

LINCOLN LORE

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KENTUCKY'S MOST IMPORTANT WEDDING

Universally noted for her beautiful women, it follows that Kentucky has been the scene of many important weddings where prominent, influential and wealthy men have been united in marriage to the belles of the Blue Grass state. No nuptial vows have thus far been performed in Kentucky which have proven to be of more importance than the rites which pronounced Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, husband and wife.

This year marks the sesquicentennial of Kentucky's statehood which has resulted in many celebrations in commemoration of the anniversary. Some of the counties formed in 1792, the same year the state was established, are enjoying a double anniversary. Among these smaller units is Washington County where the marriage of Lincoln's parents took place. To further emphasize the anniversary feature the celebration in Washington County was held on June 12, the day on which the wedding of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks occurred. The editor of *Lincoln Lore* was one of the speakers on this occasion.

It is doubtful if the incidents associated with any wedding have been and still are the subject of more controversy. It is to be regretted that due to the wide significance and international importance of this event that it could not have been left in the simplicity of its original setting. It was first advocated that the wedding never took place and that the parents of Lincoln lived as common-law husband and wife. With this objection removed by the discovery of the marriage papers, the bride was then pictured as a waif, the illegitimate child of an unworthy woman. This tradition still survives regardless of the preponderance of documentary evidence against it.

The groom who seldom figures very much in the recitals of a wedding episode has come in for his full share of attention and until recent documentary discoveries about his economic status he was given the roll of a roving vagabond of the "poor white trash," who was willing to go through the wedding ceremony for a financial consideration.

Richard Berry, who signed the marriage bond as guardian of the bride, was called just a by-stander in the court house where Thomas Lincoln secured the papers. Even the Reverend Jesse Head who performed the ceremony was looked upon as a fictitious character by some.

The identity of the home in which Thomas and Nancy were married is still in dispute and it is claimed they lived there for a space of two years and a half, leaving the implication that Thomas Lincoln was not able to provide a home for the woman he had married.

The limited space in an issue of *Lincoln Lore* for discussing such questions as those raised here have naturally been assigned to the Foundation's other publication, *The Lincoln Kinsman*. However, a brief summary of court records which deal directly or indirectly with the Lincoln-Hanks wedding ceremonies is made available here.

The Groom's Wedding Outfit

Thomas Lincoln purchased on May 3, 1806 at Bleakley-Montgomery's store in Elizabethtown, Kentucky for three shillings "one-half calf skin" presumably for his wedding boots. On May 16 at the same store he purchased a large bill of goods including cloth for his wedding suit. Four days later another lot of merchandise was purchased containing 3 yards of coating, brown Holland cloth, red flannel, buttons, skeins of silk, etc.

Decorating the Bridal Carriage

Having taken care of his own wedding outfit he purchased of the Elizabethtown merchants a "tipt bridle" for his horse which cost him "13 shillings 6 pence," over three dollars. Certainly he owned a good saddle and on the same horse, behind the groom, the bride would find a seat.

Cash for Wedding Expenses

The prospective bridegroom on May 22, three weeks before the wedding, drew from his surplus credit at Bleakley-Montgomery store the sum of "\$112.70."

Guests and Attendants

Previous to 1806 four of the Widow Lincoln's children had married into Washington County families and the wedding of her youngest son Thomas, would be of general interest to a large number of the groom's kinsfolk. The senior Berry's niece, the bride Nancy Hanks, had a great many relatives in the surrounding country. There were also Shipley, Mitchell and McCord cousins, and some small half-brothers and half-sisters of the bride in the adjacent Doctor's Fork community. Nancy's cousin and girlhood companion, Sarah Shipley Mitchell, who was bridesmaid, would be the special guest.

Bride's Cousin A Bondsman

Thomas Lincoln was in Washington County at least two days before the wedding as on June 10, 1806 he signed the following bond with Richard Berry as bondsman.

"Know all men by these presents that we Thomas Lincoln and Richard Berry are held and firmly bound . . . that whereas there is a marriage shortly intended between the above bound Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks for which a license has been issued . . ."

"Witness
"John H. Parrott.

Thomas Lincoln
Richard Berry
"Garden."

The Presiding Minister

The authority of Rev. Jesse Head to conduct a marriage ceremony for Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks and pronounce them husband and wife is found in this Washington County Court Order for February 7, 1803: "On the motion of Jesse Head, a minister of the gospel of the Methodist Episcopal Church who made the oath, a testimonial is granted him to solemnize the rites of marriage on his giving bond . . ."

The Wedding Day

Traditions still extant claim that the Judge and lawyers of the court, then in session at Springfield, attended the Lincoln-Hanks marriage ceremony and wedding festivities. The editor of *Lincoln Lore* discovered in the Washington Circuit Court Order Book for June, 1806, that the court convened on Monday, June 9, Tuesday, June 10, Wednesday, June 11, although on Thursday, June 12, the wedding day, it was not in session, but again resumed business on Friday, June 13. Richard Berry, guardian of the bride, was serving on a jury in the court. Mordecai Lincoln, oldest brother of the groom, had a lawsuit being tried in which he was the defendant, and Jesse Head, as a justice of the peace, also had business in court. Kentucky's most important wedding was even then of sufficient significance to cause the adjournment of the court for the day of the wedding, June 12, 1806.

The Marriage Consummated

The marriage returns of Rev. Jesse Head, among others noted, contain this entry: "Washington County—I do certify that the following is a true list of marriages solemnized by me the subscriber. . . . Joined in the Holy Estate of Matrimony agreeable to the rules of M. E. C. . . ."

"June 12, 1806 Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks.
"Jesse Head, P. M. E. C."

"At Home" In Elizabethtown

Two days after the wedding, on June 14, 1806, Thomas Lincoln purchased at the Bleakley-Montgomery store, in the village of Elizabethtown where he had taken his wife, "a half set of knives and forks" at five shillings and "three skeins of silk" for which he paid two shillings and three pence. The parents of Abraham Lincoln were then "at home" to their many friends and kinsmen.