

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLN'S KENTUCKY AND INDIANA PHYSICIANS

A week ago, while standing before the grave of Lincoln's mother in southern Indiana, the editor of Lincoln Lore recalled that it was at this season of the year that Nancy Hanks Lincoln passed away. On October 5, 1818, this greatest tragedy in the early life of Abraham Lincoln occurred. It is doubtful if any event contributed more to the nourishment of his melancholy spirit than this untimely passing of his mother. The fatal malady, milk sickness or trembles as it was called, continued to baffle medical science until recent years. It is now known to have been caused by Tremetol present in white snake root.

These reflections invited a listing of the physicians who may have ministered to the physical needs of the Lincoln family during their Kentucky and Indiana residences. The ordeals accompanying birth and death are usually associated with practicing physicians, although in pioneer days services at the time of the former emergency were often performed by a midwife. In Kentucky Nancy Hanks Lincoln gave birth to three children and one of them passed away while the Lincoln's still resided there. During the Indiana residence there were two deaths in the immediate family, Abraham Lincoln's mother and his sister.

DR. JOHN F. STATER

Thomas Lincoln acquired from Dr. John F. Stater of Green County on September 2, 1803 a tract of land on Mill Creek in Hardin County. How soon Stater settled in Hardin County we do not know but certainly as early as April 25, 1808 when he served with Thomas Lincoln on a jury at Elizabethtown. An estray notice reveals that on February 9, 1811 Dr. Stater was living in Hardin County "on Clear Creek near the Roman Catholic Chapel." While he was undoubtedly within reach of the Lincoln family in 1807, 1809 and 1811 the birthdates of the children, no positive evidence is available that he ever waited on the family.

DR. EBENEZER B. GOODLETTER

Most likely the physician who ministered to the needs of Nancy Hanks Lincoln when her first child was born at Elizabethtown in 1807 was Dr. Ebenezer B. Goodletter. According to Samuel Haycraft he was practicing medicine there at the time but removed from the city about 1809. We are unable to find any trace of him in the documents at hand.

DR. THOMAS ESSEX

Dr. Goodletter was followed by Dr. Thomas Essex of England, who settled in Elizabethtown as early as 1809. It is not probable, however, that the Lincolns who had then moved fifteen miles from the county seat would call him when their first son, Abraham, was born. More likely it was Mary La Rue Enlow who served as a midwife at the birth of Abraham. She lived but four miles from the Lincoln cabin and as a mother of several children was well prepared to serve in the capacity of a midwife. Local tradition ascribes her this honor.

DR. WILLIAM SULZER

As early as August 13, 1810, Dr. William Sulzer was practicing at Elizabethtown. On this date he made a subscription of 20 bushels of corn as part of a purse to be "run for on Middle Creek," the site of the local race course. He did not bear a very good reputation and did not remain long in the town. He may have been at Elizabethtown, however, when the third child of the Lincolns was born on Knob Creek in 1811. Mary Enlow, however,

is likely to have been called for this occasion also as the distance to the new Lincoln location was about the same as to the birthplace home site.

DR. DANIEL B. POTTER

At the time Dr. Sulzer was practicing at Elizabethtown a college trained man by the name of Dr. Daniel B. Potter put up his shingle in 1811. He is the only Kentucky physician who we are certain rendered some kind of medical service to the Lincoln family. When the editor of Lincoln Lore was conducting his researches in Hardin County thirty years ago he discovered in a will book, the papers on the settlement of Dr. Potter's estate. The series of vouchers listed revealed one in which the sum of \$1.46 was charged against Thomas Lincoln. The commissioners, Robert Bleakley and John Miller, reported that along with other bills due Dr. Potter's estate they had collected the said amount from Thomas Lincoln. No date for the services rendered by Dr. Potter is available but inasmuch as he did not arrive in Elizabethtown until 1811 and was dead by 1814 the bill must have been contracted between those dates. It was during this period, presumably, that the second son of the Lincolns passed away. It would be a reasonable conclusion to assume that Dr. Potter was called during his illness, or the child was taken to Dr. Potter's office in Elizabethtown.

Albert J. Beveridge in his two volume work on Lincoln, without any documentary authority whatever, cites this doctor's bill in his discussion of events occurring as early as 1806. Without any apology he leaves the reader to infer the medical bill was incurred for services rendered to Thomas Lincoln himself about this time. Of course Dr. Potter could have had no relations with the Lincolns previous to 1811.

DR. JOHN ALLEN

The two Lincoln tragedies in Indiana; the death of Lincoln's mother in 1818, and the death of his sister ten years later, would imply a desire for medical assistance if there was any available. With respect to Lincoln's mother it was almost certain that there was no practitioner who could render assistance. Josiah Crawford who is sometime mentioned as a "yarb doctor" did not arrive in the Lincoln community until 1826, eight years too late to be of assistance to Mrs. Lincoln.

There is a possibility that some medical attention may have been given to Abraham's sister, Sarah Grigsby in 1828 when she passed away in childbirth. The very nature of the case would probably cause the family to hesitate to send for the physician who appears to have been the nearest one then available, Dr. John Allen of Perry County who lived twenty miles away. Records discovered by the editor of Lincoln Lore in the Probate Court book of the county reveal that Dr. Allen was practicing there as late as 1830 and as early as 1827 and possibly much earlier. He presented a bill for services rendered to Henry C. Acton which covered a period from April 1827 to January 24, 1830. Although there was a Dr. John Allen at New Salem, close friend of Abraham Lincoln, we have been unable to identify these men bearing the same name as one and the same character.

It would appear from these surveys that the Lincoln family may have had medical aid at the time their first born child at Elizabethtown and possibly at the illness of their third child who died at the Knob Creek, Kentucky home, but aside from that it is likely they received little attention from doctors of medicine during their Kentucky and Indiana years.