

LINCOLN LORE

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THE AUTHENTICITY OF LINCOLN'S BIRTHPLACE CABIN

The John A. Davenport Tradition

The contribution of Roy Hays entitled, "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" published in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* for September, 1948, presents two independent traditions bearing on the question. The story which claims that the birthplace cabin was destroyed by fire some time previous to 1840 is accepted by Mr. Hays as factual. This point of view was discussed in the issue of *Lincoln Lore* for September 27, 1948.

The other tradition which Mr. Hays considers, holds that a log house sold by John A. Davenport to Alfred W. Dennett in 1895 contained logs that were originally in the Lincoln birthplace cabin of 1809. Mr. Hays does not accept the Davenport cabin as having been directly associated with the structure in which Lincoln was born. He affirms that the cabin enshrined in the memorial building at Hodgenville is not authentic.

The greater part of Mr. Hays' monograph deals with the history of the Davenport cabin as it was moved from place to place after it was acquired by Dennett. This is an intensely human interest story and well told, but it seems irrelevant to the major question of authenticity raised by Mr. Hays. The question of identification narrows down to this query; were any of the logs used in the reconstruction of the cabin acquired by Dennett originally a part of the cabin in which Lincoln was born?

The authenticity of the Davenport cabin was challenged as early as 1896 by Clifton M. Nichols in his book entitled *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Under a picture of the rebuilt Davenport cabin appearing on page 18 he states with reference to the original birthplace cabin, "The humble cabin was torn down, and the materials used in its construction were utilized otherwise and untimely destroyed. . . . A more pretentious residence was built upon the site but it too was built of logs. At a later period the new house was torn down. . . . The logs used in the vacated dwelling were sold to a neighbor and a portion of them remain at the present time in a dwelling occupied by John A. Davenport, and located about a mile from the old Lincoln homestead. . . . The present cabin (erected by Dennett) is only a clever imitation, of the original, built on the same plan, and with the logs obtained from a very old, decaying house on an adjoining farm."

The Lincoln Farm Association after acquiring the cabin also examined evidence with reference to the authenticity of the logs they had acquired. There was much doubt expressed at that time about the genuineness of the structure. The favorable reaction to the evidence submitted, caused such historians as Prof. Albert B. Hart of Hart, Professor George B. Adams of Yale, Professor Frederick J. Turner of Wisconsin, and Miss Ida M. Tarbell, famous author, to put their stamp of approval on the birthplace cabin.

When the editor of *Lincoln Lore* wrote his book entitled *Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood*, published in 1926, he raised the question about the authenticity of the cabin then enshrined in the Memorial and came to this conclusion, "Tradition alone can answer the question and it gives both a positive and a negative answer." He did discover that the cabin had been mutilated and cut down from the former dimensions of 16 x 18 feet to 12 x 17 feet.

At the time the Department of the Interior took over the cabin from the War Department, under whose supervision it was placed when first acquired, the question was brought up about the authenticity of the cabin. The conclusions appear in the department's publication *The Abraham Lincoln National Historical Park*, as follows: "The log cabin in the Memorial Building is

the traditional birthplace cabin. It is impossible to say with certainty that it is the original cabin. . . . Its history prior to 1861 is a matter of controversy and doubt."

The "controversy and doubt" arises partly from the fact that there was a log cabin building standing on the birthplace farm in Kentucky in 1860 at the time Lincoln was nominated for the Presidency, but removed some time before his assassination in 1865. Also, there may have been while Lincoln was President a cabin still standing on the Knob Creek farm where the boy was taken to live when but two years of age. This second early home would also add to the confusion of those attempting to identify the original birthplace cabin.

A correspondent to the *Missouri Telegraph* who was designated as "a young lady from LaRue County" stated in the issue of November 23, 1860, "The Lincoln farm is old and well worn. In an old field near a running brook the ruins of a pioneer cabin are pointed out as the birthplace of the President-elect."

Dr. Robert H. Brown, author of a two volume history entitled *Abraham Lincoln and Men of His Time*, visited the Lincoln country in 1862 or 1863 and tells of his visit to the Lincoln country. He mentions a log cabin then unoccupied standing on the Lincoln Farm on "Nolin Creek."

Robert Harvey, Company D 74th, in the *Nebraska State Journal* for February 11, 1909, writes: "I saw the rude log cabin in which Lincoln was born, in October, 1862. It was a few days after the battle of Perryville, Kentucky, when in the early afternoon we approached a low one story cabin on our left. A rail fence ran along in front and on one corner was stuck a cracker box lid on which was chalked, 'Birthplace of President Lincoln.' The chimney was at the end of the building we were approaching, and was built of splints or sticks and daubed with mud. The roof was of clapboards and held in place by poles laid lengthwise. . . . There was a door and a square window on the side facing the road and some of the logs had the appearance of being much decayed. A pear tree stood at the farther end of the building, but its uninviting fruit remained unmolested."

The traditions gathered by Mr. Hays and those presented here seem to support this conclusion: There was a log building standing on the birthplace farm in 1860 which was removed before 1865 to property later acquired by John Davenport: He sold in 1895 the building reconstructed from the birthplace logs to Alfred W. Dennett. However, the affidavits and written testimonials of those who have attempted to associate the birthplace cabin, with the logs removed from the farm in 1860, are in irreconcilable confusion. The birthplace log cabin is variously described by these affiants as round, hewed, low one story, two story, new, decayed. From one to three cabins are said to have stood at intervals on the same spot. The logs of one are supposed to have been used to rebuild a subsequent structure, another tradition suggests the original logs were used for an unknown purpose, and in a third instance, it is claimed they were burned.

Mr. Roy Hays has presented a most valuable discussion on the traditional first home of Abraham Lincoln and one would have much difficulty in the light of the evidence he has unearthed to support the authenticity of even the thirteen Davenport logs in the present traditional structure. Unless one forces himself to accept the Jacob S. Brothers' tradition about the burning of the logs, he may still be engulfed by the atmosphere of "controversy and doubt" in his attempt to pass on the authenticity of Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin.