

# LINCOLN LORE

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## MEMORIAL STAMP FOR MOTHER'S DAY

Nancy Hanks Lincoln died on October 5, 1818 and next year on this day, the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of her death will be commemorated. On the Mother's Day, preliminary to this anniversary, it is hoped that the United States Government will issue a postage stamp memorializing the mother of Lincoln.

### *The Sponsoring Group*

The effort to secure the memorial stamp is being sponsored by the Spencer County Historical Society under the direction of the following members of the stamp committee: Hilbert Bennett, chairman, Miss Laura Mercy Wright, Mrs. Elizabeth Gentry, Carl Englebrecht, Mrs. Bess V. Ehrmann and Mrs. Mina Cook. This committee has already circulated petitions for the stamp. The lists contain the signatures of about a half a million people.

If a favorable reaction by the postal authorities is assured, recommendations for the design of the memorial stamp will be submitted by a committee composed of Louis A. Warren, director of Lincoln National Life Foundation, chairman; Paul Angle, librarian of Illinois State Historical Society; Howard Chandler Christy, portrait artist; Paul Manship, sculptor; Frederick H. Meserve, authority on Lincoln photographs; and Carl Sandburg, Lincoln author. Twenty-four designs for the contemplated stamp have already been submitted.

It must be recognized that very little biographical data is available about Lincoln's mother. Some of the most important vital statistics about her are not recorded. Confusion exists as to just how she looked, also there is some difference of opinion as to what innate tendencies she may have passed on to her illustrious son. This one fact is certain, however, that she was the first and faithful wife of Thomas Lincoln and she bore him three children. One of the three became the most beloved character in American history.

### *The Birth Date of Lincoln's Mother*

One of the facts we would like to know about Lincoln's mother, especially if a stamp is to be issued in her honor, is the date of her birth. The day of her marriage and the day of her death are positively established, but any date which is associated with her birth is purely traditional and this goes for the year as well as the month and the day when she was born.

The first approach to the date of Lincoln's mother's birth which we have been able to discover in print is in Lamon's *Lincoln* [p. 10] in which it is stated that the age of Nancy at the time of her marriage was "about twen-

ty-three," placing the year of her birth about 1783. Herndon, whose manuscripts were used as a source for the Lamon book, stated in his three volume work, [vol. 1, p. 13] compiled from the same manuscripts he sold Lamon, that at the time of Nancy's marriage to Thomas Lincoln she was in her twenty-third year. This statement is undoubtedly responsible for the Lamon conclusion. Where did Herndon get his information? Possibly it was from John Hanks who stated in an interview which Herndon directed that "Thomas was older than his wife say five years." [*The Hidden Lincoln*, p. 345.]

Herndon published the statement made by the President himself that Thomas Lincoln "having reached his twenty-eighth year he married Nancy Hanks—mother of the present subject—in the year 1806." If Thomas had reached his twenty-eighth year actually he would be twenty-seven years old which would make the age of his wife, according to John Hanks, twenty-two at the time of her marriage in 1806, and the year of her birth would have been 1784. We doubt seriously that the President ever told Herndon the date of his mother's birth as apparently Lincoln himself did not know the date. In 1847 he entered the date of his mother's death in the family Bible, and if he had known the date of her birth probably he would have made a notation about it, or at least stated her age at time of death, as he did about his father later on when he entered in the old Bible some vital statistics.

The first mention of an actual birthday for Nancy Hanks is to be found in the book *Nancy Hanks* by Mrs. Hitchcock who stated that she was born on February 5, 1784 [p. 25]. Jenkins Lloyd Jones, who prepared copy for the biographical tablets placed on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial at Hodgenville, gave the birthday of Nancy Hanks as January 4, 1784. Mr. Jones was familiar with the work of Mrs. Hitchcock and was probably influenced to some extent by her information. If Mrs. Hitchcock were depending on some of the Joseph Hanks descendants for information about the age of Nancy Hanks, they gave her the birth date of Nancy, the daughter of Joseph who was the mother of Dennis Hanks, and who later married Levi Hall and not Nancy the mother of Lincoln. Mr. Jones was laboring under the same mistaken identity of the Nancy in question, so probably both dates

January 4, and February 5, are spurious.

The only documentary approach we can make to the question of her birth date is through the Hardin County census which shows Nancy Hanks Lincoln to have been between twenty-six and forty-five years of age at the time the census was taken in 1810. This would indicate that Nancy could not have been born later than 1784 or she would have been listed as under twenty-six years of age. She may have been born in 1784 and the inscription on her tombstone which states she was thirty-five years old at the time of her death in 1818 may be right, regardless of the absence of any reliable source to confirm it.

### *Personal Appearances of Nancy Hanks Lincoln*

Those having in mind the preparation of a design for a memorial stamp would like very much to know something about the personal appearance of Lincoln's mother. It is true we have no actual photograph of Nancy Hanks Lincoln as she died over twenty years before photography was invented, and no painting nor even a silhouette of her is available. Photographs are our best authorities as to how our forebears looked and memory would be of little avail in allowing us to become familiar with their appearance without the aid of visual helps.

There does not appear to be extant any dependable description of Mrs. Lincoln and no one who was really qualified to speak with authority as to how she looked has left us a verbal portrait of her. It appears that the few descriptions submitted have been greatly influenced by the personal appearances of Lincoln himself, with a tendency on the part of the Hankses to trace not only his mental endowments to their side of the house, but his physical characteristics as well.

Practically all biographers, who have tried to describe Lincoln's mother, have relied upon William Herndon's description of her. Herndon was dependent on John Hanks for the story of how she looked, when, in fact, although John gave a minute description of her, it is very evident that he never saw her in his whole life time. (See *Lincoln Kinsman* No. 43) It is doubtful if any satisfactory sketch of how she actually looked will ever be discovered.

Correction—In *Lincoln Lore* No. 693 the word "ruler" was used inadvertently instead of "president" as it appeared in the original source, *The New York Times*. Ed.