

# LINCOLN LORE

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## EARLY VISITORS AT LINCOLN'S BIRTHPLACE CABIN

Those who have visited the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln memorialized by an impressive national shrine located near Hodgenville, Kentucky, can testify to the significance of its inspirational values. There is a sincere desire among Lincoln students that this memorial of Lincoln's humble origin may not become impaired by an atmosphere of suspicion. In recent months there has been created, by a direct attack on the genuineness of the cabin, an undercurrent of skepticism which has greatly diminished the favorable influence the cabin has exerted for nearly half a century.

There has always been an acknowledgment on the part of Lincoln authors as well as the government agencies in charge of the memorial that positive identification of the cabin at this late date could not be established. However, this admission does not imply that it can be proven the cabin is spurious, and until such positive evidence is available it is unjust and almost sacrilegious to discredit this relic which has brought impressive sensations to thousands of children, women, and grown men as well.

It is of some interest to inquire who were the earliest visitors to the cabin which stood close by the Sinking Spring at the time Abraham Lincoln was elected to the Presidency. Abraham Lincoln's election to Congress in 1846 may have been of sufficient importance to cause his birthplace to be identified, but apparently Lincoln himself did not so conclude. He wrote two letters in 1848 to relatives in the east about his family connections but did not even mention his own birthplace. His father was still living but there is no evidence Abraham talked with him about it. Lincoln's name being placed before the Republican convention at Baltimore as a candidate for the vice presidential nomination probably did not excite enough interest to invite people to inquire about his birthplace.

Most likely it was not until 1858 that there would be any interest in identifying the place where Abraham Lincoln was born. Two contributing factors that year might prompt the people of Hardin County to try and discover the site. At the request of the compiler of the *Dictionary of Congress*, Lincoln prepared a brief notation which mentioned he was born "in Hardin County, Kentucky." It was also in 1858 that Lincoln was brought before the public eye by his debates with Douglas and no doubt many times he was asked about the place of his birth.

The following year 1859 at the request of Jesse W. Fell, Lincoln prepared a brief autobiographical sketch in which he mentioned that he was born "in Hardin County, Kentucky." It was not until 1860 that he became more specific about his birthplace. In another sketch he prepared for John Locke Scripps he stated that he was born "then in Hardin, now in the more recently formed county of Larue." For Thomas Hicks, the artist, however, he prepared the most extended statement about this birthplace: He said he was born "in then Hardin County, at a point within the now recently formed county of Larue, a mile, or a mile and a half, from where Hodgenville (sic) now is, my parents being dead and my own memory not serving. I know no means of identifying the precise locality."

There had already appeared a tradition which claimed that Lincoln was born at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, but the President-elect wrote to Samuel Haycraft in May 1860: "I was not born at Elizabethtown but my mother's first child, a daughter, two years older than myself, and

now long since deceased, was. I was born Feb. 12, 1809 near where Hogginsville (sic) now is, then in Hardin county." Another tradition immediately was put in circulation that he was born in a cabin on Knob Creek and many of the early visitors who observed the old cabin there in which Abraham's brother Thomas was born felt they had visited the birthplace of the President.

Certainly shortly after Lincoln's nomination to the Presidency the few old citizens who lived in the birthplace community and who remembered the Lincolns would visit the old Lincoln cabin which stood by the spring. We have testimonies of several elderly people who claimed to have gone to the cabin about the time of his nomination or election in 1860. Richard Creal, then the owner of the Lincoln farm, would probably be the first to recognize the significance of the old cabin on their place which was then unoccupied.

When the Civil War broke in 1861 and Lincoln became commander-in-chief of the armies of the Republic the President's birthplace would be a spot of special interest to the Union soldiers who moved over the highway leading from Louisville to Nashville by Bardstown. There must have been hundreds of soldiers who saw the old cabin.

Excerpts from a letter written by one of these soldiers, D. McArthur, a member of Company E 19th Illinois Infantry, in which he tells about his visit to the farm in the late fall of 1861 are of sufficient interest to present in this bulletin. The location of the cabin clearly identifies with the spot where Abraham Lincoln was born.

"Our next Camp was at Bacon Creek. I was then acting as a Scout and was sent to where he (Lincoln) was born. I hunted up the owner of the place, he was living on the place but not in the same cabin. I asked him if he was shure (sic) this was the cabin where the President was born. He said he was. I then asked if there had been any changes made since he got it. He said there had been very little changes made. The lower logs had rotted and he had replaced it with new ones. There had been no window in the house and he had put in a half sash window and had put flat rocks under some posts when there (sic) bottoms had rotted. Looking from the door to the left end was the fireplace which took up about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the end. It was made of rocks and clay about 7 feet and split sticks and clay the rest of the way up. On the right at far side of the room was the Bedstead. It was made by putting a Post at foot of the Bed and running a pole from that pole to a space between the logs at the end of the House and another pole from that post to a space between the logs at the side of the House. Then there was split boards run from the side pole to the side of the House and another pole from the post to the end of the House and all fastened with wooden pins. There was a small bed on the other side made the same way and both beds filled with Forest leafs (sic) no Bedsticks. Part of upstairs was covered with split boards and on them 4 poles juned (sic) to the boards with wooden pins for the bed and filled in between with leaves. The stairway was a pole with  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch auger holes and wooden pins drove through about a foot on each side of the pole. Some flat stones were sunk level with the ground in front of the fireplace was all the door was made of split boards with wooden hinges and a wooden latch."