

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 765

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

December 6, 1943

WIDOWER LINCOLN MARRIES WIDOW JOHNSTON

There is no part of the Lincoln biography which has been misrepresented to a greater degree than the statements about the marriages which occurred in the Lincoln family. William Herndon is largely responsible, directly or indirectly, for the purely fictitious stories which have been associated with these nuptial vows.

Herndon prepared an article on marriage and divorce which was published in the *Boston Investigator*, on January 20, 1884. He summed up his argument with this statement, "The jurisdiction of the State and the jurisdiction of the Church to regulate and control marriages and divorces are usurpations of tyrants and Popes." It is not strange with a viewpoint such as this he could see nothing sacred in the rites of matrimony.

It was Herndon's groundless fable that presented Abraham Lincoln as running away from his own wedding and leaving his bride waiting at the altar. When the marriage between Lincoln and Mary Todd was solemnized, it was Herndon who claimed Mary married Lincoln for revenge, that Lincoln never loved his wife, and told her so before he married her.

The papers Herndon supplied Lamson were responsible for the widely distributed story that the parents of Abraham Lincoln were never legally married, but lived together as common-law husband and wife.

When Lincoln's own mother died and his father married a second time, Herndon's notes are again used to heap abuse on Thomas Lincoln for deceiving the woman he married, and tricking her into marrying him. This is the commonly accepted story about the new wife's reactions after reaching Thomas Lincoln's home in Indiana; "Mrs. Lincoln was much 'surprised' at the contrast between the glowing representations which her husband had made to her before leaving Kentucky and the real poverty and meanness of the place. She had evidently been given to understand that the bridegroom had reformed his old Kentucky ways, and was now an industrious and prosperous farmer. She was scarcely able to restrain the expression of her astonishment and discontent; but, though sadly overreached in a bad bargain, her lofty pride and her high sense of Christian duty saved her from hopeless and useless repinings."

Inasmuch as the Widower Thomas Lincoln and the Widow Sarah Johnston were married in December, this might be an appropriate time to present some of the facts relating to this wedding in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

It seems as if Thomas Lincoln waited a reasonable time after his first wife's death before going back to Kentucky for another helpmate. Nancy Hanks Lincoln had been dead a year and two months and the two small children in Thomas Lincoln's home were greatly in need of a mother. Although some men could not go back to the same neighborhood where they had lived with one wife and find another woman willing to accept their proposal of marriage, Thomas Lincoln was able to do this.

The first assumption that is drawn about the Lincoln-Johnston nuptials is that the participants were at one time sweethearts, and Sarah rejected Thomas in favor of Daniel Johnston, her first husband. That Thomas was well acquainted with members of the Bush family is true, and he probably first saw Sarah when she was but nine years of age. Thomas at this time was twenty-one or just twelve years older than Sarah. By 1803 Thomas was making his home permanently in Hardin County, and became a patroller in the same company with Sarah's father. Thomas was closely associated with Sarah's brothers, and about March 1st 1806, started for New Orleans on a flatboat trip with Sarah's brother, Isaac.

On March 13, while Thomas and Isaac were on the New Orleans trip, Sarah Bush married Daniel Johnston. Upon the return of the two men, about the first of May, both of them purchased what were apparently wedding gifts for Isaac's sister. The Bleakley and Montgomery ledger shows a bill of sundries charged to Thomas Lincoln's account, amounting to seven shillings and six pence, with the notation, "for Sarah Bush Johnston." Immediately on his return, Thomas began buying goods for his own wedding outfit and his marriage to Nancy Hanks occurred three months after the marriage of Sarah Bush. Nancy Hanks was four years older than Sarah Bush and Thomas Lincoln had known Nancy ever since they were small children, having grown up together in the same community.

Upon Thomas Lincoln's marriage to Nancy Hanks, they took up their residence in Elizabethtown, where Daniel and Sarah Johnston were living, and for two years were close neighbors. During this period daughters were born to both Nancy and Sarah. It is probable that this friendship between these two women was kept alive after the Lincolns moved out into the country on a farm which Thomas had purchased from Sarah's brother, Isaac. Before the Lincolns left Indiana, Sarah Johnston's husband passed away and it is quite likely that Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln attended his funeral.

But three years had now elapsed since that migration to Indiana and before Thomas started back for Kentucky in December 1819, he was well aware that the Widow Johnston had been left in poor circumstances with three small children to care for. It is likely he also knew she was living in a cabin she had purchased from Samuel Haycraft shortly after the death of her first husband. Her father had passed away and she was entirely on her own resources. Haycraft in his *History of Elizabethtown* describes Mrs. Johnston at the time Thomas Lincoln came with his marriage proposal, as "an honest poor widow."

The editor of *Lincoln Lore* happened to know personally Squire Bush, the last surviving child of Christopher Bush, Jr., brother of Sarah Bush Johnston, who told him the story of his Aunt Sally's marriage to Thomas Lincoln. He said, "Thomas Lincoln told her that they had known each other a long time and had both lost their partners and then asked her to marry him. She replied that she could not just then. When asked the reason why, she said that she owed a few small debts which she must pay. Thomas asked her how much they were and after learning the amounts and the names of the creditors went out and paid each one of them. Then they were married."

The wedding of Widower Thomas Lincoln and the Widow Sarah Bush Johnston took place in Elizabethtown, on December 2, 1819, and was solemnized by Rev. George L. Rogers. Certainly no groom could have played a more manly part than Thomas Lincoln assumed at this time. He was not only providing a fine mother for his own two orphan children, the children of his new wife's close friend, but he was also taking the responsibility of playing the role of a guardian to the three fatherless children of his first wife's neighbor, as well as providing a comfortable home for the widow who was having a struggle to keep her family together.

When factual evidence supports the rather beautiful story about the bringing together of these two broken families and the creating of a new home, which was to furnish the childhood environment for Lincoln, it is deplorable to feel that the more ugly and wholly unreliable version of the episode will likely prevail, because it satisfies the modern hunger for scandal. Biographers in attempting to gear into this present day demand are apt to call anything that is vulgar, realistic, and therefore of value; while the beautiful and noble, because of its very nature, must be idealistic, and therefore cast aside.