

LINCOLN LORE

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MOST IMPORTANT VENTURE OF LINCOLN'S YOUTH

Without much fear of contradiction it may be said that the most important venture of Abraham Lincoln's youth, embracing the years until he became of age, was his first trip to New Orleans. It seems regrettable that so important an episode during Lincoln's impressionable years has been so greatly overshadowed by a second trip to New Orleans made three years later during the Illinois residence. It is true that some of the incidental details about the initial visit to the great metropolis are lacking, but we have in Lincoln's own handwriting in the third person this account of the boat enterprise starting at Rockport, Indiana.

"When he was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, he made his first trip upon a flatboat to New Orleans. He was a hired hand merely, and he and a son of the owner, without other assistance, made the trip. The nature of part of the 'cargo-load,' as it was called, made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the sugar-coast; and one night they were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee, but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat, and then 'cut cable,' 'weighed anchor,' and left."

In this same autobiography Lincoln makes but a very brief reference to the second trip to the great metropolis at the mouth of the Mississippi. After mentioning the building of a flatboat at Old Sangamon Town he states "which boat they took to New Orleans." That is all Lincoln had to say about the trip with the exception that "Hanks (John) had not gone to New Orleans, but having a family and likely to be detained from home longer than expected had turned back at St. Louis." Yet this is the same John Hanks whom William Herndon claimed, went to New Orleans with Lincoln and supposedly gave Herndon an eye witness account of Lincoln's reaction to the slave markets of the city.

Just how much of this interview recorded by Herndon originated in Herndon's own imagination we cannot ascertain. The following statement credited to Hanks has all the internal evidence of a Herndon composition: "We saw negroes chained, maltreated, whipped, and scourged. Lincoln saw it, his heart bled, said nothing much, was silent from feeling, was sad, looked bad, felt bad, was thoughtful and abstracted. I can say knowingly that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery. It ran its iron into him then and there." This alleged Hanks testimonial is most certainly the diction of Herndon. So is another statement Herndon credited to John Hanks who was never in New Orleans with Lincoln. John it is claimed told Herndon about an auction of slaves they witnessed and reported Lincoln to have said; "My God, boys let's get away from this. If ever I get a chance to hit that thing (meaning slavery), I'll hit it hard."

At the conclusion of the interview with John Hanks, Herndon wrote: "I can say that this testimony can be implicitly relied upon." It will be observed that this entire story is nothing more than a composite fabrication by Hanks and Herndon. Yet it is this worthless tradition that has been accentuated to the extent that little attention is paid to Lincoln's very first visit. At this time we may logically conclude Lincoln experienced the thrills and excitement one naturally would on the initial visit to the picturesque city, the novelty of which would be lacking on a second experience.

The confusion as to the exact time Lincoln and Gentry went from Indiana to New Orleans is also changeable to Herndon's notes. He claimed that John Romine told him that "Lincoln went to New Orleans about '28 or '29 . . . Boat started out of the Ohio in the spring—Abe about 20 years of age—started from Rockport, a short distance below, rather at the Gentry landing. Gone about two months." The Lamon book published in 1872 and using this source and other Herndon traditions sets the date of embarkment of the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat as early in April 1828. Practically all Lincoln biographers have accepted this orientation of the story in the spring of the year.

Here, however, we are able to introduce some documents that bear on the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat episode and also submit some family traditions that have come down through the Gentry family and should have the preference over Herndon's hearsay testimonies. The Lamon book states that while the boat was loading supposedly in the month of April, "Abe saw a great deal of the pretty Miss Roby." However, the Spencer County marriage register reveals that Miss Ann Roby and Allen Gentry were married on March 20, 1828 so there was no Miss Roby as late as April as she was already Mrs. Gentry, the wife of Lincoln's partner. While the taking of a wife might not prevent Allen Gentry from leaving shortly for New Orleans, it is not likely that he would plan his honeymoon alone. All family reminiscences contradict the spring departure.

Mrs. Calder Ehrmann is our best authority on Lincoln's first trip to New Orleans, having been well acquainted with and having interviewed many of the descendants of Allen Gentry. She also lives in Rockport where the Gentry flatboat was launched. It is Mrs. Ehrmann's firm conviction that the Gentry-Lincoln boat did not leave the Gentry landing at Rockport until the late fall or early winter of 1828. The descendants of Allen Gentry for two generations were flatboat men and both a son and grandson of Allen claim that the boats were always taken out late in the year, but never in the spring.

About this special Gentry-Lincoln trip the Gentry family is absolutely certain as to the time of departure because it was shortly after the birth of Allen and Ann Gentry's first child who was born on December 18, 1828. Allen refused to take the flatboat out until after the child was born and all seemed well at home. The descendants of Allen Gentry are in agreement that Allen and Abe started for New Orleans during the last week in December.

Based on these documentary supports and statements of the descendants of Allen Gentry, Lincoln's law partner in the enterprise, Mrs. Ehrmann prepared a pageant depicting Gentry and Lincoln leaving for New Orleans in the fall of 1828. The pageant was entitled "When Lincoln Went Flatboating From Rockport." It was first produced at Rockport on July 4, 1926 and has also been presented on later occasions. The citizens of Rockport, Indiana feel that, inasmuch as the most important venture of Abraham Lincoln's youth was associated with their city, the episode should be properly memorialized. They do not feel that the purely fictitious stories of William Herndon—Lincoln mythmaker—should nullify the historical importance of Lincoln's first trip to New Orleans.