

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THOMAS LINCOLN—LABORER

Character sketches of Thomas Lincoln, father of the President, have usually been based on the folklore and purely groundless stories put in circulation by William Herndon or by authors using his sources. One of Herndon's statements that Thomas "never fell in with the routine of labor" challenges our attention on this Labor Day a little over a hundred years after the pioneer Lincoln's death. Some observations about his industry preliminary to his arrival in Illinois at fifty-six years of age would be in point. Inasmuch as Abraham's association with his father virtually ended with the Indiana days, how his father occupied himself as an old man has little to do with the life story of the President.

### Laboring Boy

Abraham Lincoln in an autobiographical sketch stated that his father "even in childhood was a wandering laboring boy" and further continued "before he was grown, he passed one year as a hired hand with his Uncle Isaac." Left an orphan when a small boy by the death of his father, in a day when there were no scruples against child labor, one can visualize his realistic apprenticeship in the school of hard manual training. His enlistment at sixteen years of age to fight against the Indians, who were then troubling the Kentucky settlements, further prepared him for rugged toil.

### Hired Hand

We are first introduced to Thomas Lincoln as a laboring man at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where he resided after he returned from his employment by his Uncle Isaac in Tennessee. Thomas Lincoln is listed on the tax commissioners book for 1797 as a white male who had reached 21 years of age and it was during this year that we find an itemized account of some of the manual labor in which he was engaged. In possession of the writer there is an old account book dated 1797 once kept by Samuel Haycraft, Sr., and one of the pages is captioned: "Sundry acts in partnership with G. Berry. By hands working on the mill dam." The first name which appears in the list of hired hands is "Lincorn," later in the same book spelled "Lincoln" and still later "Thomas Lincoln."

From this fragmentary book it is evident that for a period of several weeks Thomas Lincoln was employed in digging a raceway for the mill noted and in helping to construct the mill dam. From the records available, it is evident among the several men employed, that Thomas was the most consistent worker among them and drew more pay than any of the other employees listed. The digging of the raceway was piecework and the wage was set at 4, 5, or 6 shillings per rod (16½ feet) according to the stubbornness of the soil. One entry appears as follows: "By Thomas Lincoln 6 rods digging at 5/(shillings); 18 ditto at 4/—(total credit) 100/." Another entry reveals that Thomas working by the day received the wage of three shillings (about 75 cents) and one of many entries states, "September 12th (1797) Brooks, Lincoln, Abe Van Metre and myself 6 days each." It would appear that at twenty-one Thomas Lincoln had "fell in with the routine of labor" and hard labor at that regardless of the statement by Herndon.

### Boatman

The building of the mill dam may have given him enough experience to be employed in building a flatboat. He was hired by Bleakley and Montgomery, Elizabethtown merchants, along with William Bush to take a flatboat in the spring of 1806 loaded with merchandise

to New Orleans. The sixteen pounds and ten shillings which he received for this undertaking was credited to him on the store ledger the month before he was married to Nancy Hanks. It was no child's play to guide a flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in the year 1806.

### Cabinet Maker

As early as his employment by Haycraft he had picked up some knowledge of rough carpenter work as is indicated by his assistance in the building of the mill dam, and although we do not have proof for the statement it is likely that he was also employed in the construction of the mill. As early as the month of August 1804 he was buying carpenter's tools, having on the eighth of the month purchased from Bleakley and Montgomery store, "1 casteel saw," for eighteen shillings, still later, "1 plane bit." Thereafter continually for the next four years while he remained in Elizabethtown, he purchased not only instruments with which to work but also supplies to be used in cabinet making. Several existing pieces of furniture as well as mantels, he is reported to have made, have been identified as his work.

### Contractor

The largest task which Thomas Lincoln performed for which we have documentary proof was the cutting and hewing of timbers to be used for a mill. Apparently in the fall of the year after he was married he made a contract with Denton Geoghegan to prepare logs for the structure. However, it was necessary for him to bring suit against Geoghegan to collect the money for his labor. This he did on March 25, 1807 and the court ordered Geoghegan to pay him the contract price. The task involved preparing thirty-five timbers from nine to forty feet in length and eight to fourteen inches in diameter. The cost of the work was four pounds and nine shillings.

### Farmer

Thomas Lincoln never gave up his interest in carpentry but apparently shortly after his first child, a daughter, was born he decided to follow farming to gain his livelihood. Back in 1803 he had purchased a 240 acre tract of land and as early as Oct. 16, 1804 was selling beef to the merchants. By 1806, the year of his marriage, he was able to deliver to Bleakley and Montgomery on one occasion 2400 lbs. of pork and 494 lbs. of beef for which he received over twenty pounds, equivalent to about \$100.00 in English money. We have documentary evidence that before leaving Kentucky for Indiana he had four horses, one a stallion, cattle, a drove of hogs and corn stored away to the amount of forty bushels.

It was not inertia or a failure in farm work itself that caused him to move to Indiana in 1816 but as Abraham Lincoln himself has testified, "My father left Kentucky chiefly on account of difficulty with land titles." Thomas lost two farms completely and part of a third because of legal processes with respect to the validity of land titles. Reaching Indiana he entered a quarter section of land and lived in the same cabin home on that quarter section for fourteen years. He not only brought up his own family but the family of his second wife as well. Thomas Lincoln should be given a more respectable place in history than has been accorded him by many of his biographers.