

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 995

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 3, 1948

LINCOLN'S MOTHER — VARIANT DESCRIPTIONS

The approaching Mother's Day again turns our attention to Nancy Hanks Lincoln. A trustworthy description of the mother of the President is not available, and it is doubtful if there will ever be found a dependable word portrait of her. This does not mean that we are lacking for traditional descriptions of Mrs. Lincoln, but the wide diversity of opinion as to how she looked invalidates all of the contributions.

It is not known that any of the many attempts to describe Mrs. Lincoln resulted from interviews with her illustrious son. Photography, which has been our chief medium for refreshing our minds on the stature and facial expression of an ancestor, was not discovered until twenty years after the death of Mrs. Lincoln. Apparently no painting or even a silhouette was ever made of her, which would indelibly impress her image on the mind of a nine-year-old boy so that it would be retained through the forty-two years until he became President.

Those who have written with most assurance about the appearance of Mrs. Lincoln, when subjected to a fair examination about their ability to make personal observations, fail to qualify as dependable witnesses. Others who seem, both chronologically and geographically, to have been in a position to take notice of Lincoln's mother's appearance, apparently had some difficulty, after a lapse of nearly fifty years, to differentiate between the appearance of the actual mother and the step-mother of Abraham Lincoln. Both of the women occupied Thomas Lincoln's cabin within two years of each other and there was also a grown sister of Abraham's, who may have contributed to a composite picture of the women described in Thomas Lincoln's home.

John and Dennis Hanks were in Chicago in June, 1865, less than three months after the President's assassination, exhibiting the old log cabin in which the Lincolns resided when they settled in Illinois. Here they first met William Herndon who talked with them about the early life of Lincoln, and especially about Lincoln's mother. The descriptions of Nancy Hanks Lincoln which grew out of this conversation became the basic source of most of the early biographers. So much dependence has been put upon some of these early variant portraits that a general survey of the validity of the testimonials might be worth while.

A Kentucky Beauty

One of Lincoln's close friends, Isaac N. Arnold, published a life of Lincoln in 1885 in which he states on the authority of John Hanks:

"Mrs. Lincoln, the mother of the President, is said to have been in her youth a woman of beauty."

The writing which Herndon calls "John Hanks' statement," is in reality Herndon's statement of what John Hanks said, written in Herndon's style of composition and credited to Hanks. The description of Mrs. Lincoln follows:

"I knew Mrs. Nancy Lincoln or Nancy Sparrow before her marriage. She was a tall slender woman, dark-skinned, black hair and eyes, her face was sharp and angular, forehead big."

The informant, John Hanks, was but four years old when Nancy married and he lived twenty miles from her home. He could not have had any personal knowledge of how she looked at this time. That very year of the marriage John's parents moved to a place 35 miles from where the Lincolns lived. There is positive evidence in a letter written to John Hanks by Abraham Lincoln on August 24, 1860, that John never visited in the Lincoln home until five years after Lincoln's mother was dead. In other words, John Hanks never saw Lincoln's mother in either Kentucky or Indiana.

A Brunette with Bluish-Green Eyes

Dennis Hanks differed somewhat from his cousin John in the information he is said to have provided Herndon. In the Herndon-Weik papers there is a letter dated, "Sanitary Fair, Chicago, Illinois, June 13, 1865," which is alleged to have been written to Herndon and signed, "your friend D. F. Hanks." Anyone familiar with the spelling and grammar of Dennis and the style of Herndon's writing will immediately conclude it was all written by Herndon, possibly from notes he had before him or from memory. The following description is found in this letter:

"Mrs. Lincoln, Abraham's mother, was five feet eight inches high . . . Her hair was dark brown hair, eyes bluish green—keen and loving. Her weight was one hundred thirty."

Dennis Hanks undoubtedly saw Nancy Hanks, both in Kentucky and Indiana. During the Kentucky residence for most of the period there, the Lincoln home was eight miles from the home of Dennis Hanks and he did not arrive in Indiana until a few months before Nancy passed away and then lived with his foster parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow. When he was called upon by Herndon to describe Nancy she had been dead nearly forty years and without any reason whatever to recall her during this long interval, he could not be too sure about the exact color of her eyes and her height, weight, etc.

Coarse Features, Bent Form

When Chauncey Black using the Herndon records described Lincoln's mother in the Lamon book he stated: "Nancy Hanks . . . was a slender, symmetrical woman, of medium stature, a brunette, with dark hair, regular features, and soft, sparkling hazel eyes. Tenderly bred she might have been beautiful; but hard labor and hard usage bent her handsome form, and imparted an unnatural coarseness to her features long before the period of her death."

Brown Hair and Gray Eyes

Jesse Weik in the Herndon volume used the same source material as Black in the Lamon volume, and this is the result of the Herndon composite portrait:

"At the time of her marriage to Thomas Lincoln, Nancy was in her twenty-third year. She was about the ordinary height in stature, weighed about 130 pounds, was slenderly built, and much the appearance of one inclined to consumption. Her skin was dark, hair dark brown; eyes gray and small; forehead prominent; face sharp and angular, with a marked expression of melancholy which fixed itself in the memory of everyone who ever saw or knew her."

Dark Hair and Hazel Eyes

Mrs. Lincoln lived in Indiana less than two years before her death. The few scattered pioneers in a sparsely settled community who saw her occasionally, could not have had a very lasting picture of her impressed upon their minds after a lapse of nearly half a century. The following informant, Nat Grigsby, seems to present in his description a composite summary of those who claim to have remembered her.

"Mrs. Lincoln, the mother of Abraham, was a woman about five feet seven inches high. She had dark hair, light hazel eyes, complexion light and exceedingly fair. Those who knew her best with whom I have talked, say she was a woman of pale complexion, dark hair, sharp features, high forehead, bright keen gray or hazel eyes."

Herndon complained, "Nicolay and Hay have suppressed many facts . . . among them . . . the description of Nancy Hanks." Possibly it would have been just as well for posterity if Herndon had shown a little more discretion about releasing descriptions of Lincoln's mother based on questionable evidence.