

LINCOLN LORE

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A SIGNIFICANT DECEMBER WEDDING

The war has made almost everybody conscious that vital statistics constitute the basic facts in biography. Birth certificates have assumed the importance of social security cards and many an individual is learning for the first time the authentic date of his birth. The lengthening casualty list, rather than the increasing national debt, is the most accurate measure of the tremendous cost of the war. The phenomenal increase in the number of weddings, during the past two years, has excelled all matrimonial records over a corresponding period of time in the history of the country.

These references to vital statistics have caused us to recall that the birth, second marriage, and death dates of Abraham Lincoln's stepmother all occurred in the month of December. Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln was born on December 13, 1788, married to Thomas Lincoln on December 2, 1819, and died on December 10, 1869. Inasmuch as this month of December, 1944, marks the 125th anniversary of the Lincoln-Johnston nuptials, the significance of these marriage vows might be emphasized at this time.

One school of biographers has been especially active in propagating inaccuracies about the various Lincoln weddings, and these events usually portrayed with more or less glamor have become sordid festivals, indeed. The Lincoln-Johnston wedding has not escaped censure and portrays the bridegroom as winning the bride by trickery and misrepresentation.

A. L. Bledsoe, reviewing the Lamson book in the *Southern Magazine* for September, 1872, makes this statement about the alleged deception used by Thomas Lincoln to win the Widow Johnston.

"The poor widow urged by want as well as by her friends and relatives married Tom Linkhorn, who represented himself as having become a respectable and prosperous farmer in Indiana. He then conducted her to the miserable home, fourteen feet square. . . . How great were her astonishment and mortification! But, like a good woman, she submitted to her hard fate and devoted herself to

the cultivation of the rising genius of your Abe."

There could hardly be made a more contradictory statement about what actually occurred than the above comment. From the lips of the last surviving nephew of Sarah Bush, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* heard the story of the preliminaries to the Lincoln-Johnston wedding. Thomas played the role of an honorable and generous suitor, who had been known to the woman he was about to marry and to the whole Bush family for twenty years or more. He had lived with his first wife thirteen years before in the very same town where he had now returned to secure a second mate, and for eight years his home was but a few miles away. Three years before he had passed through the town on his way to Indiana and at that time Sarah Bush Johnston was a widow. There are no grounds whatever for any deception being practiced by Thomas Lincoln in inducing Sarah to marry him.

The marriage nuptials celebrated in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, on December 2, 1819, was a significant wedding in its immediate benefactions as well as its long-time contributions. It brought together in a humble but comfortable cabin home a widower, a widow and two groups of orphan children which were welded into one happy and loyal family group.

Mr. Herndon had an interview with Sarah Bush in September, 1865, in which he jotted down some notes and later wrote them out in a formal statement. He quotes Mrs. Lincoln as saying, "When we landed in Indiana, Mr. Lincoln had erected a good log cabin, tolerable comfortable." She stated that she took with her a bureau that cost \$45.00 in Kentucky.

One of the highlights in this significant wedding was the bringing together of two groups of orphan children about the same ages, Sarah and Abraham Lincoln, and Elizabeth, Matilda and John T. Johnston. One can hardly overestimate the importance of the joining of these families. Of this fact we may be quite certain that the 25th day of December, 1819, was the most wonderful Christmas that Abraham Lincoln ever experienced.

Emphasis is often placed on the unkempt condition of the Lincoln children when the new stepmother arrived in Indiana, greatly to the disparagement of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

There is no reason whatever for reflecting on the housekeeping and motherly care of a woman by pointing out shortcomings that may have existed in her former home and the neglected condition of her small children thirteen months after she had passed away.

To read the story of the change of mistresses in the Lincoln cabin one might conclude that Sarah slipped into the home the day after Nancy died. Few authors have commented on the fact that Sarah and Abraham Lincoln had been without any motherly or womanly care for more than a year when the stepmother came into their home.

While we would not detract one iota from the just and rightful honor due to Sarah Bush Lincoln for her interest and care of the two children of her old friend Nancy Hanks, we have often wondered why some recognition has not been given to Thomas Lincoln for becoming a good stepfather. If certain authors really believe that there was no love between Thomas Lincoln and his son Abe, whom, it is said, he abused as a boy, how would he treat his stepchildren?

We have this testimony about Thomas Lincoln from one of the grandchildren of Sarah Bush Lincoln who said: "I have heard grandmother Lincoln say many a time that he was kind and loving and kept his word and always paid his way, and never turned a dog from the door."

When Herndon interviewed the stepmother he noted one statement that she made about her husband, Thomas. She said, "As a usual thing Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first. Mr. Lincoln could read a little and could scarcely write his name, hence, he wanted as he himself felt the uses and necessities of education, his boy Abraham to learn, and he encouraged him to do it in all ways he could."

The wedding which occurred at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, on December 2, 1819, just one-hundred and twenty-five years ago was a significant one for the nation. It brought into the Lincoln cabin home in Indiana a good and true stepmother who joined with her old friend, now her new husband, in creating a congenial and helpful home environment for the rearing of a boy of destiny.