

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN OBSERVES THE EVOLUTION OF THE STEAMBOAT

The editor of Lincoln Lore is just back at his desk this morning from a trip to the Lincoln country in Southern Indiana where he participated in five recitals arranged for the fall series of the Hoosier Historical Institutes. Five different sites associated with the Lincoln saga were visited and more than one hundred students and admirers of Abraham Lincoln were present at each of the programs.

The two spots which seemed to arouse the most human interest were locations on the Ohio River; one at the mouth of Anderson River where Lincoln operated a ferry, and the other on the river bank at Rockport where he launched the flatboat for his initial trip to New Orleans.

Abraham Lincoln first looked upon the Ohio River when he was but seven years old, at the time the family was migrating from Kentucky to Illinois in the fall of 1816. The home site of the Lincolns was eighteen miles back from the river in what was then Perry County. The county seat was at Troy, near the mouth of Anderson River where it flows into the Ohio. Troy was also the Lincoln's closest trading center and the chief trading point in that section. Later the county of Spencer was established which embraced the Lincoln home. Rockport, another Ohio River town, became the county seat and it was about the same distance from the Lincoln home as Troy.

Abraham Lincoln as a small boy with his parents often must have been in both of these towns and when he was but sixteen years of age he went to work at the mouth of Anderson River as a ferryman. For the next four years apparently much of his time was spent either at some point by the river or on the river itself.

At the time the Lincolns crossed the Ohio in 1816 there were but four steamboats on the western waters, according to the *Western Sun*, which gave an account in its copy of June 16, 1827 of the increase in river transportation up to that time. The first steamboat on the Ohio constructed at Pittsburgh, was not built until 1811, another in 1814, and two in 1815. By the time Lincoln was working as a ferryman in 1826, there has been 233 steamboats built on the western waters but 90 of them had been lost in the following manner: 28 stuck on snags, 6 burned, 1 stove in by ice, 1 sunk by another boat, and the remainder worn out. On the date in 1827 when the *Western Sun* went to print there were then 143 steamboats actively engaged in river transportation with a capacity for carrying 24,000 people.

The steamboat must have been a topic of constant discussion in the Lincoln Home during all of the fourteen years which the family lived in Indiana and also in Abraham's infant and childhood years in Kentucky. It was a trip which Thomas Lincoln made by flatboat to New Orleans in 1806 which allowed him to accumulate thirty-two pounds in gold. This money was used for the acquisition of goods in preparation for his wedding to Nancy Hanks, three months after his return. This trip Thomas made to New Orleans and others he may have made down the river would nourish his interest in river navigation.

When Thomas Lincoln as a youth was living on the waters of Beech Fork in his mother's cabin in Washington County, he must have known about John Fitch's invention of the steamboat and experiments which were made with models by Fitch at Bardstown, on the waters

of this same Beech Fork. In the same will book that records the will of John Fitch there also appears the will of Joseph Hanks and the appraisal of the estate of the pioneer Abraham Lincoln, maternal and paternal ancestors, respectively of the President.

Certainly the parental interest in the river and the fact that his father was also a cabinet maker and had undoubtedly been interested in the construction phase of the new engine driver river craft would contribute much to Abraham's interest in the river and river transportation.

There is a tradition extant in Southern Indiana that one of the earliest pieces of work Abraham Lincoln had to do away from home was the cutting of logs for the wood burning steamers. Piles of wood were stacked up on the river bank where the steamers could pull alongside to be supplied with the necessary fuel. This would give Lincoln an excellent opportunity to study the different types of steamers and also at Troy, where he worked for the shipper, James Taylor, it is likely he was often on boats at the time of loading. This would offer further opportunity to observe new improvements.

About the time Lincoln was in New Orleans in 1828 the *New Orleans Press Current and Commercial Intelligence* lists the following number of vessels in port: Ships 65; Brigs 85; Schooners 30; Sloops 6; Steamboats 20. Twenty steamboats at one time would be quite a sight for Lincoln. Probably the most significant steamboat experience of Abraham Lincoln was the return trip from New Orleans in 1828 as a deck passenger. Here for several days he would have had an opportunity to observe all the recent improvements on the new models that were continually appearing.

While it is not likely that Lincoln saw the boat while it was under construction however there was a twenty-five ton steamer built at Henderson, Kentucky in 1817 by J. Prentiss. It traded between Louisville and St. Louis. It burned in 1818.

Another trip to New Orleans after Lincoln arrived in Illinois more severely tested Lincoln's skill as a navigator and furnished enough information for his first political speech on "The Improvement of the Sangamon River." His Sangamon River experiences in Macon County, New Salem, and Springfield was brought to a climax by his having been chosen to assist in piloting *The Talisman* from the mouth of the Sangamon to Springfield, the first steamer to make the eventful trip up the Sangamon to the capital city of Illinois.

Subsequent trips on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and the Great Lakes allowed him to note the evolution of the steamboat. The time came when he too invented an improvement which looked forward to overcoming some of the obstacles then confronting steamboat navigators.

During the Civil War Erickson found the President had an attentive and appreciative ear when the virtues of the ironclad *Monitor* were discussed. It must have given the President great satisfaction to observe on the monumental trip to Norfolk the remains of the *Merrimac* which may have been sunk directly or indirectly because of orders of attack Lincoln issued and which were carried out by Captain Lardner. Secretary Chase wrote to his daughter, "I think it quite certain that if he (Lincoln) had not gone down, Norfolk would still have been in possession of the enemy, and the *Merrimac* as grim and defiant, and as much a terror as ever."