

LINCOLN LORE

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE 1816 LINCOLN MIGRATION

The approaching 125th anniversary of the Lincoln migration to Indiana which occurred sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas 1816, invites one to consider some of the motives which prompted this very important removal from Kentucky, a slave state, to Indiana, a free state. Herndon, as usual, is entirely out of harmony with Lincoln's own testimony respecting the incident.

The Herndon Sources

Chauncey F. Black using the Herndon manuscripts for the Lamon publication states very emphatically: "It has pleased some of Lincoln's biographers to represent this removal of his father as a flight from the taint of slavery. Nothing could be further from the truth."

William Herndon in his three volume work claims "The assertion made by some of Mr. Lincoln's biographers and so often repeated by sentimental writers that his father left the country to avoid the sight or contact with slavery, lacks confirmation. In all Hardin County, at that time a large area of territory, there were not over fifty slaves."

When Abraham Lincoln was two years old, the tax list of Hardin County shows that there were 1,007 slaves listed for taxation while the white male population above 16 years of age, was but 1,627. One slaveholder alone in Hardin County in 1813 listed 58 slaves for taxation, eight more than Herndon claimed had existed in the whole county.

Senator Beveridge who also used the Herndon manuscripts, wrote: "As elsewhere south of the Ohio, slavery had increased in Kentucky, but we now know that this fact had nothing whatever to do with the family's (Lincoln's) removal from that state. But the faintest evidence has been found indicating that slavery was so much as a contributing cause for their departure; indeed it is doubtful whether that institution made any impression one way or the other on Thomas Lincoln's pallid mind." Abraham Lincoln, however, in an autobiographical sketch stated: "The removal was partly on account of slavery." Beveridge repudiated this statement of Lincoln along with the President's reference to faulty land titles and states with respect to Lincoln's testimony, "We now know that these were not the reasons for the migration."

Migratory Tendencies

The migratory tendencies in the Lincoln family undoubtedly contributed somewhat to Thomas Lincoln's decision to remove to Indiana in 1816. From the time his first American progenitor had settled in Massachusetts in 1637, there had been a continual migration westward by his kinfolk and they were ever living on the very crest of western civilization. It would be strange indeed for Thomas Lincoln to have remained in Indiana when the Illinois country was ready for occupation, and it was very natural for him, in 1816, some years before, to migrate from Kentucky to Indiana when that territory was opened to settlers. It must not be concluded, however, that these migrations were due primarily to the spirit of adventure. Lincoln was not an explorer or a hunter.

Opportunity

The fundamental purpose of Thomas Lincoln's removal on the two occasions which he chose to migrate, was to better his home conditions. Proposal for the establishment of the new state west of Indiana, north of the Ohio would in itself be an invitation to those living not far away to be the first ones over the river. One early newspaper makes this comment on the increased migration to Indiana in 1816: "During no period since the first settlement in the western country has the tide of population set stronger this way than at the present. At one point in Indiana, fifty family wagons crossed the ford in one day besides those who crossed bridges, of which there were two." It was undoubtedly Kentucky which sent into In-

diana the vanguard of pioneer settlers who rapidly pushed the frontier boundary from the banks of the Ohio to the banks of the Wabash.

Influence of Kinsmen

Hananiah Lincoln, cousin of the President's grandfather, who was associated with him in his Kentucky land ventures, acquired property in Hartford, Kentucky, about 30 miles from the Ohio river in the year 1792. This gave him some opportunity to explore the western lands and it is not strange that later on two of his sons, Austin and Davis, settled about sixty miles north of Hartford, in the Indiana territory within a few miles of where Thomas Lincoln was to establish his home about two years after Austin reached the community. Thomas Lincoln had made his home with Hananiah's family for sometime before his marriage and was well acquainted with Austin and Davis Lincoln. Inasmuch as Thomas settled not far from Austin, it is very likely that he was not only influenced by Austin Lincoln to migrate to Indiana, but that the place he located his home, probably was selected because of the close proximity of the Lincoln home already established there.

Slavery

When Abraham Lincoln said in an autobiographical sketch that his parents left Kentucky "partly on account of slavery," he was undoubtedly telling the truth as was his custom. In one of the Douglas debates he used a rhetorical question about others who may have left the South to get out from under the "slavery influence." He said:

"How many democrats are there about here (a voice 1,000) who have left slave states and come into the free state of Illinois to get rid of the institution of slavery? (another voice 1,001). I reckon there are 1,001." The fact that Lincoln's parents were members of an anti-slavery church and Lincoln's own statement about having been brought up in an anti-slavery atmosphere, very clearly supports his own testimony that his father left Kentucky partly on account of slavery. From a psychological viewpoint at least this was the most important factor in bringing about the removal of the Lincolns to Indiana.

Land Titles

We have Abraham Lincoln's own statement that the major factor contributing to the removal of the Lincolns to Indiana was "on account of difficulty of land titles."

The first tract of land which Thomas Lincoln acquired in Kentucky was purchased from John Stater. It consisted of 230 acres on Mill Creek in Hardin County and the purchase price was "the sum of 118 pounds in hand paid." Incorrect recording of the boundaries, however, caused Lincoln to suffer a loss of 30 acres on this tract. On December 12, 1808, Thomas purchased 300 acres on the south fork of Nolin River for which he paid \$200 in cash and assumed a small lien. He was soon asked to defend his title by Richard Mather, a former title holder, and through the process of litigation he was deprived, not only of his home and improvements, but apparently lost his \$200 as well. Later he acquired a tract of land on Knob Creek where he settled his family, but he was not allowed to retain this property which he had purchased for any considerable time, as an ejectment suit was brought against him and he was literally driven from the farm from which he migrated to Indiana. The court records offer sufficient evidence to prove that Thomas Lincoln had enough experience in Kentucky with faulty land titles, to encourage him to remove to a state where the boundaries were guaranteed by the government, and where the improvements which he might put on the land would become his property and not that of some earlier claimant.