

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S SOLICITUDE FOR HIS STEPMOTHER

There is plenty of evidence in Abraham Lincoln's own statements that he genuinely appreciated the helpfulness of his stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln. He stated in an autobiographical sketch that "she proved a good and kind mother." While both his father and stepmother were still living Lincoln wrote to the stepbrother John D. Johnston, who with his family resided with them in the old home: "You already know I desire that neither father nor mother shall be in want for any comfort either in health or sickness while they live."

As soon as Lincoln began to get some compensation for his services as a lawyer the Johnston contingent began to ask him for financial help. While Thomas Lincoln still lived the old gentleman was used as a medium through which these solicitations for aid were advanced. One of Abraham's finest pieces of economic advice was a letter written to John D. Johnston in reply to a request for eighty dollars. In this letter Lincoln refused the gift but offered this stepbrother an extra dollar for every dollar he would earn.

When death removed Thomas Lincoln from the picture the stepmother of Abraham became the instrument used by the members of her family to secure funds from Mr. Lincoln. The fact that Abraham had reached a place of eminence and the further knowledge that he greatly esteemed his stepmother opened the way for these approaches.

Abraham Lincoln seemed much more anxious than the widow's own son to secure the stepmother against want when John Johnston proposed to sell the land where they lived and go west. Lincoln wrote Johnston that he "would have no hand in such a piece of foolery . . . particularly on mother's account. The eastern forty acres I intend to keep for mother while she lives: if you will not cultivate it, it will rent for enough to support her—at least it will rent for something."

Lincoln closes this letter on November 4, 1851 in this manner: "A word to mother, Chapman tells me he wants you to go and live with him. If I were you I would try it awhile. If you get tired of it (as I think you will not) you can return to your own home. Chapman feels very kindly towards you, and I have no doubt he will make your situation very pleasant." Johnston sold out his part of the land formerly belonging to Thomas Lincoln, to John J. Hall, a nephew, son of Squire and Matilda Johnston Hall. Hall began to cultivate the forty acres which Lincoln had purchased for his stepmother which apparently was sufficient for her support. The widow lived with her daughter Matilda and the Hall family.

The Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress contain some letters from members of the Johnston family to the President which must have kept him uneasy about the welfare of his stepmother whom he continued to help financially although the land he had secured for her, properly worked, should have taken care of her few and simple needs.

Dennis Hanks who married Elizabeth Johnston, another daughter of the widow, wrote to Lincoln on April 5, 1864 and the portion of the letter relating to the stepmother follows:

"I received your little check for \$50.00. I showed it to mother. She cried like a child. Abe she is mity childish, heap of trouble to us. Betsy is very feble and has to wait on her. We ort to have some person to wait on her. We are getting old."

Possibly some of the money which Lincoln sent to his stepmother did not reach her, as later in the year John J. Hall with whom the stepmother apparently was

residing wrote this letter to Mr. Lincoln on October 18, 1864:

"Dear Uncle. This leaves us all well but grandmother she is pretty puny. I write to inform you that your grandmother has not and does not receive one cent of the money you send her. Dennis (Hanks), or (Augustus) Chapman (son-in-law of Dennis) keeps all the money you send her. She now needs clothing . . . Dennis is cussing you all the time and abusing me and your best friend your stepmother. They make you believe they are taking care of her which is not the case. It is my mother (Matilda Johnston Hall) who has been taking care of her and has for the past four years. If you wish her to have anything send it by check here to the bank at Charleston or send some for I tell you upon the honor of a man she does not get it and he Dennis has threatened to put her on the county. I hope to hear from you soon . . . I remain your nephew. John J. Hall. N. B. I have written you the plain truth by grandmother's request. She has been asking me to do this for years."

Another "Uncle Abe" letter came from Decatur, Ill. on Nov. 18, 1864 written by James Shoaff, who had married another daughter of Dennis and Elizabeth Johnston Hanks. He writes in part: "My object in writing you is simply to ascertain if you will not confer a favor upon me, you can do it if you will and thereby place me in a comfortable position of life where I can decently support my family. What I respectfully ask for is the appointment of Postmaster of Decatur . . . Nancy wishes to be remembered. Father Hanks (Dennis) was robbed of 130 p. at Crestline on his way from Washington. Please give me a favorable answer and you shall ever be remembered. Yours very Truly James Shoaff"

Still another "Uncle" letter reached Lincoln a few weeks before he was assassinated. It was from Harriet Chapman, the daughter of Dennis and Elizabeth Johnston Hanks, who had married Augustus Chapman. Most of her letter related to the recent death of her mother. Of chief importance, however, was her appeal for help for herself and an appointment for her husband. She wrote: "I was down to see grandma Lincoln on New Years day. She seems to be failing fast and is grieving herself to death about mother. Poor woman how my heart aches for her. She was so destitute of every comfort. She wants to leave there very bad and come to my house and tells me that she is badly treated. I told her it was impossible for me to take her just now for my house is small and not very comfortable and my family large. . . . It looks too bad for as good a woman as she is to be compelled to spend her last days in *want and misery* and I for one will do, as I always have done, my part in her behalf and now I want you to assist me by giving my husband a situation so that he can support his family and get them a home and then we will take grandma Lincoln and take good care of her as long as she lives. . . . I ask you for your assistance feeling sure that you would not deny me and grandmother made me promise to write to you and tell you to do all you could for us for she would rather live with us than any where else."

Even after Abraham Lincoln's assassination his stepmother still lived on and the bereaved Mary Todd Lincoln wrote a letter to her, now in possession of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, which opens with this paragraph:

"In memory of the dearly loved one who always remembered you with so much affection will you not do me the favor of accepting these few trifles?" So it would appear as if Abraham Lincoln's solicitude for his stepmother was shared in a measure at least by his wife.