

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLNS' REMOVAL FROM KENTUCKY

Some of the most important events in the life of Thomas Lincoln, father of the President, occurred in consecutive decades beginning with his birth in Virginia in 1776. Ten years later Thomas saw his own father shot down by the Indians in Kentucky which robbed him not only of guidance but financial support as well. In 1796 we have the first record of Thomas as a laborer earning a daily wage, as on July 16 of that year at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, he was paid thirty-nine shillings by Samuel Haycraft. Ten years later he married Nancy Hanks on June 6, 1806.

The significance of Thomas Lincoln's removal from Kentucky which featured his 1816 decade experiences has not as yet been fully appreciated. Inasmuch as the migration took place sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas of that year this might be an appropriate time, on the 130 anniversary of the occasion, to further explore the far reaching importance of this move.

The removal of the impressionable seven year old Abraham Lincoln from a slave state to a free state may have changed the whole course of American history. If Abraham had remained in Kentucky and had grown up with the institution of Slavery it is not likely he would have had any opportunity for political advancement in the party with which he became affiliated or the newly organized anti-slavery group which at a later date he helped to organize.

What the change in atmosphere might have done for him had he remained in Kentucky is clearly set forth in his own words in a speech which he made at Peoria on October 16, 1864. He said in part: "I think I have no prejudice against the Southern People. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not exist among them they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us we might not instantly give it up. This I believe of the great masses north and south."

The little attention which has been given to the early reaction of Abraham Lincoln towards the slavery question has been due largely to the erroneous statements made by William Herndon about the attitude of Lincoln's parents towards involuntary servitude. On page 19 of volume one in the three volume edition of this work published in 1889 this paragraph appears:

"The assertion made by some of Mr. Lincoln's biographers, and so often repeated by sentimental writers, that his father left Kentucky to avoid the sight of or contact with slavery, lacks confirmation."

This is but one of the many occasions when Lincoln's law partner would have come nearer the truth if he had referred to the writings of the President himself rather than depend upon gossip and his own imagination to draw the picture.

He not only misrepresented the situation himself but even Beveridge, who placed so much confidence in Herndon's conclusions, was lead to comment "not the faintest evidence has been found indicating that slavery was so much as a contributory cause of their departure; indeed, it is doubtful whether that institution made any impression one way or another, on Thomas Lincoln's pallid mind."

Both Herndon and Beveridge should have been familiar with the autobiographical sketch which Lincoln prepared for Scripps in 1860 in which Lincoln made a direct statement about the reason for his father's mi-

gration from Kentucky to Indiana. Lincoln wrote, "This removal was partly on account of slavery but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in Kentucky."

It would appear that the word of Abraham Lincoln about his father's removal would be a fairly good "confirmation" of this very important fact that some "sentimental" writers have had the temerity to mention. If Lincoln's own word did not constitute the "faintest evidence" about the removal, Beveridge could not have had a very high regard for Abraham Lincoln's integrity.

In the debate with Douglas at Alton, Lincoln put the rhetorical question, "How many Democrats are there about here who have left slave states and come into the free state of Illinois to get rid of the institution of slavery?" The reporter claims that one voice interrupted and said "a thousand" another voice added "a thousand and one" to which Lincoln replied, "I reckon there are a thousand and one."

Herndon also makes another comment with reference to Thomas Lincoln's reaction to slavery and the system in general in Kentucky, which reveals his ignorance of the whole situation. In the same paragraph which contains his former erroneous conclusion this statement appears about Thomas Lincoln and his slavery surroundings:

"In all Hardin County—at that time a large area of territory—there were not over fifty slaves; and it is doubtful if he (Thomas Lincoln) saw enough of slavery to fill him with the righteous opposition to the institution with which he has so frequently been credited."

J. Winston Coleman, in his excellent work, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* notes that in 1820 there were 126,732 slaves in the state. The Hardin County Commissioner's Book for 1816, the very year of the Lincoln's removal, reveals there were 1,238 slaves within the boundary of Hardin county. That same year, according to the commissioner's book, one citizen in the county alone was in possession of fifty-three slaves—three more than Herndon claimed there were in the whole county.

Lincoln had some correspondence with A. G. Hodges of Frankfort Kentucky in 1864 which should set at rest any controversy about the contributions of his parents to his earliest notions about slavery. Lincoln wrote, "I am naturally anti-slavery." If he was opposed to slavery by nature it would appear as if his parents had something to do with the environment which created this natural opposition to the institution. Lincoln also stated in the Hodges letter: "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel."

We have Lincoln's own statement that his memory went back to his Kentucky days. Slavery was the most widely discussed question in the immediate community where he spent his early childhood as revealed in contemporary records. His parents were members of an anti-slavery church and so was his school teacher, Caleb Hazel. The controversy became so heated in one church but a mile from Lincoln's birthplace that the doors of the church were closed. Would it be a reasonable supposition that Abraham's parents would prefer to bring up their children in a free state in preference to a slave state where the slavery subject was a continual source of controversy. The removal of the Lincoln's from Kentucky, as Abraham Lincoln has said, was "partly on account of slavery."