather of the President, united.

Many of the Virginia migrations to Kentucky were church migrations. Sometimes a whole congregation would move in a body. The pioneer Abraham Lincoln established his home on a four hundred acre tract near Louisville, Kentucky. One acre in a corner of this farm was set apart as God's acre, and on this land the Long Run Church was built. In its burial ground the body of the President's grandfather lies buried.

Lincoln's own father and mother were devout people, and their first cabin home was built at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, near the Severn's Valley Baptist Church which is the oldest Baptist organization west of the Alleghenys.

There has been a tendency to underrate the economic, social, and intellectual status of Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and their religious experiences have been called expressions of emotional fanaticism. It is not likely that either one of Lincoln's parents or his stepmother were students of theology, but they were united with religious movements which were attempting to interpret the will of God for pioneers who were settling a vast American wilderness.

After two years of married life spent in Elizabethtown, Lincoln's parents moved to a point about one mile south of the South Fork Baptist Church, and probably attended the services there. This was known as a Separate Baptist Church, and the first baptisms in Kentucky are said to have taken place in this congregation.

The Lincolns affiliated, however, with the Little Mount Separate Baptist Church which was situated about five miles north of the Lincoln cabin. The first sermons Lincoln heard were from the pulpit of this anti-slavery church. Not only were Lincoln's parents members of this congregation, but Caleb Hazel, one of Lincoln's school teachers, also joined this religious body.

One cannot place too much emphasis on the fact that Lincoln's parents were affiliated with an anti-slavery

church, as it was in the home of his parents, Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, that Abraham first heard the wrongs of slavery discussed. Both ministers who were the regular preachers of the congregation while Abraham was growing up were greatly opposed to slavery and preached against it.

We can understand why Lincoln could write, "I am naturally anti-slavery," for long before the slavery question became a political issue with him, it was a moral issue debated in the churches with which his parents were affiliated. It will be recalled that Abraham Lincoln said in one of his autobiographical sketches that his father left Kentucky for Indiana "partly on account of slavery."

There was no church organization in the Pigeon Creek community where the Lincoln's settled in Indiana at the time of their arrival, and it was not until after the death of Lincoln's mother that steps were taken to establish a congregation in the community. Nancy Hanks Lincoln's name was still on the old church register at the Little Mount Church in Kentucky when she passed away. It was David Elkin, a pastor of this church, who journeyed to Indiana and preached the funeral sermon in her memory.

Thomas Lincoln was one of the moving spirits in the building of the Pigeon Church in Spencer County, Indiana, and he is said to have made the pulpit and other furniture in the primitive log meeting house. Abraham at this time was old enough to help in the construction, and it can be said that he helped to erect at least one log church building where he attended worship.

The old minute book of the congregation is still extant, and the names of Thomas Lincoln and his wife, Sarah, appear upon its pages. The record shows that Thomas Lincoln joined the church by letter from the Kentucky church while his wife joined "by experience." Abraham Lincoln's sister Sarah also affiliated with the congregation "by experience," but Abraham's name does not appear on the register.

Thomas Lincoln was not only a member of the Pigeon Church but a very active one as the record reveals. He often served as moderator at its meetings and was appointed on important committees to look after improvements to the building, to call on absent members, to interview those who had violated some of the church rules, and to attend conferences and conventions as a representative of the church.

The religion of Lincoln's parents found expression in the home. Abraham is said to have told a friend, "My mother was a ready reader and read the Bible to me habitually." We are also advised by members of the family that grace was always said at every meal. During all the impressionable years spent in Indiana, Lincoln was living in a home where a very definite religious atmosphere was created.

After Lincoln's father and his stepmother moved to Illinois they still kept up their active interest in the church, and Thomas affiliated with the Christian or Disciple Church at Charleston, Illinois. He died an active member of this congregation and the minister of the church has testified to his exemplary christian character and his loyalty to the church.

These ancestors of Abraham Lincoln who passed on to the offspring a deep appreciation for spiritual values contributed more or less to the first annual national Thanksgiving proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, which established a special day of Thanksgiving each year for the nation to acknowledge its religious heritage.