

LINCOLN LORE

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A. LINCOLN AND J. D. JOHNSTON—STEP-BROTHERS

The letter in facsimile, which appears more often than any other to have been reproduced by the press in reporting the contents of the Lincoln Papers recently opened in Washington, is not in the President's hand but written by his step-brother, John D. Johnston. A verbatim copy of the letter appears in this issue of Lincoln Lore. Without a knowledge of the Lincoln-Johnston family background and the many tricks played by Johnston to extort money from Abraham, the letter might leave the impression that Lincoln had neglected his old father and step-mother.

When Thomas and Nancy Lincoln and their two children passed through Elizabethtown, Kentucky on their way to Indiana in 1816, Sarah Bush Johnston who resided in the town and with whom the Lincolns were well acquainted had recently lost her husband, Daniel Johnston. She had been left in humble circumstances with three children, Elizabeth, Matilda, and John D. Three years later, fifteen months after the death of his own wife, Thomas Lincoln returned to Kentucky and married the widow Johnston. The wedding increased the size of the Lincoln family to eight—the parents, two Lincoln children, three Johnston children, and a youth, Dennis Hanks who had been given a home.

Elizabeth Johnston married Dennis Hanks, Matilda married a step-brother of Dennis, Squire Hall, and when the family migrated to Illinois the Thomas Lincoln colony had increased to thirteen people. John D. Johnston married on October 13, 1834 Mary Bar—and after her death he married on March 5, 1851 Nancy Jane Williams. Johnston and his large family is said to have lived on Thomas Lincoln during his lifetime and then imposed themselves upon the widow.

As early as 1840 Johnston began putting financial pressure on Abraham Lincoln by working through his father. It is likely that the \$50.00 for value received which Thomas Lincoln paid John D. Johnston on December 3, 1840 was made possible by the generosity of Abraham. The emotional crises through which Lincoln passed at this time is usually dated from, "The fatal first of January 1841." Possibly there were other contributing factors to Lincoln's disturbed mental condition besides his love affair with Mary Todd which was interrupted on the day following the culmination of the strange deal in the Coles County home of his father.

Returning from Kentucky where he had gone to recuperate, Lincoln had hardly reached home before conditions in his father's home made it

necessary for him to again straighten out some tangled affairs in Coles County. Even before he had purchased a home for himself in order to protect his aged parents from the voracious Johnston, Lincoln very wisely purchased from his parents a quarter section of land with a reservation of a Life Estate to them. The codicil to the deed in Lincoln's own hand follows:

WHEREAS, I have purchased of Thomas Lincoln and his wife the North East fourth of the Southeast

Johnston's Letter To Lincoln

friday morning Char May 25th 1849
Dear Brother

I hast to inform you that father is yet a Live & that is all & he craves to See you all the time & he wents you to come if you as able to git hure, for your are his only Child that is of his own flush & blood & it is nothing more than Nateral for him to crave to see you, he says he has all most despared of seeing you, & he wents you to prepare to meet him in the unknown world, or in heven, for he thinks that own savour savour (sic) has a crown of glory, prepared for him I wright this with a bursting hart, I came to town for the Docttor, & I won you to make an effort come, if you as able to get hure, & he wents me to tell your wife that he Loves Hure & wents hure to prepare to meet him at ower "Savours feet, we are all well, your Brother in hast
J. D. Johnston

quarter of Section twenty-one in Township Eleven North of Range Nine East for which I have paid them the sum of Two Hundred Dollars and have taken their deed of conveyance for the same with a reservation of a life Estate therein to them and the survivor of them.

Now I bind myself my heirs and assigns to convey said tract of land to John D. Johnston or his heirs at any time after the death of the survivor of the said Thomas Lincoln and wife provided he shall pay me my heirs or assigns the said sum of Two Hundred dollars at any time within one year after the death of the said Thomas Lincoln and wife and the said may be paid without interest except after the death of the survivor as aforesaid.

Witness my hand and seal this 25th day of October A. D. 1841.

A. Lincoln (Seal)

During the years 1846, 1847, and 1849 Lincoln was in Washington for a congressional term and unable to make frequent visits to his parents.

Upon his return to Springfield he was thrust into the most important patronage dispute which had confronted him. Just at the time he was in the midst of the "land office controversy" and should have returned to Washington at once, Johnston's letter of May 25th arrived with its strange implication that Lincoln's father was at the point of death. It is evident from a letter which A. G. Henry wrote Joseph Gillespie that Lincoln visited his father and would go to Washington "at the moment he gets back, he is now in Coles." His parents resided in Coles County.

Thomas Lincoln was not only "yet alive" as Johnston put it in May '49 but he was still alive up to January '51. In fact Abraham Lincoln and his wife lost one of their children, Edward, before Lincoln's father passed away.

The following February Johnston again wrote Abraham soliciting his help in securing a mail contract. Lincoln set about the task immediately and informed Johnston the following day: "I have made out a bid for you at \$120, guaranteed it myself, got our P. M. here to certify it and send it on."

In December 1850 and in January 1851 Johnston made another concerted drive on Abraham for funds which caused Lincoln to write to Johnston the famous letter of January 2, 1851 which begins, "Your request for eighty dollars I do not think best to comply with now." Two more letters were written to Lincoln within the next few days. The great press for money at this time was Johnston's contemplated second marriage which occurred on March 5. After the death of Thomas Lincoln on January 17, 1851 Johnston began to try and get the widow's property into his own hands so he could dispose of it and Lincoln had to step in and prevent it.

Johnston would have put his own mother on an allowance of \$16.00 per year but Lincoln wrote to him on November 25, 1851: "Now if you are satisfied in treating her that way, I am not. . . . I cannot to oblige any living person, consent that she shall be put on an allowance of sixteen dollars a year."

The letter Johnston wrote to Lincoln on May 25, 1849 which is featured in this bulletin makes one contribution to Lincoln's family genealogy which should be pointed out. Johnston in referring to Thomas Lincoln reminds Abraham, "you are his only Child that is of his own flesh & blood." This statement should contribute something positive to the continual controversy about Abraham Lincoln's paternity.