

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S BAPTIST BACKGROUND

Year after next marks the three hundredth anniversary of the first of a series of episodes which contributed much to the religious background of Abraham Lincoln. Obadiah Holmes in 1651 was tied to a whipping post on Boston Common and given thirty strokes with a three corded whip for preaching doctrines contrary to the belief of the established church. This same Obadiah Holmes was an ancestor of President Lincoln.

This pioneer's courage and zeal for religious freedom were recalled by the editor of Lincoln Lore as he walked across old Boston Common on March third. Further meditation from day to day about this whipping post experience of one of Lincoln's forebears, served as a nucleus for a discussion which was presented at a dinner meeting two weeks later in the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church at Cleveland, Ohio. It seems quite appropriate in the midst of the Lenten season to make room in this issue of Lincoln Lore for some facts relating to Lincoln's Baptist Background.

Samuel Lincoln who landed at Salem, Massachusetts in 1637 is well known to students of Abraham Lincoln as the President's first American Lincoln progenitor. But few people are advised, however, that Obadiah Holmes who arrived at Salem two years later was also a Lincoln ancestor and "believe it or not" still another Lincoln forebear, William Bowne, had arrived at Salem at least one year before Samuel Lincoln reached America. It is the Holmes and Bowne ancestors of the President with whom we are chiefly concerned at this time.

Obadiah Holmes, a glass maker of Salem, united with the Baptists about 1646 and had become a preacher with that organization by 1651, when he was imprisoned and later flogged as already related. The whipping, however, did not curtail the exercise of his religious freedom and for thirty years he served as pastor of the First Baptist Church at Newport. The descendants of the old preacher did not soon forget the price he paid for his religious convictions.

William Bowne as early as 1636 acquired land on Jeffries Creek at Salem. He was the father of a son John, who became one of the most prominent early settlers of New Jersey. Capt. John Bowne married Lydia, the youngest daughter of Obadiah Holmes and together they helped to establish the first Baptist Church in New Jersey, located at Middletown. He was one of the twelve men who signed the famous Monmouth patent which declared:

"Free liberty of conscience, without molestation or disturbance whatsoever in way of their worship." This was one of the earliest declarations of religious tolerance and the patent was recorded on November 8, 1665. John and Lydia Holmes Bowne occupy the same generational status in the lineage of Abraham Lincoln as Samuel and Martha Lincoln of Hingham.

Sarah, a daughter of Capt. John and Lydia Bowne, was a member of the Middletown Baptist Church as early as 1713. She married Richard Saltar, referred to as the "King's attorney" who later became a judge of Monmouth County and a member of the House of Deputies of New Jersey. It should not be forgotten that it was Sarah's father, Capt. Bowne who was one of the founders of the first Baptist Church in New Jersey and that it was her grandfather, Obadiah Holmes, who was beaten on Boston Common for expounding his religious faith.

It was a daughter of Richard and Sarah Bowne Saltar named Hannah who by her marriage united the Samuel

Lincoln family of Massachusetts with the Holmes and Bownes. Her husband's name was Mordecai Lincoln II, son of Mordecai Lincoln I, and a grandson of Samuel Lincoln. As far as we can learn this was the first time the Lincolns were inoculated with the Baptist faith and apparently Hannah made a creditable application of the doctrine of the venerable Obadiah Holmes.

Mordecai and Hannah Saltar Lincoln had but one son John and five daughters. John married a widow by the name of Rebecca Flower Morris in Pennsylvania and from there they moved with their family and some of John's sisters' families into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia about the year 1765. The Baptist influence of John's mother found expression in the organization of the Linville Creek Baptist Church on the property John had settled. The old record book of the church has been preserved in the University of Richmond library at Richmond, Virginia, and it testifies to the fact that John's oldest son Abraham, grandfather of President Lincoln, was one of the most influential members. It was in the religious atmosphere created by the Linville Baptist Church that Thomas Lincoln, the father of the President, was born in 1776.

When grandfather Abraham Lincoln and his wife Bersheba migrated to Kentucky in 1782 they helped to establish, shortly after their arrival, a Baptist church. They set apart one acre of their 400 tract, east of Louisville, Kentucky, as a church building site and cemetery. There stands today on this site the Long Run Baptist Church and in the cemetery lies the body of grandfather Lincoln who was massacred by the Indians in the month of May, 1786.

The widow of the pioneer Abraham Lincoln moved her family of five children, the oldest one but fourteen, to the Beech Fork community in Washington County, Kentucky. Here, Thomas Lincoln, her youngest son, who was born in the Linville Creek Church community, and who moved with his parents to the Long Run Church community in Kentucky, married Nancy Hanks in 1806. They went to keeping house in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where the Severns Valley Baptist Church stood, the oldest organization of Baptists now in Kentucky.

Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, then situated in the very center of the Baptist movement in Kentucky, could not have visualized the important part the Baptist church was to play during the next few years in moulding their opinions with respect to the question of slavery. In the fall of 1808 they moved into the community where their son Abraham was to be born the following February. A few months before, the minister of the South Fork Baptist Church, not far from their cabin home, had become greatly disturbed over the slavery question. Finally the minister, William Whitman, declared himself an "amansapater" as an entry in the church record book for Dec. 19, 1807 reveals. When Abraham Lincoln was born the church was closed because of the controversy over human bondage, and fifteen members had gone out of the church "on account of slavery," to organize the Little Mount Anti-Slavery Baptist Church. It was this organization with which the parents of Abraham Lincoln became affiliated. There the first sermons Abraham heard were by William Downs and David Elkins, celebrated Baptist preachers who ministered for the church, and who were opposed to the institution of slavery. From this brief recital of early religious contacts of the President's forebears, one may draw his own conclusions as to the influence of the Baptist background in the life of Abraham Lincoln.