

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS LINCOLN GOES TO NEW ORLEANS

There is general knowledge that Abraham Lincoln, in his young manhood, made two flatboat trips to New Orleans. Few people are familiar with the fact that his father also in his early days in Kentucky made at least one trip and possibly others to the great metropolis. One need not press the claim that the father's reminiscences of the Mississippi and New Orleans stirred Abraham Lincoln's imagination with the result that his flatboat experiences followed the pattern set by his father. Some details about Thomas Lincoln's trip to New Orleans in 1806 are of sufficient importance to record.

Thomas Lincoln may have had some experience with flatboats as early as 1802 when he was still residing in Washington County. The Lincoln home was in the Beech Fork community where there was considerable shipping done by flatboat to New Orleans via Salt River, the Ohio and the Mississippi. One of Thomas Lincoln's closest friends at this time was Peter Sibert, who stated in a deposition that he was engaged as a flatboat pilot from 1804 to 1813. On some of the smaller tributaries of Beech Fork it was necessary to wait in the spring for what the settlers called a "fresh" following a heavy rain or melting snow. Launching a flatboat at such a time was called "going out on a fresh."

Thomas Lincoln first went to Elizabethtown in 1797 where his name appears on the tax commissioner's book as having then been twenty-one years or over. Hananiah Lincoln, a relative, was then residing in the county seat town. In 1803 Thomas, then living in Washington County, purchased a farm on Mill Creek, Hardin County, about 10 miles from Elizabethtown and having learned the cabinet maker's trade he was often in the business center of the county. Here he became acquainted with Isaac Bush, who was to become his partner in the 1806 flatboat venture, sponsored by the local merchants, Bleakley and Montgomery.

Among the more important source data in the Foundation collection are two books, a day book and a ledger, used in the Bleakley and Montgomery store from 1805 to 1807 inclusive. From the viewpoint of the student of history the most important entries relate to Thomas Lincoln, father of the President, who was trading at the store during this interval. The editor of Lincoln Lore discovered these books at Dallas, Texas in January 1936 in the possession of a descendant of one of the original partners.

The fact that merchants took produce in exchange for items sold necessitated a good price for their accumulated stock if they were to succeed. New Orleans offered the best market for those who lived on tributaries of the Ohio and other Mississippi waterways. Inasmuch as Elizabethtown was only 25 miles from the Ohio, much of the produce was hauled by wagon to the point of embarkment.

Apparently a river trip was being contemplated by the merchants as early as January 15, 1806, as on this one day several purchases of pork were made at the price of fifteen pence a pound. The amount of pork delivered and the names of the sellers follow: William Withers, 3,049 lbs.; Luke Colvin, 296 lbs.; John Rice, 547 lbs.; James Young, 2,450 lbs. This represented a total of 7,240 lbs. for a one day's purchase. A month later the store was still buying pork.

Actual preparation on the part of the two boatmen, Isaac Bush and Thomas Lincoln, were underway by February 17, when Bush paid Gideon Withers for "9 Days work on Boat at 4/6, 2. 0. 6." On the following day Bleakley and Montgomery made these purchases: Thompson Overhall, 40 lbs. lard at 6 pence; John Reed, 1 steer 386 lbs., Pork by Able 108 lbs., Pork 318 lbs. Total 812 lbs. at 15 pence; Henry Ditto, Sr., 83 lbs. Lard & Tallow at 6 pence, 150 Bushel of Corn at 0.2; William Withers, 225 Bushel Corn at 0.2, 64 Bushel Potatoes at 0.2, 38 lbs. Hemp at 5 pence.

Thomas Lincoln himself also sold to Bleakley and Montgomery on February 18, 1806: 2,400 lbs. Pork at 15 pence and 494 lbs. Beef at 15 pence, bringing him a credit with the store of 21. 14. 1½. This entry is almost positive proof that Lincoln was operating at this time his Mill Creek farm.

As late as February 26 Isaac Bush became indebted to John Reed for 1988 feet of Plank at 9 pence totaling 8. 18. 10, which possibly represents part of the timber which went into the making of the flatboat. On the same day John Reed received a credit from the store of 0. 15. 0. for 12 Venison Hams which also may have been packed on the boat for New Orleans. On February 25 Horatio Waide delivered 14 hats to the store and they too may have been part of the lighter freight.

The names of Thomas Lincoln and Isaac Bush failed to appear again on the day book of Bleakley and Montgomery until May 3. We may safely conclude that during most of this interval they were at New Orleans or enroute to and from the place. On May 3, back in Elizabethtown again, each man purchased at the store ½ Calf Skin for 3 shillings, probably for some new boots. In addition Bush purchased ½ lb. Tobacco, for which he was charged 9 pence.

Thirteen days later on the sixteenth of May, Isaac Bush and Thomas Lincoln had a settlement for the New Orleans trip as the notation under the name of Isaac Bush contained this credit.

"Cash 13. 14. 7½."

"Boat and going to Orleans 60. 0. 0. 73. 14. 7½."

The credit opposite the name of Thomas Lincoln on May 16, 1806 is entered as follows.

"Going to Orleans 16. 10. 0."

"Gold 13. 14. 7½. 30. 4. 7½."

If Bush received the same amount as Lincoln for making the trip, 16 pounds, and this amount plus expense for material and labor hired which was apparently 10 pounds it still leaves 34 pounds to be accounted for, which was probably charged up to the cost of the boat by the personal labor of Bush and Lincoln in making the craft ready for transportation. A division of the amount would give Thomas considerable more compensation to be derived from the flatboat venture.

Apparently the receipts from the operation of his farm and the money realized for his trip to New Orleans put Thomas Lincoln in a financial position which encouraged him to take a wife. His marriage to Nancy Hanks Lincoln on June 12, 1806 might be called the sequel to his partnership with Isaac Bush in the operation of an "Orleans Boat" as these river craft were called.