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THE AUTHENTICITY OF LINCOLN'S BIRTHPLACE CABIN THE JACOB S. BROTHERS TRADITION

Mr. Roy Hays, an honored member of the Detroit Lincoln Fellowship, has spent many years of intensive research on the traditional birthplace cabins of Abraham Lincoln. His efforts are now summarized in the September 1948 issue of the Abraham Lincoln Quarterly under the caption, "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" The cabin in question refers to the one enshrined in the memorial building at Hodgenville, Kentucky.

Mr. Hays virtually answers the question he has raised by stating on the very first page of his monograph that, "The original cabin was torn down prior to 1840." He further invalidates any claim of authenticity made on behalf of the present structure standing at Hodgenville by observing that when the genuine cabin was razed before 1840 the logs were burned. Without submitting further evidence to support his premise, the author in a single paragraph of but sixty-five words apparently closes the argument.

We are happy, however, that Mr. Hays did not conclude his monograph at this point. If so, we would have missed the intensely interesting story of the meanders over the country of a certain log cabin which, supplemented by fragments of other dwellings, finally found a haven in the Lincoln Memorial on the birthplace farm in Kentucky.

However, because of such limited space available, this issue of Lincoln Lore cannot furnish room to extend the review of Mr. Hays' evidence beyond the burned cabin paragraph and the Rowbotham comments which follow it. In some subsequent issue attention will be called to that part of Mr. Hays' carefully annotated manuscript developing another supposition. It reveals an immense amount of original research and a tenacity on the part of the author to follow through, a trait many writers of history fail to acquire.

Lincoln students for a period of nearly forty years have been aware of the "burned cabin" tradition originating with Jacob S. Brothers and published in 1909 by J. T. Hobson in his book entitled *The Footsteps of Abraham Lincoln*. Hoping to clarify the tradition, more than twenty years ago the editor of Lincoln Lore visited the widow of Mr. Hobson and purchased from her such miscellaneous Lincoln papers, which had formerly belonged to her husband, as were then in her possession. The papers threw no further light on the Brothers tradition.

Hobson first interviewed Brothers on March 30, 1899, and learned that he once lived on the Lincoln farm in Kentucky. Four and a half years later on September 8, 1903, Hobson again interviewed Brothers and states, "At my request he gave a fuller statement which I wrote out and then read it to him, all of which he said was correct." At the time of this interview Brothers was eighty-four years of age and was trying to recall events which had occurred in another state seventy-six years before. It is the testimony of this lone witness that Mr. Hays depends upon when he makes the unqualified affirmation that the genuine Lincoln birthplace cabin burned before 1840.

Jacob Brothers stated in his 1903 interview: "In the year 1827 when I was eight years old, my father purchased the old farm on which Abraham Lincoln was born." This date is shown by duly authorized records to be in error. In 1827 the farm was in possession of Henry Thomas who had acquired the property from George Burkhart on January 28, 1824. On October 14, 1830, Henry Thomas sold the farm to John J. Gash, and Gash conveyed the title bond by endorsement to Henry Brothers on the second day of April 1835. On March 25, 1840, John J. Gash, the same assignee who sold the property to

Brothers, reassigned it to Charles Huss. Affidavits in litigation proceedings reveal that "Brothers could not pay the purchase money", and that "it would cost \$20 to defend the suit" which he could not secure, and furthermore stated that he "would not defend it." Mr. Hays admits that the farm was in possession of Brothers but five years, from 1835 to 1840.

The reminiscences of Jacob Brothers are further recorded as follows: "We lived in the house in which Lincoln was born. After some years, my father built another house almost like the first house. The old house was torn down, and, to my knowledge, the logs were burned for fire wood. Later he built a hewed log house."

We have here the story of a poor family, that could not pay for the land on which they lived, or raise \$20 to defend a title to it. Nevertheless, within a period of five years they built a new home similar to the one in which they were living and then constructed within this same five years period still another better cabin. This probably is too much cabin building for so short a period, when the average pioneer family lived in a cabin for a generation, at least, and often for a lifetime.

If Jacob Brothers, as he states, went to live in a log cabin which his father purchased in 1827 when he, Jacob, was eight years old; if it was this same cabin, as he affirms, which was used for firewood; then it could not have been the Lincoln birthplace cabin that was burned, but another structure. Jacob was sixteen years old before his father acquired possession of the birthplace cabin. But now instead of a phantom cabin, we have in its place as many as two other cabins on the birthplace farm to account for.

During the 1903 interview with Brothers, Hobson quotes him as saying, "The pictures we often see of the house in which Lincoln was born are the pictures of the first house built by my father." If any deductions of historical value can be drawn from Brothers' reminiscences, Lincoln students should get some satisfaction at least to learn that Brothers could identify the then publicized cabin, which he claimed was constructed similar to the one in which Lincoln was born. The picture of the traditional birthplace cabin mentioned by Brothers shows it to be a hewed log structure but the implication of Brothers' testimony would indicate that the third and last cabin which his father built was the first "hewed log house" constructed and so the confusion continues.

Mr. Hays in the paragraph following his brief discussion on the burning of the traditional birthplace cabin makes this comment, "It is not necessary for us to rely entirely on the statement of elderly Jacob Brothers as to the fact that the original cabin disappeared before Lincoln became a national figure." Hays then refers to an engraving and a letter by John B. Rowbotham, who visited the Lincoln Farm in the spring of 1865 and found no cabin there.

Lincoln became a "national figure" as early as 1860 and it is difficult to figure out how the absence of a cabin on the Lincoln farm in 1865 supports Brothers' statement that the original authentic cabin was burned before 1840. It is also illogical to conclude, that because there was no cabin there in 1865, there was no cabin there during the interval from 1840 to 1864. As far as we know none of the traditions relating to the removal of a certain log cabin from the Lincoln farm to the Rodman farm, place the removal later than 1861.

Admitting the frailty of memory, it does not appear that the reminiscences of a man eighty-four years old, which try to recreate events which occurred seventy-six years before, should be looked upon as infallible.